

Bodies for Sale. Pingueroismo and Negotiated Masculinity in Contemporary Cuba

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Abstract: This essay relates the research of a kind of male subjects (*pingueros*) inserted in the informal economy of pleasure linked to the tourism in Cuba. Studying their performance on homoerotic circuits in Havana, the text analyses how the *pingueros* when dealing with foreigners negotiate masculinity and identity; it also discusses the locally constructed concepts of gender and sexuality, on one hand, and nation and survival on the other. Finally it links the sexual tourism with the contradictions inside the revolutionary model.

Keywords: Cuban revolution, male sexual work, *pingueros*, homoerotic ambiences, Sexual tourism in Havana, *la lucha*, new man.

This is the Land of Low-Hanging Fruit (Esta es la tierra de los mangos bajitos)

*Europe frolics in my little town,
This is the land of the low-hanging fruit
Coconut water, aged rum and mojitos,
This is the land of the low-hanging fruit,
Where everything is cheap
and the weather is fine,
this is the land of the low-hanging fruit.*

Los Aldeanos

At 18, Alberto goes out every night seeking the company of foreign tourists who enjoy his firm, muscular body. He makes up a love story; in return, he receives the promise of emigration and a few dollars. I met him on a summer night in 2008, while I was strolling Havana's downtown with a Cuban gay friend. The corner of the Yara movie theatre, one of the most popular, animated streets in the city and a well-known site for cruising among men, was teeming with people that particular evening. A young man approached us and asked us for a light and then asked us for the time, two typical pretexts intended to help decipher the national origin of the other person.

My friend looks slightly different than the average Cuban and has the distinctive accent of those who have lived abroad for a long time. We struck up a conversation because Alberto was having a "slow" night and asked us if we could treat him to a beer. In exchange, he promised to share his life story with us. We talked for about two hours and when he said goodbye, he returned to "*la lucha*"¹, the struggle for a *punto* (a *Yuma*)--competition from other *pingueros* and police harassment allowing. I never saw him again.

That was the beginning of a research project on *pingueros*: male subjects who have inserted themselves into an informal economy of pleasure related to sex tourism in order to gain access to money, commodities and other material benefits.

The jargon of the Cuban sexual marketplace has spawned a number of words related to the interaction of foreigners and locals, mostly within the context of tourism. Thus, the word *pinguero* has become equivalent to *jinetera*, the name long used to as a substitute for the heavily stigmatized term "prostitute." *Jinetero*, on the other hand, designates those male subjects involved in informal economic activities with foreigners who are not interested in consuming the official venues for guidance and engagement offered by Cuba's government-run tourist agencies. *Jineteros* procure tourists, via a commission, in return for goods and services including incidental sex.²

¹ In Cuban popular slang "*la lucha*" means the struggle for daily survival, although in this case it refers to sex-for-money exchange with foreigners.

² Another tourism-related actor is the "*fogatero*," urban male subjects inserted in the market of European women tourists who visit the island to consume the sexual myth of the Cuban lover, usually with racial undertones. According to researchers Deborah Pruitt and Suzanne Lafont, whose work focuses in Jamaica, this phenomenon is associated with the western construction of an exotic "other" that is more passionate, more natural and more sexually alluring (Pruitt & Lafont; 1995: 430).

In this work, I explore the various ways in which *pingueros* negotiate their masculinity and identity through interactions with foreigners. I am particularly interested in examining their efforts to craft a legitimate social space within the network of Havana's homoerotic *ambiente* [environment or scene]³ as well as evaluating how such experience influence how they understand gender and sexuality. Furthermore, I take into account the way in which these identities intervene in discussions of the national and discourses of survival, as seen through the articulation of concepts such as "*la lucha*" [the struggle].

Over the last decades, foreign researchers have produced a myriad of scholarly works on female and male sex labour in Cuba (O'Connell Davidson, 1996; Wonders and Michalowski, 2001; Hodge, 2001; Trumbull, 2001; Holgado, 2002; Cabezas, 2004; Fosado, 2005; Pope, 2005; Allen, 2007; Stout, 2008; Alcázar, 2009). Some of these authors have associated the resurgence of prostitution in the 1990s with the rise of sex tourism and the island's general economic crisis as a result of the (Holgado, 2002; Cabezas, 2004; Wilson, 2008) collapse of Socialism and the Soviet trading bloc (Trumbull, 2001). In Cuba, both journalists and researchers have examined this phenomenon (Elizalde, 1996; Díaz y González 1997; Díaz, y Fernández 1996; Jiménez, 2003). However, as Ana Alcázar asserts, research on this subject in Cuba focuses analyzing young people as lacking revolutionary consciousness and overly influenced by a capitalist consumption patterns, decadent social values and deviant behaviour (Alcázar 2009).

Other frameworks of interpretation regarding sexual relations of *pingueros* are based on the concept of "exchange" and *relaciones de interés* [relationships founded on material interest] (Fosado; idem: 75). However, such an approach may also prove insufficient to the task of understanding such experiences, especially if we consider that most human

³ I would not speak of the existence of a homosexual community in Cuba, but rather of a Havana homoerotic *ambiente*. I circumscribe it to the capital because there these groups have a stronger visibility and significance. By homoerotic *ambiente*, I understand a temporal-spatial dimension for the meeting and interaction of individuals who do not necessarily identify with homosexuality. These are spaces of cultural diversity which do not exclude people by their sexual orientation or identity. I refer to homoerotic practices as those related to sexual relations or erotic encounters among same-sex people, without considering the existence of a social identity. The idea of *ambiente* provides a more precise notion of the negotiations taking place between these groups and state institutions with the aim of creating spaces of socialization despite the absence of a collective homosexual, gay or homoerotic consciousness as such.

relations are almost always mediated by some degree of interest.⁴ On this issue, Alejandro, one of my informants remarked: “What we are living in this country today has taught me that love is something that only exists in movies and romantic novels. These are tough times for love—for me it doesn’t exist at all.”

Following Amalia Cabezas, we can say that sex work is not merely related to sex and money as a means for fulfilling basic needs; rather, it has become a means for achieving recreation, consumption, travel and even migration and marriage (Cabezas; 2004:992). In a impoverished context like that of Cuba, the insertion of individuals into the sexual marketplace and sex-for-money exchanges have not only facilitated access to consumer culture, but allowed for a kind of social mobility that the same individuals would never have obtained otherwise.

This text is based on fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2009. It has included observation, multiple informal conversations with *pingueros* and ten interviews with young people ages 18-33: eight people from the provinces and two from Havana. Of these, three have been involved at least once in stable heterosexual relationships with children for whom they were the primary economic providers. This ethnographic work was carried out entirely in El Vedado district and I have used pseudonyms in order to preserve the confidentiality and identity of my informants.

Initially, this paper attempted to include a wider sample of interviews; however, the complex nature of the subject and the inaccessibility to sources posed insurmountable methodological limitations and challenges. Many of the *pingueros* I approached in the streets asked for money in exchange for their stories, or refused to be interviewed, fearing I might be an undercover policeman or a state security agent. While I might have enriched the spectrum of viewpoints I collected by paying my informants, the risk of introducing biases in the fieldwork led me to reject such an option as a methodological strategy.

