

# Using the body

An ethnographic study of sexual capital in Havana, Cuba

Anne Danielsen Fragell



Master thesis at the department of social anthropology, the faculty of social science

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

16.11.2020



## **Abstract**

This master thesis investigates sexual capital among middleclass women in Havana in the context of global, economic and gendered inequalities that has increasingly affected the Cuban society since the 1990s' Special Period. Sexual capital is defined by physical appearance, social skills and personality, and functions as a fourth asset to Bourdieu's economic, cultural and social capital and proves to be convertible into the latter capital forms. Based on six months of fieldwork in Havana, Cuba, and relevant literature, this ethnographic study aims to reveal social meanings of sexual capital in a particular field, mainly by investigating how my interlocutors relate to their female bodies in their everyday lives. This study presents the concept "using the body" by focusing on how women working in Havana's restaurant business and music scene exploit their sexual capital to obtain money, social status and power.

By investigating the research question, "in which ways does sexual capital affect female agency among urban middleclass women in Havana?", this study illustrates how "using the body" relates to social mobility and power, but also stigmatization and gendered inequalities.

## **Acknowledgements**

First of all, I want to thank my interlocutors for sharing their everyday lives with me, for their honest and wise thoughts as well as becoming my friends. Further, I would like to thank Ståle Wig for being a supportive and honest advisor during the three years this master project has lasted.

To my boyfriend and father to our son, Pedro Perez Vento; thank you for all support during the fieldwork, the time after and especially for being an excellent father, housewife and cook during these last intense months. Thank you, all of my friends who have been positive, and supporting this whole time, and especially to my friend Marte Nogva Mårstøl, for motivating and helping me to continue this project after a long maternity leave. Also, thank you to my family for practical and emotional support. And most importantly, I will thank my dear friend Gjertrud Jonassen, for making this project possible and everything I have learned and accomplished after you became a part of my life.

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>0</b>
<b>MOTIVATION</b> .....	2
<b>THE POLITICAL CONTEXT</b> .....	4
<b>THE INFORMAL SECTOR</b> .....	5
<b>TRANSFORMATIONS OF WOMANHOOD</b> .....	6
<b>USING THE BODY IN CONTEMPORARY HAVANA</b> .....	9
<b>AIM OF THE THESIS</b> .....	11
<b>STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS</b> .....	12
<b>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>SEXUAL CAPITAL</b> .....	14
<b>GENDER</b> .....	18
<b>AGENCY</b> .....	19
<b>BEAUTY</b> .....	21
<b>RACE</b> .....	22
<b>METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>POSITIONING THE FIELD</b> .....	26
<b>APPROACHING THE FIELD</b> .....	27
<b>PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION</b> .....	28
<b>ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW</b> .....	29
<b>REFLEXIVITY</b> .....	30
<i>Gender, Ethnicity, Age, Class</i> .....	30
<i>Falling in love with a “local”</i> .....	32
<i>Feminism and gender equality– global concepts?</i> .....	32
<b>LANGUAGE</b> .....	33
<b>PROCESSING THE DATA</b> .....	34
<b>ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS</b> .....	34
<b>SPENDING MONEY ON BEAUTY</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>BEAUTY IDEALS</b> .....	37
<i>Marisol: “make-up is just a woman’s need to feel good, or not”</i> .....	37
<i>Selena: “Men want a big ass and big boobs”</i> .....	39
<i>Samantha: “I have to do women-things”</i> .....	40
<i>Gendered and racial ideas of beauty</i> .....	42
<b>THE FEMALE CONSUMPTION MARKET</b> .....	44
<i>Economic independency</i> .....	45
<i>Business in the household</i> .....	47
<i>The smell of allá</i> .....	49
<i>Foreign connections</i> .....	51
<b>SUMMARY</b> .....	52
<b>CONVERTING SEXUAL CAPITAL</b> .....	<b>54</b>
<b>MAKING THE ENDS MEET</b> .....	56
<b>JINETERISMO</b> .....	57
<b>“LA CUBANA Y EL YUMA”</b> .....	59
<b>VERONICA’S NARRATIVE</b> .....	62
<i>Selling sex</i> .....	62
<i>Selling drinks</i> .....	65
<b>YAMILKA: LA MUSICA</b> .....	67
<i>The French party</i> .....	69
<b>AGE AS AN ASSET</b> .....	71
<b>MALE SEXUAL CAPITAL</b> .....	72
<b>SUMMARY</b> .....	75
<b>USING THE BODY: POWER, RESISTANCE AND STIGMA</b> .....	<b>77</b>

<b>REGGAETÓN: SEXUALIZING WOMEN</b> .....	78
<b>SEXUALLY INDEPENDENT</b> .....	81
<b>THE MACHO IDEA</b> .....	83
<i>Humor as resistance</i> .....	85
<i>Femininity as power</i> .....	87
<b>LOOKING FORWARD</b> .....	88
<i>A worthy future</i> .....	90
<b>SUMMARY</b> .....	92
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>93</b>
<b>LITERATURE</b> .....	<b>95</b>



## Introduction

After her first birth, followed by months of breastfeeding, Veronica said her breasts changed from being “firm and pear-shaped” into rather “punctured and hanging”. Although several mothers experience such a change, she felt lower self-esteem due to her post-partum body. To solve this problem, she decided to conduct a breast augmentation, placing implants into her breasts to make them bigger. In some cases, the Cuban health system offers plastic surgery for free, but lines may be long and not everyone who dislikes a body part can be prioritized (Lundgren 2011: 136). Therefore, Veronica decided to conduct the procedure illegally – in a national hospital (all hospitals in Cuba are state-run), but secretly. She would have to pay a handsome sum of money to the doctor who would conduct such a surgery.

First, she contacted a male doctor who worked in a tourist hospital, which was also state-run but received income from tourists and their health insurance companies. Due to the hospital’s privileges and international connections, he had access to breast implants through the tourist hospital. Furthermore, the doctor stole the implants from the hospital and sold them to Veronica for 600 dollars. Unfortunately, he lacked experience and knowledge to conduct a breast augmentation, and therefore advised Veronica to find another doctor who could insert the implants to her breasts. Fortunately, she found another doctor in another hospital who claimed he was able to do the surgery. Since the procedure would be secret, Veronica and her mother sneaked in one evening when there were less people in the hospital, while her one-year-old daughter was home with Veronica’s father.

Veronica was not allowed to spend the night but leave the hospital as soon as the surgery was over. Narcosis, which is normal during a breast augmentation, would make her sleep for too many hours. Therefore, she only received local anesthesia. Veronica characterized the procedure as the worst experience in her life, due to the fact that she was awake during the surgery and the pain that followed. The surgery costed her 200 dollars, in addition to the 600 dollars she had already paid for the stolen implants. That is a substantial sum money for an average Cuban. To afford the surgery, she had saved up for a year. Also, her daughter’s father contributed economically to Veronica’s new pear-shaped and firm breasts, although she did not specify how much. However, she claimed it was worth it. “Now I can wear the tops and bikinis I want”, she said proudly to me when telling this story. To be the ultimate version of herself, Veronica felt her physical appearance and personality need to harmonize. According to Veronica, her self-esteem comes from her intelligence, her self-representation and physical



appearance. Although “looks” is not enough to obtain success, it is an important asset to cultivate her *sexual capital*.

Sexual capital is a recent concept in social science and is based on Bourdieu’s forms of capitals; cultural, social and economic capital (1986: 241-258). The use of sexual capital has increased during the last decade within sociological fields. There is no significant difference between the concepts of sexual and erotic capital. The different terminologies may exist because the concept is quite new, and thus social scientists have not yet agreed of which term to use.

However, despite its novelty, the term sexual capital has proved to explain how physical factors, such as looks and appearance, affects individuals’ *agency*<sup>1</sup>; economically, culturally and socially (Green 2011, Martin and George 2006, Waters 2016).

Sexual capital does not refer exclusively to sexual experience, skills or an individual’s number of sexual partners, but also to beauty, sexual attractiveness, social skills, energy and likability, self-representation and personality (Hakim 2010: 12-16). This thesis’ definition of sexual capital leans on Adam Green’s (2011) theoretical approach; “*sexual capital accrues to those for whom there is general consensus regarding desirability*” (: 247). In other words, sexual capital can be defined as a common opinion of attractiveness within a social field. Social researchers, such as Martin and George (2006), have been interested in whether, and how, sexual capital can “*be converted to other forms of capitals?*” (: 128, 129). Veronica’s breast augmentation illustrates an answer. First, by investing money in plastic surgery, Veronica converted economic capital into sexual capital. Secondly, since physical appearance and self-representation affected the amount of tips, she would receive in her bartender job, social relations and thereby cultural knowledge, Veronica could convert her sexual capital further into economic, social and cultural capital. Not only because her body appeared as attractive, but also because Veronica herself felt attractive; both bodily and mentally, she “loved herself” (Edmond 2010: 220).

Through investigating beauty ideals and plastic surgery in Brazil, Edmond (2010) writes, “Some mothers reach for the tools of aesthetic medicine to augment freedom” (: 220).

Considering sexual capital, he explains how “plastic surgery becomes a tool to negotiate

---

<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, *agency* refers to how social agents experience possibilities related to social mobility (Bourdieu 1979), in addition to how social agents may manipulate, change and thus become deviant examples of their collective social reality (Foucault 1982)

markets where the sexual capital of age and beauty can be exchanged with various kinds of cultural and economic resources” (: 229).

Based on my six months’ fieldwork among urban middleclass women in Havana, the capital of Cuba, in addition to relevant literature, I argue that sexual capital is an exchangeable value among Cuban women to improve economic, cultural and social capital. However, this thesis aims to investigate the relation between sexual capital and agency among women in particular, but as some empirical findings and literature illustrate; sexual capital is not only cultivated and exploited by heterosexual women, but also by queer and heterosexual men (Allen 2012, Aboim 2012, Simoni 2015).

Women (and men) exploiting their sexual capital is a global and common phenomenon. Gaining benefits through one’s sexual capital – from becoming successful models to receiving more tips at one’s waiter job, is practiced by women in various countries, classes, genders and ethnicities (Hakim 2011, Green 2011). However, investigating the meaning of sexual capital in a particular social field may reveal a fruitful insight to structures related to a particular society.

Furthermore, social scientists have considered topics related to the Cuban sex industry. Within the context of global economic inequalities, these studies show that internal and external structures of gender and ethnicity contribute to shape women’s (and men’s) agency, and thus their ways to improve economic, cultural and social capital, concretely through sex work and foreign social relations (Kummels 2005, Stout 2008, Roland 2010, Allen 2012, Simoni 2015).

This thesis’ approach to sexual capital is not mainly sexual-economic relationships, but rather how my interlocutors cultivated and exploited their sexual capital in different ways; through their working positions, romantic relationships and within their social environment in general.

## **Motivation**

Women who use their sexual capital in order to increase their economic capital was not the original plan of this master project. Inspired by Norwegian female musicians and western feminist discourses, my previous plan was to investigate female musicians in Havana, and

how they potentially challenged gender stereotypes. While seeking the limited number of feminist musicians in Havana, I discovered a phenomenon that changed my perspective on gender in general, and women in particular, both personally and anthropologically.

The majority of women I met seemed to be extremely passionate about their looks. Moreover, women seemed to take advantage of their looks and sexuality, in other words their *sexual capital*, to increase their economic capital, mostly through their romantic relationships and social relations with tourists. Naturally, I also observed deviations from this pattern. Some women cultivated and exploited their sexual capital to a lower extent, and even attempted to avoid “using their body” to obtain benefits. However, the phenomenon of using one’s sexual capital occurred so crucial and fascinating, that my field took a completely different direction. I began to hang out with women working as musicians, waiters and bartenders in tourist restaurants and among workers and clients in beauty salons. In musical and restaurant professions, I observed how factors such as looks, personality and self-representation were important tools to succeed economically, socially and culturally. Furthermore, through consuming services in beauty salons and commodities in fashion stores, clients improved their physical appearance as well as their sexual capital while the salon workers obtained a form of economic independency.

In sum, ahead of fieldwork I was motivated to seek out women who challenged gender stereotypes. Yet ironically, I ended up focusing on how women cultivate and exploit gender stereotypes.

I found it interesting to try to understand how and why my interlocutors spent a remarkable amount of their salaries on acrylic nails, make-up and clothes, at the same time as they shared economic worries about “making the ends meet”.

Otherwise, I was surprised and fascinated about the seeming normalization of sex work among my interlocutors and people in general, including tourists visiting Cuba. The majority of my empirical cases illustrate how women took advantage of their sexuality in everyday life-situations. Thus, sexual capital has become a useful concept to investigate and analyze how my female interlocutors used themselves and their bodies to strengthen their social, cultural and economic capital.

## **The political context**

«Cuban socialism today is not what it has been imagined to be, nor what it was designed to be, nor what it once was in practice» (Hodge 2014: 445).

When seeking to study the Cuban society, it is crucial to describe the country's political and economic context, from the Revolution in 1959 until the Soviet Collapse in 1989, and thus the economic crisis throughout the 1990s, until the growing private and informal sector.

The Cuban society is officially based on Fidel Castro's socialism which emerged after the Revolution in 1959. In the public sector, including professions as lawyers, teachers and doctors, the average state salary is about 30 dollars a month. Such a salary does not cover basic needs. Although Cubans receive food rations, free health care and free education (including university education), informal work and consumption practices are seen as necessary to make the ends meet (Bastian 2018).

Since of the Soviet Collapse in 1989, Cuba have been dealing with tough economic and material challenges, similar to other communist countries. To compensate for the loss of subsidies from the Soviet Union, the Cuban government expanded the private sector by allowing small private enterprises to open. Furthermore, investing and expanding the tourism sector has provided important incomes for the Cuban people and state. Tourist spheres, including sex tourism, rapidly changed the economic, cultural and social agency of Cuban women and men (Hodge 2014, Roland 2010).

In 1993, the dollar was tangled into the Cuban economy as a second currency in addition to the national one – the Cuban peso. Further on, in 2004, the dollar was transformed into CUC (Cuban convertible peso) – a supposedly convertible and dollar-based currency. Due to how the private sector sustain Cubans with the majority of their material needs, dollars are not only attractive but also necessary for Cubans' everyday lives (Holbraad 2017: 82, Bastian 2018: 85).

## **The informal sector**

Throughout this thesis, I will illustrate how economic and gendered structures across different working sectors in Havana serve to increase the value of sexual capital, and influences women's (and men's) agency.

The economic structures in the Cuban society are determined by a hybridity of the public, private and informal sectors. In my field, I heard several stories about workers in public institutions using illegal strategies to gain higher income. As illustrated in the story about Veronica's breast augmentation, doctors working in public hospital exploit illegal strategies by selling medical services "under-the-table". In a few occasions in my field, I received medical offers from plastic surgeons, dentists and doctors who wanted to conduct private services for a high price.

Bastian (2018) organizes three upper class groups connected to the Cuban state; the Military, Government Officials and people working for mixed companies (hybrid of transnational and Cuban regulation).

Furthermore, there exist several non-state private businesses of different sizes. In many cases, such businesses have a public license, which means they are legal and pay taxes to the state. Since salaries in these businesses are completely based on private transactions, they are public and private at the same time. Other businesses in the private sector are unlicensed and therefore illegal. However, whether private businesses are legal or not, they depend on informal social relations to grow (Bastian 2018: 61, 62)

The core interlocutors of my study represent three different working positions in Havana, Cuba. All of my interlocutors' working positions are a hybrid of the public, private in in certain cases the black sector.

My interlocutor Yamilka worked as a musician in a hotel. The name of the hotel will not be mentioned to maintain her privacy. However, the hotel, which is Yamilka's employer, had a shared ownership between an international company and the Cuban State. Further, she received salary from the hotel in CUP – the non-convertible public currency. Additionally, she received a decent amount of tips from tourists in CUC; the dollar-based, convertible currency.

Secondly, the restaurant where the majority of my interlocutors were working, engaged in the public, private and black sector activities. The ownership was private, but the restaurant was a licensed and formally registered business and was obliged to pay state taxes. Equipment was often bought in the private or the black market, since state-owned stores could not sustain the restaurant with all the kitchenware, food and commodities it needed to maintain its standard and attractiveness for tourists. In this restaurant, salaries were paid in CUC.

Thirdly, the beauty salons where I conducted fieldwork were formally licensed, and paid state taxes, but relied on private customers for income. Here, equipment such as nail polish, acetone and nail files were bought either in state-owned stores, formal and privately run stores, or through unregistered black market traders.

Ultimately, these examples illustrate how state-based, private and informal economic practices overlap and thus create hybrid businesses.

## **Transformations of womanhood**

Another historical context to consider, in order to understand the empirical material presented in this thesis, is Cuba's gender policies before and after the 1959 Revolution. From the beginning of the twentieth century, and until the socialist revolution in 1959, upper class women engaged in the Women's movement in Western countries through feministic discourses such as divorce rights and women's participating in the labor market (Corrigan 2005: 132). Furthermore, it is crucial to note how privileged upper-class women with housekeepers and nannies in their household had the time and energy to engage in feministic campaigns in Cuba. Nevertheless, their work and engagement aimed to include all Cuban women in a positive way, and seemed to influence national policies after the 1959 Revolution (: 85, 86).

After 1959, as Cuba became a socialistic country, feminist agendas, shared with the upper-class women from the prior-socialistic society, influenced new socialistic politics. The Cuban Women's Federation, the FMC<sup>2</sup>, encouraged women to participate in wage-labor, while governmental daycare and schools would cover children's needs in the daytime (Härkonen 2015: 3).

---

<sup>2</sup> Federación de las Mujeres Cubanas

Already in the 1960s, Cuban doctors attempted to procure contraceptives, although a widespread access to proper and safe contraceptives was not accomplished until the 1980s. In 1979 and thus twenty years after the revolution, abortion was completely legalized and accessible for all Cuban women. These changes would contribute to cultivating the ideal of the “New Woman” by enabling women to join the working sphere and politics, and thereby create gender equality, as emphasized by the Cuban state’s socialist ideology. However, some women found it difficult to combine working in the public sphere with managing domestic work in the household, and many left the labor sector and went back to being full-time housewives (Andaya 2014: 31, 41).

As a part of making new, socialistic citizens, (heterosexual) sexual education was integrated in Cuba’s educational system throughout the 1970s. In these classes, gender equality was emphasized and thereby women were encouraged to see themselves as not only reproducers, but also sexual beings who should focus on their own sexual needs (Lundgren 2012: 36). Due to these changes, women could distinguish from traditional gender roles; not only through wage-labor, but also as sexual agents instead of reproducers. These changes were seen as a contribution to making healthy and socialistic citizens, whilst their behavior and mentality would create “correct” social values (: 36-37).

Moreover, Cuba’s expansion of the private market, as well as tourism in the 1990s, provided new ways to use the body and thereby achieve economic capital for Cuban women (and men). Although sex work had been occurring in Cuba since colonial times, the increasing need for the new dollar-currency in the 1990s and the intensification of tourism, (including sex tourism), created a new form of womanhood that contradicted with socialist values. Women’s (and men’s) sexual agency showed to gain benefits in the private and informal market, concretely through tourism (Kummels 2005: 20).

Contradictorily to the state-socialist ideal of the “New Woman”, Cuban women’s agency, as well as the value of their sexual capital, expanded alongside with (sex)tourism (locally called *jineterismo*<sup>3</sup>), and the private market. First, selling sexual services or engage in relationships with tourists proved to increase women’s agency by converting sex into economic, cultural and social capital. As Roland (2010) argue, Cuban sex workers do not only receive money,

---

<sup>3</sup> An emic concept referring to Cuban sex work (Roland 2010: 6), but also relates to strategic acts from Cubans towards tourists, as creating social, sexual and romantical relationships which further may lead to economic and geographic mobility (Härkonen 2015: 10, as cited in Andaya 2007: 292-295, see also Kummels 2005, Stout 2008, Simoni 2015)

but also access to restaurants, nightclubs and hotels, referred to as “the global community” (: 12). Second, the private market allowed Cubans to open their own businesses, which in many cases led to increased economic capital, also for women (Pertierra 2008).

As in the case of my ethnographic field, the agency of women working in restaurants and the music scene showed to be influenced by their sexual capital. Although my interlocutors did not sell sexual services during my fieldwork, tourists’ desire to consume them as Cubans (in certain cases; Cuban women in particular) provided money, foreign goods, and access to “the global community”. In this process of tourists exchanging money and goods for socializing with Cubans, their sexual capital ascribed attractiveness to themselves as “products” in the touristic sphere.

During my fieldwork in Havana in 2018, FMC’s (the national women’s federation) work was visible through campaigns that addressed violence towards women and journals representing women’s interests and socialistic values. The anti-violence campaign was mainly visible through billboards along motorways, showing a woman who covers her eyes with her hands and the text *eres más que obedecer* (you are more than obey).

One day, I visited a women’s journal run by the FMC and talked with a young female journalist who worked there. During our conversation, she emphasized how Cuban women needed to learn about *machismo*<sup>4</sup>, and how it surrounds women in general (at least in Latin America); even those who feel unaffected by it. When I shared my perception of how my interlocutors seemed more engaged in their looks than machoistic problems, she avoided to answer the question, before she continued promoting her feminist and socialist ideas. However, from this women’s journal, I brought with me four FMC-magazines and showed them to three interlocutors who were working in an Italian restaurant where I conducted the majority of my fieldwork; Veronica (28), Marisol (21) and Samantha (22). Personality tests, sewing patterns and cooking recipes were part of the content, as well as pictures of revolutionary women in military uniforms. These pictures attempted to remind the magazines’ readers that also women fought in the revolution back in the 1950s – something that seemed completely irrelevant and uninteresting for Veronica, Marisol and Samantha. After a few minutes of investigating these magazines, the women put them away, found Veronica’s iPad and began watching American pornography. As these women were watching

---

<sup>4</sup> “... an exaggerated display of manliness but also the idea that men should have supremacy and control over women in every aspect of their life and that both physically and psychologically” (Rosendahl 1997: 52-53).



the iPad, the pornographic actors' physical appearance, as well as the sexual positions the actors conducted in the videos, created noteworthy engagement compared to the socialist and feministic magazines.



Figure 1: The FMC-magazines representing both "modern" and revolutionary women

Although my interlocutors experienced great benefits by having a socialistic free health care system that provided abortion, contraceptives, medicines and birth- and maternity needs, the concept of gender equality did not occur in the same terms as ideal of the “New Woman”, the FMC-magazines nor as I had learned about gender equality in Norway (also mentioned in Rosendahl 1997: 100). Being “liberated” and “independent” proved to be important to these women, but they sought independence and liberation rather through beauty, bodily confidence and personality; in other words, by cultivating their sexual capital.

### **Using the body in contemporary Havana**

Recently, while writing this thesis in 2020, I chatted with my interlocutor Marisol on social media. She lives in Havana, Cuba, and is struggling materially because of the corona crisis, which has led to an economic lockdown in the capital. Our digital conversation included some topics of my thesis, as well as touching upon how Cubans experience these difficult times;

Me: Do you think women invest more in their looks today than before?

Marisol: I don't know, but it is easier to use the body than the brain. And I also think that depends on the values that you grow with. And now people don't grow up with the same values as before. Now, more people really don't care

Me: Because of [the musical genre] reggaetón?

Marisol: Yes, exactly. They don't care because they don't know about it. They don't know the same anymore, they do not learn it, not home and not in school

Me: Are they waiting for something you think?

