Imagined individuality
Cultivating separated personhood in Cuba and beyond

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Abstract: If no man is an island, if we are inherently social creatures, how should we understand people's claims to be valuable individuals, separate from their environment? Based on ethnographic research among self-employed Cuban market traders, this article analyses performances of imagined individuality to understand how people cultivate a notion of themselves as separate from social ties. In Cuba, work in the growing private sector provides a foundation upon which people assert personal independence. In order to cultivate and realize these notions of individuality, one needs to fulfill gendered expectations of material distribution. Hence, to assert personal independence requires the mobilization of unequally distributed resources.

Keywords: Cuba, gender, individuality, kinship, markets, personhood

Across disciplines, researchers have converged on the notion that a "self-made" and fully autonomous human being is an illusion. Albert Einstein considered modern man's sense of separateness "a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness" (Sullivan 1972). Émile Durkheim argued that the notion of the "individual" was a myth (Giddens 1971), while Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1975: 162) put it more dismissively in 1844: "the members of civil society are not atoms . . . [Yet] the egotistic individual . . . may in his non-sensuous imagination and lifeless abstraction inflate himself to the size of an atom, i.e. to an unrelated, self-sufficient, wantless, *absolutely full,* blessed being." A century and half later, psychiatrist and behavioral researcher Matthew Johnson ruminated on the same conundrum (Pollan 2018: 366–367).

> We're trapped in a story that sees ourselves as independent, isolated agents acting in the world. But that self is an illusion . . . You can take any number of more accurate perspectives: that we're a swarm of genes, vehicles for passing DNA; that we're social creatures through and through, unable to survive alone; that we're organisms in an ecosystem, linked together on this planet floating in the middle of nowhere. Wherever you look, you see that the level of interconnectedness is truly amazing, and yet we insist on thinking of ourselves as individual agents.

If no man is an island, if spouses, kin, and friends rely on each other, if we are inherently interdependent creatures, then how can we un-

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derstand people's claims to be valuable "individuals," separate from their environment? Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic research among Cuban market traders, this article investigates what it takes for men and women to be perceived as humans free from social influences. In anthropology, the critique of the notion of the self-contained individual has taken a number of forms. Anthropologists have stressed that while the concept of the individual might be second nature to most Westerners, it often does not make sense in other cultural settings. Building on Marcel Mauss's (1985) essay on "the category of the person," Louis Dumont (1980) argued that the "individual" was a Western category. Dumont contrasted the Western notion of the "individual" with what he called *homo hierarchicus*, a holistic, hierarchical category of the person, which he claimed was prevalent in Indian society. His underlying argument was that both the Western and Indian "categories of persons" were products of their respective histories and cultures. Later, Marilyn Strathern (1988) used a concept by McKim Marriott (1976) to add to this argument. Strathern contrasted the Melanesian "dividual" (a divisible self, composite, constituted by interdependent relations) with the Western "individual" (an indivisible self, solid, constituted by personal independence). While Strathern's and Dumont's theoretical contributions differ and have faced criticism on different grounds (LiPuma 1998; Shweder and Bourne 1982; Spiro 1993), their arguments both associate "non-individual" forms of personhood with non-Western settings, and "individual" forms of personhood with Western settings.

The theoretical perspective I develop here diverges from this analytical tradition. Rather than looking for the culturally ingrained manner in which people in a given society perceive personhood, my material highlights the dynamic, contradictory, and situation-specific nature of people's self-experience and understanding. Even if anthropologists are right to criticize the assumption that humans everywhere consistently cultivate a notion of personhood according to the Western liberal idea of the "individual," it is nonetheless the case that people across the world, in certain contexts, tend to assert their personal separation from others. As they do, they cultivate what I call an *imagined individuality*.

Individuality is not a fixed state of being; it is a dynamic evaluation, which differs in observable ways across gender and kinship divides, history, and concrete situations. In other words, individuality is a social phenomenon. People's self-understanding and assertions of personal independence rely on the mobilization of relational resources. Marx and Engels, Durkheim and Einstein were right, therefore, to point out that humans are "atoms only in imagination" and that the idea of a self-possessed individual is an "optical delusion." Individuality is *imagined* because despite the interdependencies that constitute human beings, our minds can sustain an image of our own personal separation. However, the fact that individuality is imagined does not mean that it is not real. Like the notion of a national community (Anderson 2006; Jenkins 2002), individuality is imagined but not imaginary. As we will see, people assert notions of personal separateness to create ad hoc effects as a deliberate means for short-term goals. To cultivate separated personhood can also be a more careful effort to construct a long-term identity, a durable sense of oneself as a self-sustained and valuable person.