By comparison, foreign researchers access these groups with relative ease because contact with foreigners is valued as a form of social capital from which *pingueros* are sure

⁴ Some works on the subject by foreign or Cuban researchers living abroad have defined the interactions between many Cubans subjects--*jinetes*, intellectuals and musicians alike-- and foreigners during the 1990s as essentially instrumental. In so doing, they inadvertently tend to idealize not only the period before the crisis, but also create a kind of knowledge that recreates the framework of exceptionalism as they construct Cubans as Others deprived of the most elemental ethical values, rather than subjects making rational choices in constrained circumstances.

to obtain certain benefits. In addition, informants are guaranteed greater security and anonymity as Cuban authorities have less control over the result of foreigners' research, which is mostly available in scholarly publications—sometimes in English—that obtain little circulation on the island. Therefore, informants feel protected in a context where a strict surveillance still prevails. Thus, my own subjectivity as a Cuban national undoubtedly mediated my research, although arguably in favour of a more organic exchange with informants, less influenced by expectations of material or symbolic benefits.



These photographs were taken as part of a project by the Cuban photographer Eduardo Hernandez Santos about Havana's seafront wall (El Malecon) at night. They were published, with essays by the author, as a book, *El muro*, in 2009. The images are not of people described in the text.

'Untitled' © Eduardo Hernandez Santos

Aquí, en la lucha...! Pingueros and Contemporary Metaphors of Survival

Jineteras/os and *pingueros* became visible during the economic crisis of the 1990s after the collapse of the Socialist bloc which forced the island to embrace foreign capital and tourism. This scenario favored the emergence of a cheap sex market that lured thousands of young people who used sex as a way out of the crisis or of the country; others adopted it as a lifestyle.

During those years, the island suffered one of the most severe economic depressions since the revolutionary government took power in 1959. Under these “exceptional” circumstances, the state’s adoption of a dual-currency system, one in US dollars or convertible pesos (CUC) that gives access to the most important goods and services and another one in Cuban pesos—with a correspondingly low purchasing power—has forced popular sectors to implement survival strategies on the cusp of illegality.

Thus “*la lucha*” a recurring word in the Cuban official discourse was given a new meaning by the vast majority of the population earning meagre *peso* wages in state-controlled sectors of the economy. For them, “*la lucha*” represented a series of survival strategies designed to cope with daily hardships. To be in “*la lucha*” grants the Cuban contemporary subject a certain amount of freedom of action that transcends laws as well as ethical and moral values. The identities that take on sex as a survival strategy also adhere to the same frame of mind. Thus, the term “*luchador/ra*” helps to negotiate the stigma and censorship of their practices in the social discourse. Reinier, a young *pinguero* explained:

I am a *luchador*, meaning I have set myself a goal and will do anything to achieve it. I fear nothing and no one. I know that many people condemn what I do. They see me as an antisocial person, a delinquent. But I would like them to see me for what I truly am: a person with aspirations, who fights to be someone. I live without shame or regrets of any kind. The only thing that has always made me feel ashamed is not having even one peso in my pocket.

For this young man, “*la lucha*” structures and articulates not only his practices but his whole concept of the world. His body, his only capital, is the vehicle he uses to accomplish goals. Even though he goes to bed with different men every night, he does not consider himself either a *pinguero* or a prostitute, but an individual “facing tough times.”

The metaphor of “*la lucha*” works as a practical instrument for negotiating masculinity and distancing oneself from the stigma that young men like Reinier confront in having sex with other men. Over the past fifty years, the Cuban social subject has been constantly bombarded with male-dominated, highly militarized discourse. The government has articulated a nationalist rhetoric anchored in such a discourse as a means of social control and policy implementation. In the midst of the “Cold War” and the political conflict with the United States, the island adopted a siege mentality. Since the early 1960s, the country was also immersed in a transnational effort to build socialism, led by the USSR, and the Eastern European Socialist bloc. Leaders largely legitimated that effort by relying on a discourse of constant and inevitable war, one deeply linked to the concept of the “New Man.”

Ernesto Guevara in 1965 popularized the concept of the New Man as part of a “secular religious”⁵ project intended, among other things, to eliminate the bourgeoisie as a class and create a new type of “superior” social subject, armed with new a mentality and values. At the same time, this subject embraced a model of traditional masculinity and political ideology based on the revolutionary theory and the construction of Soviet-style Socialism, a goal that came to play a central role in Cuban revolutionary rhetoric. In many ways, the New Man ultimately emerged as a national stereotype as it came to embody a series of highly simplistic representations and values, mandatory touchstone for identifying or representing the social conglomerate.

As the distance between the logic of state capitalist policies adopted by the government and the socialist values of the Communist political framework grew in the 1990s, the process generated other values among citizens more in tune with consumerism and individual expectations than with the continuing political rhetoric of leaders. In this regard, *pingueros* came to constitute the unintended counterpart of the state’s revolutionary project: they not only witnessed its failure and contradictions, but discredited the sincerity of its aspirations to create a New Man as a whole.

By virtue of its ideological control, the Cuban political system historically undermined the legitimacy of the family as the fundamental reserve for the inculcation of social values, replacing it with the educational system and forms of socialization primarily provided by the

⁵ According to Dalmacio Negro (2009), the project to create a new man in the West had been articulated from atheologies or political religions that adopted the form of ideologies.

state. With the crisis, the paternalistic role of the Cuban State, which had long provided security and basic living conditions, began to collapse. From that moment on, the growing social inequality triggered by the effects of a dollarized economy, began to affect the code of values. The State's inordinate intervention and control over people's private lives and subjectivities produced a subject who was not only lacking in financial capitals and resistant to change, but also more prone to political simulation and survival practices.

Due to the crisis, many families, especially the poorest ones, found themselves forced to readjust their educational expectations and ignore their children's actions as parents themselves became involved in the daily survival dynamics of "*la lucha*" Alejandro, a twenty-year old *pinguero* confessed:

My parents don't know anything about this, they don't know what I am up to. My mother suspects but says nothing, apparently because she is ashamed. She also doesn't say anything to my father because she doesn't want to upset him. He thinks I come to Havana for business reasons, to sell cheese and meat, that I have fallen in love [with some girl in the city] but I believe it's because he doesn't want to know, he doesn't want to find out, because selling cheese doesn't make you that much money and when I go home, I bring a lot of money and new, expensive clothes.

For some *pingueros*, the discourse of *la lucha* serves as an instrument for homoerotic de-identification and the negotiation of masculinity, but frequently as a means for avoiding the category of sex worker. There was no consensus among my informants as to the terms used to describe their practices. Some felt uncomfortable with the category of sex worker, because they perceive *la lucha* as a temporary condition and they alternate the selling of sexual services with participation in other trades and economic activities. Others, however, prefer to be seen as "normal" workers. Such is the case of Roberto:

This is a job like any other: the problem is that for society, I am something else. If some work in agriculture and others in construction, I don't know why I can't *pinguear*. I have no idea how to plant anything or what to do with a brick; I do what I know how to do in order to get somewhere in life and I am not hurting anyone. In the end, everyone should be able to do what they want to do with their bodies and no one is giving me any free lunch. In my home town, there are barely any jobs for young people; the only options I have are to work in agriculture, construction or to become a policeman and I would rather be dead [than become a cop]; I prefer to continue doing what I do.

Over the years, much of Cuba's rural population has been forced to migrate to urban areas in order to grapple with the situation as the crisis affected the countryside more severely than Havana or other urban cities benefitting from the rise of tourism. Statistics reveal that in provinces like Guantánamo and Las Tunas, state wages, paid in pesos, the secondary currency known as *moneda nacional*, are much lower than in other parts of the country (National Office of Statistics, ONE, 2009)⁶. In addition, nearly 100,000 sugar workers were laid off in 2001 due to a restructuring of this industry (Uriarte-Gastón, 2004).