Marisol: They are waiting for something to happen. Now people are hungry for real (because of the corona crisis)

This conversation illustrates how “using the body” can be associated with the “wrong” values that according to Marisol is a result of economic marginalization (that people are hungry “for real”). According to her, using the body means engaging in sexual and romantic relationships strategically to achieve economic benefits. Although sex work is not a rare sight in Havana, my interlocutors associated such work with economic marginalization and demonstrated how themselves would never sell sexual services to gain economic benefits. In other words, using the body was considered as an easy and promiscuous tool that contradicts with the “right” moral; a last resort (Aboim 2012: 80), and a weapon of the weak (Scott 1985). The “right” option would rather be to “use to brain”, as for example through education or skills that are not related to sexual capital.

As implied by my question to Marisol, “using the body” is also associated with the music genre reggaetón; characterized by catchy melodies, song lyrics that, according to my interlocutors, promotes (female) promiscuity, partying, money and an erotic dance style. Moreover, this music symbolized how Cubans invest more time and money in “superficial” values such as sex, partying and tourist hustling instead of education, intelligence and the “right” moral. Illustrated by the conversation with Marisol, as well as relevant literature, reggaetón and the culture it promotes is labelled as a “low cultural level” (Lundgren 2011, Baker 2015: 136).

In this thesis, I will illustrate that the concept of “using the body” reveals further aspects in women's lives than this emic perception, that considers reggaetón performers and sex workers. The etic approach to using the body rather points to the process of how middleclass women in Havana cultivate physical and social attractiveness (sexual capital) and further

exploit it to increase social, cultural and economic capital. First, social capital is defined by the status of those in one's social network – such as tourists or upper-class Cubans, whom are easier to meet in touristic spheres as restaurants and concerts. Further, cultural capital may increase with access to restaurants, clubs and hotels of high status, which is easier obtained through interaction with tourists or Cubans with a high cultural status. As I will describe in chapter five, foreign friends can function as “cultural goods”, something which is likely to increase one's class position. Ultimately, economic capital – money or commodities (clothes, make-up, jewellery), may be achieved through foreign relations (tourists or remittance from family abroad). My interlocutors frequently received money or gifts from foreign friends whom appeared to appreciate their beauty and self-representation and simply having Cuban friends.

As I argue throughout this thesis, by cultivating their beauty and confidence, and by working in the private and informal sector, my interlocutors used their bodies and thus sexual capital while also distinguishing themselves from a “low cultural level”; they sold drinks, served restaurant clients and performed concerts. Crucially, in their work, their bodily and social attractiveness became a tool to obtain further benefits, such as tips, gifts and foreign relations. In other words, through cultivating beauty ideals and confidence, and engaging in profitable social relations, women used their bodies and their sexual capital to improve their everyday lives.

### **Aim of the thesis**

This thesis investigates how women use sexual capital within three different working spheres in Havana; beauty salons, the music scene and in the restaurant business. The main interlocutors from these working spheres are categorized as heterosexual women within Havana's middleclass. Consequently, I will discuss how gender, ethnicity and class, strongly influenced by structures related to tourism, the private and informal sector, serve women's agency to depend on sexual capital.

Throughout this thesis, I aim to contribute towards a broader understanding of *sexual capital* by analysing its relation to agency among women in a particular social field. Hence, I will discuss how sexual capital is convertible to economic, cultural and social capital (Martin and George 2006: 129).

Based on six months of fieldwork in Havana, Cuba, in addition to further literature and theory, this thesis aims to answer the question: *In which ways does sexual capital affect female agency among urban middleclass women in Havana?*

### **Structure of the thesis**

In **chapter two**, I present an overview of relevant literature, topics and concepts which has shaped the theoretical framework of this thesis.

**Chapter three** presents methodological tools I used during the fieldwork, considerations of reflexivity and problems I dealt with when and after conducting fieldwork in Havana.

In **chapter four**, I explain, through my own empirical findings and relevant literature, how women cultivate their sexual capital by consuming fashion and beauty commodities. By putting effort to looks, such as make-up, fashion and acrylic nails, my interlocutors invested economically their bodies, that further showed to increase their sexual capital and thus their agency. Ultimately, I will illustrate how women's investments in their sexual capital provide a steady income for those working in this beauty- and fashion market.

**Chapter five** considers how women who work in Havana's private sector, concretely in the music scene and restaurant business, exploit their sexual capital to increase their economic, cultural and social capital. Further, due to global, economic and gendered inequalities, I will describe how my interlocutors' agency is influenced by sexual capital and thus its convertibility to economic, cultural and social capital. Again, I underline how sexual capital was exploited through socializing and performance, and not sex work.

**Chapter six** discusses how "using the body" involves power, resistance but also stigmatization, concretely among women within my field. In this chapter, I will illustrate how state policies and ideology, *machismo* and economic marginalization creates contradictions related to female identities. Further, the chapter considers how the "oversexualization" of women, concretely through the music genre *reggaetón*, has created intense discourses about women's bodies. Ultimately, I will present some of my interlocutors' thoughts of the future to illustrate further aspects of why "using the body" was a commonly used tool in their everyday

lives, despite how “using the body” and their female bodies in general also led to stigmatization, sexual harassment and cultural discourses.

# Theoretical framework

## Sexual capital

Capital, understood as circulating and convertible value, has been approached by classic social thinkers, such as Adam Smith (*Wealth of Nations*, 1776) and Karl Marx (*Capital*, 1887). In 1961, Theodor Schultz developed a notion of human capital, where he writes,

Although it is obvious that people acquire useful skills and knowledge, it is not obvious that these skills and knowledge are a form of capital, that this capital is in substantial part a product of deliberate investment, that it has grown in Western societies at a much faster rate than conventional (nonhuman) capital, and that its growth may well be the most distinctive feature of the economic system (: 1).

Later on, in *Forms of capital* (1986), Bourdieu emphasizes that a capital form has a tendency to reproduce or extend its form in a certain social field in a certain time. A type (or a subtype) of capital in its specific form represents a social structure in the society, “*which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices*” (: 243). In other words, a form of capital and its function in the society should be studied in its contextual moment, time and thus social reality. The three forms of capital; cultural, social and economic, are likely to depend on each other, as social and cultural capital are convertible to one another, as well as into economic capital, which thus is convertible to social and cultural capital<sup>5</sup>.

As social science has built on Bourdieu’s forms of capital, sociologists and authors have developed other capital forms, such as health capital and sexual capital (Michael 2004, Hakim 2010, Green 2011). They have expanded Bourdieu’s theoretical approach, and contextualized it into more specific inquiries, including, as this thesis will investigate, the question of how sexual capital affects female agency in certain contexts.

In their article “Theories of Sexual Stratification”, Martin and George (2006) examines previous attempts to analyze sexual capital; from a logic and calculated market approach into analyzing sexual capital within a particular social field, including historical changes and

---

<sup>5</sup> *Social capital* considers an individual’s social network and thus obligations, while *cultural capital* is defined by embodied cultivation, cultural goods (pictures, instruments, machines etc. and educational qualifications. Ultimately, economic capital is defined by an individual’s money and (convertible) property rights (Bourdieu 1986: 243)

deviations. Ultimately, they suggest three directions for analyzing sexual capital. The first considers the *extent of the field*, determined by hegemonic systems of judgement but also its qualitative variations (: 126-127). Secondly, one can approach what they call the *interest libido*, or “the nature of sexual capital”, and understand the logic of its ranking, as well as its internalization in habitus and the field (: 128, as cited in Bourdieu [1980] 1990b: 57). The third direction aims to analyze the *autonomy* of the sexual field, whereas the authors paradoxically return to a market approach; “the extent of sexual pairing is substantively tied to the economic field, it is naturalized and seen as noneconomic”. In other words, the autonomy, or the logic, of a sexual field may be theoretically approached in economic terms, but people’s *understanding* of sexual attractiveness and desire is rather non-economic. The latter direction opens for further analysis of historical changes and deviations considering sexual fields and hence sexual capital (: 129)

In her book “Honey money” (2011), Catherine Hakim claims, in a controversial and generalizing way, that physical appearance (sexual capital) determines an individual’s success in life. As a fourth asset to cultural, social and economic capital, erotic (sexual) capital is as valuable as money, she claims (:18, 20). Hakim defines erotic capital with six elements; beauty, sexual attractiveness, social attractiveness, energy and liveliness, self-presentation and sexuality (:12-15).

The most controversial and generalizing argument in “Honey Money” is arguably her concept, *the male sex deficit*, which aims to explain how men have greater sexual desire than women. Statistics show that men have a higher number of sexual partners, constitute the majority of customers in the sex industry and are more likely to have affairs (:48, 49). Furthermore, Hakim’s statistical sources show that “*women regularly report lack of sexual desire*”, at least in Australia and The USA (:50). This “gap” of sexual desire between women and men is supposed to explain why women have greater erotic capital and gain more success by using it.

Despite the importance of highlighting how female sexuality and *erotic capital* affect the agency of women all over the world, Hakim’s (2011) theoretical approach and arguments lacks empirical grounding, theoretical foundation and a critical view.

Sociologist Adam Green (2012) criticizes Hakim for overstressing the concept of erotic capital, and therefore undermining its utility. Further, he claims that erotic capital, by the use of Hakim, fails to explain anything else than beauty and sex appeal (: 145).

Green argues that social structures of age, race, sexual orientation and ethnicity are factors which should be considered when analyzing sexual capital and studying women's sexual desirability, beauty and sexual appeal (: 151).

While Hakim aims for a comprehensive and universal theory of erotic (sexual) capital, I share Green's (2012) argue that her empirical examples and sources fail to concern women in a variety of ages, classes and ethnicities. For example, Hakim (2011) claims that previous perceptions of sex differences, such universal and biological differences in IQ, "has been eliminated by giving girls equal access to education" (: 72), supposedly without any critical thoughts concerning class and ethnicity.

As a solution to these problems in Hakim's theoretical approach, Green's himself focuses on contextualizing sexual capital within what he calls a sexual field (: 152), in similar terms as Martin and George (2006).

In a previous article, *Playing the sexual field* (2011), Green illustrates how sexual ideals are shaped by hegemonic discourses of physical appearance (: 247). This paper is supported by his empirical data and theoretical approach that emphasizes how Martin and George's (2006) article aims to establish "analytics of the sexual field", based on Bourdieu's triad; field, capital and habitus (: 246).

Furthermore, Green's (2011) fieldwork was conducted in a gay society in Northern America, where he claims sexual ideals are shaped by factors such as skin color, hair, body shape and age, and further shape the "structure of desire" within the sexual field. By using Goffman's (1959)<sup>6</sup> theory of "front work", Green explains how actors in the sexual field grow their self-presentation, which again may increase their sexual capital (Green 2011: 258). By achieving a status of high sexual capital, actors increase their position in the status hierarchy within a specific sexual field (: 263).

Instead of turning his empirical grounding and theoretical approach into a universal common sense, as Hakim, Green analyzes sexual capital in a particular social field, shaped by its structures of desire. Additionally, referring to his interlocutors as *actors* in a competition of

---

<sup>6</sup> Mentioned in Green I. Adam (2011: 248), *Playing the (Sexual) Field: The Interactional Basis of Systems of Sexual Stratification, Inequalities and Interaction*, *Social Psychology Quarterly* 74(3) 244-266, American Sociological Association



gaining sexual capital, he presents the *actions* within the social field instead of static perception of attractiveness.

Moreover, Green's theoretical approach, which is strengthened with his empirical ground, illustrates how sexual capital is contextual. Furthermore, his data and analysis contribute to answer Martin and George's question, "can specifically sexual capital (if it exists) be converted into other forms of capital?" (2006: 129).

The latter question is also being explored by Ding and Ho (2012) in their investigation among sex workers in the Pearl River Delta in China, called *Xiaojies*. In this context, a majority of the *Xiaojies* had migrated from rural areas in China and Taiwan, in order to achieve an urban identity in the city. Modern commodities such as false eyelashes, make-up, high heels, fake nails and wigs become tools to grow a modern and feminine identity (: 50). Despite the sex workers' effort to increase their sexual capital, obtaining a high social status in the urban city-environment appeared, in some cases, as nearly impossible. Thus, Ding and Ho discovered that sexual capital is not always convertible to economic, cultural and social capitals due to stigmatization of being "rural" and "promiscuous" women. Although the sex workers are aware of this, they still obtain increased self-esteem by living urban lives and growing a sexualized identity, and in terms of their imaginations, future aspirations and dreams (: 57). Ding and Ho's case shows that society's structures of gender, class and ethnicity may become an obstacle to convert sexual capital into social, cultural and economic capital. Thus, the *Xiaojies* failed to improve their class-position, and rather appeared as promiscuous women from the rural working class, instead of middle- or high-class citizens as they dreamed of.

Finally, Water's (2016) empirical study of erotic (sexual) capital in Post-Soviet Mongolia draws upon the fact that social representation is significant in the Mongolian society. She claims that historically, beauty indicates high social status among residents in the Mongolian capital, Ulaanbaatar. In the Soviet era from 1924 to 1992, women were encouraged by the state to put less focus on their beauty and more focus on knowledge and participation in wage-labor. Despite this attempt, the importance of beauty continued to affect people's status and self-representation (: 29). The case of Post-Soviet and modern Mongolia indicates that the meaning of beauty and sexual capital, which is historically embedded in the society, has become commodified and modernized, especially after the Soviet collapse in 1989. As the capitalistic marked is growing and desire for material wealth is increasing, beauty and self-representation, also called sexual capital, becomes necessary to maintain an urban lifestyle

and one's class position. Further, Waters defines erotic capital as "...the maximization of attractiveness that reciprocally influences other aspects of social, cultural, and economic life..." (: 31), and highlights how erotic capital has relevance concretely among modern and wealthy groups in the Post-Soviet country (: 31). Among the residents in the Ulaanbaatar, physical appearance is accomplished with urban activities such as material consumption and cosmetic surgery.

Throughout this section I have presented the concept sexual capital with its origin and its different theoretical and empirical approaches: From Hakim's (2010) universal theory of erotic capital as a beneficial asset for people in general and women in particular, to Green's (2011) field of sexual desire and attractiveness, and further to Ding and Ho's (2012) investigation of rural migrants who use their bodies through sex work in order to convert their sexual capitals in to other capitals. At last, I emphasize how Waters (2016) investigates erotic (or sexual) capital in terms of social representation and class within a post-soviet society that deals with a growing private market and class. This view shares my own theoretical approach to sexual capital; by not exclusively focusing on sexual activity - as searching sexual partners (Green 2011) or sex work (Ding and Ho 2012), but rather investigating how physical attractiveness influences class mobility and female agency.

## **Gender**

When approaching and analyzing sexual capital, cultural constructions of gender is inevitable. How a person experiences and utilizes sexual capital must therefore be analyzed in a context of cultural, social and economic aspects of gender.

After the first feminist wave in the 1970's, anthropologists as Ortner and Whitehead (1981) focused on how gendered differences is not only caused by biological differences, but are also cultural constructions, that vary across different societies and social groups.

Moore (1994) claims that "social sciences now take it as axiomatic that gender is a cultural construct"; to understand gender differences, it is necessary to study the meaning of those cultural constructions in the societies we aim to study (: 71).

Based on her fieldwork during the 1990s in Eastern Cuba, Rosendahl (1997) argues that the gendered division of private and public, is highly relevant in the Cuban society; women's

domain is expected to be *la casa*, while men's domain is considered to be *la calle*<sup>7</sup> (: 58). Internally in the Cuban society, gendered differences affect everyday lives of men and women, with high expectations on whether men or a woman fulfill their culturally constructed gender roles. Traditionally, "a good woman" is associated with being attractive, motherly and remain in the household, while a man is expected to work and provide economically for the household (: 65-67).

Although the socialist Government and the Cuban Women's Federation, FMC, for years have encouraged gender equality in the household, women still "belong" in the household, while men "belong" to the street (Rosendahl 1997: 59, Pertierra 2008, Härkönen 2015).

Further, economic difficulties in the 1990s changed the lives of women within the household, as well as the lives of men in the street. The political and economic shifts in this period created new forms of autonomy for the individual. According to Pertierra (2008), many Cuban women have exploited the possibilities of the household by managing small businesses, in the private sector, located in the household. Women gained income by selling commodities from their houses, such as food, toothpaste and manicure services (: 758), in addition to sexual services or relationships with foreigners (: 761). Härkönen (2015) claims that the gendered division of private and public sphere among Cubans is highly relevant; women take care of tasks inside the house, while men do tasks in the street, even when a couple does not live together (: 14).

However, throughout this thesis, I will illustrate and discuss how female gender stereotypes are used to improve confidence and power (chapter four and six), exploited through sexual capital (chapter five), but also provide "traps" as sexual harassment and stigmatization (chapter six).

## **Agency**

As she relates gender to agency, Henrietta Moore (1994) writes that gendered differences create different types of agency. Further, she addresses the issue about the relationship between structure and practice, and the individual and the social (: 49). This issue raises the question of agency, which on the one hand shows how sexuality and gender are constructed by its circumstances – its social structures. On the other hand, she poses the question, "do any of us really believe that we identify wholeheartedly with the dominant gender categories of our own societies?" (: 51). Whether an individual appropriates to a gender role consciously or

---

<sup>7</sup> *La casa*: The house. *La calle*: The street

unconsciously is a difficult theme to analyze. Nevertheless, Moore concludes “that no one can ever be fully aware of the conditions of their own construction” (: 53).

Throughout this thesis, I approach the concept of agency by asking two questions. First, in which ways are people’s agency determined by the structures in the society? And secondly; how do individuals’ ways to deal with, resist and manipulate those structures, potentially change them?

In his famous work *The Distinction* (1995), Bourdieu considers how the human body functions as a social subject which attributes symbolic qualities in relation to its social reality (: 242-243). This approach views social structure from a top-down perspective which implies that dominant structures in the social space determine and defines a person’s agency. Nevertheless, he also mentions how a social subject, group or class may attempt to change the social classification system. Such a classification system will always be reproduced in reshaped forms, due to the fact that social subjects additionally function as social agents with abilities to manipulate choices and their perception of social reality (: 245).

Further, in order to analyze the power of the subject, Foucault (1982) focus on the “antagonism of strategies”, which concerns deviant actions and manipulating the dominant structures in a society. According to Foucault, this down-top focus grasps the aspects of societies in a more nuanced and realistic sense. Instead of viewing how structures in society create the social subject, he seeks to study “the way a human being turns himself into a subject” (: 778). More general, power does not exist as a universal phenomenon, but exists in actions conducted by social subjects (: 788). Since this theory puts power in relation to subjects and individuals, it emphasizes the autonomy and agency of the individuals.

In this thesis, I will illustrate how my interlocutors’ agency is influenced by economic and gendered structures in their society (dominant structures; Bourdieu 1979), but also most importantly; their roles as social agents who attempt to manipulate, resist, change or escape their social reality (antagonism of strategies; Foucault 1982). While living in a society they experienced as challenging due to state policies and limited economic possibilities, they conducted strategic actions through their works and their bodies; to make the ends meet and to improve their identities, lifestyles and future.

As mentioned in the introduction, using the body may be associated with sex work. Although my interlocutors used their body through non-sexual services, literature concerning Cuban sex workers shares relevant aspects of agency; concretely by focusing on how female and male Cubans use their bodies, in different ways, to “exercise agency through different strategies” (Roland 2010: 5).

In a postcolonial context, Roland (2010) addresses the agency of Cuban women in the light of the commodification of Cuban culture and tourist consumption. Considering gendered, racialized and sexualized dynamics inside and outside the Cuban society, Roland explains how western tourists see “colonized” women as more sexually accessible than women in their home country (: 13). Many Cuban women embrace this perception of their own gender and ethnicity, in order to receive money and other goods from male tourists (: 12). Sex work in Cuba is often referred to as *jineterismo*, and Cubans looking for social, romantic or sexual relationships with tourists are called *jineteras* (*jineteros* as men). For the Cuban, the relationship may increase social, cultural or economic capital, while the tourist “wins” a social, sexual or romantic relationship (Kummels 2005).

As already mentioned, literature considering Cuban sex work shares the view on how my interlocutors exploited their sexual capital when interacting with tourists or other persons with high status (Kummels 2005, Roland 2010). Instead of exchanging sexual services or engaging in romantical relationships for economic, cultural and social benefits, they invested their appearance and themselves to improve their position in the social, cultural and economic hierarchy. Considering how Cuban women and men’s agency is limited, due to global inequalities and fragile economic structures in the society, I aim to use the concept of agency to reflect upon my interlocutors’ possibilities in the society they actually live in. By referring to agency, I do not claim that Cuban women and men experience a wide range of choices to improve their lives. Rather, by using the concept of agency, I emphasize how Cubans in general and women in particular take advantage of the possibilities that exist, despite the materialistic and economic challenges they face every day (Scott 1985).

## **Beauty**

In this thesis, I do not refer to beauty as equal to sexual capital, but as an ideal and a tool for obtaining sexual capital.

Hakim (2011) emphasizes that beauty itself does not cover the total impact of erotic (sexual) capital, since erotic capital includes social skills as well. However, despite cultural

differences, she claims, again in a generalizing way, that the concept of beauty is universal; people all over the world has a common opinion of what is beautiful or ugly (: 30, 31).

By approaching the concept of beauty in a less generalizing and a more anthropological way, Edmond (2010) illustrates how beauty, class and race are intertwined in the Brazilian society, where plastic surgery has become a tool for improving self-esteem and social status. He defines beauty as "... a social domain that has its own internal logic that cannot be reduced to an operation of other forms of power" (: 20).

Within his field, he emphasizes how beauty ideals, fashion and the female body target female consumers, without being a target for male sexual desire (: 29).

In Brazil, increasing the level of beauty is linked to increasing one's class position in society. This is possible due to plastic surgery and other beauty commodities which again is available due to the capitalist market. In this context, capitalism conquers an already settled class system and creates democratic principles, considering how even the poor can "beauty" themselves to success and money (: 235, 236, 252).

Writing about the lives of women in Havana, Härkönen (2015) highlights how beauty is a core element for women's social status. Impacted by gender and physical factors, such as race, body and clothes, women obtain their level of sexual attractiveness (: 15).

In this thesis, I will not categorize my interlocutors according to different levels of beauty but illustrate and discuss how they relate to social ideals of beauty.

The perception of beauty and attractiveness is highly subjective, which makes it meaningless to analyze the "level of attractiveness" of persons in my field.

In chapter four, I will elaborate how collective beauty ideals are approached individually.

Furthermore, within my ethnographic field, I discovered that opinions and notions of beauty are affected by gendered, racial and class-related structures. But most importantly, whether it is influenced by "black" or "white" culture, my interlocutors used female beauty ideals to obtain female liberation, confidence and power.

## **Race**

The concept of race is crucial when investigating sexual capital in the Cuban society; not only because Cubans represent a variety of "races", but because beauty is also influenced by racial opinions; whether women, men and transgendered overstate or minimize their racial appearance (Green 2011: 256, Edmond 2010: 155, 156, 171-173).

My starting point to approach this topic is the observation that race is a *social* reality in Cuba – Cubans categorize people according physical features such as skin color and hair type. This categorization is intertwined with beauty ideals. Further, I use *ethnicity* when considering a person’s geographically origin and *race* when considering racial appearance, such as skin color and hair type. As I will mention the concepts of race and ethnicity a few times throughout this thesis, I find it relevant to clarify the difference between two concepts that tend to overlap with one another.

The racial discourse in Cuba is strongly affected by attempts to create equality between “races”. As the Cuban people represents different “racial categories” as white, *mulato* and black, in addition to different ethnic descendent, such as African and European, racial diversity is present in people’s everyday lives.