Yet, in given situations, even a chest-pounding self-described lone wolf will highlight the opposite of personal separateness, namely their embeddedness in social relations. Sidelining the meta-narrative about whether a given society is becoming more individualistic or detached from community structures (Englund and Leach 2000), this article offers insight into how Cubans at times embed themselves *in* and disembed themselves *from* social relations. In one moment, people can "inflate" themselves to the "size of an atom," cultivating a sense of themselves as individuals stripped of interdependencies. In another moment, they can adopt the opposite perspective, rhetorically embedding themselves within social relations and obligations to emerge as interdependent relatives and

friends. To understand such maneuvers and, by extension, how people anywhere imagine their individuality, it is useful to depart from the analytical strategy of distinguishing geographically between "categories of the person," between Western and non-Western, and instead explore how people cultivate and use notions of personal separateness differently within specific social settings.

The independence of market traders

The "workers on their own account," *trabajadores por cuenta propia*, are an emerging group of actors in Cuba who represent economic practices with a long and contested pedigree in the nation's history (Ritter and Henken 2015). Since the dawn of the Cuban colony, commercially minded men and women have traded food and merchandise, run restaurants and bars, or found other ways of making a living by offering services that exploit discrepancies in value. Yet, the legality and moral status of such practices have shifted with the island's political regimes. Most dramatically, the government that came to power in 1959 all but eradicated private enterprise. In March 1968, at the height of the official push toward Communism, Fidel Castro declared an "all-out, powerful, revolutionary offensive" that would rid the country of private enterprise, "uprooting" economic exploitation and "parasitism" from the earth (Castro 1968). In the following months, government officials made their way to all the remaining small businesses on the island, declaring that their property was no longer theirs, but that of the state. From railroads to rum factories, car dealers to corner stores, authorities seized political control of the economy. This massive social restructuring required employing all able-bodied citizens in state enterprises.

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 profoundly shook this ideological and economic push for Communism, leading to economic reforms that would allow, once more, for Cubans to engage legally in private enterprise. During the 1990s, the legal category of the *cuentapropista* emerged, a private, "self-employed" worker. In 2010, after Fidel Castro officially withdrew from power, his brother Raúl Castro initiated a second wave of reforms, which recognized private self-employment as "one more alternative" for legitimate labor (Castro 2010). Entrepreneurs were now allowed to hire others, paving a cautious way for the growth of small- and medium-sized businesses. However, indicating the limits of those reforms, both business owners and their employees were legally classified as *cuentapropistas*. Moreover, employers faced heavy tax burdens to discourage them from hiring more than five people. Yet compared with the 1960s push for Communism, the new rhetoric and policies were dramatic. The new president spoke about how the "rectification and necessary updating" required a mind-shift among the very members of the Communist Party and emphasized the need to allow "private work" to thrive for the benefit of society. "We can assure you," Raúl Castro said, "that this time there will be no going back" (Castro 2010).

During my fieldwork in the new private halls for retail trade in Havana between 2015 and 2018, I noticed how the official label of the "worker on his/her own account" rang true with how these small-scale entrepreneurs routinely conceptualized themselves. As one clothing vendor put it, "I come here to the market, I *work*. I live my own life. I take care of myself, on *my own*." *Cuentapropistas* seemed to draw on their new legal status to emphasize their independence from family, friends, and the state, maintaining an image of themselves as human islands, free from social obligations. In self-reflective moments, they aspired to an ideal of a person who is fully in control of oneself. "I don't like asking" was their common reasoning. "I make my own money, here at the market." A proverb that summarized this imagined individuality could be heard in reggaeton songs or during passing conversations at bus stops, marketplaces, and over cups of coffee: "He who deserves does not ask."

Cuban researchers have traced this emphasis on personal independence among the self-employed in representative surveys, where the majority (79.8 percent) reported to have gone into self-employment out of a desire to be "autonomous" (Pañellas et al. 2015: 219). More than half of the sample, which included single-man entrepreneurs and established employers, declared that they had little interest in forming business alliances (Pañellas et al. 2015: 226). The findings resonate with how the market traders of my study reflected about themselves. Disappointed at how an importer had let her down during a business deal, clothes seller Ramona declared, "Here at the market we are lions, not monkeys." She implied that far from being gullible idiots, traders were ruthless and individual hunters. The law of the market was simple, said Ramona. "Everything has a price."