The uneven development of the island's economy, long a problem before 1959, remained and arguably intensified afterward, prompting internal migration to urban centres that continued to enjoy relatively better infrastructure and more job or educational opportunities. (Valdés Paz *et al*, 2001). Residents of Havana, for example, have consistently received larger and more varied rations of basic foods through the official state rationing system than residents of the countryside. While logic may appear to dictate that rural residents have less need of rations because they enjoy access to land and the opportunity to cultivate gardens, the state's long-established monopoly on land ownership and accompanying Communist laws restricting its use by private citizens historically prohibited such possibilities until the 1990s. Similar restrictions continue to inhibit such activities today.

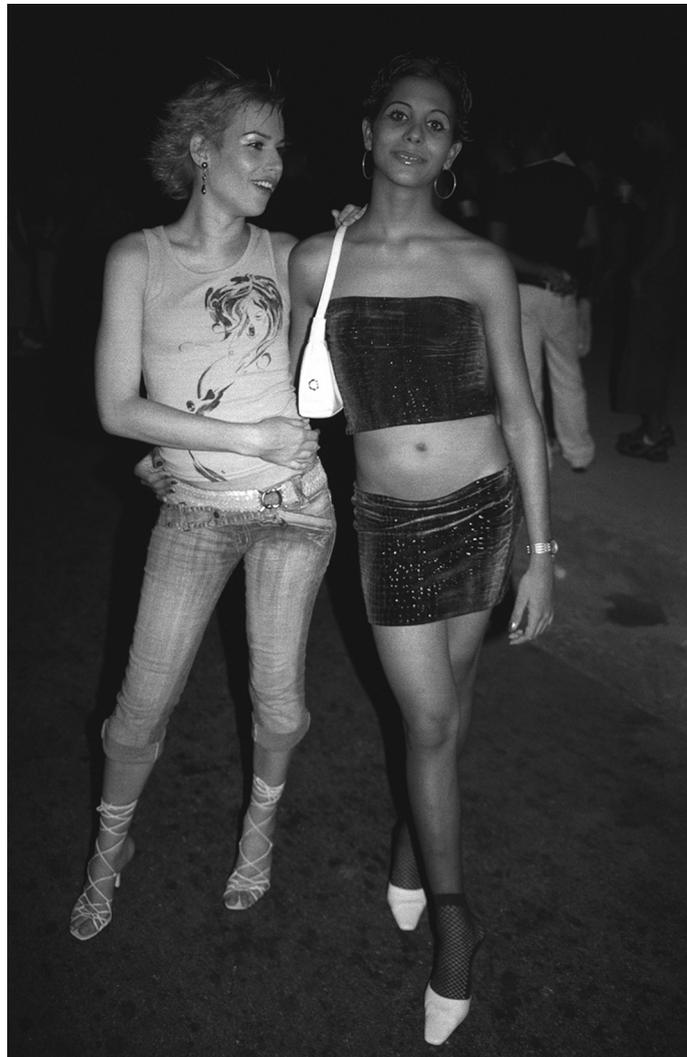
As in the case of *jineterismo* (Alcázar, 2009), popular notions of *pinguismo* remain rooted in citizen understandings of it as a pathological behaviour, a form of personal depravity and, at best, the result of unprecedented capitalist influence. Most Cubans therefore reject *pinguismo* as primarily a solution to fulfilling basic needs and see it as the product or cause of dysfunctional families. Traditional perceptions regarding sex work are also marked by a series of prejudices that ignore the analysis of variables like migration, labour market, informal economy, class, race and citizenship. As Laura María Agustín (2005: 618-630) points out, the connections between sex work and such variables require an interdisciplinary approach that moves beyond the allegedly immoral nature of still dominant concepts like prostitution.

Within revolutionary discourse, the practices and dynamics of transactional sex challenge and defy the ethics and project of socialism. If for many years the elimination of prostitution

⁶ Note of the translator: by the Spanish acronym, *Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas* (ONE).

was heralded as one of the Communist state's greatest achievements, its resurgence has demonstrated the incapacity of official paradigms in responding to the crisis as well as the inefficacy of the state's policy tools for tackling the myriad ways in which sex work relates to multiple challenges citizens face in their daily lives.

Official discourse views *pingueros* reservedly, as do many homosexuals who construct them in similar ways, often perceiving them as lazy youngsters. In addition, homosexuals often construe *pingueros* as devoid of a genuine homoerotic configuration and a clear definition of their sexual identity (Sierra Madero, 2006; Stout 2008). Thus, *pingueros* are always under suspicion, not only because of their ambiguous, flexible gender identity, but also because they represent a challenge to the stability of the categories of labour, desire, pleasure and identity that have traditionally operated within Cuban culture.



'Untitled' © Eduardo Hernandez Santos

Pingueros and Discussion on the National Body

Despite their dubious social identity in the eyes of most Cubans as well as state officials, *pingueros* remain a central part of debates on sex tourism and prostitution, as well as nation and nationalism. In his polemic text: "Colonization of the Cuban Body. The Growth of Male Sex Work in Havana," researcher Derrick Hodge argues that *pinguero* is not primarily a category of sexual preference: it is first and foremost an economic category. And the category *pinguero* is also an accommodation to Cuban nationalist sensibilities. (Hodge, 2001: 22). For Hodge, *pingueros* result from the "commodification of desire" and their construction as an economic category derives from the "commodification of identity" (2001: 27).

Cuban nationalism, he points out, refuses to accept the penetration of the female body by foreigners, despite the degree to which female sex work has become an observable aspect of everyday reality for many Cubans. That explains why *jinetas* are more persecuted and controlled by authorities than *pingueros*. Consequently, *pingueros* embody the anti-imperialist, decolonizing power of the Cuban phallus, symbolically conquering the bodies of the foreigners and defending Cuba from its would-be invaders, like any good revolutionary Cuban man. Thus, in acts of *pinguismo*, the Cuban body, constructed as a male subject, is not wounded (Hodge, 2001: 23).

Indeed, revolutionary nationalism has established a relationship between the discourse of sexuality and certain notions of sovereignty and imperial colonization. Following the analogy between the sexed human body and the national corpus, colonization has been theorized as an act of penetration (Sierra Madero, 2006) based on the traditional model of understanding homoeroticism⁷ and sexuality as a whole. Thus conceived in feminine terms, the Cuban nation remains a vulnerable space susceptible to penetration by the foreign Other.

In the first years after the fall of the Batista regime in 1959, the Revolution that came to power relied on an idea long ingrained in the popular imaginary of both Cubans and Americans: the national body as a "backyard" of pleasures connected to the island's

⁷ Guillermo Núñez Noriega (2001:18) point outs that this model has helped organized sexual relations between males according to their erotic role. In this respect, the "active" role would be played by a "masculine" subject and the passive role by an "effeminate" or "less masculine" subject.

tourism industries. During the first half of the twentieth century, Cuba was, as Louis Pérez points out, tailored to meet the wishes and interests of Americans and as “a land of pleasures which were unavailable at home” (Louis Pérez, 1999:183). For the tourist, comments Pérez, Cuba existed solely for the enjoyment of Americans, as a land to experiment with forbidden alcohol, drugs and sex (Louis Pérez, 1999:187). The island was a place to have sex with the woman of the exotic, primitive, carnal, and passionate Other, governed by libidinous impulses and marked by racialised overtones (Louis Pérez, 1999:189).