Historically, Cuba has been attempting to deal with racial inequalities in different ways since their independence from Spain in 1868. Since José Martí and other nationalists fought against Spanish Colonialism in early 19<sup>th</sup> century, racial equality has been an important goal, which unfortunately has been difficult to obtain (De la Fuente 1998). After the revolution in 1959, the Socialist Government claimed to have “erased” racial inequality and discrimination by eliminating “race” from national discourse. This does not mean that racial discrimination disappeared in practice (: 61). According to de la Fuente, racial and social polarization intensified after the economic crises of 1990’s and, and thus several studies of Cuban society emphasize racial discourses (: 63). The revolutionary government has been accused for silencing racial discourses, claiming that racism does not exist in Cuba (De la Fuente 1998). However, several studies of the Cuban societies include the topic of race, claiming that racial inequalities affect the everyday lives of Cubans (Roland 2010, Weinreb 2008, Perry 2016).

Moreover, in both regular tourism and sex tourism, racial attitudes which can be related to colonialism have proved to leave traces. For example; women “of color” are often viewed as wild, animalistic and “oversexual”, while “white women” has been viewed sexual only when they are in a love relationship (Roland 2010: 14).

This inequality between “races”, classes and ethnicities in the global hierarchy must be considered when analyzing Cuban women’s agency and sexual capital.

When discussing “race” within my field, my interlocutors would often emphasize the absence of racism, and share “politically correct” opinions, and for example underline how skin color or “race” is insignificant for a person’s agency and identity in social and cultural contexts. However, when analyzing the empirical data and ethnographic interviews, it became clear that racialized beauty ideals imply how racism was intertwined in my ethnographic field. I observed how racial appearance mattered in hierarchal ranking of physical factors such as hair type and skin color, concretely within a system of racial categories, which I thus will present: *Negros* are described to have black hair, dark skin and curly, frizzy hair, with descendent from West-African slaves which were brought to Cuba during colonial times. Further, *mulatos* are understood as brown-skinned, and often have black, curly and frizzy hair. Also, *mulatos* are a mixture of blacks and whites, with descendants both from West-African slaves and white European settlers. Lastly, *blancos* are described with light skin, brown, black or blonde straight hair and descend from European Settlers. In chapter four, I will further elaborate on how racialized beauty ideals related to sexual capital.



## Methodology

How does an anthropology student conduct fieldwork in a big city with thousands of different social environments, which represent thousands of different perspectives of the Cuban society? The road to a holistic view of my field contained some changes, frustrations and difficult choices.

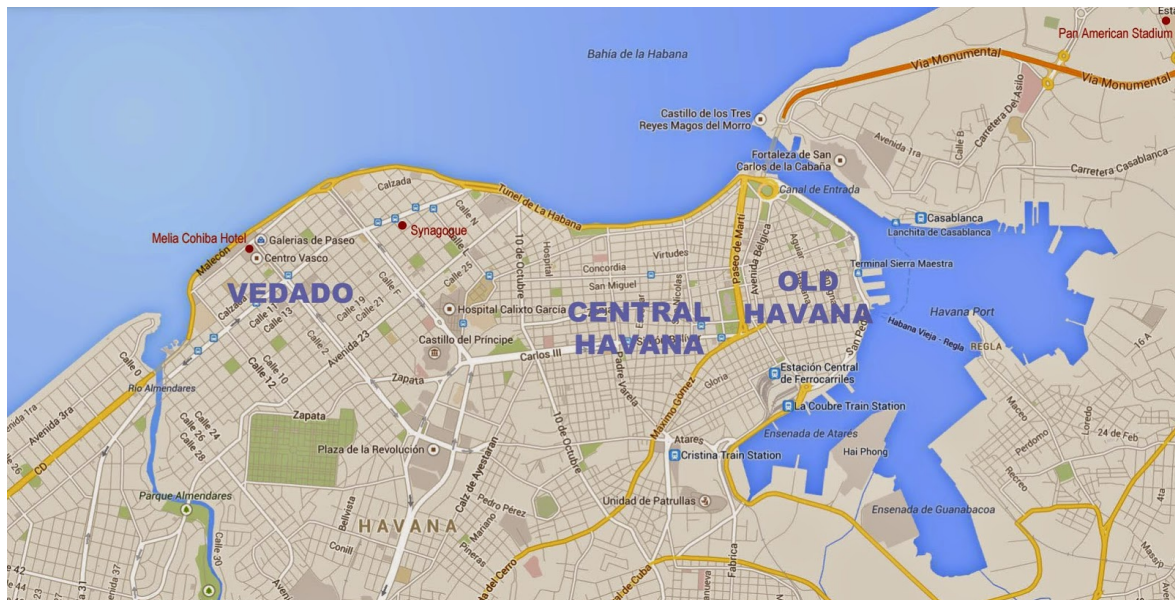
My fieldwork in Havana began the third of January 2018, and ended the first of July the same year, when I returned to Norway. At the time I arrived Havana, I aimed to study female musicians and how they potentially challenged gender stereotypes within Havana's music environment. Due to methodological challenges, such as limited language skills and an absence of women who challenged gender stereotypes, I chose to change my field into women who worked in beauty salons in Havana. Although the field changed, I continued hanging out in the music environment. In my "free time" I spent a considerable amount of time in a restaurant that soon became a part of my ethnographic field as well.

Despite unforeseen changes and methodological challenges, the field turned out to provide rich data and covered three different environments that represented three different types of working positions within Havana's private sector; the musical scene, beauty salons and the restaurant business.

When I analyzed the data, I discovered how *sexual capital* is a useful concept to describe these women's realities, as their investment in beauty, self-representation and confidence proved to increase their sexual capital, that seemed to strongly influence their agency.

## Positioning the field

*Havana, Cuba*



Geographically, the field stretched out among two different districts of Havana, which I have chosen to anonymize. However, the two districts represent two different social, cultural and economic classes. Ethnographically, I conducted research in three different social environments, representing three different professions that among middleclass women in Havana. The first social environment was based on female musicians in traditional Cuban music who worked in hotels, nightclubs and concert arenas. Here, I will represent one key interlocutor named Yamilka. In her social environment, I have included Clara, her friend who also work as a musician, in addition to further friends, including male tourists, in addition to Louis and Pierre: two middle-aged French men, who traveled from France to Cuba frequently, and whom Yamilka referred to as her friends.

The second social environment where I collected data was the environment related to an Italian restaurant and bar. This environment includes the workers, regular guests and tourists who were part of the restaurant's social milieu. My main interlocutors from this environment are the female workers who worked as waiters and bartenders. Cubans who work as waiters and bartenders can be placed in Havana's middleclass, although their salaries varied strongly with the high and low tourist seasons. In high seasons a waiter or bartender can be tipped as much as 80 dollars a day, whilst in the low season their daily salary could be as low as 5 dollars.

From this environment, I will present five interlocutors in this thesis; Selena (23), Veronica (28), Marisol (21), Samantha (21) and Rosa (74). I conducted participant observation by

hanging out in their workplace, in addition to follow them around in the city, to cafes, beauty salons, clothing stores and their homes.

Furthermore, my empirical material includes a variety of places I visited during the field; even places I did not consider as a part of my field – as for example a rent-out room where I lived for three weeks.

The third social arena in my fieldwork consisted of two different beauty salons. Here, I sought to collect ethnographic data, as well as to doing manicure and pedicure myself. The majority of the workers in these salons were women, as well as the guests. The first salon was located in one of the worker's home, whom can be categorized as the upper working class; since they worked in the private sector, they were not depending on state salaries, but since the majority of their clients were Cubans, they missed the privilege of tips from tourists. Here, the key interlocutors are Marisela (74) who was the owner of the house, and her daughter Elena (30) who worked in the salon together with Melissa (23). The mother of Melissa, Yanet (53), visited the salon frequently and usually participated in domestic work together with Marisela while their daughters were working. In the second salon, that I visited mainly together with Selena, worked Elisa (25), three other women and two gay men.

By dealing with three different environments, I observed differences and similarities across different neighborhoods and working professions. Although I at times experienced the altering through different sub-fields as hectic and confusing, the rich and varying empirical data has proved to be fruitful for this thesis' analysis.

### **Approaching the field**

Early in the fieldwork, I discovered that the limited social network I already had in Havana was extremely valuable. Ahead of the trip to Havana, I contacted people in my social network with social connections to Cuba, in which resulted in new Facebook-friends, phone numbers and a place to live the first weeks of the fieldwork. I also traveled from Norway to Cuba with an acquaintance of my parents who introduced me to her own social network in Havana, mainly related to the Italian restaurant I have presented above. Hanging out in this restaurant, partly together with my companion from Norway, resulted in several interlocutors and important empirical findings.

At the beginning of the fieldwork, I attempted to interact with persons related to Havana's music environment, since my previous plan was to investigate women in the music environment. By coincidence, I met Yamilka (the female musician) within the first apartment I lived in Havana. Fortunately, she was eager to bring me to concerts and introduced me to her musician friends. Unfortunately, as already mentioned, the field and topic became difficult to study. Despite the difficulties, I continued hanging out with Yamilka, which resulted in fruitful fieldnotes after all.

In March, I began doing participant fieldwork in beauty salons, which was relevant because I aimed to investigate beauty ideals in general and how my interlocutors cultivated their sexual capital. Eventually, I picked out two beauty salons that I visited about three to five days a week. I also conducted participant observation in a beauty salon or hung out with interlocutors' in varied places such as cafes, the beach or by going shopping. Occasionally, my interlocutors from the restaurant and I visited different beauty salons in different neighborhoods and thus classes.

Furthermore, the fieldwork has continued after I returned from Cuba to Norway, and until the present day. Interacting with my interlocutors through social medias, as well as observing how they present themselves on Instagram and Facebook, has influenced and contributed to the analysis of this thesis.

Finally, since I engaged in a romantic relationship with a Cuban man during the fieldwork; a relationship that also has continued until the present day, I must acknowledge that both him and his family has influenced and inspired the analysis of this thesis as well.

## **Participant observation**

Participant participation was my main method to produce empirical data for this thesis. Madden (2010) defines ethnography as, "a qualitative social science practice that seeks to understand human groups (or societies, or cultures, or institutions) by having the researcher in the same social space as the participants in the study" (: 16), which implies that participant observation is a natural choice when doing ethnographic fieldwork.

Together with Yamilka and her friends, I went to concerts, parties and night clubs. Participant observation was conducted mainly by being a participant of the different events. Since these nights contained a huge variety of people, loud music and some alcohol, I frequently went out

to the street or to the bathroom to write fieldnotes on my phone. Usually, we met close to Yamilka's house before we took a *taxi colectivo* to the events.

In the daytime, I conducted participant observation in beauty salons and an Italian restaurant, which were all located in the same area. Every morning, I would pass by the restaurant, where mornings were usually calm and with plenty of time to catch up with the waiters and bartenders. If I would not have my Spanish classes, the next stop would be my regular nail salon, where I fixed my nails while hanging out – talking with the workers and customers and observing their everyday lives.

Together with my interlocutors in the restaurant, I visited several beauty salons in different parts of Havana. Although salon business itself has got a limited focus in this thesis, these visits resulted in valuable data after all, due to the social relations we created and maintained, simply by hanging out.

### **Ethnographic interview**

During the last month of my fieldwork, I conducted five interviews with my five different interlocutors in the restaurant. The interviews were conducted in varied locations such as cafes, in their workplace, homes and my apartment. During the interviews, I sat with my computer on a table or in my lap and rapidly wrote down what they told me. It did not feel natural to record the conversations. Due to how the conversation flowed quite freely, I could not stick to every question I had prepared in the interview guide. However, the subjects in the conversations were based on the following questions;

- a) How does beauty commodities such as clothes, makeup and acrylic nails shape and/or affect your self-esteem?
- b) How do you prioritize your money on a monthly, or weekly, basis?
- c) How does the informal market affect your possibilities to get beauty products and services?
- d) In which way does mothership affect women's working situation in Cuba?
- e) How do you experience cultural differences between men and women in Cuba?
- f) How does ideas about race affect women's choice of sexual partners?
- g) What do you think about being "economically independent"?

The interviews were strengthened by the fact that I had already created and maintained social relations with my interlocutors for nearly six months. For this reason, the answers could be seen in relation to their actions that I had observed for quite a long time. For example, I could place their answers and perceptions in different contexts, which I already had knowledge about, as the question, “what do you think about being “economically independent?”. Then, I would know what “economic independency” means in their gendered and economic context, which will be further elaborated in chapter five.

Finally, the interviews have provided valuable data, and answers concrete questions related to the analysis of the thesis. However, the interviews would have been less valuable if they had not happened *after* a substantial period of fieldwork.

## **Reflexivity**

### **Gender, Ethnicity, Age, Class**

It is crucial to mention some experiences that demonstrate how ethnicity, class, gender and age influenced my role as a researcher, as well as my access and position in the field. As a European “tourist”, I immediately noticed (Cuban) people’s interest in having foreign friends, something that is linked to high social and cultural status.

By being a woman, I experienced the attention from (Cuban) men in general as intense and provocative. Walking the streets of Havana alone, dressed up or not, day or night, I felt harassed and even promiscuous by how men shouted out uncomfortable comments or gave me intense looks. After a few weeks, I started to ask them to leave me alone, in Spanish.

When the latter seemed to intensify their attention, I started to say local phrases, in an angry tone, such as; *que pinga es tu problema* (what the fuck is your problem) in a way that made them uncomfortable. As I will describe further in chapter six, vulgar language and humor became a resistance towards sexual harassing attention, by my interlocutors and myself.

I experienced my own agency when I gained access to what became my regular nail salon and a place for participant observation. Since the salon workers were mainly interested in doing my nails, and expected me to leave afterwards, it was difficult to find a “reason” to hang out at their workplace. One day, I found a combined nail salon and watchmaker, called *relojero*. The *relojero* was a young man, and immediately showed interest in me by giving me several compliments about my looks and personality. Since he had a variety of equipment, I asked him to fix my sunglasses, which missed two screws. He went to a friend in the neighborhood,

found screws in the right size and repaired my sunglasses. Then, when I was going to pay him for this service, he told me that it was a favor, for free. The *hau* was created (Mauss 1872). Due to this uncomfortable social relation I made with the *relojero*, I began to pass by the salon to talk with him in addition to create social relations with those I actually aimed to “study”; the female salon workers. A few days after “hanging out” in the combined watchmaker and salon, the *relojero* wanted to give me books, which I would have to pick out in his apartment. I followed him to his home, picked out two books (related to Cuban women) and left quickly, in fear of giving him the wrong expectations. However, I continued hanging out in his workplace, but eventually dedicated more attention to the female salon workers. The *hau* escalated the day the *relojero* wanted to give me a watch (which appeared beautiful and expensive). Quite shocked and insecure, I accepted the gift, but regretted the minute I left his workplace. The next day, I returned the watch and explained how I could not reciprocate the gifts I had received. Additionally, I told him about my Cuban boyfriend. Unwillingly, he accepted the return and never gave me anything again. A few weeks later, he asked me to buy him an iPhone, which made me realize his intention with the gifts. According to my friends in the restaurant, he probably hoped for a European girlfriend, followed by its privileges. Fortunately, these events and the “relation” between me and the *relojero*, served the salon workers with great entertainment and interest in me. Finally, it felt natural to hang out in their workplace as well, even when they were done fixing my nails.

Further, I met another challenge related to my ethnicity when conducting research in the salon; despite that I eventually learned Spanish and attempted to understand their humor, expressions and conversations, they called me “*Ana: La turista*”. At least they acknowledged my name, or the Cuban version of my name (Anne – Ana). The cultural gap between me as a “rich western tourist” and the salon workers, as “poor Cubans”, never really diminished. For example, I was consequently charged three times more than locals, for manicure and pedicure. Locals paid 1 dollar for manicure and pedicure, while I paid 5 dollars for the same service. Although I gladly paid this price, it signaled that they considered me as a foreigner and not a friend. When visiting other salons with Cubans considering me as a friend, I usually paid local prices.

Also, the salon and watchmaker were located in the entrance of the salon-workers home. Unlike other women and men who “hung out” in their salon, they never invited me further into their house. By curiosity, I invited myself into their living room and kitchen a couple of

times, but I could easily notice their skepticism by “letting a stranger into their house”, although I experienced Cuban people as very hospitable in general.

### **Falling in love with a “local”**

During my fieldwork, I got engaged in a romantic relationship with a “local” Cuban (with residence permit in Sweden). As he was working in the Italian restaurant in Havana at the time of my fieldwork, it became natural to conduct research in the social environment related to this place. This is relevant to mention, as it strongly affected my position in the field: I gained more respect, access and few romantical requests (despite that he traveled back and forth from Cuba to Sweden during my fieldwork, and therefore was not always present). The “cultural gap” that I experienced between me and the workers in my regular salon, barely existed between me and the workers of the Italian restaurant, due to how I became Pedro’s girlfriend instead of “just a tourist”.

Once I engaged in this relationship, the role as an anthropologist became blurred. People in this environment seemed to forget that I was “studying” them, although I regularly reminded them about it. This led to a level of trust which obviously empowered my data<sup>8</sup>.

My relationship with a “local” proved to be helpful and empowering for my fieldwork, with some exceptions. Yamilka, the *musica*, was skeptical and negative to my boyfriend. She encouraged me to flirt with her male Cuban friends behind his back, in addition to end the relationship. Since she was single herself and enjoyed attention from men, she wanted me to be as “free” as her. Another potential reason for why Yamilka disliked my boyfriend (which she met two or three times) might be the hustling for foreigners: Having a single foreign friend would be more attractive than a single one, who was already “taken” by a Cuban man. Unfortunately, because of this conflict, and in respect to my relationship, I had to end the friendship with Yamilka in the middle of April; more than two months before the fieldwork ended.

### **Feminism and gender equality– global concepts?**

In her book, *Passion for difference* (1994), Henrietta Moore discusses how feminism have influenced her own theoretical perspective as a social anthropologist, in addition to how reflexivity can contribute to the understanding of how scientists are influenced by political

---

<sup>8</sup> It is crucial to mention that I did not enter the romantic relationship with the intention to improve my access to the field.



discourses, such feminism («the problem of representativity», cited from Nancy Miller 1991: 20).

By being a feminist with an interest in discourses of gender equality and women's rights, I met some challenges in the field. My interlocutors' perception of gender equality and independence contradicted my own perceptions of those concepts. Statements such as “if someone wants to help Cuban women, give us clothes and make-up”, “mothers are the main caregivers for children” and “it is the man who should pay for dates” represent the gap between me and my interlocuter's relation to gender roles. Ironically, I ended up expecting my Cuban boyfriend to pay for restaurant visits and experienced an increasing interest in clothes, make-up and nails. This also contributed to minimize the gendered and cultural gap between and my interlocuters.

In general, my perspective on gender has become broader, richer and, I would argue, less prejudiced. During my fieldwork, I got intertwined in a social environment dominated by gender differences. The way these women behaved and used their bodies seemed to empower their confidence and status. Also, I learned how embracing femininity is associated with being “liberal”, which means that the ways women approach fashion and beauty may seem controversial, shameless and even promiscuous, but since they are “liberal”, they appear as strong and confident. Nevertheless, when processing and analyzing the data, followed by reading relevant literature (Roland 2010, Härkönen 2015, Rosendahl 1997), I realized that their sense of “liberation” and empowerment is strongly related to female physical appearance, and less to gender equality as I know it in Norway (as for example economic equality between men and women). The latter will be discussed in chapter six (Roland 2010, Kummels 2005, Stout 2008, Hodge 2014).

However, my personal perception of gender and the changes of it has apparently colored the data collection and analysis in this thesis, although I have attempted to be as objective as possible.

## **Language**

The official language in Cuba is Spanish, which I managed to speak and write after two months with frequent Spanish lessons. However, the Cuban accent was quite challenging to understand, although I partly adopted this accent myself. Cubans are known for “eating their words”, skipping the pronation of certain letters in a word. For example, the expression “mas o menos” (more or less) is often pronounced “ma o me”. The common expression “No es

facil” (It is not easy - referring to Cubans struggles in their everyday lives) is usually pronounced “No e fas”, which illustrates how they “eat their words”. Fortunately, the majority of my interlocutors also spoke English, and we could therefore switch language when I found it challenging to understand what they were saying.

## **Processing the data**

In order to systemize and getting an overview of my data, I organized different cases, days and stories into different topics related to the aim of the thesis. Afterwards, it became easier to discover the pattern in my interlocuter’s lives, which was helpful when creating my research question; *In what ways does sexual capital affect female agency among urban middleclass women in Havana?*

Furthermore, I have analyzed potential contradictions between my fieldnotes and the ethnographic interviews: The ethnographical cliché “the difference between what they say and do” became inevitable. A huge contradiction, as I will elaborate further in this thesis, is how my interlocutors would hardly admit the importance of physical appearance, or sexual capital, in their everyday lives. Nevertheless, the utilization of sexual capital became inevitable when analyzing the fieldnotes. My interlocutors’ actions considered “growing their beauty” in a high degree, while in the interviews, some of them uttered that looks (which is a part of sexual capital) should not determine one’s social status. However, when talking about *other* Cuban women in general, they would say that sexual capital in many cases is determining for one’s success and social status. I explore this paradox in more detail in chapter six.

## **Ethical considerations**

With regards to ethical considerations, I wish to present my interlocutors in a respectful way. However, as an anthropology student, I aim to present my analysis of the data as honest and objective as possible, within the theoretical frame I have chosen for this thesis. For example, situating my interlocuter’s statements and life experiences in the context of social, cultural and economic structures may clash with their wish to appear as “strong independent women”. Also, the empirical data contains sensitive information, such as sexual assaults, illegal businesses and sharing of vulnerable emotions, which I have elaborated as respectful as possible and in terms of ethical considerations.

To anonymize my interlocutors and their lives, I have changed all names, certain locations, working places and further information. Also, in an attempt to anonymize my interlocutors as much as possible, their physical appearance is described as marginally as possible; only details that are relevant for the analysis are included.

Regarding my interlocutors who are not Cuban, I have changed their countries of origin, in addition to their names. In certain cases, it has been difficult to anonymize interlocutors, particularly when it comes to the foreigners who are part of the social milieu of the Cubans I write about. In these limited cases, I have opted to combine the identities of different persons into one composite character. I established informed consent with all the interlocutors of this thesis.

## Spending money on beauty

When I did the surgery with my boobs, after giving birth, I felt life was easier, because I fixed them (the breasts). Because the way I feel about myself, and to face things in my life – I always want to be sure that I look the way I want – that gives me confidence in myself. It's about how I feel, and then it's easier to face the world (Veronica, June 2018).

Before describing how women exploit and convert sexual capital into social, cultural and economic capital (chapter five), it is crucial to comprehensively elaborate where, how and in which terms women cultivate and exploit sexual capital. As Schultz reminds us, “what economists have not stressed is the simple truth that people invest in themselves and that these investments are very large” (1961: 2).