It is tempting to accept these assertions of personal autonomy as descriptions of how businesses actually operate in Cuba. Their self-presentation rhymed with the widespread suspicion among intellectuals that market relations corrode social bonds and detach actors from the purportedly "non-economic" ties of kinship, gender, and state influence (Yanagisako 2002; Zelizer 2009). The perceived role of individual autonomy fits, for instance, with Clifford Geertz's description of traders in non-industrial marketplaces. The bazar, wrote Geertz (1979: 198), "is the nearest thing to be found in reality to the purely competitive market of neo-classical economics, the one place in the world where isolated, interest rivalrous, profit maximizing sellers still actually confront isolated, non-propagandized, utility-maximizing consumers on equal ground, deterministic actors in the cosmic drama of supply and demand." However, to accept such narratives at face value, as Geertz arguably did, would overlook a fundamental reality, namely the gap between the image that market traders can present of themselves, which at times does resemble "the purely competitive market of neo-classical economics," and their actions to make trading work.

The sociality of self-employment

Upon closer inspection, *cuentapropistas* were "self-employed" only in name. They did not work by themselves. Market actors got start-up capital from relatives and friends, rarely as clear-cut loans but rather as favors or ambivalent gifts (Vidal and Viswanath 2019). Moreover, they depended on each other in rotating savings associations whose collective nature provided an advantage over individual means of acquiring and saving capital. Even quick sales at a marketplace were a collective practice. Traders cooperated like anglers hauling in a "catch." One vendor would spot a customer coming in and rush to share information about where one could buy a certain type of merchandise. A second vendor would take over, fetching clothes and accompanying the customer to the testing room. A third trader could walk by, casually complimenting the customer about how well the merchandise fit. To add to the collective choreography of selling, the actual clothes could very well belong to a fourth market actor. After money and merchandise switched hands, involved parties were left arguing about their rightful cut.

Another aspect to the social nature of market trading concerned employment within the sector. Businesses owners depended on relatives, friends, and neighbors to recruit workers (Pañellas et al. 2015). Ironically, these social bonds of kinship and friendship, both within the country and from abroad, sustained the illusion of self-employment. A *cuentapropista* could get start-up capital from a long-time friend, employ a nephew as a favor to one's sibling, and trade in vast networks of neighbors, all the while insisting, "I work for myself!" In her self-narration, Ramona, who recently took her niece on a trip to Moscow to purchase merchandise, tended to mute her intermingling of family and business: "I would never mix family and business, are you nuts?" In short, doing business involved family and friends to a greater degree than people openly admitted. Why? What lies behind this

drive to detach oneself rhetorically from the social relations of everyday existence?

The independence of men

During her fieldwork in financial markets in Chicago and London, anthropologist Caitlyn Zaloom (2006: 111) was struck by how hard traders worked to cultivate an image of themselves as fiercely independent, calculating, and autonomous "economic men." Although operating in a vastly different terrain, Cuba's market traders were similarly attracted by the notion that they are independent economic actors. As on the trading floors in Chicago and London, their individuality had a gendered dimension. The individuality of men stood apart from that of women.

For anyone who spent a day in a marketplace in Havana in 2016 or took a taxi anywhere in the city in that period, chances were high that one would hear Jacob Forever's reggaeton-hit *Suéltame la mía* (roughly translated: *Let me go, baby*). Whenever Jacob's voice blasted through worn out stereos, women and men would sing along, "I need to catch some air/And return the next day/Let me go, baby." The video opens with the artist sitting on the edge of a bed wearing a thick gold chain around his neck and gold jewelry in his ears and sporting a pair of white sneakers. Jacob tells his girlfriend that he is leaving to see friends. In bed and holding a book, the woman pleads Jacob to stay. The singer rebuffs, "let me go, baby, let me go," before getting up. The following scenes show the artist walking the woods, charming other women, grooving in the club, and within seconds, atop a mountain, first alone, and then magically surrounded by women. Meanwhile, Jacob's partner is at home sniffing his clothes, discovering a contact card in his wallet. "You want to be with me all the time," sings Jacob. "You don't let me be, not even for a moment/And that ain't the way it can be/ [. . .]Let me go."

Suéltame la mía alludes to why Cuban men so often emphasize their autonomy in opposition to the female-centered domestic sphere, justifying the need to "catch some air." The song expresses the classic Caribbean distinction between the male domain, the street (*la calle*), and the female sphere, the house (*la casa*). Decades of political initiatives have sought to emancipate Cuban women through social welfare policies, legal shifts to promote female employment, family planning, and contraception (Andaya 2014). Yet, studies keep documenting how *la calle* remains a symbolically male domain, while domestic life and *la casa* remains the symbolic arena of women (Härkönen 2015; Lewis et al. 1977; Pertierra 2008; Rosendahl 1997). In popular parlance, a Cuban man can "have street" (*tener calle*), but the saying does not apply as easily to women.