It is little wonder, then, that one of the first interventions of Cuba’s revolutionary nationalism was the “rehabilitation of prostitutes” and the regulation of tourism in order to erase the image of the nation as a space penetrated, colonized and used as a site for gambling, vices and pleasures. At the beginning of the 1960s, and as part of a secret operation conducted by the Ministry of the Interior, thousands of female prostitutes became the object of state intervention and were placed within “re-education” programs. The program for the “rehabilitation” of prostitutes marked the first in a series of policies aimed at controlling the feminine body and its sexuality, within a framework of respectability, to achieve not only the incorporation of women into the labour force, but also their conversion into reproducers of ideology and socialist standards of morality.⁸ Accordingly, both homosexuals and prostitutes symbolized bourgeois decadence and colonial penetration. To that end, strategies were designed to eliminate them. One of the best known efforts to accomplish that goal was the creation of the Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP).⁹

Today, *pingueros* represent a fracture in the processes of constructing national masculinity as a unified, collectively occupied space as well as a challenge to the “invented tradition”

⁸ Control over women’s sexuality was a collective role; even the Communist Party and a mass surveillance organization like the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs) assumed that responsibility. Communist Party members were persuaded to quit the Party ranks if they decided not to leave their adulterous wives. There were even times during the military campaigns in Africa in the 70s and 80s when the Cuban government sent men soldiers letters—popularly known as “yellow envelops”, informing them about their wives’ extramarital affairs and encouraging them to divorce them. For fiction writings regarding this issue see: Carlos Alberto Montaner (2011). *La mujer del coronel*, Santillana USA Publishing Company, Miami.

⁹ These labour camps existed in Cuba between 1966 and 1967, as a means to “re-educate” citizens into the socialist values. Homosexuals, religious people, and other subjects who did not fit the symbolic paradigm of the “new man” were sent to these camps.

of the Cuban Mambí, the nineteenth-century nationalist guerrilla who fought to liberate Cuba from Spain, and the larger, anti-imperialist warrior tradition cultivated in the Twentieth Century and adopted as a state icon after 1959. Therefore, *pingueros* represent a fissure of the national body that contrasts with the images of heroes and new men that have been exported for so long by the revolutionary nationalism. Within the nationalist logic that predominates today under Raúl Castro, *pingueros* should not be rejected for their potential homoeroticism, since homosexuality has recently been co-opted and assimilated within the framework of the “politically correct” sexual diversity, thanks largely to the efforts of Raúl’s daughter, Mariela, founder of CENISEX, a state agency devoted to precisely that cause. However, the socio-economic mediations that intervene in their configurations and practices seem to prevent nationalism from integrating them fully into the “imagined community.” Thus, official discourse continues to construct these young men as vagrants and antisocial delinquents who contradict the morals and ethics of a country richly endowed in the heroic tradition of socialist, anti-colonial struggle (Rodríguez, Álvarez, 2001:3).

Pingueros do not conform to a homogeneous unity; there are different types of experiences and gradations that notably influence their modes of interacting with foreigners. The nature of such relationships greatly depend on *pingueros*’ economic situation at a given moment, their life goals, and their ways of viewing sexuality as well as their social background in terms of class, race, urban versus rural upbringing, etc.

The testimony of René--a young man from the eastern province of Holguín--with a gender-sexual configuration that fits the most traditional form of masculinity--reinforces the idea of *pingueros* as active “penetrators” of foreign bodies:

They all want to penetrate me, even queens. I don’t know why. Even though *pingueros* allowed themselves to be penetrated, they say they are active and always try to hide the fact that they are passive because if they accept it, they would be admitting that they are homosexuals. Sometimes I get tired of it because they come to penetrate me or to be penetrated, that’s what this is all about.

René, a 20-year old mulatto man who was born in Santiago de Cuba, “the hot land” as this province is known on the island, offers an even more profound view of his objectification in racial terms. This young man confessed me that the colour of his skin is a precious asset in the trade of *la lucha*: “People come here with the morbid idea of having sex with blacks and mulattos because they say we are more handsome and hotter than whites and that a

mulatto like me simply doesn't exist in Europe. One of them told me to my face that he wanted to have the experience of penetrating a Cuban blackman."

René's testimony is rooted in a series of prejudices that connect race with the processes of "exoticization" and "mythologization" of Caribbean masculinity (Allen, 2007); Pruitt y LaFont, 1995). Actually, the processes of social endogamy that happen in many countries prevents many individuals from developing relationships with people outside their class circle. However, in the context of tourism, these subjects may change their attitudes. Amalia Cabezas notes that although the tourism industry revolves around hotels, meals, entertainment, souvenirs, among other things, tourists pay, mainly, for "experiences" and feelings. Tourism, she adds, is the commodification of the experience that allows people to fulfil their fantasies and set free bodily pleasures (Cabezas, 2009: 93).

If it is true that the discourse of penetration often works as a demarcation point for distinguishing *pingueros*, and that the classification of sex roles linked to the binary framework of penetrator/penetrated influences their practices and interactions with foreigners, their sexuality is more fluid and emotionally complex than meets the eye. Andrés comments:

At one time, I thought I was a big macho man and rejected anything that smacked of homosexuals, but I realized that in order to survive, I had to befriend transvestites, gays, lesbians because *Yumas*¹⁰ go looking for us in their *ambiente*. So no matter how much I discriminated against them, I had to evolve in order to survive.

The above comment demonstrates that if we constrain *pingueros* to an economic category, we risk overlooking a series of negotiations and discussions about gender and sexuality that are vital to understanding these subjects and their subjectivities. Therefore, an extremely complex and diverse group is represented beforehand as a homogenous and predictable unity.

Derrick Hodge suggests that *jineteras* are more harassed by Cuban authorities than *pingueros* by virtue of the former's place within the longstanding paradigm of both popular and official anti-imperialist nationalism. Although he admits that *pingueros* do endure near

¹⁰ "*Yuma*," a street jargon used in colloquial Cuban Spanish to refer to foreigners, particularly US, although it is also extended to English speaking Europeans. The word "*Pepe*"—familiar for José, and a very common name in Spain-- was also used to refer to Spanish nationals.

constant harassment, he cites individual police officers' machismo as a more relevant causative factor than official policy. However, some of the narratives I collected during my fieldwork and more profound reading of the same context yield a contrary view. Alejandro, another of my informants, told me that:

Jineteras have more possibilities to survive than we do. They are better paid and are more accepted because they are heterosexual women, although once in a while they do it with other women for money. We are always going to be seen as delinquents, as men who, despite having the opportunity to earn a decent living doing honest work, prefer to bend over and take it in the ass. This is so much the case that women not only make a buck easier and faster than we do, but they don't suffer from the same traumas. No one knows what we have to go through just to make a single *peso*.

Interactions with police determine many of the daily activities such as which walking routes *pingueros* may take and other forms of routine decision-making. These kinds of pressures and constant strategizing influence not only everyday behaviour but also how they negotiate their masculinity with clients. Many opt to stay longer periods of time with a single client in order to protect themselves from police raids and further harassment as well as maximize earnings. Ramón comments:

In this kind of work one must have his papers in order, and one cannot spend a lot of time in the same place. It is smart to take a break and wait it out until policemen assigned to patrol particular areas where we operate are rotated and replaced with ones who don't know you. I go back to my hometown right after I spend time with a foreigner. That's much better because I don't have to be working the streets all the time and dealing with the police.