This chapter concerns how beauty ideals are approached through consumption within Havana's private and informal sector. By consuming beauty- and fashion commodities and services, women increased their looks, confidence, social status and thereby sexual capital. I will describe how female beauty ideals were approached in gendered and racialized terms, in various ways. My interlocutors approached beauty ideals to cultivate their own, individualistic and female identity, and thus, the ideals of beauty cannot be precepted as just “collective”, but rather as Edmond (2010) suggest;

“... aesthetic ideals cannot be seen *only* as a reflection of gender or racial subordination. Once we consider broader historical changes – from the expansion of consumer culture to transformations in love and sexuality to the rise of medical techniques of self-regulation – it becomes more fruitful to see beauty as a complex domain of interlocking values and institutions, what Marcel Mauss (1990) would have called, a “total social fact” (: 33)

In this thesis, it is crucial to emphasize the hybridity and fluidity of beauty ideals; there does not exist a unified “model” of physical appearance, but various influences which are approached differently by each individual. Nevertheless, empirical examples illustrate that physical appearance is also influenced by hegemonic systems of judgement (Martin and George 2006: 126-127). In a Bourdiesian sense, beauty ideals are created by dominant structures in the society, but as each social agent manipulates those ideals, merely to look

different from “others”, ideals of beauty become hybrid, fluid and reshaped (Bourdieu 1979: 245). My interlocutors wished to liberate themselves from stigmatization and judgement in their social reality – which they managed to a certain degree, but nonetheless, social structures of gender, class and race appeared to influence how they approach beauty and fashion.

Ultimately, through consuming services in beauty salons and fashion commodities in the private and informal market, my interlocutors maintained not only their sexual capital but also provided salaries for the workers of these businesses, which were mainly women. Institutions as beauty salons and clothing stores functioned as important centers of the women’s sphere and also attracted queers and transgender persons who were able to cultivate their feminine beauty ideals, thanks to these beauty institutions.

Finally, this chapter aims to describe how foreign connections sustained women with western beauty-and fashion commodities, which created a hierarchical system where foreign (western) goods and culture appeared as dominating.

## **Beauty ideals**

### **Marisol: “make-up is just a woman’s need to feel good, or not”**

Marisol worked as a waiter in the Italian restaurant. She grew up in a rich neighborhood in the upper middleclass. With descendants from Spanish settlers, she was categorized as *blanca*. In her everyday life, she preferred to look “natural”, which meant to dress herself in casual clothes and decrease the use of make-up or nail polish. Otherwise, in situations such as job interviews and important social events, she would put make-up, formal dresses, straighten her hair (which was already quite straight) and nail polish, depending on the context, as she explained;

I will never put red lipstick in a job interview because it is not correct because red lip stick will draw attention. Maybe it looks good in a bar, but not in an important meeting... In Cuba they will judge you as a prostitute. Red lip stick – draw attention to look sexy – prostitute.

Furthermore, she claimed that women in general share this concern for putting efforts to one’s physical appearance, in addition to avoid the trap of looking promiscuous.

You don't have to be superficial if you care about makeup, ... the makeup is just a woman's need to feel good, or not. Because you can be natural, I see myself as superficial and natural, but I use make-up some days, it is just women.

However, a few times during the fieldwork, we went to the beach together. Then, Marisol, would sit in the shadow under a parasol to avoid becoming exhausted from the heat, and tanner of the sun. Therefore, she used long sleeve sweaters and a sufficient amount of sunscreen.

Sometimes, when I feel tanned, I put a light foundation in my face to look whiter because I don't like to look tan. I also put this after the beach, because then I will get more tanned. On the beach, I use a lot of sunscreen because I want to be as white as possible. I like to be white and my skin gets dirty when I am tanned, I get dark and a lot of fat in my skin, because of my skin type.

Marisol and I spent time together in a variety of places, such as the restaurant, each other's homes, beauty salons and cafes. In one of our conversations, she explained how the pressure to invest in her physical appearance contradicted with her wish to be "natural". On the one hand, she claimed to be comfortable with showing herself in public places without make-up, painted nails and fashionable clothes. On the other hand, she admitted being affected by the society's pressure to dress up and put make-up in order to create a feminine appearance. Although she attempted not to depend on make-up and clothes to feel comfortable with herself, she also experienced how it increased her self-esteem in certain contexts. She even claimed that buying a new outfit or getting a new haircut could decrease negative emotions as stress and sadness.

Moreover, Marisol's thoughts about female beauty ideals illustrates how cultivating one's physical appearance, as putting make-up and nail polish, is naturalized in women's identities and emotions. She also emphasized how looks and self-esteem are connected, and how approaching beauty in the "right" terms is important when creating social relations; in her working place and within her social environment.

### **Selena: “Men want a big ass and big boobs”**

I used to end the day with passing by the Italian restaurant where I conducted fieldwork. Usually, Selena sat by the bar, holding a cigarette between her fingers decorated with rings and red, long acrylic nails while talking loudly and vulgar Cuban slang. She was married to the restaurant manager, an Italian man called Manuel who was ten years older than her. The restaurant was located in the touristic *barrio*<sup>9</sup>, Havana Vieja. On a daily basis she helped her husband running his restaurant business. Selena’s working position in the restaurant was never specified but considered observing the waiters and making sure they did their job properly. Often, she was “hablando mierda” (talking shit) with employees or friends.

Every week, Selena had several appointments related to beauty and well-being. A couple of times a week she went to the gym, which she did mainly to obtain more curves on her body. She categorized her body as too thin for the Cuban ideal and claimed that Cuban men did not find her body attractive. People often advised her to eat more. Despite “lacking” a big bottom and breasts, she felt beautiful and also knew that her physical appearance was appreciated by her husband. However, to exemplify female body ideals, she referred to a couple both she and I knew,

In Havana, men do not care so much about the “perfect” woman as long as you have a big ass and boobs; for example, Jovini is beautiful, his girlfriend is ugly but has a big ass and big boobs, sometimes in a couple one can be ugly, and one can be beautiful if the woman has that body.

Other days, she went to a nail- and hair salon where she received acrylic nails and *keratina* treatment – washing her hair with a liquor smelling cream that make the hair straight and smooth for at least four weeks. Having long and colored nails appeared as a basic need for Selena, and due to her curly and frizzy “mulata-hair”, she would always keep her hair straight and smooth, by receiving a *keratina* treatment once a month, in addition to blow and straight her hair after every hair wash. Similar as Marisol, she avoided the sun to maintain a light skin color. Tourists and many white Cubans categorized Selena as a *mulata*, while darker skinned Cubans saw her as *blanca*. Once, she broke the pattern of attempting to look “white”, and got

---

<sup>9</sup> Neighborhood

a “rasta” hairstyle for a few weeks. Then, she got told by darker skinned people that this kind of hairstyle “is not for white people”.

On the one hand, Selena claimed to have accepted her fluid racial categorization. On the other hand, she said, “I don’t need to be any race, people can call me whatever they want – racists (white foreigners and white Cubans) call me *mulata* and darker skinned Cubans call me *blanca*”. Referring to tourists and some white Cubans as “racists” appeared as a resistance to the fact she was never “white” enough for “white” people.

Another institution of beauty that Selena regularly visited was a salon located in the wealthier neighborhood, Miramar. This salon had a different character compared to the salons in Havana Vieja and Centro Havana. Here, they offered more expanded and varied services, such as massages, facial treatments, birth mark removals, microblading of eyebrows and acupuncture. Nails and hair-services were not a part of this salon’s services. The workers, the equipment and the products appeared to be high quality, and the furniture was modern (compared with the old and damaged furniture and equipment in the salons in less wealthier neighborhoods). Also, the prices customized rich, wealthy Cubans and tourists. Before and after visiting this place, Selena would always express how clean she felt after treatments in this wealthy, professional and clean salon. In this place, she could receive treatments that appeared to be seldom in Havana.

### **Samantha: “I have to do women-things”**

On a humid and warm day in May, I was standing on a street corner in Centro Havana, waiting for Selena and Samantha to pick me up in a taxi, before we were going to visit the beauty salon in Miramar. Behind where I was standing, there was a building with an office in it, probably related to state bureaucracy of some sort. By looking into the building, I observed a Cuban flag and a picture of Cuba’s former president, Fidel Castro. The chairs were probably produced on a low budget in the fifties or sixties, but still functioned as furniture, despite their bad condition. Out in the street, where I waited for my interlocutors, I received several romantic and sexual comments from Cuban men, completely based on my looks, gender and ethnicity. “Oye, linda, tienes novio?” (Hello beautiful do you have a boyfriend) and “*rubia* (blond woman), where you from?”

Eventually, my interlocutors’ taxi arrived, I hopped in, and we arrived at the salon fifteen minutes later. Samantha and Selena were wearing gym clothes, because they came directly from the gym, sweaty and with no make-up. Samantha went to the gym mainly because she



loved physical activity, and sport. By contrast, Selena went to the gym to maintain a fit body, being passionate about her looks and physical appearance. Because we were going to do “facial treatment” in the salon, they saw no need to shower and style themselves up until after the salon visit. Selena experienced the gym and facial treatment as “ugly” activities, due to sweating in the gym and cleansing dirt out of her skin in the salon, and thereby explained, “sometimes, you have to be ugly to get pretty”.

Samantha rarely visited salons, but Selena convinced her to go. Selena embraced well-being and what she called “taking care of her body and her looks”.

After the three of us had received facial treatment and Selena a microblading treatment<sup>10</sup> of her eyebrows, we were about to pay. Selena usually had money, due to her Italian husband’s fortunate economic situation. I could naturally pay for myself, as I was a western student. Unfortunately, Samantha had misunderstood the prices and therefore had to use every dollar she had left, with some help from Selena. Afterwards, I asked Samantha how she could prioritize a facial treatment when lacking money. She answered, “I am a woman, I have to do women-things, like taking care of my looks. It is important”.

Samantha often had to face female beauty ideals in which she experienced as alienating, because her individual identity was rather influenced by her interest in sports than beauty and fashion. In Samantha’s workplace, both male and female waiters were expected to look sexy and professional. Thus, the female uniform contained a short black skirt, a white or black shirt with black formal shoes – many of the women wore high heels (but not too high, which was categorized as promiscuous and therefore not professional).

The male uniform had long black pants and white shirts; both so tight that a potential muscular body was highly visible. All of male waiters had a quite muscular body. Women were encouraged to use make-up, mainly by Selena. But Samantha did not prefer to use make-up or hair products. She was rather comfortable in shorts and sneakers. Nevertheless, her circumstances were filled with expectations and engagement in beauty. But in her football team, beauty pressure did not exist. There, women were expected to look masculine and sporty, and success and popularity was achieved by physical skills and not physical appearance. Unfortunately, football did not equal economic capital, unlike her work, which made a certain engagement in beauty and fashion inevitable in Samantha’s everyday life.

---

<sup>10</sup> Coloring each hair from the root, which after three treatments will give a permanent color for at least three months

Furthermore, during a period of three weeks, Samantha had a “crush” on one of the male waiters in the restaurant. She saw him as attractive because he was muscular, *mulato*, kind and a “gentleman”. In this period, Samantha used eyeliner and mascara, hoping to receive more attention from her “crush”. One day when I passed by the restaurant, she almost ran towards me, saying discreetly “oh my God he invited me on a date tonight, but I do not have anything to wear besides my working clothes”. Since I lived close to the restaurant, I offered her to borrow my clothes, make-up and the shower in my apartment. She ended up borrowing a jumpsuit with an “open back”, some make-up, and even my underwear. When I asked if she wanted to borrow my straightener, taking for granted that every Cuban disliked their curly and frizzy hair, Samantha answered “no, I like my curls”.

Afterwards, she described the date as successful and even spent the night with her “crush”, in his family house. Unfortunately, their fling burned out, and Samantha’s use of make-up decreased in the following weeks.

### **Gendered and racial ideas of beauty**

Within my ethnographical field, gendered and racial structures appeared to be integrated in social and individual identities, also through beauty ideals. Although Cuban men may gain economic, social and cultural capital by having good looks, women are expected to engage in their looks in a higher degree than men (Härkönen 2015: 113)

In her study of village life in Eastern Cuba, Rosendahl (1997) explains how gender differences and thereby different expectations on physical appearance become embodied from a young age. As wives, mothers and seducers, women should be attractive to maintain their social status (: 66). Further, Rosendahl emphasizes how girls and women are strongly associated with femininity and beauty, besides reproduction and motherhood. In girl’s fifteen-year celebration - *quince*, femininity, sexuality and beauty are visualized through a beautiful “princess-dress”, make-up, food and decorations. *Quince* symbolizes a girl’s sexual adulthood – when she is allowed to engage in sexual relations, which eventually leads to motherhood (Härkönen 2015: 93-95).

Considering Samantha, who seemed more comfortable and exited when discussing football with the male waiters at her workplace (the Italian restaurant), than talking about beauty and fashion with women, her example shows how women’s everyday lives are influenced by female beauty ideals; especially within the restaurant business. Still, her “down to earth” behavior and sporty appearance did not damage her agency or social relations; rather, people

seemed to like her “realness”, and also, she was well skilled at her job; serving, speaking English and charming the customers. But when attempting to engage in a romantic relationship or just by being part of her working environment, she could not escape what she called “women things”.

Similarly, Marisol, who attempted to embrace “naturalness” and little make-up, claimed that make-up and beauty could cure stressful and negative emotions, which implies that make-up and clothes are mainly female assets and tied to female confidence.

“Race” appeared as another important factor for my interlocutors’ approach to beauty ideals. Although the concept of race was rarely in their minds and perspectives, the racial system I introduced in the theoretical framework (chapter two) was mirrored through beauty ideals. I often observed how people got ascribed nicknames based on their skin color. A male cook in the restaurant called me “my white sister” and insisted on that I called him “my black brother”, something which was meant to be humoristic, from his side. Often, in the street, I heard Cubans calling each other *negrita* (black woman), *mulata* (mixed woman) and *blanca* (white woman), seemingly without bad intentions. Also, nicknames as *flaca* (skinny woman) and *gorda* (overweight woman) were frequently used. Moreover, people’s looks became labeled out in the open, seemingly without bad intentions.

Furthermore, when walking in the streets of Havana with tall buildings on each side, I observed how the majority of people would walk in the shadow side (but not too close to the buildings, because balconies may fall down due to their fragile material state), to avoid the burning sun, but also to avoid getting darker skin. The majority of my interlocutors often shared the importance of maintaining the color of the skin as light as possible, in addition to avoid getting sweaty and sticky skin. Furthermore, hair types categorized as “black” and “mulato”, which refers to curly, frizzy and dry hair, were often precepted as “bad”. For example, it was said that dry hair absorbed more sweat and therefore smelled “bad”, and also was hard to comb. A typical hair type of a “white” person was often referred to as “good”, and an ideal type of hair, due to its smoothness and shininess. The latter hair type was said to not absorb as much sweat as curly and frizzy hair and therefore had a better smell.

Contradictorily, Samantha embraced her hair, and did not want to straight it nor use *keratina*, which proves how collective beauty ideals were manipulated by each person to mirror their individual identity.

However, within my field, *black* and *mulata* bodies often created negative associations, with some exceptions; some bodily features, such as a big bottom and big breasts, were categorized as *negra* or *mulata*. As Selena stated, “Cuban men want a big ass and big boobs”, which appeared as an ideal body for Cuban women. One could even be “fat and ugly”, but thus pretty because of one’s big bottoms and breasts. Additionally, as I will illustrate in chapter five through my interlocutor Yamilka, being *negra* showed to be a benefit when interacting with tourists.

Writing about racialized beauty ideals in Brazil, Edmond (2010) states that “cultural aesthetic ideals often seem to mirror larger social hierarchies”, where he claims that “brown” (*mulata*) is beautiful, but “black” is stigmatized. This view reflects on how Brazil is heading “towards Europe” – associated with modernity and whiteness. An attempt to commodify and glorify black beauty in contemporary Brazil proves that racism is at least challenged, although “color hierarchies privileging whiteness” become an obstacle to obtain racial equality (: 27-28, 134-135).

Similarly, my empirical data implies how “blackness” creates negative associations, although Cuba has officially attempted to challenge, or even “eliminated” racism (De la Fuente 1998: 61).

However, perceptions of beauty within my field relate to Martin and George’s (2006) concept of *interest libido*, or “the nature of sexual capital”; my interlocutors’ utterances as well as actions illustrate how gendered and racialized beauty ideals were “internalization in habitus and the field” (: 128, as cited in Bourdieu [1980] 1990b: 57).

Someone’s beauty did not necessary decrease because of one’s racial appearance or “racial category”; rather, beauty was cultivated by approaching racialized beauty ideals where “whiteness” appeared as superior, with a few exceptions.

### **The female consumption market**

After describing how beauty ideals are intertwined in gendered and racialized structures inside and outside Cuba and emphasizing how these ideals are approached individualistically by social agents, I will now focus on how my interlocuters engaged in Havana’s consumption culture.

Although it contradicts with state-sanctioned revolutionary or moral values, being able to buy high status commodities often becomes a daily struggle (Holbraad 2017, Härkonen 2015).

Bastian (2018) claims that a person's or family's level of consumption is often linked to his or her position in the class hierarchy (: 80). Wearing commodities of high status and appearing wealthy is likely to strengthen one's economic, cultural and social agency (: 87, see also Härkönen 2015: 110 and Allen 2012: 38).

The development of consumption patterns in Cuba is strongly relevant for women's perception and exploitation of sexual capital. Härkönen (2015) argues that although women's income has increased since the 1990s (due to the private and informal market), men tend to gain higher incomes and maintain their traditional provider-role (: 113, Rosendahl 1997: 66). According to the majority of my interlocutors, they usually spend nearly their whole income on beauty and fashion consumption. As this chapter illustrates, this consumption represents a crucial part of their everyday lives; the women sphere, where women and beauty ideals function as the main influence and interest of its participants, and thus its importance for women's everyday lives.

Furthermore, since the commodities in the state-run stores are categorized as expensive and of bad quality, my interlocutors mainly consumed in the private and informal market, where they experienced a broader selection in beauty- and fashion commodities as well as food and further basic needs. Ultimately, to even exist, the private and informal market, and thus its consumers, depends on receiving commodities from foreign countries, often through tourists they have become friends and lovers with.

### **Economic independency**

For the majority of my interlocutors, sustaining themselves economically did not appear important or possible (Veronica shared a different view). Selena explained that in a marriage, the woman and the man share the money – it is not “your” or “my” money. Being married or biologically related implies economic obligations and no one can possess “their” economic capital for themselves.

Among women in my ethnographic field, “economic independence” emphasized having money to buy beauty and fashion commodities. Money also appeared as necessary to spend time with their female friends, as they went to bars, cafes and shopping together. Therefore, I did not calculate how “economically independent” they were compared to their male partners. Rather, to understand their definition of economic independence, I focused on their relation to consumption, in the context of the gendered money-distribution.

Elisa worked in Selena's regular nail salon. This salon was not anyone's home but rented privately. Just down the street was Elisa's house, which she shared with her husband, daughter and mother. As in several Cuban families, her mother took care of Elisa's daughter while she and her husband were working. Although Cubans families have free access to kinder gardens, some of my interlocutors as well as my in-law family has emphasized the importance of *la abuela* (the grandmother). In many cases, *la abuela* takes care of their grandchildren to enable their daughters to leave the household, work and in some cases, contribute to the household economy. According to my empirical material, a man would rarely take care of children and domestic tasks instead of working (although there exist deviant examples).

As proved by Elisa, the fact that her mother took care of her daughter enabled her to gain her own income. Since her husband insisted to provide for all the economic costs in their household, Elisa used the majority of her income on make-up, clothes, jewelry and beauty services. She experienced that having economic control over her own consumption equaled economic independence.

According to Härkönen (2015), Cuba's economic transformation in the 1990s played a significant role in "gendering of money"; women's expectations on men's materialistic wealth has increased. From another perspective, Pertierra (2008) argues that in Santiago de Cuba, women have become more economically independent and less depending on men, due to increased participation in wage labour.

However, according to my empirical data, women showed a willingness to pay for their own consumption. But in a wider perspective that considers the total amount of money a Cuban need to "survive", women appeared to depend on their male partners, simply because men appeared to work in professions with a higher income than women and because men were expected to be economic providers (except from Veronica who truly attempted to provide for herself, mother and daughter).



Figure 2: On the outside of the salon where Elisa worked: Extensions of natural hair are bleached in natural sunlight

### **Business in the household**

While conducting research, I observed and visited numerous of beauty businesses, ran by women and mainly for women. Such businesses included beauty salons and informal shops that sold commodities such as clothes, nail polish and jewelry. Visiting and consuming within these “beauty institutions” were a crucial part of my interlocutors’ daily errands.

Considering women’s agency, beauty salons and stores selling “female” items were usually owned by women and seemed to provide them a fair amount of income. Still, running such a business did not appear to improve their class position, in contrast to for example international restaurants, that according to my observations were usually owned by men. Pertierra (2008) argues that because of extreme economic shortages in the post-Soviet “Special Period”, which led to expanding the private market in Cuba, many women began to extend their household into small businesses, gaining income by selling commodities such as food, toothpaste and nail polish (: 758).

During my field, I observed hundreds of beauty salons that were an extension of the household; by using the entrance or another part of the house as business, women could combine domestic work and labor in the private market.

Working in the private market often provides a level of autonomy; opening hours, products and interior is decided by the manager, and co-workers may influence the latter factors as well. All the beauty salons I visited were self-employed and licensed, which means that the salon-owner was obligated to pay state taxes, but they could themselves decide working hours, salaries and administration. According to Bastian (2018), such private businesses may gain higher salaries than in the public sector, but there are no labor protections or regulations (: 143).

In the house of Marisela (74), located in Havana Vieja, two businesses were running; a watchmaker and a beauty salon. In this venue, no furniture or equipment appeared as modern. As in most salons in Havana Vieja, chairs lacked different parts and were uncomfortable to sit on. Still, a sense of interior style and charm colored the venue. In the salon section, there were two identical working tables with lamps hanging above. Several times during manicure and pedicure, I feared that those lamps would fall on my head, being cabled and attached in a seemingly dangerous way. On the wall behind the working tables, hundreds of nail polishes in different colors were displayed on a shelf.

Marisela's house was located in a busy and crowded street with several other small enterprises: shops, workshops and salons. The days that the salon and watchmaker were open, people passed by frequently, either to buy services or socialize with Marisela, who was a social and cheerful person. Other people stopped by with backpacks packed with commodities for sale; deodorants, perfume and toothpaste were typical and popular products for sale. Occasionally, the workers or customers bought these items.

Marisela and Elena categorized themselves as poor, similarly to many Cubans I met. However, Elena's income, provided by her customers, in addition to remittance from a family member in Spain, sustained them with basic household consumption and some saving. Every month, they managed to put aside a small part of their income in order to pay for an ongoing construction project which had already lasted for five years at the time of my fieldwork. This



project considered to build stairs from the first to the second floor, where they wanted to create a *casa particular*<sup>11</sup> to increase their income furtherly.

A couple of years ago, Elena finished a five-years University degree in economics and rapidly got employed as an accountant in a state office. Due to low state salaries, which she claimed makes it impossible to survive in Cuba, she chose to open a beauty salon in her mom's house instead. Besides the increased salary she receives in her private business (at least compared to her previous state job) she enjoys the flexibility of working times. The opening and closing times are flexible and the workers can take a day off as they wish. Clients often called or passed by to check if the salon was open and adjusted themselves after Elena's working hours.

However, to Elena and Marisela's salon and house, women came to cultivate their looks and confidence, participate in domestic work and socialize with each other. At the same time, they contributed to the income for Elena and Marisela, so they could buy their basic needs and come further in the construction process and hopefully, create a *casa particular* and thus improve their economic situation furtherly.