Ramón is a young native of the eastern province of Camagüey who moved to Havana after finishing his military service. With no cash on hand and no job, he wanted to make money so he could invest it in a bicycle workshop in his native town. While there is no explicit law regulating the activity of *pingueros*, authorities use other legal methods—as they do with *jineteras*—to keep a firm grip on areas with a high degree of tourist traffic.

Decree law 217 from April, 1997 regarding internal migration in Havana has served to fine, incarcerate or deport *pingueros* and *jineteras* who do not possess "legal residency" in the capital. This decree, in addition to imposing a series of bureaucratic hurdles on people who

want to move to Havana—regardless of the family ties they may have with the owner in whose home they propose to reside—cautioned against those “special zones that are highly relevant to tourism.”

The law stipulated that people “who come from other parts of the country with the intention of establishing fixed domicile, residing or cohabiting permanently in Havana, without official permission, will be fined 300 pesos and sent back home immediately.” In addition, citizens from other provinces found in the capital who were not inscribed in the local Identification Office [*Carné de Identidad*], are to be fined 200 pesos and sent back home immediately.¹¹

This law allows police overseeing tourist areas to harass people coming from the provinces who do not have “legal residency” in Havana and prevent them even from socializing in such areas. Police can legally arrest such “illegal migrants” under any pretext, or ask for their IDs. Yamel explains:

I always keep a little money aside--which I don't touch for the world--to give to the police. It's my way out if they come asking for my ID. Police are very corrupt but they are also pretty shrewd. They don't take money directly from us. They work in combination with clerks from places like the ice-cream parlour *Bim bom* and they tell us to leave their money with them so they can collect it later. They are constantly harassing us. By acting like tough enforcers, they can come to an agreement with us and increase regular access to bribes.

In a highly bureaucratic system such as that of Cuba, public functionaries are poorly remunerated; as a result, corruption and inefficiency run rampant. Many *pingueros* interviewed for this article, especially those from the provinces, emphasized this point. In part, these conditions are responsible for the existence of an informal market for the sale of a temporary residency status in the capital, renewable on a regular basis every three months for 30 CUC. Ahmed explains:

I was deported once back to my province because the police asked for my ID which had my address in Camagüey. I was given a 400-peso fine and a warning not to return to the city, despite a government slogan claiming that Havana is “the capital of

¹¹ In 2011 the Ministry of Justice published in the Official Gazette (a government publication that disseminates new laws) a modification to decree law 217 excepting spouses, children, parents, grandparents, grandchildren and siblings of Cubans with legal residence in the capital from permission to live in Havana.

all Cubans". In order to return, I bought myself a three-month temporary residency and every time I renew it, I have to pay 30 CUC.

Decree law 217 is not the only one that gives police the green light to make arrests, there are also other categories of punishable offenses in Cuba's Penal Code, including "tourist harassment," soliciting¹² and activities defined as "socially dangerous". Social dangerousness is defined as "the potential proclivity of an individual to commit a crime and is manifested by any type of conduct in open conflict with the norms of socialist morality."¹³



'Untitled' © Eduardo Hernandez Santos

¹² Although Cuba does not have a law that prohibits sexual work, in 1999, article 17 of law No. 87 modified the sentences for individuals accused of soliciting customers for prostitutes.

¹³ Law No. 62 (Penal Code) was modified by law No. 87. Title XI, chapter I, Articles 72, 73, 74, 76, 86.

“*La mecánica*,”¹⁴ Romance and Negotiated Masculinity

A number of popular metaphors capture the interactions of *pingueros* and foreigners. Among the most interesting ones is “*la mecánica*”, described by researcher Gisela Fosado during her fieldwork at the end of the 1990s (2004:99). “*La mecánica*” entails a series of narrative strategies that keep *pingueros* from asking money upfront from tourist-clients by presenting the former as victims of the system who are simply looking for a new life abroad or seeking true love.

Thus “*la mecánica*” plays a role in sexual relations and serves as a bargaining chip for negotiating the meaning and performance of masculinity. In this context, *pingueros* use the act of being penetrated to justify asking for more money or obtaining better dividends. Their consent to be penetrated by the foreign Other empowers foreign-clients and serves as a strategy “that helps them relax and give more money.” Andrés comments:

I always say that I am active and when I let them penetrate me I just make something up...that it is my first time and that I do it as a token of affection. I pretend to be nervous and reject them at first because afterwards I can get them to eat from the palm of my hand. Otherwise, it seems too easy and they lose interest. The idea is to mellow them out so that they feel generous and pay more. I make them think they are special, that it was my first time. In the end, they think they are in control.

In this testimony there are several elements that deserve attention. It is interesting to note the notion of “mellowing” that this subject uses in his interactions with foreigners. Thus, an act that could be interpreted as reproducing the subaltern condition turns into an act of empowerment and “control” over the Other. In that sense, this subject describes a conscientious action in which penetration has a use value and masculinity is “offered” in exchange for material reward.

Some subjects conceded that being part of a “friendship” in which no money is exchanged can translate into better dividends because tourists convince themselves that they are merely being generous with their wealth and resources, as opposed to paying for a service. This statement supports the testimony of some of my interviewees including Alejandro:

¹⁴ Scheming

(...) it is more productive to be with a *Yuma* for a week or two than to work the streets at night. A tourist who rents a beach house, a car, and takes you to discos can be more generous. When he leaves, you've made a long-lasting friend who can send you gifts and money with other friends who come for a visit. Otherwise, you only get paid for the service. I feel that when they pay, we become more of an object to them and the treatment is different. But it depends on the *Yuma* because there are some who simply want to rip you off, giving you nickels and dimes or old rags that you cannot even sell in a moment of crisis. I hardly ever ask for money, I just ask if they can help me through a rough time. We make plans and I share my life story, my hardships and needs. I'm always on my best behaviour, I'm nice with them, and give them the idea that I'm very open minded. But I don't do this all the time, only when I realize that the *Yuma* has money. I pay attention to whether he wears brand-name clothes, what kind of car he drives, the places he takes me to eat and dance. The street and life teach you lessons that you can't find in any book.

The same dynamics have been documented by other researches in the Dominican Republic among the *sanky pankys*¹⁵, the equivalent of Cuban *pingueros*. According to Amalia Cabezas this is because a direct commercial transaction will call off other possibilities like marriage, trips abroad, and gifts and will identify the subjects as male prostitutes, something that they try to avoid (Cabezas; 2004: 999). On the other hand, it must be taken into account what clients expect from these subjects in terms of affection and seduction. There seems to exist a "tacit contract" between *pingueros* and tourists by means of which the formers should display a series of tools and codes of romance so as to make foreigners feel that they are not paying to have sex. However, romance is not always an effective strategy, particularly for those who come from the provinces. For them, their arrival in the capital is a difficult moment as Mario explains:

When I got here I only had 60 pesos in my pocket. I travelled on the back of a truck like an animal. When I arrived, I was covered with grime. I borrowed a pair of shoes and I went straight to the Malecón. That night I made thirty bucks and I breathed again but I had to save a lot. I did not eat much. On days that I ate lunch, I would

¹⁵ *Sanky pankys*, or beach boys, are gigolos who cater exclusively to foreign tourists, providing sexual services and companionship to both men and women. For more information see Cabezas, Amalia L. "Between Love and Money: Sex, Tourism, and Citizenship in Cuba and the Dominican Republic". *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2004, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 987-1015.

skip dinner. I wanted to save as much as possible so as not to be against the wall. I have lost 15 pounds already, I look like a corpse. I'm a member of the Union of Young Communists but that's just a front and lately it doesn't help you to get by. It was important before when I was trying to get a job that paid in hard currency but now it's worthless. My goal is to leave the country but I don't know if I'll be able to make it.

These boys, who cannot rely on established networks of friends, set up commercial relationships at low rates that are beginning to spoil the "business." Andrés comments:

There are *pingueros* and *pingueros*. There are the cheap ones who do anybody, even for three bucks, but those are mostly the Palestinians¹⁶ who have never seen 30 bucks in their lives. They have no respect for themselves and are affecting us because then *Yumas* want to spend a luxury night and pay a misery. But I understand them because some of them arrived in Havana without a penny and needed to make quick money. It happened to me too. When I'm desperate because I owe a week's rent, or money, I'll have sex with anyone for whatever price in order to pay my debts. However, if I'm good, I play hard to get and if I don't get paid what I ask, I don't go out even if it's Brad Pitt begging me to do so.

Others, like Héctor, establish a regular fee for his services before interacting with the tourist because he is not willing to cope with the uncertainties of a romantic affair:

I set my own fee upfront because I respect myself. They [foreigners] come looking for affection, caresses—they love to be kissed—and that has a price. By pretending to be [sincerely] affectionate, they are just trying to pay less. They promise you the moon and then they dump you. That's why I'm clear from the start. I can't waste my time with someone if I don't know for sure that he is going to be worthwhile. Time is money. And I've already been fucked too many times.

However, Ramón is not so strict in his demands. He is happy with some consumer goods that he considers valuable:

¹⁶ Racist definition used in Cuba to identify people coming from the eastern part of the island. It is based on prejudices and beliefs about the values and ways of living that denigrate these people.

Sometimes I bargain over some clothes in addition to charging some cash. Clothing has its value especially if it's designer. I see it as an investment and when I'm in the poor house, I sell it. Brandnames like Dolce & Gabbana, Diesel, Levi's sell like hot cakes especially in the countryside. When I arrive in Camagüey with those rags, the hillbillies go wild and they can't even tell for sure if they are real or fakes. I sell it to them as if I operated an exclusive boutique.

This model of success inspired by high levels of consumerism and access to goods and services that are not readily available to the majority of the population awakens in many youngsters the desire to imitate others who, because of their involvement in these activities, boast their exceptional buying power. Alejandro explains:

I arrived in Havana in 2000 at the age of 17. I had studied Italian language because I wanted to work in tourism. My parents were simple workers who couldn't afford the things I wanted. Like any other young person, I wanted to go out, have fun. I had friends who were *jinetes* and they had money and motorcycles, and good clothing, and beautiful women and I wanted to be like them and to have what they had.

While *pingueros* take active part in the economy of pleasure linked to tourism, they also sell clothes and electronics like cell phones that tourists give them in their home towns when they are short of cash.

Likewise in Havana, there is a underground economy that provides bed and board to those coming from the provinces with little money. Some districts in the capital, like the Colón neighbourhood in Central Havana that had been a centre for prostitution before the Revolution, are returning to their former activities. Alejandro lives in this popular neighbourhood, characterized by a high concentration of people and crammed housing. He described his daily routine to me:

I'm living in *barrio de Colón*. I wake up as soon as my neighbours in the tenement house next door start blasting their music around 10am. I'm staying at an old house with ten more *pingueros*. The owner is a toothless old woman who rents rooms to *pingueros*. People say she used to be a madam in a brothel before the Revolution and that afterwards they tried to rehabilitate her. She sells boxed lunches of pork or pasta that are cheaper than eating out. I hardly go out during the day to save money and avoid the police. The idea is to pass the time, so I workout, sleep a lot to recover my strength and about 7pm I shower and smother my body in cream and cologne to

smell good. Around 10pm, I hit the streets and sometimes I come back or not depending on whom I do.

Pingueros have a marked interest in designer labels and make a cult of their bodies using transnational referents that are popularized by global stars from the world of entertainment. The clothes they wear accentuate their muscled bodies and their image is part of a male global aesthetic that is constantly being reinvented through their contact with foreign tourists and the influence of the cultural products of Hollywood's entertainment machinery and the transnational music industry.

The impact of globalization in Cuba has been felt not only in the rise of an emergent tourism economy that has brought large dividends to some social elites as a result of complex processes of increasing social inequality and decapitalization that affect the majority of the population, but it has also generated an economy of pleasure for gay tourists accessible to all income levels. Together with a cheap street sex market in Old Havana and El Vedado, there is an exclusive *pinguero* service that caters to the needs of elegant private parties. These services are featured in catalogues available to moneyed international gay customers. Ángel, a young man and native of Havana, does not "do the streets," he offers a personalized service, exclusive only to a select clientele of businessmen, intellectuals or foreign artists who want to have a homoerotic experience with young Cuban. He explains the dynamics of this service:

My fee starts at 100 dollars and I make lots of money in a month. Sometimes there isn't much action but with what I make, I don't need to sell myself in El Vedado or anywhere else. Actually that works better for me because in my neighbourhood no one knows that I'm in this business. I go to gatherings or private parties hosted by businessmen or people in high positions whose identities I can't reveal. They call me on my cell and arrange a date. I go to fancy places in Miramar, where there is privacy. I'm very discrete and well mannered, that's why they call me. And because the pay is good, sometimes I have to do things I don't like to but what choice do I have?

"Sometimes," adds Ángel, "I serve as a sort of lady-in-waiting, accompanying clients to restaurants, to the beach, to discos, depending on what they want." In this scenario, the relationship can vary, depending on the client's expectations, but they always expect a display of romance, seduction and consent from the other. It is interesting the way they have to name the performances of these subjects and their symbolic implications.

Apparently, *pingueros* structure their gender negotiation by allotting varying degrees of masculinity to themselves and their paying partners depending on the kind of relationship both establish. In this particular case, Ángel uses the term lady-in-waiting to describe a symbolically “feminized” and subordinated function, and yet, one which yields better dividends among *pingueros*.

Many of my interviewees see themselves as heterosexuals and flaunt their masculinity as an immutable, static entity that by no means could be called into question since it is part of a dichotomy between the sexual behaviour during “*la lucha*” and sexual desire. In fact, some of them came to Havana as pimps of their girlfriends before engaging themselves in sexual encounters with foreign tourists (men or women). Later on, things often do not work out the way they expected as their girlfriends marry a foreigner and leave Cuba, simply quit needing their “protection” or decide not to engage further in “*la lucha*” for other reasons. This is the case of Reinier:

My girlfriend and I decided to come to Havana to be in “*la lucha*.” She was in worse straits than I. She only had one skirt made by her grandmother and a pair of dress shoes that she had to share with her sister, so they had to take turns going out at night. We rented separate rooms at an apartment on K and 17 St in El Vedado at 1.50 daily because we wanted to be in “*la lucha*” on our own.

The original plan was that Reinier would come not only as an escort but also to seduce middle-aged foreign women interested in “tasting fresh meat” and that she would do the same with male foreigners. Having sex with strangers was part of the inconveniences of “*la lucha*” but it was all for a mutual cause, or so they thought. The night of their arrival they went to *El Johnny*, a discotheque in Miramar:

She went out with an Italian guy and took him to the rented room in El Vedado. That night I wasn’t lucky so I waited for her. Her room shared a wall with mine so I heard the creaking sound of the bed that drove me crazy and her moaning and the *yuma*’s screams. He paid her 70 bucks and she came to my room to show me the booty. I didn’t know how to look at her. She had this rancid smell, and I was so disgusted that I asked her to take a shower. Next day we went shopping. She got herself a new outfit to continue in “*la lucha*” and bought me a pair of sneakers and a pair of jeans...