### **The smell of *allá***

Within my field, I learned that in the private market, commodities are categorized as cheaper than the formal market. Also, commodities were often imported, legally or illegally, from cheap chain stores in western countries through tourists or the few Cubans who can travel abroad. "Cheap" and foreign commodities normally gained a higher status than "expensive" and bad quality commodities from the formal market. The fact that these commodities were illegal, separated from the national market and foreign, seemed to make them exclusive, rare and *fetishized*<sup>12</sup>, originating from the market and "world" of freedom and privileges – where the tourists (and their goods) came from, and only a limited number of Cubans could afford to visit. Consuming these commodities was experienced as participating in "the global

---

<sup>11</sup> A rent-out apartment, mainly for tourists. These are usually licensed and pay taxes but receive CUC (the dollar-based currency) from tourists. Such businesses are known for gaining high economic income

<sup>12</sup> In *Pretty Modern* (2010), Edmond distinguishes his approach to fetishism from Freud (sexual perversion) and Marx' (a misunderstanding of the relationship between human beings and the objects they produce). Rather, he draws upon Walter Benjamin's (1999) combination of Freud and Marx' approach, who defines fetishism as "a dream world", "that is absorbed into the consumer's fantasy life" (: 59). Edmond himself addresses "fetishized relationships" to recall how the "Brazilian body" exists as "a body politic traversed by political, economic, and erotic relations reflected in medical technologies" (: 61).

community” (Roland 2010: 12); through dressing and styling their bodies with foreign goods, they felt wealthier and prettier, and most importantly, they cultivated their sexual capital.

However, when I bought commodities in informal shops in Havana, I noticed how the sellers wondered why a *yuma* (a foreigner), chose to consume in the informal market of Cuba – since those commodities were often smuggled from *allá*, “over there”, outside Cuba, where I came from. “Over there” commodities were bought cheaply, before Cubans sold them with a profit in the informal market. Once, Selena and I went to a woman who sold nail equipment. When I was interested in buying a nail file, the lady asked me “why do you want to buy that here when it’s so cheap in your country?”, without even knowing which country I came from. Further I explained that I was staying for quite a long time in Havana and needed a nail file at the moment. Then, similarly to many Cubans I met during the fieldwork, the woman wondered why a foreigner would spend such a long time in a country like Cuba, referring to its material shortages, as well as Cubans desire to migrate *allá*.

Furthermore, the day I conducted an ethnographical interview with Selena in her husband’s restaurant, we were interrupted by Valeria who entered the restaurant with a bag full of foreign commodities. She was also married to a European man, and during a recent trip to Europe with her husband, Valeria had been shopping a big amount of clothes, jewelry and make-up with the intention to sell it with profit in the informal market. These commodities she brought with her became directly from the sale section from H&M.

With an obviously interest of seeing the content in Valeria’s bag, Selena allowed her to make a “pop up-store” in the staff room, where she displayed a limited selection of H&M’s spring collection on a table. Selena, three female waiters and I took part in this “pop-up store”, and thereby bought smuggled and illegal clothes, sunglasses and make-up from H&M. The women all emphasized the delicious smell of *allá*; all items were categorized as “still fresh”, due to Valeria’s recent arrival from Europe. Selena and the waiters expressed how they felt as they actually were in the European H&M store themselves.

The desire for foreign consumption became even clearer the day Marisol and I went to a secret clothing store in Havana, run without license, and therefore informal. In the store-owner’s house in one of the wealthier neighborhoods in Havana, the furniture, decoration and household equipment represented wealth and money. The owner of this clothing store made

her grandmother's bedroom into a clothing store in the daytime. About twenty to thirty customers visited this shop every day, craving for spending money on western smuggled products. Approximately one time a month, the owner of the shop traveled back and forth to Spain or the US to buy clothes on sale in western chain stores such as H&M and Forever21. Her travel privileges are due to her Spanish passport, which gave her visa possibilities in Europe and the USA. Only a limited number of Cubans can apply for a Spanish passport, thanks to their Spanish ancestors. Marisol, who has Spanish ancestors, had recently applied for a Spanish passport, hoping to achieve the same travel privileges. The store manager talked positive and passionately about traveling to Miami, New York and Madrid, which is a dream Marisol wish to experience in her future.

Before we left the store, both with a bag of clothes, the storeowner said, "remember, do not tell the wrong persons about this store. Hope to see you again!".

However, drawing upon the two last empirical examples, women's beauty- and fashion sphere did not only function as an importance institution. Through consuming in Havana's private and informal market, my interlocutors consumed *allá*, concretely what they imagine as western and wealthy culture, which also represented a part of the world that most of my interlocutors have never seen although they dreamed of traveling there. As I will illustrate in chapter five, foreign goods and culture do not represent the consumption culture my interlocutors participated in but is also strongly related to how and why women exploited sexual capital.

### **Foreign connections**

As an alternative to spending money on clothes, women and men exchanged clothes with each other. In this way, people could renew their wardrobe without spending money. The clothes exchange system was based on changing garment for garment. Usually, my interlocutors exchanged garments they did not use much. This legal activity took place in all kinds of locations such as homes, restaurants, working places and in the street. Sometimes, Veronica was participating in "clothes exchange nights" with her female friends. Then, all the participants had to bring clothes for exchange. The clothes exchange activity is free and popular among different social environments in Havana. Furthermore, there are exceptions of rules when it comes to exchange; if a garment was bought for a higher price than average, or

is considered more valuable than an average garment, it can be worth two garments instead of one. Even within this system, I noticed the *fetishism* for foreign goods (Edmond 2010: 59). Since I aimed to participate in my interlocutors' everyday lives and had brought two suitcases of clothes to my fieldwork, I engaged in the clothes exchange. Fortunately for my interlocutors, they could consume *allá* by exchanging clothes with me, while I could obtain empirical data and participation in the environment I studied.

One day, Veronica had a denim jumpsuit and a red, thin shirt she wanted to change, and I showed her a yellow dress with flowers. Veronica considered the dress more special and unique than her two garments, which made her exchange the jumpsuit and the shirt with the yellow dress. However, participating in a clothes exchange system requires that you have clothes with a certain status, preferably from western brands, but exceptions can be made.

A common way to obtain foreign commodities, often for free, was through tourist friends. Greta, a sixty-four-years-old German woman, used to travel to Havana once a year. On every trip, she brought a suitcase with clothes, make-up, nail polish and perfume as gifts for her Cuban friends. Her two closest friends, Veronica and Marisol, who worked as waiters in the restaurant, usually took responsibility for distributing the commodities, "equally" to all the workers in the restaurant, although the majority of the gifts were only suitable for women. In return, Greta could enjoy Cuban friendships and culture, as well as feeling generous by "helping" people who were placed lower in the global hierarchy than herself. Although they seemed to appreciate socializing with Greta, this empirical example proves that goods and thus foreign connections is a crucial way to cultivate one's beauty-and fashion ideals, and thereby sexual capital.

## **Summary**

Approaching beauty ideals was hardly precepted as a collective phenomenon for my interlocutors, due to how collective ideals and "following the stream" threatened their individual identities. Moreover, they did not "identify wholeheartedly with the dominant gender categories" in their own society (Moore 1994: 51), but rather manipulated dominant beauty ideals to create a personal and unique style and appearance.

However, Marisol expressed that she improved her looks for personal reasons; to maintain her self-esteem and self-representation, while Samantha constantly faced and tried to approach

beauty ideals she experienced as alienating. Marisol's utterance of how make-up and beauty, "is just a woman's way to feel good", implies that improving physical appearance is naturalized as among women as a group. Further, Moore (1994) also states, "that no one can ever be fully aware of their own construction" (: 53).

Moreover, beauty and body ideals should be seen from an individualistic perspective, but also in the light of the social context. The process of identification, influenced by gender, race and class, is related to the social status one wants to achieve – where you want to belong, and who you want to impress. In other words, where you can obtain social, cultural and economic capital, while keeping your dignity, morals and individuality. As we will see in chapter six, women in my field were constantly facing potential traps of appearing and behaving in the "wrong" ways. When using their bodies to cultivate their looks, as well as exploiting sexual capital, they had to mind traps of appearing promiscuous and "low class".

The latter appears through the racialized categories that were intertwined in my interlocutors' hegemonic systems of judgement (Martin and George 2006), which, I argue, can be further related to their desire for foreign – concretely western, culture. I argue that the fetishism (Edmond 2010: 59) of embracing foreign goods and people, mirrors an attempt to distinguish themselves from national politics – associated with a fragile material standard and limited agency, and rather embrace foreign culture – associated with modernity, stability and "whiteness". By consuming H&M, Forever21 and interacting with foreigners, my interlocutors managed to integrate foreign culture into their everyday lives and thus participate in a "higher" class. Cultivating one's bodily appearance and thus sexual capital is a crucial part of the process of "using the body". Foreign (western) goods and culture symbolizes not only how these women aimed to look "white" and "wealthy", in addition to embrace western culture by for example interact with foreigners (as me), but also where they dreamed of traveling and in many cases, live.

The next chapter considers how my interlocutors not only cultivated, but also exploited sexual capital – concretely within touristic spheres, to increase their economic, cultural and social capital, and most importantly; their female identities and power.

## Converting sexual capital

Sometimes I flirt with customers just for fun, because I can control them because I am in my place (the bar), and I do not have to see them again. And they are tourists. And maybe they leave good tips. And I think that doing makeup and styling myself can affect my confidence and self-representation. Also, if you are smart and nice, then they (the tourists) are going to like you and maybe tip you more. The way you speak with people, the way you sell things. You have to have something more than looking pretty. For me, “just to look pretty” is never good enough. You need something in your head, and to have culture, read books, be curious and so on. Some people live more for the outside things and for having fun, “temporary fun”. Then, maybe looks are more important. There are old guys coming to find a pretty girl, and then looks is enough. There are rich tourists that just want to have beautiful girls, wives. But Cuban men can also be like that, and women can also pick their men because of their money (Veronica, June 2018).

Throughout this chapter, I will illustrate how sexual capital becomes valuable in work settings in the informal sector that are not directly linked to sex and romance, but rather Havana’s music scene and restaurant business.

Subsequently, this chapter will discuss Martin and George’s (2006) question, “can specifically sexual capital (if it exists) be converted into other forms of capital?” (: 129). Furthermore, I will emphasize that obtaining access to what Roland (2010) calls “the global community” (: 12) can help to understand how and why women (and men) cultivate and exploit their sexual capital.

Among female workers in the restaurant, putting effort into physical appearance, such as putting make-up and high heels (but not too high) appeared as beneficial for my female interlocutors. Further, what Veronica said, “just to look pretty is not enough”, showed to be true. Looking pretty is enough for obtaining economic capital, as for example through sexual-economic relationships. However, to maintain one’s self-respect and identity, and obtaining a worthy social status, it takes more than looks. Having a passion or skill, such as photography, literature, football or an education seemed important for these women’s confidence, and thus intertwined in their sexual capital.

Through working in Havana's touristic sphere, their beauty, social skills and confidence (sexual capital) became a tool to "be seen" by tourists and wealthy Cubans, as well as socializing and sometimes flirting with (foreign) customers. Through exploiting their sexual capital in this way, they obtained Bourdieu's three capitals; the economic, cultural and social. Firstly, many of my interlocuters obtained gifts from their foreign friends they had made through their work. They could use these gifts themselves or sell in the black market. Also, foreign customers were seen as a tip potential. In the restaurant, the waiters and bartenders could receive from 1 to 50 dollars per table. Musicians with a tourist audience could potentially gain much tips, if the tourist(s) enjoyed the concert and the found the musicians attractive. Further in this chapter, my empirical material will illustrate that working in the touristic sphere was associated with a big potential to increase economic capital. Secondly, through such relations, foreign friends (also called *yumas*) appeared as "cultural goods" that adorned Cubans' appearance and thus improved their cultural capital and class position. Thirdly, having foreign friends was associated with power and privileges, and would likely strengthen one's social capital. I experienced that many Cubans attempted to create relations with foreigners because "hanging" with foreigners appeared as powerful and privileged, as described in chapter three (Bourdieu 1979).

I underline that in the case of these waiters, sexual-economic relationships were not part of exploiting sexual capital. Rather, their sexual attractiveness, strengthened by their Cuban ethnicity and gender, as well as their investments in beauty and fashion. Roland (2010) argue how "tourists fetishize (Cuban) culture in its commodified forms", which implies how Cuban women function as commodities they can exchange into "money, social capital... and entertainment" (: 6). Similarly, in my field, tourists seemed eager to "consume" Cuban national identity, something that improved their cultural and social capital. Greta, the German tourists, expressed how she could "adorn" herself with her Cuban friends as "cultural goods", as well as "unique" knowledge of the Cuban society and culture, something which increased her cultural capital. By sharing stories about her Cuban friends' "crazy lives" and harsh reality (due to economic marginalization), she also improved her social capital. In the same way, Greta's Cuban friends adorned themselves with her – a "Yuma", which increased their cultural and social status, in addition to economic capital (Bourdieu 1986: 243).

In the Italian restaurant, I interacted with both sex tourists and tourists who wished to create non-sexual relations with Cubans. Besides sex tourists who searched for erotic and "exotic" experiences, and sometimes romantic relationships, other tourists often searched social

relations with Cubans as well. As the German tourist Greta said, “to put it bluntly, through our friendships, my Cuban friends receive gifts from me, and I can improve my social and cultural capital in Germany, because it is culturally lucrative to have Cuban friends”.

Although Greta did not search for sexual experiences during her trips to Havana, she found her Cuban friends attractive. Once, she described her friend and my interlocutor Veronica, as charming, confident and beautiful; in other words, Greta acknowledged her sexual capital.

### **Making the ends meet**

“La madre de la independencia es la independencia económica” (the mother of independence is economic independence). Money equals power – if you have money you have power, you can get your human needs like a house, food, things that you need to live. If you have money you can have everything (Marisol, 10.06.2018).

In Cuba, state subsidies and support that was supposed to cover all persons’ basic needs have decreased alongside with expansion of the private sector (Bastian 2018: 12-13). Therefore, money – concretely CUC, has become extremely important for Cubans to sustain themselves with material needs. Furthermore, access to CUC is obtained in the private and informal sector where social connections, in addition to tourism, is determining for an individual’s salary (: 63)

According to my interlocutors, one has to think “outside the box” to make the ends meet in Cuba. Working Monday to Friday from nine to five in the public sector can appear economically unnecessary, because of the low salaries. In the private and informal sector, education counts less, and social connections are significant for businesses to grow (Bastian 2018: 61-62). As mentioned above, in my field, physical attractiveness, confidence and social skills (sexual capital) were important tools to succeed in certain businesses, especially among female workers.

Among my interlocutors, working in the state sector was associated with low salaries, fragile materialistic conditions and “boring” jobs.

Bastian (2018) explains how revolutionary cultural capital<sup>13</sup> has lost much of its previous significance due to the new economic structures in Cuba’s informal sector, such as consumption, social status, and power (: 29).

---

<sup>13</sup> “a historically specific formation of the “right” type of political attitudes and cultural capital” (Bastian 2018: 27)



Similarly, based on his fieldwork in Boca Chica in the Dominican Republic, Gregory (2007), emphasizes how working in the informal sector, and concretely in the tourist industry, is considered to enhance people's social mobility. Especially darker skinned or low-class Dominicans experience difficulties in obtaining economic capital and social mobility. Therefore, "to work in tourism-related, activities, formally or informally, was to avail oneself of knowledge, skills, and relationships that would enable one to overcome, to move ahead, and to turn things around..." (: 45). Additionally, Gregory emphasizes how an exotic racial appearance and sexual attractiveness appeared as enforcing when socializing with tourists.

The following empirical examples will show how being employed in the tourism sector in Cuba, and having social relations with foreigners, are seen to enhance people's economic, social and cultural capital, in addition to providing possibilities to travel and migrate abroad. By emphasizing how Cuban national identity has become commodified since the Special Period, Roland (2010) writes, "Cubans regularly exercise agency through different 'strategies' as they navigate their way through the rules of revolutionary society that are subtly, if not explicitly, changing with the increasing incorporation of global capitalism" (: 5).

Based on my empirical findings and literature, I argue that women in the restaurant as well as musicians became commodified in the context of tourists' desire to "consume" Cubans, as explained in the introduction to this chapter. In this process of commodification, my interlocutors' sexual capital was strongly influencing their agency. On the other side of the process, Cubans wished to consume "yumas" as well; not only with the hope to receive money and gifts, but also to enter "the global community" (Roland 2010: 12).

### ***Jineterismo***

Literature on Cuban sex work shares views with this thesis by focusing on how Cuban women's agency in many ways depend on foreign connections, and also how sexual capital is a tool to create such relations (Berg 2004, Kummels 2005, Roland 2010, Hodge 2014, Allen 2012, Simoni 2015).

Cuba has experienced an increase in sex tourism since the Special Period. Some Cubans engage in sex work to afford basic needs, which according to Stout (2008) is called *luchando* and refers to how many Cubans struggle to make the ends meet (: 739). Other motivations to

engage in sex work might be access to high status restaurants and clubs, or even romantic relationships with tourists, which also may lead to migrate opportunities. Roland (2010) claims *jineterismo* (see footnote 3) is not exclusively about money and materialistic desire, but also participating in “the global community that is creeping into Cuba by going out dancing and to restaurant that they cannot afford on pesos” (: 12).

However, post-colonial factors should be considered when studying sex work in Cuba, as Caribbean women historically has been pictured as sexual objects by white, European men. This “othering” of Cuban women affects their agency in a context of sex tourism (Roland 2010: 13). Further, one should emphasize how global economic and gendered differences result in “cheap” sexual services for Western tourists, but high incomes for Cuban sex workers (Kummels 2013, Pertierra 2008: 761, Pope 2005).

Within my field, I noticed how people considered sex work normal – Cubans need money, and tourists need sex. Exchanging sex for money appeared as accepted and logical to my interlocutors. At the same time, *jineteras* were stigmatized among my middleclass female interlocutors, who themselves chose to work legally within the tourist spheres to obtain economic, cultural and social capital.

Within the social environment related to the Italian restaurant, I met Paul, a German music video producer. He traveled to Cuba one to five times a year to engage in music video productions, mostly within the controversial music genre *reggaetón*. During his trips to Cuba, Paul frequently paid for having sexual relations with Cuban women, to whom he often brought gifts from his home country. According to Paul, his Cuban “lovers” would rather receive beauty- and fashion commodities from Europe than money. Furthermore, he claimed that European women were too uptight and “hard to get”, and that Cuban women were easier to engage sexually with and even had higher sexual skills. Also, he found *mulatas* very attractive. Due to his status in Havana, he did not always have to pay for sex – several women wanted to engage sexually and romantically with Paul, for free.

Close to the restaurant, there was a *casa particular* (see footnote 11), where Paul used to stay during his trips to Havana. This *casa particular* was run by three women; the owner who was in her fifties, and two younger women in their thirties who cooked, cleaned and did the laundry. In this place, sex work was allowed. It was said that the (female) owner of this place behaved as a “foreign man”; not only because she had high economic capital (due to her successful tourist rent-out rooms), but with that money, she frequently bought sexual services

from younger male Cubans. By difference, the two younger female workers of this place occasionally operated as *jineteras*. Through taking payment for sexual activity with tourists (both in the *casa particular* and other places in Havana), in addition to cook and clean, their salaries increased significantly.

In the beginning of my fieldwork, I stayed in this place for three weeks, although not at the same time as Paul. However, I observed that the majority of guests in this place were ordinary tourists (families and so on), and not sex tourists. Occasionally, “couples” consisting of sex tourists and *jineteros* (both heterosexual and queer couples) spent one or more nights. Among these “couples”, the Cuban *jinetero* or *jinetera* usually appeared much younger than the tourist. However, Paul’s perception of Cuban women presents a vision and common attitudes that he shared with other sex tourists: The idea that Cuban women (and men) are easy to engage with sexually and have an exotic appearance, are factors which determine Cuban women’s agency in general (Roland 2010: 12, Kummels 2005, Berg 2004, Allen 2012).

According to my empirical findings, such ideas are not only determining the agency of *jineteras* and *jineteros*, but also Cuban women working in professions related to tourism, such as waiters, musicians and bartenders. Among my interlocutors, their agency depended on tourists who were intrigued by their attractiveness, as well as social skills and confidence Cubans. Moreover, their sexual capital became valuable not only through their investing in beauty and fashion, but also their Cuban ethnicity and female gender. Also, due to the economic and global inequalities,<sup>14</sup> which structure Cuban-foreign relationships, sexual capital became transferable to economic, cultural and social capital. Below, I will elaborate on the latter through empirical examples.

### “La Cubana y el Yuma”<sup>15</sup>

Selena explained that many Cubans see tourists as the “only” way to obtain economic capital, and thereby she felt stigmatized by being married to a tourist. By being a married couple consisting of an “older European man” and a “young Cuban woman”, they fulfilled a stereotype of sexual-economic relationships, or *jineterismo*. Although *jineterismo* was not the

---

<sup>14</sup> Roland (2010) writes, “In addition to highlighting racial and gender inequalities that predate the revolution, tourism also reinforces a transnational hierarchy that favours comparatively wealthy tourists (*yumas*) over Cubans, who are treated by the industry as second-class citizens” (: 15)

<sup>15</sup>Translation: The Cuban woman and the male tourist

case of Selena and Manuel's marriage, Selena often experienced that people saw her as a person with the "wrong" values, "stealing a tourist's money by using her body" – which according to Selena was false accusations (Berg 2004: 52-52).

Although salaries and incomes are widely unstable in the restaurant business (due to low and high seasons of tourism) Selena appeared privileged by being married to a foreigner, and neither less considering his successful restaurant business in Havana. Through her husband's social environment, she could enter nightclubs and restaurants of high cultural status. Within this environment, there existed "average" Cubans but also people of higher status, such as famous actors, musicians and other cultural profiles.

Recently, while video chatting with Selena in social medias, I asked her if her social status have changed after marrying a foreigner with higher economic capital than the average, she answered,

No, I started to feel different (as a better person) when I started to speak English. But no, I never ever think that another person is more important, just because he lives in (or comes from) another country. I feel proud of having contact with different cultures like you, because I learn so much and my mind opens.

In this conversation, economic capital appeared as insignificant, unlike cultural capital that Selena achieved by expanding her knowledge of Italian culture and language. As mentioned, *yumas* showed to increase Cubans' social capital, as both foreigners were categorized as "second-class citizens" (Roland 2010: 15).

Further, I asked Selena about how class inequalities are affecting the contemporary Cuban society;

.. my mama did not raise me like that, so I understand that there are just persons (everyone is equal). But in Cuba, seventy percent think that if you are a tourist you have success and money... People say to me, "of course you are with him because he is a tourist". They also say (laughing) that "tourists don't have dicks and don't fuck well", seriously they say that. People that know Manuel (her husband) they understand that I love him. But others think that just because he is from Italy, he is successful and have a lot of money, and I am with him because he is a tourist and not because he is a good person. Cuban people think like that, not everyone, but most of them.

Although Selena did not directly answer my questions, a different aspect came into light; the stigma of a Cuban woman being with a “Yuma”. Her apparent need to underline that she loves her husband and that his money is *not* important, implies how she experience to feel stigmatized and judged as a *jinetera* in disguise. Although she claimed to love her husband, certain persons around her found it hard to believe.

Similarly, based on her empirical research in Havana in the early 2000s, Mette Berg writes that, “for many white *habaneros* it was confusing and incomprehensible that European men should wish to have relationships with or even marry dark-skinned Cuban women” (2004: 52).

However, in another occasion during the fieldwork, Selena described the reciprocity in her relationship in a different and more vulgar tone. This day, she and I were sitting in her regular nail salon where Elisa worked, and Selena received new acrylic nails. As the three of us started to discuss economic independence among Cuban woman, Selena expressed how she sometimes took advantage of her sexual capital, and said in a humoristic tone:

I want silicone in my breasts, but Manuel says I do not need it. But maybe if I ask him after he had an orgasm, he will say yes. Many Cuban women are strong and have power, they have sex with their husbands, and they get everything they want.