Something similar happened to Alejandro and his girlfriend who shared a similar arrangement. He told me that one of the toughest moments for him was when he chanced

upon his girlfriend while out with a male tourist: "Coincidentally I ran into my girlfriend at the beach and when she saw me she started crying. She knew she couldn't approach me or else she would spoil everything. It was hard to hear her sobbing and pretend I didn't so that the guy wouldn't suspect."

Both Alejandro and Reinier told me that their lives got complicated when the families of their girlfriends began to torpedo their relationships. Alejandro's mother-in-law threatened to press charges against him for procuring. As to Reinier, problems with his in-laws took a different course: "at first her family accused her of being a whore but when they saw money coming in, they changed their minds and I became a nuisance and they declared war on me. They even convinced her to marry a *yuma* which she finally did. After that, I continued in *la lucha* on my own until now." He claimed he was not lucky with women because most foreigners "come to Cuba looking for blacks or mulattos and since I was neither, I was fucked." The lack of money and his plans to leave Cuba at all cost, led him to hang around the Malecón where he became exposed to the *Habanero* homoerotic environment, something he had never thought to be involved in:

I never imagined that I had to sleep with a man, let alone that I was going to make a living out of it. Everything was strange to me, seeing men kissing. I wasn't used to that kind of life or ways. It came as a blow to me until I got used to it. If homosexuality did not exist, I would starve to death.

Reinier noted that having sex with men did not change his perception of homosexuality because he sees it as something alien to his inner desires and feelings and above all because his idea about it is associated with embracing an identity and not just about having sex. For Reinier, embracing a homoerotic identity implies a rejection of sex with women and engaging in an exclusive relationship with a man:

Being a homosexual means something else. You must have a relationship and live with another man. You understand? I sleep with men to make a living, but I don't see myself as a homosexual. I like women and at some point I would like to form a family and have children. I have friends who have discovered that side in them while being in *la lucha* and they have their partners. But that's not my case.

Although Reinier distances himself from homosexuality, he concedes that the homoerotic environment has been fundamental to his performance and survival and that after spending time in those networks he is no longer as judgmental as he once was. When

forced “to do anything”, he has certain sexual preferences: “I like young feminine men and I prefer foreigners, since Cubans, even if they have money, tend to be chatterboxes. I hate kissing men. Their kissing is rough but I do like effeminate clients because they are softer.” However, despite his estrangement from homosexuality, he confesses that he has felt pleasure during some of his homoerotic encounters:

I can't deny that after having been to bed with so many men I have started to enjoy it, but not with all of them because I have to deal with such characters that you can't imagine. However, I must confess that I have felt pleasure at times. Life puts you in some situations...Although I don't lose track. I know this is *la lucha* but I admit that I have felt pleasure.

The relationship that *pingueros* have with their bodies is both complex and contradictory. To some, the body is only a tool, a form of capital with use value that guarantees them access to a “good life.” In their narratives, the good life is associated with economic solvency, dressing well and eating well, going to discos every night and helping their families. To others, the body is a place of important self-discovery where they can contrast their notions of gender, sexuality and pleasure. That's how Andrés describes it:

This world has changed my life. I now see homosexuality as something normal. At the end of the day we are homosexuals and those who say otherwise, it's because they are either in denial or are plain stupid. Some say that they don't this or that but in the end, they do everything although they pretend to be tough men.

Although they might have sex with other men in or out the space of “*la lucha*” and although in most cases they might define themselves as homosexuals, *pingueros* do not embrace the “coming out” notion as a visible and proud individual act in the American or European style. In fact, in Cuba, due to historical and cultural reasons, being in the closet has been more of an “open secret” (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1998) than the acquisition of a public identity based on the individual's sexual orientation. According to an old Yoruba saying “you don't inquire about what you already know”: in other words, certain things do not have to be explicitly described in order to exist.

Pingueros' perceptions of homosexuality vary from individual to individual. To some, prejudices are not solely expressed in gender terms, but also in the language of economic competition. Yamel feels a special aversion for transvestites:

I can't stand them. I think they behave like clowns and I don't get them. You can be a homosexual but not a flaming queen. In this world there is a tremendous competition and quite frankly I don't know what *Yumas* see in them, but the truth is that transvestites pick up lots of foreigners. *Pingueros* can't stand fagots but they would like to erase transvestites from the face of the earth.

Rejection of the feminine seems to structure the discourse of some *pingueros*. The feminine seems to establish a differentiation/matching of masculinity. In another moment of our interview, Yamel noted: "I came here to struggle, not to be with women as others do. Women bleed you dry of your money, and of everything, and then once they exhaust you, they beat it."

Many of the narratives compiled for this work reveal that there are many different ways in which *pingueros* self-construct themselves as subjects. In some cases their practices are associated with the process of hypermasculinization and their sexual-gender configurations are shaped via the reproductions of stereotypes in the binary framework of active-passive within an economy of roles. For these *pingueros* the judgments and notions on gender and sexuality have been tailored after the traditional "Cuban macho man" role model not only as a desidentification strategy, but also as a relational mode in itself.

However, other *pingueros* pursue more fluid role models that indicate a change in the way males are beginning to identify themselves with the category of "men" and to regard the "macho man" as something old and obsolete. To some of my interviewees, the term "man" is more ethical than sexual. That is why they try to stay away from *pingueros* and establish other social networks and connections. "Many homosexuals are more men than many *pingueros*," says Ángel, adding:

Pingueros give a place a bad reputation, so hanging out with them makes you look bad because if they say hi to you in front of a foreigner, I might be seen as bad too, that I befriend delinquents. I don't like *pingueros*, or the way they talk, or behave. They have no ethics. They have a dirty mind. They even give *yumas* pills to knock them down and rip them off or to stop them from having a hard on to avoid sex. A *pinguero's* worst enemy is another *pinguero*. I have talked to some of them whom I thought were my friends and when I've turned my back on them they were exchanging phone numbers with the *Yuma* I was dating. To me, being a man is having ethics and having sex with another man does not define you as a human

being. In fact, I know many homosexuals who are more of a man than many *pingueros* who think they are big macho men.

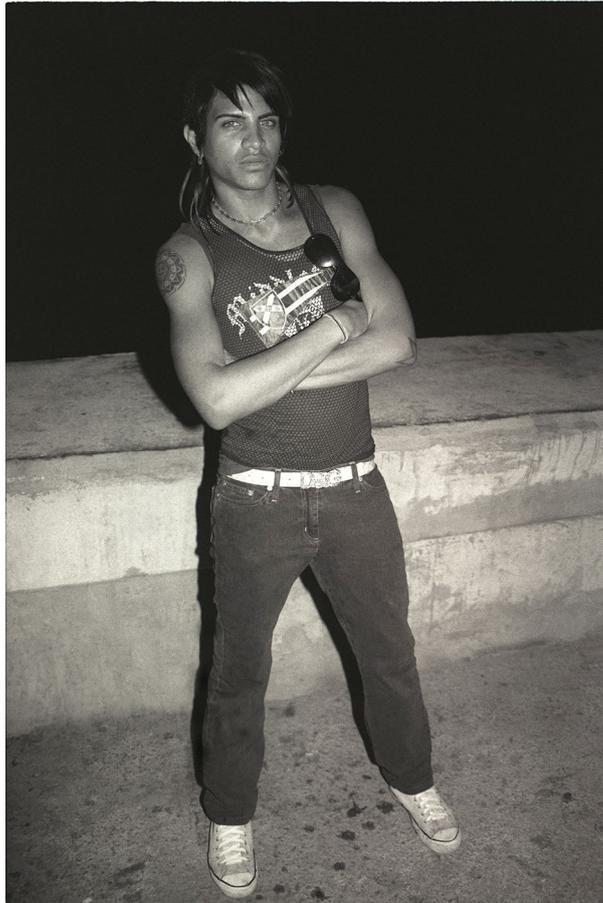
In this testimony there is also an estrangement from the figure of the *pinguero*. It might be possible that the research and production of knowledge on this phenomenon have aimed at trying to unify these subjects under the same category even though they have multiple configurations and opinions. In this regard, and agreeing with Judith Butler, we can be sure that identity is a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience (2001, 50).

Some of the narratives that I have compiled for this work explode and destabilize the category of “men” that so often seems immutable. “I am a man regardless of what I do in bed. I hate those definitions, they seem *cheo*¹⁷ and outdated,” says Arturo another one of my informants. Similar evidence has been collected by Carlos Ulises Decena during his field work with Dominican immigrants living in the United States. For them too, the macho man not only implies lack of modernity and less equitable sexual relations, but is perceived as an obstacle to achieve social mobility (2011:181).

According to my testimonies, it seems that as a result of the contact with foreigners, and the socialization within the “*ambiente*” the sexual notions of these subjects have opened up and modernized. However, no matter how much they try to distance themselves from the macho configuration, they still reproduce a “feminized” model of economic independence that is anchored in the vision of the male provider. “Just imagine,” Ángel remarked, “he has the money, so he provides for me. Everything I have, I owe it to him. I try to please him in everything and the truth is that I can’t complain.”

To some of my *pinguero* informants, the idea of success basically translates into being kept by a foreigner from abroad or leaving the country under their protection. Others, however, aspire to make enough money to start their own business in order to quit “*la lucha*.” Nevertheless, most of my informants are young people with an eye focused firmly on the present, affected by consumerism and with little hope for the future. The combination of these conditions prevents them from subverting the processes of subalternity in which they are immersed because the economic revenues from “*la lucha*” rarely yield enough dividends to put an end to poverty and social immobility.

¹⁷ *Cheo* is a term used in the “*ambiente*” to describe heterosexual men who are *machistas* and homophobes. In general, in Cuban slang *cheo* is something ridiculous and *démodé*.



'Untitled' © Eduardo Hernandez Santos

Epilogue

The Cuban contemporary context has become a post-socialist, neoliberal scenario in tune with global policies that have radically reduced state subsidies to key sectors such as public health and education, once pillars of the government's political legitimization. With the alleged aim of "updating" the economic model in order to preserve the continuation of socialism on the island, the Cuban state began to implement "a labour readjustment policy"--a strategic euphemism—resting largely on massive layoffs.¹⁸ In addition, the

¹⁸ As part of the policy of "actualization" of socialism, the Cuban government, headed by General Raúl Castro, initiated in 2010 a massive layoff process which affected 500,000 workers until March 2011. This figure constitutes 10% of Cuba's labour force. In addition, it was planned that by the end of the year 2011, one million state workers would have to leave the labour market, which constitutes 20% of the island's labour force. To counteract the impact of such measure, 250, 000 self-employed jobs and some more in the private sector would be created (Mesa Lago, 2011:30). However, this has proved an unattainable plan due to the economic decapitalization of the majority of the Cuban people, the lack of bank credits to private individuals and a number of government restrictions that

private sector has been boosted in the areas of services and with the legalization of new trades that fall outside the state labour market. However, the majority of the businesses are not in the hands of the unemployed, but in the hands of certain elites linked to tourism or to people who have received remittances from their families abroad. The average salary of about 450 Cuban pesos--roughly 20 US dollars—has not changed in years¹⁹ and it is estimated that the cost of living has increased 20% in the last few years.

In a national context where tourism has become a key economic engine and development policies arise from conditions of deepening austerity and reduction, it is not unusual to see economically deprived and educationally disadvantaged youths turning to sex as the sole means of satisfying their basic needs and gaining access to other goods and services. Tourism has been described by some scholars including Antonio Benítez Rojo (1992) and Amalia Cabezas (2009) as a mechanism for recycling certain modes of colonial domination. Other researchers point out that the plantation model established in the Caribbean during the 19th century has been substituted today by tourism because of its long-term impact on local cultures and economies. Cabezas says that under the new “all-inclusive” model of tourism that has been implemented in the Caribbean, many beaches have been privatized and nearby communities banned from entering the resulting enclaves (Cabezas, 2009:29).

Until very recently, Cubans—unless they were government functionaries, military or exemplary workers—were not allowed to book rooms in hotels or enjoy their facilities. These prohibitions formed part of an official policy aimed at exerting ideological control and at hiding existing privileges among certain sectors of the population. Today, with the restitution of these rights, in virtue of the country’s economic needs and in an effort to change the government’s image, the Cuban state has ceded a regulatory function to the market, which automatically (and indiscriminately) excludes wide swaths of Cuban society. As a result, there are many gaps, tensions and contradictions in the “egalitarian” model used to legitimize the revolution, thus generating friction and resentment toward the State.

make it virtually impossible to achieve other ways of reinserting the laid off workers into other economic spheres.

¹⁹ According to Carmelo Mesa Lago although there was a small increase in the nominal salary and the pensions, their real value is between 73% and 50% respectively which is still lower than the 1989 levels (2011:27).

The “all-inclusive” model of enclave tourism also contains a sexual component which makes the Caribbean an attractive destination. While the World Bank promotes the Caribbean tourism industry as a regional economic alternative, “pleasure areas” have been built globally for the enjoyment of First World tourists (Nagel, 2000; Alcázar, 2009). This phenomenon is accompanied by processes of racialization, exoticization and hypersexualization (Kempadoo, 2004) that turn Cuba into an ethnosexual territory (Nagel, 2000: 159-160), that is to say into an exotic destination where there exist intersections and interactions between ethnicity and sexuality to serve the foreign other.

Although the Cuban government has tried to promote alternative, sex-free tourism models such as health, ecological and academic tourism, it has been unable to subvert global notions of the island as a place for pleasure and sex. There have even been foreigners who travelled to Cuba for non-sexual reasons, but have been involved in what O'Connell Davidson called “situational sex tourism” (1996:42); that is, even when they did not come to Cuba specifically for sex, at some point during their stay, they came into contact with Cuban men and women whom they compensated in material means. Some studies indicate that tourists who have travelled to Cuba for sex were cheap sex hunters in places like Eastern Europe and Morocco. They valued Cuba as a safer, less violent place where it was less likely to catch sexually transmitted diseases (Fosado, 2004: 68).

So far, I have tried to challenge some of the notions that have presented *pingueros* as a stable, essentially economic category of sex work linked to sex tourism. I have avoided a prudish reading of the phenomenon, and tried instead to look into the multiple social, racial, gender and sexual intersections that characterize these subjects. There are still other avenues of analysis open for future projects. For instance, conducting research on the experiences and attitudes of tourists who seek *pingueros* constitutes one viable path for exploration, one that would shed new light on the multidimensional social world that these subjects construct and inhabit on a daily basis.

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