Elisa, who was doing Selena’s nails, laughed but nodded confirmedly. They both assured me that the latter statement represented a general mentality among Cuban women, although it appeared as humour. On one hand, using her body or exploiting sexual capital contradicted with Selena’s moral values. On the other hand, she experienced her sexuality as a power.

Another day, during one of our many conversations, she claimed that a vagina is a woman’s weapon, which serves to manipulate men’s will. By depending on her husband’s income, sex appeared as a way to exercise agency (Roland 2010: 5). Fortunately, she loved her husband and enjoyed having sex with him, and therefore, Selena could exploit her sexual capital and at the same time keep her dignity and morals. Once, she mentioned that she would like to open a salon or a clothing store, but at the same time, she was satisfied with helping her husband in the restaurant. According to Selena, she never felt suppressed, nor saw herself as promiscuous or cunning; her sexual capital *and* her real love for him,

equalled her husband's economic capital. The way she used her body was experienced as empowering rather than symbolizing economic subordination. Further, she said "who wants to work when they don't have to? We are not weak, we are just smart, and we like to have sex so what is the problem".

Although many Cubans can be categorized as wealthier than Selena and Manuel, her capital – economic, cultural and social – was clearly affected by her marriage. It is crucial to mention that according to Selena herself; she married her husband out of love, and not for the money. Nevertheless, the global and gendered economic inequalities occurred through their marriage: Manuel; a European man with economic privileges, together with Selena; a young Cuban woman who frequently invested in her sexual capital, and occasionally exploited this capital through sexual intercourse with her husband. The way Selena was labeled as a "jinetera in disguise" (by some people) illustrates how Cuban women are expected to exploit their sexual capital, especially in relations with foreigners. As I have made clear; Selena did not "use her body" to achieve economic benefits, but through her love-relationship with her husband, she voluntarily used sex as a "weapon", which could give her "anything she wanted". Considering how the latter statement may contradict with her morals, it shows that exploiting sexual capital is a naturalized matter – it might be "wrong", but at the same time; easy and common.

## **Veronica's narrative**

### **Selling sex**

Since childhood, Veronica was dreaming of working with animal care. Therefore, she chose a high school that specialized in veterinary studies, and after four years she became a certificated veterinarian. Shortly after finishing high school (*Tecnico Medio*), she started a job in an animal clinic. At this time, she was eighteen years old. Unfortunately, working as a veterinarian turned out to be a disappointment. Veronica could not practice the way she had been taught at school, due to the lack of equipment and medicine for animals. At the clinic, she earned 25 dollars a month, which according to Veronica is the average salary for veterinarians in Cuba. To Veronica, a salary of 25 dollars a month was "nothing". To earn extra, Veronica had occasionally been selling sex to tourists since she was sixteen. Although she sold sex only "for fun", she got paid until 100 dollars for one night, and thus experienced what she called economic freedom. She never sold sex to survive, or to make the ends meet, because she could depend economically on her parents, who belonged to the economic

middleclass. However, with these extra salaries, she could buy clothes, make-up and other commodities herself, and cultivate her sexual capital. She enjoyed the fact that she did not have to ask anyone for money. Eventually, Veronica worked less in the clinic, and more in the sex industry; she did not find sex work uncomfortable at that time, and experienced that the benefits of selling sex to tourists were much higher than working in the public sector.

Veronica's experience shows that sex work in Havana does not always occur in the street with a male hustler controlling every dollar that is earned (Kummels 2005: 20). In her time as a *jinitera*, she would visit nightclubs of high cultural status, customized for rich Cubans and tourists, together with her friends who also sold sex. During the night, she would meet or get introduced to male or female tourists and thereby she would choose her customer for the night – voluntarily. Most often, she earned 100 dollars for one night, which was normal for “upper class sex workers”, as she called it herself. Among this friend group of sex workers, there was a lesbian woman, called “the lesbian boss” who functioned as a leader. This woman was highly respected by the tourists and looked after Veronica and the other sex workers. Due to her authority, strong personality and high economic capital, Veronica claimed that “the lesbian boss” protected them from potential sexual assaults or harassment from tourists:

We always chose rich ones (the rich tourists), but we did not go to them (asked them to buy sex). We (the Cubans and the tourists) just stayed together and had fun, we went out just to have fun. Everybody knew the lesbian boss, and everybody respected her, because she had money and a strong personality, and her gang was someone who sold sex. But we were never with Cubans (never sold sex to Cubans).

Considering the different levels of autonomy that exist in Havana's sex work industry (Kummels 2005), it is crucial to mention that Veronica's story represents a particular and limited environment of sex workers. However, while “taking payment for sexual services”, as Veronica herself called it, she constantly attempted to keep her dignity and self-respect. To do this, she rejected sex tourists whom she found unattractive. Although she categorizes herself as heterosexual, she sometimes chose female customers to varyate her sexual experiences. She claimed that she sold sex “for fun”, because she enjoyed being part of her working environment that consisted of male and female Cubans, queer and straight. Veronica never sold sex to survive, but to expand her social network and earning extra money. Within this environment, Veronica and her colleges experienced exclusive parties with pleasant food and

drinks. In other words, they managed to enter “the global community” by cultivating and exploiting their sexual capital (Roland 2010: 12)

Furthermore, at the age of 20, Veronica engaged in a romantic relationship with a Cuban male sex worker she met within her environment. His name was Abdiel, and he worked “full-time” through a sexual-economic relationship with a British tourist called Charlie (that frequently traveled to Havana). At first, Abdiel and Veronica had to keep their relationship secret, in fear of making Charlie (Abdiel’s sugar-daddy) jealous, and that he would end the sexual-economic relationship. Veronica accepted remaining their relationship secret, since Abdiel could lose his “job” and his salary. One day, Abdiel uttered that Veronica had to stop selling sex, because her body was his, and not the tourists’, whom seemed to threaten Abdiel’s masculinity with their money and cultural benefits. As she was extremely in love with her boyfriend, Veronica accepted his wish and started to spend most of her time in Abdiel’s family house, helping her mother-in-law with domestic work, while Abdiel was out, using his body in his sexual-economic relationship and provided for his family and Veronica, who could not even be out in public areas with Abdiel, due to how their relationship had to remain secret. At this time, Veronica was in love, but unhappy.

After a few months, Veronica became pregnant with Abdiel. As they were going to be parents together, she refused to hide her and Abdiel’s relationship. They both decided to inform Charlie about their relationship and the pregnancy, and fortunately, Charlie reacted positively. Eventually, Abdiel and Charlie’s sexual-economic relationship ended (as far as Veronica was concerned) and Veronica created a friendly relationship to Charlie. After the baby was born, Charlie (surprisingly) provided for them economically and bought the necessary baby equipment. Ever since she became pregnant, Veronica stopped with sex work for good, and therefore had no income herself. Although she felt lucky to receive money from Charlie, she also disliked the fact that she was depending economically on her boyfriends’ previous sex-customer. She received money in the wrong terms, and sometimes doubted that Charlie and Abdiel’s sexual-economic relationship had actually ended. As she was telling the story, Veronica looked at my shocked facial expression and said, “I know this is a crazy story, and it was too good to last”.

Then, she told me that when her daughter was one year, she conducted the breast augmentation and ended the relationship with Abdiel, who eventually became an absent father



with little interest in his daughter, although he contributed economically for two years after the relationship ended (and to her breast surgery). Veronica did not know if Abdiel and Charlie still had a sexual-economic relationship, or how Abdiel provided for himself. Furthermore, in the end of the ethnographic interview with Veronica, I asked her if she could think of anything negative by selling sex, to which she answered:

Now I would never do it because I have a daughter and it feels wrong. I respect others that are doing it, because they don't have another choice. But I don't think it is good to yourself. If you enjoy it, like that lesbian boss who really enjoyed selling sex, but I feel that I could not be myself, because it was some parts of my personality that my friends (in the sex work environment) did not understand. I do not like that someone is insulting my intelligence. I do not like that someone control me because they have my money. I did not see it in that time, but now I see that the tourists I sold sex to did not see me as a person, just my body. It's not about the sex. It's that they don't see you as a person. Just the body. It is easy to go and fuck someone, it might take only five minutes, but after the sex I felt the need to talk to the person just to see the person the tourist was. Someone was nice to me, but others did not want to talk, just fuck. I wanted to show them that I am more than sex. But those experiences have made me to the person I am. I would not do it if it was hard. It was easy. And no consequences.

Through sharing these thoughts and experiences, Veronica illustrates that “using the body” in the wrong terms was not exclusively “fun” and “easy”, as it contradicted with her moral, self-respect and person. Finally, she stated how many women were “forced” to engage in sex tourism during the early 2000s, because it was the only way to obtain economic, cultural and social benefits; “in those times it was not so many options to make money. Now there is private business.”

### **Selling drinks**

In the time of my fieldwork, she was working as a bartender in the Italian restaurant, which she had done for the last seven years. During the high season, when thousands of tourists came to Cuba, her salary would be between 20 and 100 dollars a day. That salary enabled her to provide for her mother and daughter, with whom she lived. “My mother is the ‘wife’ who takes care of my daughter which is now eight years old, and cleans the house, clothes and cooks. I am the ‘man’ because I work and put the money”, Veronica said proudly. But in the low season, she often gained as “low” as 5 CUC a day, which still is above the monthly state salary at 30 dollars but categorized as low by Veronica and the other restaurant workers.

Socializing with tourists is a crucial part of any bartender's work. In a conversation with Veronica, she mentioned that she frequently flirted with clients in the bar, partly because that increased the tips, which constituted the majority of the waiters and bartender's salaries. Sometimes she created friendly relations with her foreign customers, whose brought her clothes, books and other commodities from their country. Her German friend Greta, who is mentioned in chapter four, is an example of how foreign relations often result in commodities from the outside of Cuba, in addition to friendships. Another male friend from New Zealand, whose name was Nick at the age of fifty, brought her clothes and shoes on his yearly trips to Cuba. Veronica explained,

Ok, once Nick texted me from New Zealand and asked what I want him to bring. I said, maybe a dress with cherries motives, and when he came to Cuba, he brought thirteen different dresses with different cherry motives on them, and a pair of Doctor Martens shoes. He is running an escort business with Philippines and sends me pictures of his naked whores all the time. He has a lot of dirty money which he uses to buy gifts to girls all over the world. We never have sex, but my boyfriend gets a little jealous of him, because he flirts with me and bring me all those things. Once I asked if he could take a picture of his ass because he is so handsome, and he went to take a picture in the bathroom and came back and showed me (laughing).

The latter statement illustrates how sexual capital is included in relationships with tourists, although sexual activity is not a part of it. Veronica and Nick found each other attractive but did not engage sexually. Bringing gifts was simply a part of Nick's gesture for women he found attractive, and Veronica received a friendship with a foreign man she found handsome and exiting, in addition to receive a lot of gifts, such as the thirteen dresses with cherry motives.

Greta was a regular customer in the restaurant, as well as in Veronica's bar. She frequently mentioned how Veronica's feminine and confident looks inspired her own femininity, and also, Greta liked Veronica as a person. She liked how she reflected about the Cuban society, the way she dressed, her hair style, the way she made drinks and the way she behaved in general. For this reason, Veronica was the main receiver of Greta's gifts, every year.

During my fieldwork, she had a relationship with Enrique, who was at her own age. They lived in separate houses but visited each other frequently. After her tough experience with her

daughter's father, Abdiel, and his "sugar-daddy" Charlie, feeling economically independent of a man (or anyone), threatened her dignity as a strong and independent woman. She could not even live in the same house as a man. Having a boyfriend living permanently in her house would decrease her autonomy and independence, as she preferred to be in charge of all parts of her life – her body, her job and her money.

Moreover, Veronica was strongly engaged in her physical appearance and beauty ideals, as explained in the introduction of the thesis. Her looks and confidence depended on one another, and thus, her sexual capital became a benefit through socializing and receiving both tips and gifts from tourists that were charmed by and attracted to her physical appearance. First, Veronica's way of using her body transformed from selling sex, to remain in her in-law family's household, as an asset of Abdiel's masculinity. Further, she became pregnant and eventually gave birth to her daughter before her breasts became her daughter's main nutrition for some months. Afterwards, as described in the introduction, she conducted a breast augmentation to make them bigger, and "hers" again. Shortly after this surgery, Manuel hired her as a bartender in his Italian restaurant. At the time of my fieldwork, she felt sexy, confidence and economic independent. She was highly respected from all the workers in the restaurant, the men included. And most importantly; she loved her daughter, her body and herself.

### **Yamilka: La musica<sup>16</sup>**

Yamilka was a single twenty-eight-year-old woman who worked as a musician within traditional Cuban music, in a hotel in Havana. She can be categorized as a *negra*, and Yamilka herself claimed that her racial appearance was a benefit in her work, which consisted of singing and dancing in front of a tourist audience, including male tourists who fancied darker skinned Cuban women. Moreover, Yamilka was passionate about music and invested money, energy and time in improving her musical skills. She hoped that her music career would generate opportunities to travel or migrate abroad, unless she would fall in love with a tourist who could provide visa in a foreign country.

At the time of my fieldwork, she lived with her mother and father in one of Havana's less wealthier neighbourhoods. Since her salary was above the average, she contributed economically to the household. I met Yamilka by a coincidence, because I rented a room in

---

<sup>16</sup> A woman working in a musical profession

her family house for one week, at the very beginning of my fieldwork. Besides working in the hotel, she was teaching musical classes in a high school. Also, she played in another band characterized by traditional Cuban music mixed with more modern genres such as funk, jazz and soul. Due to her musical profession, Yamilka belonged to Havana's young "cultural elite", that would typically hang out in night clubs and concert arenas of high cultural status. Those persons she categorized as friends were usually musicians or foreigners.

Once we met for lunch, she came directly from a meeting with a Mexican male friend who brought her gifts – swiss chocolate and perfume. Proudly, she showed me these gifts and even let me try the chocolate.

After the lunch, we went walking in Havana Vieja, searching for a tattoo studio where I could get a nose piercing. In the middle of Obispo – Havana's main tourist street – Yamilka pointed at a café where a band was playing a concert with traditional Cuban music. While pointing at the band, she said, "I know them (the band), they are my friends". In the café, tourists were sitting and drinking mojitos and beer, listening to the live music. The main focus of the band was Diana, the female singer, who frequently switched between singing and playing a flout, while dancing sensually with her hips. Diana was wearing a black, tight dress that barely covered her bottom, and high heels. She had short curly, blonde hair, brown skin and smiled charmingly to both female and male tourists in the audience. While performing a song, Diana spotted Yamilka as well, and cheerfully waved us both towards her and the band. Then, Yamilka was given a percussion instrument to join the band for the rest of the song, while I was standing besides Yamilka, doing participant observation.

However, after the song was over, Yamilka introduced me to Diana. Suddenly, we were interrupted by a male tourist, seemingly aged around sixty, who came to say hello, concretely to Diana. And she appeared to know him well. When Diana saw this tourist, she opened her arms, said, "you came!" and hugged him for many seconds, lovingly. The tourist had brought Diana a gift – some equipment to her flout, which made Diana give him another even longer hug, saying "oh my god thank you so much". Then, Diana and the tourist walked down Obispo together, searching for a restaurant to have lunch.

Furthermore, Yamilka and I went in another direction to search for a tattoo studio which conducted nose piercings, which we never found. However, while walking around in a very humid and hot climate (that Yamilka disliked because the skinned got darker), I asked her if she had ever had sex with her male tourist friends, to which she answered,

No, no, oh my God, no, they (male tourists) say that if I wanna come with them, they will give me everything. They say ‘girl, you are so beautiful, I can give you everything you want’. They give me those things because they think I am beautiful.

Instead, she claimed that she received such gifts because the male tourists found her attractive. Also, she mentioned that her “exoticness” (dark skin, curly hair and Cuban ethnicity), increased her attractiveness towards tourists, also explained by Paul, the German tourist and mentioned in relevant literature (Roland 2010, Berg 2004).

Musicians working in touristic spheres may gain a substantial income from tips. When working, Yamilka and her colleagues cultivated themselves as a product, “selling” themselves, through exploiting their sexual capital. Their performances followed by socializing with the tourist audience often resulted in longtermly relations with tourists – often middle-aged men, who enjoyed coming to their concerts. These foreign friends usually brought gifts, money and invited the musicians out for restaurants and bars. In this way, Cuban women exploited their sexual capital, not directly by selling sexual services, but by performing in music concerts, and thereby creating social relations with tourists from whom they received tips, gifts and exclusive parties.

### **The French party**

On a Saturday morning, I received a text from Yamilka where she asked if I would like to join her and her French friends for dinner the same day, at seven o’clock in the night. When I asked for the location, she told me to meet her at the hotel she worked in, at six-thirty. I expected being introduced to some French young women whom Yamilka had met through her musical profession, in an international restaurant. Later that day, I entered the hotel where Yamilka’s was working. After waiting in the lobby for some minutes, Yamilka came towards me, dressed up and ready, and seemed happy to see me. Suddenly, two of her female Cuban friends showed up in the lobby as well. They were also going to the dinner with the French friends. After catching a *taxi colectivo* and driving around Centro Havana for ten minutes, trying to find the location of their French friends, we finally found it. I understood quickly that I had misunderstood the upcoming dinner; with whom and where. The French friends were not young nor female, but two men in their fifties, named Louis and Pierre. Neither were we going to a restaurant, but to an apartment the French men rented for their three weeks-stay in Havana. We were directed to the balcony, sat down and was served beers by a male Cuban

friend of Louis and Pierre. After a while, their Cuban friend had prepared a buffet in the kitchen. Fish, chicken, rice, vegetables and shrimps were nicely displayed on a table, and all the food was meant for us women. All women, except from me, ate a big amount of food. I observed how the other women went in and out to the kitchen several times for another portion. When I finished my meal long before my interlocuters, they asked me “are you not going to eat more?”. After an hour, another friend of Yamilka entered the apartment, and started to eat from the buffet as well, in addition to drink beers. The conversations in this party concerned the music industry in Havana, as it turned out that the French men were working with music production and music videos, in France and in Cuba.

Other conversations considered the controversial music genre reggeatón, and the how lyrics and music videos within this genre suppressed and sexualized women, in addition to appear of bad quality compared to the music genre my interlocuters were engaged in, such as traditional Cuban music (Baker 2015: 136). Another conversation considered how *La Fabrica* – a combined art gallery and night club, had transformed from being an attractive place for Havana’s cultural elite<sup>17</sup> to a “mainstream” place for sex workers, tourists and hipsters. The topics of the conversations illustrated that hanging out with these French men cultivated Yamilka and her friends’ cultural and social capital, in addition to economic capital.

At one point, one of Yamilka’s friends, Clara, asked Louis to fix her broken iPhone-screen, and seemed irritated when he told her that he could not fix it. Eventually, around twelve in the night, Yamilka and her friends started to dance (sensually as they always did), with the Frenchmen as the “audience”. Unwillingly to join this dancing, I left quickly.

Although it seemed as these French men were “real” friends with Yamilka and the other women, I could not stop thinking that sexual services were a part of their relationship, although Yamilka previously had denied having sexual-economic relationships with her foreign friends. Moreover, by participating this party, I personally felt like a sexual object, as it appeared that “us women” were the entertainment of the party. The way we received drinks and food, how Yamilka and her friends had dressed up and the ways their French friends were looking at us, made me suspect that this party would end with sexual activity between the young Cuban women and the older French men (which I never found out since I left early).

---

<sup>17</sup> Persons related to art, music and other positions with high cultural capital

From this night, certain aspects became fruitful for the analysis of this thesis. For Yamilka and her friends, their French friends represented economic capital, not only by serving food and drinks, but also by potentially provide a visa abroad; either through being their employer or a romantical partner. Furthermore, these French men appeared as a door into the global community (Roland 2010: 12). Besides their money, these men represented cultural capital by supplying the Cuban women with “Yuma” friends and access to a Havana’s international cultural milieu. Further, they symbolized social capital by their high social status, strengthened by the idea that foreigners are precepted as “second-class-citizens” (Roland 2010: 15).

A few days after the party with Yamilka’s French friends, Clara’s band played a concert in a “hot” concert arena in Vedado. Louis and Pierre, as well as Yamilka and I, came to see her and the band perform. After this concert, I could notice how Clara and Yamilka prioritized to “hang” with their French friends among musicians and the audience who stayed to socialize and party; truly, due to the status my Cuban interlocutors achieved status by “adoring” themselves with foreign friends, even with a high cultural reputation.

### **Age as an asset**

Age is an important asset in sexual capital (Green 2011: 246). Rosa (74), my oldest, wisest and probably most honest interlocutor, was also working in Manuel’s Italian restaurant. She was responsible for the restaurant’s toilets, organized the cutlery in drawers and brought the tablecloths home for washing. Additionally, she washed the laundry of Manuel and Selena weekly, for which she was paid up to 15 dollars a week. In a two-hour interview with Rosa, she shared her life experiences and thoughts about the present and the future of Cuba. In the middle of the Special Period, she quit working in a state office as a cartograph, mainly because she needed CUC, a currency that was only available in the private and informal sector. Although she had a husband who could provide for her, she did not feel comfortable as an unemployed housewife. Therefore, she started to work “aqui y allá”<sup>18</sup> in the informal sector, for quite many years until she fortunately became the neighbor of Manuel. He gave her a job as a toilet guard in his restaurant – a profession which can result in much tips if one has luck and charm.

---

<sup>18</sup>The expression «aqui y alla» refers to working in the informal sector, often illegally, unspecified and in contemporary working positions.

In the time of the fieldwork, Rosa explained that she did not put much effort to her looks compared to when she was younger. Ever since her husband passed away some years ago, she had not been feeling interested in engaging in new romantic relationships. However, every day, she used make-up to feel better with herself, but not as much as before, when her looks generated more benefits, through her work and through her social relations.

Once a month, she colored her hair black (the natural color of the hair was grey), claiming it made her look younger. She would always have nail polish on her fingers and toes and was one of the lucky receivers of Greta's gifts.

Rosa experienced her age as a dominating factor that became a weight to everything, including her feeling of attractiveness and thereby her sexual capital. Although she did not see it herself, her older age resulted in a sustainable number of tips from customers who got charmed by "the old Cuban woman" who passionately looked after the restaurant's toilet and saying "thank you, thank you" when receiving tips. Still, she did not socialize and flirt with customers as the younger waiters, due to her lack of English skills, but also because she felt too old to exploit her body in such a way. Before, when she was younger and felt more attractive, she could gain more money and social relations by working in the private and informal sector, while now (at the time of the fieldwork), she smiled to toilet guests and received some tips, but could not compare with the younger women. This reminds us of how sexual capital and its convertibility transforms across different contexts, ages and, as I will elaborate below, gender.

### **Male sexual capital**

The definition of women as a cultural constructed group depends on its differences from cultural construction of men (Moore 1994). To give a broader insight to women's relation to sexual capital, it is crucial to investigate how male sexual capital distinguish from and relates to female sexual capital. As Henrietta Moore writes, "bargaining and negotiating between women and men, and indeed between persons of the same gender, are often about definitions and interpretations, and it is for this reason that gender relations are always involved with power" (1994: 91-92). As chapter six will illustrate, exploiting sexual capital often leads to benefits, but also represents a process where women constantly negotiate their power position and social status. This process is highly related to gender differences and thus the power relation between women and men.



According to relevant literature, Cuban men – both queer and straight – also experience how their sexual capital is convertible into other capital forms (Simoni 2015, Hodge 2014, Stout 2008). Considering how Cuban male attractiveness in Cuba strongly depends on economic capital, Allen (2012) claims that material wealth is a crucial quality when women seek male partners (Allen 2012, see also Härkönen 2015:). In other words; sexual capital is sometimes not sufficient to increase other forms of capital, as women mainly look for potential economic providers when searching for male partners (Rosendahl 1997: 69, Härkönen 2015: 112). However, Simoni (2015) emphasizes how sex tourism have contributed to a changing Cuban male identity, explaining how also men experience a need to use their sexual capital to obtain economic capital (: 400). In the eyes of foreign women, Simoni argues that Cuban men are known for having high sexual skills, something that empowers their attractiveness significantly. Since foreign women emphasize care, affection and love in their romantical relationships, instead of providers, sexual attractiveness counts more than economic capital when Cuban men seek out foreign women (: 405). However, losing the provider-role in the relationship challenged the masculine identity of Simoni’s interlocutors, which appeared to be compensated with an exaggerated *macho* behavior, not only among their foreign lovers but also among their Cuban family and friends (: 405). According to Simoni, the latter is described as “specific accounts of how people negotiate paradoxes in their daily lives” (Simoni 2015: 408).

Furthermore, through experiences and narratives from interlocutors in my field, I discovered how also men took advantage of their sexual capital to obtain economic, cultural and social capital. In the beauty salons where I conducted fieldwork, the majority of customers and workers were heterosexual women, with some exceptions; in Selena’s salon, there were working two queer men– one as a hairdresser and one as a cleaning worker. Once, the male hairdresser asked me on a date. Because I had heard that he was gay, I asked, “but they said you were into men?”, to which he answered, “no, I am into women only”. Then, two female colleagues of him started to laugh behind him. Further, I told him the fact that I had male gay friends in Norway, who were even single, and suggested to introduce him for them in Facebook. Not surprisingly, as several persons in the salon had mentioned that he was gay, he accepted my offer, and I even took a picture of him that he wanted my gay friends in Norway to see. Then, I was not longer a potential date. This story illustrates that sexual capital is also significant for men, in addition to how they “negotiate paradoxes in their daily lives” (Simoni 2015: 405), such as sexual

orientation or, as the following example emphasizes, their heterosexual and masculine identity.

As mentioned in earlier in this chapter, Veronica's ex-boyfriend was gaining high salaries through his sexual-economic relationship with Charlie. She explained how his Cuban male identity was already challenged by being a *jinetero*, and even more by having a girlfriend who "gave her body" to other (foreign) men,

After I moved in with Abdiel, I stopped all payment for sex because Abdiel said I had to, because my body belonged to him. But Abdiel was still doing it (selling sex). It was his way of living, and he did it to be a pop singer, and I did not want to stop his dream. I was working in the clinic a little. I felt strange about the money he made; I did not want him to buy me things with those money.

When asking about gender differences among sex workers, she continued,

It's not the same as women, women are having fun with it, but guys are seen as gay people – they are called *Bugarrón* – it is a really ugly word, not even so common as joking. At least, Abdiel was the *Bugarrón* (the one who penetrates his male partner) and not a *Maricón* (the one that gets penetrated). Abdiel's friends could not know what he was working with, only his family.

According to Veronica's narrative, her male partner Abdiel experienced more stigmatization by working as a *jinetero* than herself. Still, Veronica had to quit selling sex, while Abdiel claimed he had no choice. Before they dared to tell Charlie about their relationship, Abdiel saw himself as the main provider, especially since he was about to become a father.

As mentioned in chapter two, Cuban men are traditionally expected to be the economic providers of the household. Due to struggles related to be a provider, Simoni (2015) explains how Cuban men receive money from their European sexual and romantic partners. Although the economic balance in their foreign relationships clashes with their Cuban male identity, receiving money from foreign women and men is experienced as a sacrifice to maintain the economic capital that is expected from a man (: 404).

Veronica's thoughts about she and her (ex)boyfriend selling sex revealed similarities and differences of how and why women and men use their sexual capital through sexual-economic relationships and in their everyday lives. Although they both enjoyed being part of an international and high-status environment, Abdiel justified sex work with his provider role, unlike Veronica who claimed she sold sex "just for fun". Furthermore, Veronica claimed that women can more easily use their sexual capital because they experience less stigmatization about it, which implies how "using the body" is associated with less risks, stigmatization and thereby "consequences" among women. By difference, men would rather feel pressured to engage in sex work to fulfil their provider role and feel the need to keep their work secret for their social network. Still, as I will illustrate in greater detail in chapter six, the word *jinetera* is a stigmatized label (Kummels 2005, Berg 2004).

Although Veronica and Abdiel's agency was affected by their sexual capital, they exploited their sexual capital for different purposes and with different consequences. This example illustrates how female and male sexuality appear different in relation to each other. The Cuban male provider role seemed to be intertwined in the way Abdiel used his body, and also how he negotiated his masculinity through a gay sexual-economic relationship. While Veronica experienced less stigma of selling sex, Abdiel rather preferred her to remain in the house, not only to maintain his provider role but also because he did not want to "share" Veronica's body with foreign men and women (Kummels 2005: 20, Simoni 2015: 395-396). In the context of global, economic and gendered inequalities, cultural constructed gender roles were constantly negotiated through the power of their bodies. Furthermore, the agency of sexual capital is highly influenced by women and men's attempt to fulfil their gendered identities.

## **Summary**

Through the empirical findings and narratives related to my interlocutors, I have argued that within the music environment, restaurant business and further touristic spheres in Havana, sexual capital is a tool that can increase women and men's possibilities to obtain economic, cultural and social capital.

This chapter has illustrated how *jinetismo* is an influencing factor for women's agency. As mentioned in this chapter, *jinetera* appeared as a stigmatized label, associated with the

“wrong” values. Due to global and gendered inequalities, the value of Cuban women’s sexual capital appeared to increase, while foreign men symbolized money, wealth and privileges. These gendered and economic inequalities created difficulties for Selena’s social status.

Otherwise, in the context of tourists’ desire of consuming Cuban people, practiced through social, sexual and romantic relationships, my interlocutors’ sexual capital (beauty, confidence and social skills) became a helpful tool to create such relations.

Furthermore, from describing how my interlocutors approached “white” beauty ideals to increase their own confidence (chapter four), it is fascinating to see how Yamilka emphasized her “black” racial appearance when interacting with male tourists. The latter illustrates how sexual capital in certain cases becomes a strategic and contextual matter, depending on its convertibility into economic, cultural and social capital.

This chapter has illustrated similarities and differences of sex work and working in the private sector: When Veronica was working as a *jinetera*, sexual capital was required in a high degree and her social and intellectual skills seemed irrelevant for her customers.

However, when working as a bartender, Veronica exploited her sexual capital but emphasized her social and intellectual skills as well. In this way, she managed to keep her self-respect and dignity while flirting with tourists in the bar – and receiving tips.

Similarly, Yamilka explained that her beauty, ethnicity and racial appearance attracted male tourists with relatively high economic capital, specifically through her work as musician.

Fortunately for her dignity and self-respect, Yamilka’s musical qualifications was the main tool for her work. Sexual capital appeared as a significant “bonus” that improved her social network, cultural status and economic privileges.

Ultimately, as empirical examples and relevant literature illustrates, sexual capital is contextual and constantly negotiated after its convertibility into other capital forms.

Ultimately, the hegemonic structures of judgement are not bounded nor static, but rather fluid, and modifies between gender, ethnicity, race and age (Martin and George 2006, Roland 2010).

## Using the body: Power, resistance and stigma

Women's power and space is limited, guys can just take space, especially when they are with other guys. To annul your personality. I have met a smart guy, but with his friends he just acts the same. Always goes to the lowest level, and nobody judge them (Veronica).

In this chapter, I will explain how women cultivated and exploited sexual capital, using their bodies to obtain a position of power within narrow margins of agency. There was a short way from using one's body in the "accepted" terms, to being stigmatized as promiscuous and cunning. While sex work was usually met with some acceptance and understanding, due to how many women depend on salaries from sex work (Kummels 2005, Roland 2010, Pertierra 2008), women and men often considered it wrong to use one's body in non-sexual-economic relationships, and especially in those cases where the man had a high economic capital. To do so would downgrade one's class position. In such relations, women had to mind their behavior and status, which could be easily stigmatized, as explained by Selena in chapter five.

To define "low" culture and class, my interlocutors often brought up the controversial music genre reggaetón. Through this music, they pointed to how its lyrics and music videos contributed to an oversexualization of the female body, where women were turned into sexual objects. "High" culture was rather associated with education, language skills and art. The latter, art, was used to legitimize women's investment in fashion, beauty and body. In the name of art, a woman could pose almost naked in front of a camera without representing "low" class. She could also dress "promiscuous" and conduct plastic surgery as long as it was for aesthetic reasons (art), instead of obtaining economic benefits. The stigma occurred when women disagreed of the definition of art. Some claimed that reggaetón was art, while another saw it as a sign of unintelligence and moving "backwards" (Lundgren 2011: 45). Through legitimizing their own approach to beauty, music and fashion as "art", in contrast to reggaetón and "low" cultural values, they confirmed that their bodies were used in the "right" way (Bourdieu 1979: 128-129, Rosendahl 1997: 53). The way they defined these concepts reveals how they attempted to maintain their social status, femininity and self-respect; assets that outlines their sexual capital, and the power of their agency.

Finally, to present a wider lens on these women's everyday lives and practices, I will describe their perception of their future. This may strengthen the understanding of why they cultivated and exploited sexual capital and "used their bodies" the way they did.

### **Reggaetón: Sexualizing women**

As mentioned in the introduction, the music genre reggaetón created discourses concerning the "oversexualization" of women, as well as stigmatization by dancing and participating in reggaetón music (Lundgren 2011: 32). Also, it was said that reggaetón music encouraged men to sexually harass women. Interestingly, people rarely seemed to consider whether this harassment originated in men or women's behavior. In other words; whether sexual harassment was legitimized by women's "oversexualization" or men's machoistic attitudes. When I asked Rosa what she thought about today's young generation of women, she answered,

Today women seem more liberal, in their mind, in the way they dress, how they interact with people, there is no shame in their actions. I think this is decreasing their self-respect because I cannot understand that they can be like that. For example, recently, I saw a five-year-old girl going in the street and saying bad words. Not everyone, but a lot of children learn and scream bad words. They talk about the music that has a lot of bad words and messages to young people. Kids start to sing songs about sexual things. A younger woman was here (in Rosa's apartment) once and told us that one time, her kid showed her a video of a dog having sex with a doll in the sofa with a nasty reggaetón song in the background, and her kid were laughing about it. And before, everybody knew the words "pinga" (penis) and "cojone" (testicle), but nobody would say it. Now they say those words all the time<sup>19</sup>.

In other words, behaving in vulgar and promiscuous ways was something Rosa categorized as liberal and shameless at the same time. Further, this behavior implied how these women lacked self-respect and ascribed them a "low" cultural level (Lundgren 2011).

Among my interlocutors, their opinions varied about reggaetón. Rosa disliked the music, as already described. Similarly, Yamilka and her friends saw the music as female suppression. Veronica hated reggaetón as well and categorized it as unintelligence music that makes people stupid. Furthermore, Samantha agreed in how the lyrics were "stupid" and how

---

<sup>19</sup> The interview with Rosa is translated from Spanish

women were oversexualized but enjoyed reggaetón music when dancing and partying.

Finally, Selena claimed that the women who are dancing in reggaetón music videos are not sexualized but rather dare to be confident with their bodies.

Within my field site in Havana, I noticed how reggaetón was widely played in poorer neighborhoods as Centro Havana and the non-touristic spheres of Havana Vieja. Furthermore, the reggaetón music was said to increase sexual harassment, due to how women dressed more promiscuous (and therefore was “easier” to harass), in addition to how men adopted a violent and vulgar behavior by consuming the music. By many of my interlocutors and other people I met, listening and dancing to reggaetón; “slutty” women and “machoistic” men, were associated with having a low cultural level. Selena, who enjoyed the music, admitted that she liked the music, instead of “pretend you are something you are not”.

Paul, the German tourist, presented a different aspect of reggaetón, as his job was to produce reggaetón music videos. He and I had several conversations about a variety of topics, whilst the majority considered Cuban women, and in one of them, he shared his “manual” for making successful reggaeton music videos;

You must have sexy women who twerk, that is just basic. Also, they must have big and beautiful bottoms. We always put oil to make their bottoms shine. Not much clothes of course. That is what people want. Sexy women and luxury, golden necklaces and nice, expensive cars on the beach with palms, and money flying around (laughing).

Then, he shared an idea of a potential successful lyrics and music video,

A rich man drives an expensive car into a poor neighborhood in Havana. Then, he picks out a beautiful woman that he wants, and asks her to come with him, which she does. He has to go to her family and ask for permission to make the woman his girlfriend, and then they can have sex. In the end, the rich man and the poor Cuban woman are driving away to a better life, and people are waving them goodbye, a little jealous of course. It is stupid, I know. But people want luxury and unachievable dreams.

When retelling the conversation with Paul, it is crucial to mention that the content in his music videos represents a utopic reality. However, through Paul’s vision of how to succeed within the reggaetón industry, three questions came into my mind; does *reggaetón* represent “what people want”? Do people want partying, dancing and sex, while fantasizing about

unachievable dreams? And, do this “sexualizing” of female bodies represent women’s freedom or machoistic suppression?

Clara, who was a musician in a Cuban funk-band and also Yamilka’s friend, once told me, “in a way, the women in reggaetón are even more *machistas*, because instead of being suppressed by male *machistas*, they suppress themselves and us (women)”. Again, the contradiction arose; women who dared to show and use their body and sexuality implied having the “wrong” morals, low self-respect and even being a *machista* themselves. The opposite to the latter; being a monogamous housewife, would also be associated with being a victim a machoistic attitudes. In the light of the latter, it is relevant to ask; how can women potentially achieve ownership of their bodies?

Based on her fieldwork in Vedado, concretely within the white middle class, Lundgren (2011) describes how the controversial music genre reggaetón represents “low culture” in Cuba, due to how male reggaetoneros view women as sexual objects in lyrics and music videos. Lundgren describes how lower-class women often become targets for *othering*, whereas they become ascribed as promiscuous and ignorant due to their low-class level, and not their actual behavior and appearance (. 45).

This othering mainly considers illustrating class and race differences, whereas reggaetón, promiscuity and *machismo* characterize “low culture”, opposed to the white middle class that represent education, gender equality and a higher cultural level (: 34).

Writing about the social meaning of reggaetón music, Geoffrey Baker (2011) analyses its social and cultural meaning in the Cuban society. He writes, “Cubans often consider sexuality to be an important aspect of life that lies outside government control, and the body may thus be perceived as a site of freedom and self-expression” (: 136), before he draws this view upon *jineterismo* and how young habaneros “use their bodies” to obtain benefits from tourists;

Reggaetón’s highly sexualized movements and lyrics thus need to be understood in the context of a city where dancing and sex provide both metaphorical and literal routes of escape, enabling spheres of experience beyond state ideology and Special Period hardship, but also potentially constituting a commodity in the grey economy, a way forwards in life, and a way out of the country (: 138).



Thus, the culture of reggaetón symbolizes how bodies are adjusting to fulfil touristic desires, also called “commodification of Cuban national identity” (Roland 2010), with the hope to distinguish themselves, and even leave, their harsh reality of complex and controlling state policies and also the economic marginalization that has lasted since the Special Period.

Drawing upon Baker’s argument (2015: 138), this music culture also illustrates how the “the unprivileged” are dealing with and trying to improve their realities, as similarly to why my interlocutors cultivated and exploited their sexual capital (Scott 1985).

Considering how my interlocutors and others criticized reggaetón’s view on women as sexual objects, it seems that they opted to “use their bodies” to obtain benefits, from tourists as well as privileged Cubans, despite the contested moral nature of such practices. Selena precepted women dancing and performing to reggaetón as confident and liberated – in the name of “art”, while my other interlocutors distinguish themselves from such a “low” cultural level.

Subsequently, I refer to Marisol’s statement during our chatting on social medias, that, “it’s easier to use the body than the brain”. But since using the body is perceived as a last resort – a “weapon of the weak”, one needs to ascribe confidence, identity and power to the body, as cultivating one’s sexual capital (Aboim 2012: 80, Scott 1985).

As the presence of the hated and loved reggaetón music reminds them of, and as this thesis emphasizes; using the body, through their sexual capital, was their tool, and in cases of *machismo* and stigma; their weapon.

### **Sexually independent**

Using the body in the “right” ways also considered women’s sexual lives. My interlocutors aimed to be sexually independent, which means to prioritize their own sexual needs at least as much as that of their male partners’. Additionally, sexual independence meant the freedom to interact sexually with whom and when they wanted. Although some were in monogamous relationships and could not embrace this sexual freedom, they emphasized women’s sexual rights. Unfortunately, as they shared their thoughts about women and men as sexual agents, gender inequalities occurred to threaten their sexual independence.

However, I asked four of my young interlocutors how they saw women and men with a high number of sex partners during our ethnographic interviews. Although it may be politically

correct<sup>20</sup> to emphasize equality between men and women's sexualities, at least within my ethnographic field, some of my interlocutors saw the number of sex partners as insignificant, while others shared concerns and problems due to *machismo*;

I don't care, maybe I would cheat if I met someone I like. I think that other girls are ashamed, but I am not. I was with a lot of people when I was single (Veronica).

Have sex with whoever you want it's their pussy not mine, no matter if it's women or men, everybody should have sex whenever they want, with whoever they want. But I don't like people that pretend that they are something they are not. If you are a *descarada*<sup>21</sup>, you are *descarada*, so don't pretend you are not. *Descaradas* are people that don't respect couples, they just want what they want. They don't care about their own couples either, they just want to fuck (Selena).

When I met my ex-boyfriend, he had been with a lot of girls before me. And I was thinking, "oh my god", but he changed when he got together with me. People can always change. I always give people a chance. But I was afraid he was going to be a *descarado* with me. I don't like *descarados* because they can cheat. And I am a little jealous (Samantha).

I don't care; I don't care about genders and how many people you have slept with. But there is this macho idea in the world, so everyone will get affected [because of a universal *machismo*, women with many sex partners will always get stigmatized] (Marisol).

On the one hand, as some of my interlocutors' thoughts about sexual freedom and gender equality suggested, it *should* be socially acceptable to be a *descarada*. Having a rich sexual life with several sexual partners is also quite safe, due to the public health care system (Andaya 2014). On the other hand, such a sexual lifestyle can be challenging for monogamous relationships, in addition to how *descaradas* and *descarados* are stigmatized labels, similarly as *jinetera* and *jinetero*. Furthermore, as Marisol mentioned, *machismo* appeared threatening and problematic to women's sexual independence, since a macho man would want his woman to remain in the household, and thus hinder her from being a *descarada*. Although my interlocutors aimed to be unaffected by *machismo*, the following

---

<sup>20</sup> Some answers might be more affected by "politically correct" perceptions than true and realistic thoughts and experiences

<sup>21</sup> Translated as "shameless" and often refers to a promiscuous man (*descarado*) or woman (*descarada*) with the "wrong" morals. Often, *descarada/o* means having high number of sexual partners and clashes with monogamy.

empirical examples and literature will illustrate how women's bodies in certain cases became a target for oppression, as well as resistance.

### **The macho idea**

In general, in Cuba, there is an idea of *machismo*, for example that women should be at home or that they are promiscuous if they sleep with many people. Women can be judged for this, like a whore. But if you are a man, you have succeeded if you have slept with many. As a woman, you have to care a little bit about what people think. My boyfriend would be affected if I was a *descarada*. When you are a woman you have to be more careful with education, beliefs, friends and other people. You can get judged. Or bullied. Or whatever. When you are a woman and you are in a party, you have to be careful, so you gain respect from other people. To get respected you have to have a reputation, so people don't judge you and hurt you. You can sleep with a lot of men, but people cannot know. You have to be respectful and be reserved about your life entirely. If you talk a lot about fucking men, especially for gay persons, you can get judged, because of the idea of *machismo* (Marisol).

In the context of a village in Eastern Cuba, Rosendahl (1997) emphasizes how gender equality is difficult to obtain; although women and men officially have equal rights, and gender equality is a crucial part of state politics, traditional attitudes appear to limit the practice of gender equality in everyday life (: 52).

The concept *machismo* relates to such traditional attitudes, which she defines as “an exaggerated display of manliness, but also the idea that men should have supremacy and control over women in every aspect of life and that both physically and psychologically, men and women are in different spheres” (: 52-53).

In several conversations with my interlocutors and other women I met in Havana, I heard narratives of sexual harassment, taking place on the bus, in the street, in people's homes and at work. One day, during Samantha's lunch break in the Italian restaurant, we began to talk about sexual harassment. When Samantha was 16 years old, she and her friend were standing in a crowded bus on their way to school. Suddenly, Samantha's friend looked at her with fear in her eyes and said, “just move to the left side, and do not ask why”. Without understanding the situation, Samantha moved herself to the left as much as possible in the extremely crowded bus, as Havana's buses tend to get. Her friend stayed quiet, keeping the fearful face,

for the remaining five minutes. Finally, they arrived the bus stop close to their school and Samantha's friend said, "Samantha, your bottom is full of sperm". A man who had been standing behind Samantha, were masturbating towards her bottom, and no one said anything, except from her friend who only dared to say, "move to the side". During this conversation, Samantha tried to see the story as humoristic, and also emphasized how women experienced such harassment every day, in Cuba. She categorized the majority of her male friends as kind and respectful towards women. Unfortunately, a few "crazy" men occasionally felt the need to conduct sexually harassing acts towards women.

Another day in the field, during our ethnographic interview to be exact, she told me another story from her previous restaurant job; not in a humoristic sense, but rather horrifying;

In another restaurant I worked in, the boss felt like he had a position of authority, and girls that worked for him were expected to have sex with him (the boss). The boss tried to sleep with me many times. My ex-boyfriend wanted to beat him up. One time, my boss called for me when I was working in the restaurant. He was in his office and said, "Samantha you have to come to the office, I have to talk about something important", and I went up (to his office). And he told me to take off my clothes and have sex with him. He put me against the wall with force and said, "you have to do it because everybody here (women who work in the restaurant) do it", but I did not want. And that is the last day I was working. The other girls working in the restaurant slept with the boss because they did not have a choice. They don't study, and they don't think they will find other work. The boss is threatening them with firing them if they don't sleep with him. They don't go to the police. Because they are so afraid to lose their job. They have for example kids to pay for. I only worked there for one month. When I was almost forced to sleep with my boss, I felt bad, stressed and pressured. Therefore, I changed my job to where I work now, which is so much better (Samantha, 06.07.2018).

According to Samantha, such assaults were not unusual within Havana's restaurant business. Sadly, she stressed how these women in general and these waiters in particular aimed to pay as little attention to such problems as possible, due to how "they did not have a choice". Further, she confirmed my hypothetical argument that considers how waiters and bartenders' sexual capital becomes significant to get hired; not only to increase the tips and engage in foreign social relationships, but in Samantha's previous case; the manager saw them as potential sexual partners. The latter illustrates that women's bodies are not only target for stigmatization, but also sexual harassment and assaults. However, to keep

her dignity and mental health, Samantha changed workplace into the restaurant she worked in the time of my fieldwork.

Sexual harassment, mostly referred to as *machismo*, appeared to be the worst threat to women's bodies and identities. Receiving degrading and harassing comments in the street, and even facing severe situations of sexual assaults, reminded women of the "oversexualization" of their bodies, as illustrated through reggaetón. These experiences of sexual harassment illustrate how women's limited power position in the private sector combined with machismo attitudes, in certain cases, turn their bodies into targets for sexual assaults. These stories also remind us of the dark side of sexual capital: Being in a position where one's agency strongly depends on bodily attractiveness may become a difficulty instead of benefit.

Therefore, through cultivating and exploiting sexual capital in their "own" terms, representing their individual identity, cultural level and power, my interlocutors achieved an ownership to their bodies. The latter enabled them to deal with *machismo*, stigmatization and economic marginality.

### **Humor as resistance**

Veronica uttered some experiences of sexual harassment, *machismo* humor by men and how she sometimes responded to such harassment;

Sometimes, people say to me, "with that mouth, I bet you are good to suck dicks", and I hate it. Another time, I was coming home from a night out, it was late. There was some gossip in the neighborhood about "la corta cara" (the cutting face); that a man was going around cutting people's faces in the street. I used to have a knife in my pocket just in case. This night, a guy touched me in the street (in a sexual harassing way). So, I showed him my knife, and said, "soy la corta cara" (I am the cutting face) and ran to my house. Another time, I saw a man jerking off close to the restaurant, so I slapped him in the face" (Veronica).

Although the majority of people in my field agreed on that *machismo* existed; in the restaurant business, in reggaetón lyrics, in the street and, as Marisol claimed; in the world, they never referred to themselves as victims by machismo, although they occasionally experienced sexual harassment. Rather, it appeared as "other" women were considered the

victims of *machismo*, as for example the female waiters at Samantha's previous work that were indirectly forced to have sex with their boss. And quite often, women were joking about being violent towards men, using threatening words or actions, usually in front of their male partners and their friends.

Men's humor often considered making fun of homosexuality, by calling each other *maricon*<sup>22</sup> or feminine nicknames as *preciosa* (beautiful lady) or female versions of their names<sup>23</sup>; by these men, femininity (as well as homosexuality) was experienced as threatening to their heterosexual masculinity, and thus masculine superiority (Lundgren 2011: 145). However, when joking about women, such as their body shapes or level of promiscuity, they attempted to do it discretely, so their female partners would not get offended. Joking about *putas* and "partying wildly" without women (which would create jealousy and *mujeres locas*<sup>24</sup>) would likely be categorized as extremely funny.

Women's humor often considered adopting men's humor by making fun of men as the men made fun of each other or. Sometimes, especially when conversation touched topics related to *machismo*, women's humor became vulgar and violent towards men, in a rhetorical sense. Once, after having discussed the severe topic #metoo for a while, in addition to how Cuban women in general would react on sexual harassment, Veronica suddenly said, "I once raped my ex-boyfriend with a dildo in his ass, but he liked it though", in addition to claim that she would never accept getting beaten by a man, or anyone.

In another occasion some weeks later, in a conversation that considered infidelity within romantic relationships, Selena said, "if my husband cheats on me, I would pretend like nothing until I blew his dick and right before his orgasm, I would bite his dick off and never talk to him again".

I rarely heard about women conducting systematically violence towards men. Rather, women's violence towards men was described in a rhetorical way; through rebellious humoristic discourse that threatened with relentless social action (Smith 2012: 172). Supplementary, women did not seem to hide their humor from men, such as men

---

<sup>22</sup> A gay man; concretely the one who is penetrated, while the "penetrator" is referred to as *bugarron*

<sup>23</sup> For example, the name "Robert" may in certain contexts transform into "Robertcito", which means "little Robert", while "Robertcita" means "little female Robert".

<sup>24</sup> "crazy women"

sometimes attempted to hide their humor from women. Thus, by minimizing their masculinity and threaten with sexual assaults, I this humoristic discourse functioned as a resistance towards *machismo*.

But how can resistance towards a problematic phenomenon such as *machismo* be addressed through only humor, and not serious discourses? To answer the latter question, I argue that addressing machismo would also victimize these women and decrease their gendered power that they claimed they had. Therefore, my interlocutors found it important to claim that *other* women were affected by *machismo*, and thus used vulgar humor to devictimize themselves in front of men (except from Marisol who defined *machismo* as a superior and universal problem). By using humor as everyday resistance and distinguish themselves from the problem of machismo, they opposed themselves to other “weak” women, in addition to threaten and “scare” men with a violent and masochistic language. As Scott (2008) considers everyday resistance, “to mitigate or deny claims made by superordinate classes or to advance claims vis-à-vis those superordinate classes” (Scott 2008: 32). My interlocutors would always deny being victimized by machismo, nor subordinate to men in general. Using machoistic and violent humor themselves appeared as a way to conduct resistance while maintaining their power position and femininity.

### **Femininity as power**

Within my field, I learned that femininity and masculinity functioned as distinguished spheres that were rarely crossed; only in men’s *machismo* humor (through feminizing each other) and women’s everyday resistance towards *machismo* (appropriating violent and masculine behavior). However, a certain separation between the female and the male sphere is common in other societies in the world, as Henrietta Moore (1994) reminds us; “sexual differences and the category of sex are constructed within discourses as necessary features of bodily identity” (: 14). Further, as I aim to illustrate below, such a bodily identity, through sexual capital, is a feature and a tool of power.

In the very beginning of my fieldwork, while I still attempted to investigate feministic attitudes among female musicians in Havana’s music environment, I got engaged in a conversation with Hugo, a man who have been active in Cuba’s hip hop community in the early 2000s. Then, Hugo mentioned *Las Crudas*; a female Cuban Rap Duo that was active in the early 2000s as well. He described how they attempted to behave and look as men; they

dressed as men, and even peed standing, as men. Ultimately, he asked a rhetorical question, “how can they be role models for women when they don’t even look like women?”.

According to Hugo, a woman who does not fulfill her femininity, in addition to appropriate masculine behavior, achieved limited power and agency.

Among my interlocutors, being liberated through their female bodily appearance was strongly associated with (female) independence and power. In this sense, “liberated” means that social actions are conducted regardless to potentially being shamed or stigmatized. However, I observed how femininity became an asset to obtain this independence.

In Havana’s beauty salons, women (and sometimes male queers) came to fulfill their femininity, which further increased their looks and confidence. In the salons, I met also gay men with feminine interests, behavior or appearance who could express themselves openly within the women’s sphere. Although homosexuality seemed accepted and unproblematic by the state and among people’s utterances, men’s macho humor implied how *maricones* were a target for bullying.

Furthermore, women’s cultivating of physical appearance, such as plastic surgery, acrylic nails, make-up and fashion, appeared as a powerful tool to increase their confidence and identities as women. This confidence helped them to deal with different situations in their everyday lives, or as Veronica put it; “to face the world”.

Based on my fieldwork in Havana, empirical analysis and relevant literature, I argue that women experienced the cultivation of their femininity through beauty and fashion as liberation and empowerment. In a context where female agency strongly depends on (feminine) sexual capital, to dare to show feminine sensuality, to reach towards beauty and fashion ideals, and thus to exploit it in the “right” ways, contributed to female power and independence.

## **Looking forward**

When Marisol was 16 years old, her father was released from prison. According to Marisol, her father had run a private business that eventually became extremely successful and therefore a threat to the government’s politics. As a result of this, he was prisoned for one



year. After he was released, he fled to Miami due to his fear of being prisoned again. I was never told how he traveled to Miami, but one can assume that the journey was dangerous, because he did not bring Marisol with him. She stayed with her mother in Havana. Her parents divorced a long time ago. Marisol told me how devastated she was from missing her father when he was prison. When her father left the country, she was even more devastated by the fact that she could not leave as well. In 2016, after Marisol finished *Secundaria* (high school), her father arranged a “fake” wedding with a Mexican man, who he paid 800 dollars. Through this marriage, Marisol would achieve a resident visa in Mexico. From Mexico, she could cross the American border. This is a very dangerous journey, but Marisol aimed to do it. Further, if she would manage to cross the American border, she could take advantage of the “wet foot, dry foot” policy; an interpretation which offered residence to visa-less Cubans after their first year in the United States (Betancourt 2019: 181).

A couple of days before the fake arranged wedding was going to be held, the Mexican man arrived Havana. Then, the wedding was conducted, seemingly by normal circumstances, in Havana. Marisol wore a typical wedding dress and they invited around thirty guests who all knew that the wedding was fake. Together with her new “husband”, she participated in photo sessions that would make it look “real”.

A few days after the wedding, her new “husband” returned to Mexico with the 800 dollars he received from Marisol’s father. As Marisol was preparing to leave Cuba and migrate from Mexico to the USA, Barack Obama eliminated the “wet foot, dry foot” policy, just a few weeks after the wedding. Obama justified the elimination of this law by underlining that all immigrants within American borders should be treated equally (Betancourt 2019: 200). Now, Marisol’s migration to the USA was delayed, indefinitely. She told me how she was dealing with a tough depression after Obama erased her only hope to obtain residence in the United States. At the time of my fieldwork, she was still married to the Mexican, on the paper. Eventually, Marisol and her father discovered another way for Marisol to leave Cuba; applying for a Spanish passport, which she could because of her Spanish ancestors.

Although she found it hard to obtain economic independency, Marisol strongly attempted to distinguish herself from “using the body”; she associated such promiscuous behavior with low culture, as described above (Lundgren 2011). When migrating through her fake Mexican marriage was not an option anymore, she applied for Spanish passport that would make it easier to enter the USA. At the time of my fieldwork, she had stopped rushing with leaving

Cuba, because her boyfriend, Ramiro, wished to live in Cuba. Still, she hoped to receive a Spanish passport, not only to migrate abroad in the future, but also to travel abroad without paying hundreds of dollars for a visa. Although Marisol gained her own salary by working as a waiter in the Italian restaurant, she depended economically on her Ramiro's money, as well as her father's, who still lived in Miami.

Currently, in 2020, her Spanish passport-application is going through a bureaucratic process that has lasted over a year. She hopes to migrate to the USA or Spain one day, to secure the future for herself and potential children. On the one hand, she loves Cuban culture, her mother and her boyfriend, but on the other, she does not see a worthy future in her country.

This story illustrates that sexual capital is not the only way my interlocutors sought to improve their present and their future. Marisol was lucky enough to have access to money, from her father in Miami, which made her sexual capital insignificant for her Mexican husband; he married her completely for money. At the same time, economic capital alone has yet not proved itself to secure Marisol's present or future. During my fieldwork, she received salaries from her waiter job as well as economic support from her boyfriend, whereas her sexual capital counted and thus influenced her agency. Marisol's example illustrates how sexual capital tends to get exploited in a higher degree when other capital is lacking, or becomes irrelevant (Simoni 2015, Aboim 2012).

### **A worthy future**

In Cuba, the month of May is associated with heavy rain showers, intense heat and exhausting humidity. These weather changes tend to generate feelings of fatigue and melancholy, as I indeed experienced myself. On top of that, May is the beginning of the low touristic season. In one of this hot and humid days, Veronica was standing behind the bar, waiting for tourists to come to drink and tip, as well as being a good company. She loved to talk with foreigners and learn about their lives and experiences. But now, there were few tourists coming to Havana and Veronica's bar, at least until the middle of October, when the climate would become colder and dryer. After talking to Veronica for a while, we ran out of topics and therefore began to look throughout the window, observing people in the street. Four men were playing dominoes in the sidewalk, with the dominoes displayed on a wooden board, laying on their laps between them. Other people wandered around in the street, while socializing or illegally trading coffee and rum. While I still found street life in Havana

fascinating, Veronica only saw hopeless people dealing with an emptiness created by material shortages and an uncertain future that lacked goals and possibilities. Veronica seemed as melancholic as one gets in the month of May, and said,

I will sit down with my daughter when she is 15 years old and tell her to marry someone rich. Seriously, I don't want her to waste her time like me, sitting in a bar and have little money. I couldn't marry someone I didn't like, some old guy, just because of his money, like Paul (the German tourist). Imagine if I had to sit and listen to his talking all the time. You know, old people talk so much all the time. I don't have the patience for that, so that's why I am sitting here and suffering, but I think my daughter has the patience (Veronica, 25.05. 2018)

By living in Cuba, Veronica and her daughter had access to free education (which made Veronica certificated to work with animal care) and a free health care system that covers all necessary medical services, including contraceptive and abortion (Andaya 2014).

Nevertheless, I experienced how Veronica and other interlocutors struggled to see a worthy future in their country. In the light of this struggle, their bodies became a tool to distinguish themselves from a society associated with worn out politics, a fragile infrastructure and lack of money. Problems considering lack of material goods, complicated and time-consuming bureaucracy and bad service in the public sector were often referred to as *no es facil* (it is not easy) (Rosendahl 1997: 125). Instead, they were longing for something more modern, richer and sophisticated. However, Marisol, and Veronica's unreliability towards their society revealed how cultivating and exploiting sexual capital is not only about beauty, money and status, but also a hope for change and creating a worthy future.

Ultimately, women exploiting sexual capital is widespread among a variety of countries, classes and positions in the global hierarchy, in wealthier countries as well as countries struggling with poverty (Hakim 2010, Green 2011, Waters 2016, Aboim 2012). However, in the context of my interlocutors, using the body was, more or less, the easiest and perhaps the only option to improve their everyday lives. Although they "used their bodies" in terms of confidence, individuality and through works they were skilled at (which helped them distinguish from low class, reggaetón and promiscuity), their position in the global hierarchy create narrow margins of agency. In the light of the latter, "using the body" appears as an only option, a last resort, and a weapon of the weak (Aboim 2012, Scott 1985).

## Summary

In this chapter, I have illustrated a variety of aspects related to how women cultivate and exploit sexual capital. Perceptions of how a woman should dress and behave morally illustrate the margins of female agency. As mentioned, there was a short way from appearing confident and liberal, to being defined as cunning and promiscuous. Moreover, the bodies of women in my field were not only a tool to improve their lives, but also potential targets of labelling in a negative sense (*descarada*) and sexual harassment. Therefore, they constantly had to prove that they acted according to the right morals, because if they did, they would gain respect and power.

Moreover, the value and convertibility of sexual capital into other cultural, social and economic capitals should be seen in light of global, gendered and economic inequalities (Stout 2008, Roland 2010). First, global inequalities influence female agency through tourists' desire for consuming and adorning themselves with Cuban people. In this way, my interlocutors' sexual capital became valuable by ascribing attractiveness to themselves as "commodities". Secondly, gendered and economic inequalities overlapped one another: As society's expectations imply that men are providers and women are being provided for, as well as consumers, female agency strongly depends on receiving money, consuming beauty and fashion items as well as exploiting their sexual attractiveness.

As Veronica appeared economic independent, she could use a substantial part of her money to cultivate her sexual capital. Furthermore, her sexual capital was converted into money and foreign friendships, which again generated in economic capital; money and beauty-and fashion items, cultural capital; cultural knowledge and foreign friends, and social capital; a social network consisting of high-status persons, as for example foreigners. Through this circle of converting capitals, female agency is exercised to maintain and improve confidence, identity, class position, social status and thus power.

## Conclusion

We all use our bodies in our everyday lives, myself included. And our bodies are hardly distinguished from social structures. Although we can manipulate our bodies and even our actions in attempts to change those social structures, our bodies will always be a social matter (Moore 1994: 71-80).

Drawn upon my empirical material and relevant literature, this thesis has illustrated how urban middleclass women in Havana cultivate their sexual capital through bodily features, such as using make-up, fashionable clothes, acrylic nails, and hair styles. In this way, they strengthened their confidence, well-being and self-representation, which further contributed to obtain privileges from basic needs as food and soap, to beauty- and fashion commodities, foreign friends and potential travel- and possibilities for migration. Their sexual capital, through the confidence and power it generated, even became a “weapon” to deal with *machismo*.

Moreover, I have argued that “using the body” is a comprehensive expression that relates to class, ethnicity, race, gender and power. From one emic perspective, to “use the body” towards strategic ends is stigmatized and associated with sexual-economic relationships, and thereby “wrong” morals. At the same time, “using the body” can represent female liberation and power, not only by cultivating female beauty ideals, confidence and identity, but also as a way to exploit one’s sexual capital to obtain benefits as money, social status and respect. My interlocutors – urban middleclass women in Havana – used their bodies to achieve social, cultural and economic benefits. However, the problems of “using the body” arose when opinions of class and gender clashed, creating discourses of womanhood and the gendered power inequalities in society. To acknowledge “using the body” as a necessary tool in their everyday lives, would mean to categorize themselves as “weak”. But when their sexual capital showed to matter, they used their bodies “as if” it did not matter. To participate in “the global community” and move forward, they had to represent something more than “just their bodies”, as dignity, confidence and a “high” cultural level. In cases where sexual capital was exploited seemingly without dignity and self-respect, the female body appeared weak, and using the body as a last resort. Therefore, using the body “as if” it was unnecessary showed to be a powerful tool to reach their goals when education, knowledge and other skills were lacking or irrelevant (Aboim 2012: 80). Although women spoke of using the body as a

“weapon of the weak” (Scott 1985), their sexual capital proved to be an easy and, I would argue, a clever tool, to strive for a worthy present and a worthy future.

## Literature

Allen, Jafari (2012) *AMERICAN ETHNOLOGIST*, Vol. 39, No. 2, p. 325–338, Yale University

Aboim, Sofia (2012), Sexualized bodies: Masculinity, power and identity in Mozambique, *Norma*, Vol. 07, Issue 1, 2012, 67–90

Andaya (2014) *Conceiving Cuba*, Reproduction, Women, and the State in the Post-Soviet Era, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick

Baker, Geoffrey (2011) Cuba Rebelión: Underground Music in Havana, *Latin American Music Review*, Volume 32, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2011 pp.1-38)

Bastian, Hope (2018), *Everyday Adjustments in Havana*, Economic Reforms, Mobility and Emerging Inequalities, Lexington Books, Lanham

Berg, L. Mette (2004), Tourism and the revolutionary new man: the specter of *jineterismo* in late ‘special period’ Cuba *Focaal – European Journal of Anthropology* 43 (2004): 46–56

Betancourt, R. Roger (2019), *The Cuba-U.S. Bilateral Relationship*, Chapter 8: A Political Economy Approach to U.S Normalization Policy Toward Cuba: Obama and Trump,

Bourdieu, Pierre (1986) The Forms of Capital. Pp. 241-258 in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. G. Richardson. New York: Greenwood Press

Bourdieu, Pierre (1979, 1995) *Distinksjonen*, En sosiologisk kritikk av dømmekraften, Oversatt av Annick Prieur, Pax Forlag A/S, Oslo

Corrigan, Lisa (2015). Cuban Feminism: from Suffrage to Exile: *Advances in the History of Rhetoric*, 8:1, pp.131-153, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group

De la Fuente, Alejandro (1998), Race, National Discourse, and Politics in Cuba: An Overview, *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Race and National Identity in the Americas pp. 43-69

- Ding Y and Ho SY (2012), Sex Work in China's Pearl River Delta: Accumulating sexual capital as a life-advancement strategy, *Sexualities* 16 (1/2) 43-60,
- Edmond (2010) *Pretty Modern*, Beauty, sex and plastic surgery in Brazil, Duke University Press. Durham
- Green I. Adam (2011), Playing the (Sexual) Field: The Interactional Basis of Systems of Sexual Stratification, *Inequalities and Interaction*, *Social Psychology Quarterly* 74(3) 244-266, American Sociological Association,
- Green I. Adam (2012), 'Erotic capital' and the power of desirability: Why 'honey money' is a bad collective strategy for remedying gender inequality, *Sexualities*, 16(1/2) 137-158,
- Grossman, M. (1972). *The Demand for Health*. NBER, New York
- Gregory, Steven (2007, 2014), *The Devil Behind the Mirror*, Globalization and Politics in the Dominican Republic, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles)
- Hakim, Cahtrine (2010) *Honey Money: the power of erotic capital*, Allen Lane, London
- Härkönen, Heidi (2015), *Kinship, Love, and Life Cycle in Contemporary Havana, Cuba: To not die Alone*, Palgrave Macmillan, Nature America, New York
- Hodge (2014), "Dangerous" Youth: Tourism Space, Gender Performance, and the Policing of Havana Street Hustlers, *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 441–472
- Holbraad, Martin (2017), Money and the morality of commensuration, currencies of poverty in post-soviet Cuba, *Social Analysis*, Volume 61, Issue 4, Winter 2017, 81–97, Berghahn Books
- Kummels, Ingrid (2005), Love in the Time of Diaspora. Global Markets and Local Meanings in Prostitution, Marriage and Womanhood in Cuba, *Iberoamericana*, V, 20, 7-26
- Lundgren, Silje (2011), *Heterosexual Havana*, Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, (Ph.D.) Uppsala University. 216 pp, Uppsala.



Lundgren (2011) Shaking that ass: Reggaetón as an embodiment of “low culture” to mark difference and privilege in contemporary Havana, Serie *HAINA VIII 2012*; Bodies and Borders in Latin America

Lazar (2012), A Desire to Formalize Work? Comparing Trade Union Strategies in Bolivia and Argentina, *Anthropology of work review Vol.33 (1) pp. 15-24*, by American Anthropological Association

Madden, R (2010): “Ethnographic Fields: home and away”, chapter two in (ed.) Raymond Madden: *Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography*, Sage, London

Martin and George (2006), Theories of Sexual Stratification: Toward an Analytics of the Sexual Field and a Theory of Sexual Capital\*, *Sociological Theory 24:2 June 2006*, American Sociological Association, Washington DC

Mauss, Marcel (1872-1959), *The gift; forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*, translated by Ian Cunnison, with introduction by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Routledge/Kegan Paul, London

Michael T. Robert (2004), Sexual capital: an extension of Grossman’s concept of health capital, *Journal of Health Economics 23 (2004) 643-652*

Moore, L. Henrietta (1994), *A Passion for Difference*, Essays in Anthropology and Gender, Polity Press, Cambridge

Roland L. Kaifa (2010), Tourism and the commodification of *Cubandidad*, *Tourist Studies 10(1) 3-18*, Sage

Rosendahl, Mona (1997) *Inside the Revolution*, Everyday life in Socialist Cuba, Cornell University Press, Ithaca

Ortner, S. B. and H. Whitehead (1981): *Sexual Meanings, The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, Cambridge University Press

Perry, D. Marc (2016) *Negro Soy Yo*, Hip Hop and Raced Citizenship in Neoliberal Cuba, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2016

Pertierra, Anna C. (2008) En Casa: Women and Households in Post-Soviet Cuba, *The Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Cuba: 50 Years of Revolution, pp. 743-767, Published by Cambridge University Press

Pope, Cynthia (2005) The Political Economy of Desire: Geographies of Female Sex work in Havana, Cuba, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol.6 (2), pp.99-118,

Schultz W. Theodore (1961), Investment in Human Capita, *The American Economic Review*, March 1961, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp. 1-17, published by the American Economic Association

Scott, J. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Retrieved from <https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.uio.no/2027/heb.02471>

Simoni, Valerio (2015), Breadwinners, sex machines and romantic lovers: entangling masculinities, moralities, a pragmatic concern in touristic Cuba, *Etnográfica*, vol. 19 (2)

Stout, M. Noelle (2008), Feminists, Queers and Critics: Debating the Cuban Sex Trade\*, *J. Lat. Amer. Stud* 40, 721-742, Cambridge University Press

Waters, A. Hedwig (2016), Erotic Capital as Societal Elevator: Pursuing Feminine Attractiveness in the Contemporary Mongolian Global(ising) Economy, *Sociologus*, Vol. 66, No. 1, Manufacturing Beauty, Grooming Selves: The Creation of Femininities in the Global Economy pp. 22-51, Duncker & Humblot GmbH

Weinreb (2008), Race, Fe (Faith) and Cuba's Future, *Transforming Anthropology*, Vol. 16, Number 2, pp. 168–172, American Anthropological Association