One afternoon at the market where I worked, clothing seller Alejandro expressed his imagined individuality with chest-pounding energy, declaring, "No one can govern me!" The night before, he had clashed with his mother-in-law, who was visiting for a month, over a "hard talk" about how he admired female customers at the marketplace. The next morning at work, Alejandro described her reaction as an attempt to "put the foot in," controlling his independence and his relationship, even from a distance. "What was I going to say?" he asked rhetorically. "That I just sit there [in the market stall] and look straight ahead [when women pass by]? That's what she wants, that I just think: sale, sale, sale. Diapers, food, sale, sale, sale." Like Jacob Forever in the music video, Alejandro often complained about how his partner insisted that he be home at certain hours in the afternoon, restricting his urge to roam in public.

The marketplace provided Alejandro with a free zone, a refuge from the mundane drudgery of *la casa*, where women wielded greater influence. As the proprietor of his own business, Alejandro used the marketplace to assert his imagined male individuality. He would sometimes take time off to see women he flirted with, inviting them out to lunch or spending time with them in a rented room to "escape." Alejandro was also known to amble in the aisles, jok-

ing and exchanging insults with male traders. He performed his individuality with theatrical flair. The market was Alejandro's scene, to the bemusement of many and admiration of some.

From "dog" to "donkey"

Yet, to be a free agent like Jacob Forever's video persona was only one side to how Cuban men imagined themselves as valuable individuals; assuming the role of the socially respectable provider was equally important, illustrating how assertions of personal separation and autonomy relied, crucially, on the fulfillment of social obligations. In the words of Alejandro, an adult man could not simply be the "dog" who ran after women. He had also to be the "donkey" who brought food to the table and provided for the family. To emerge as truly independent one ought to have dependents. The categories of dog and donkey embody popular models of Caribbean masculinity, balancing the promiscuous mastery of public life, what Peter Wilson called "reputation aspects," with the compliance of fatherly and household obligations, the "respectability aspects" (Freeman 2014; Simoni 2015; Wilson 1973). Whereas Cuban men among men would highlight how they were good at being a man (a reputable dog), women tended to focus on what constituted a good man (the respectable donkey). Men articulated and acted upon these different and often contradictory models according to the situations in which they found themselves (Simoni 2015: 394).

Cuban women tended to expect adult men to provide material benefits to them as romantic partners and relatives, and men's performance as providers influenced how women evaluated them as truly independent (Härkönen 2015). To provide for others was, in other words, a way to assert one's imagined male autonomy, adhering to the ideal of being someone who does not "ask" for resources but instead supplies others with them. A son who lived in Havana or abroad and traveled back to his hometown to share his wealth generously with relatives, was a "real" independent man. A man who "forgot" such obligations was shameless, or at worst, a *muerto de hambre*, someone starving to death. Among potential romantic partners, a man who did not spend enough could be considered stingy or even unattractive (Härkönen 2015: 371; Härkönen 2019). In other words, to emerge as independent and valuable was costly.

The material presented so far highlights the social foundation of people's assertions of personal separation. To be seen as a valuable individual, and to perceive oneself as self-sufficient, Cuban men could not simply live in isolation. To emerge as self-contained and valuable, torn from the fabric of society, one had to fulfill gendered obligations. Hence, to speak of one's "self" in complete isolation is illogical, like trying to clap with one hand. Creating a sense of personal separateness requires social acts, assertions, and an audience that recognizes these acts and characteristics as markers of individuality. The proof of Cuban men's individual personhood depended on a gendered performance and the evaluation of others (Keane 2016: 82). This social and gendered basis of individuality comes further into focus when we turn to female aspirations for personal autonomy in Cuba.

The independence of women

To join Cuba's formal private workforce also inspired women to assert their imagined individuality. The case of Tamara, a 21-year-old woman from the outskirts of Havana, illustrates how this could happen. In the spring of 2016, Tamara landed a job as an assistant shoe seller at a large private retail market and began speaking of herself with newfound confidence. "Now I have a *job* [*trabajo*]," she concluded, less than two months in. "I take care of myself. I work." Tamara took pride in the fact that she would no longer need to depend economically on the father of her child, who lived in the United States. Besides, she said, echoing the adage that *he who deserves does not ask*: "I don't like asking." Tamara's work history resembled that of

many other *cuentapropistas*. Having become an adult in a time when the value of a state salary was at an all-time low in Cuba (Spadoni 2014: 26), Tamara could not survive from working in the state sector. She had taken informal jobs, recently as a cutter in a home-based shoe "factory" on the outskirts of town. Additionally, she benefited from remittances. Tamara's aunt lived in the United States and regularly sent money to her mother, who decided how to spend it as the head of the household. Earlier, Tamara had been in a romantic relationship with a foreigner, which had also brought a certain income. Yet, in the story she told about herself, Tamara underplayed all these other means of income, highlighting instead how her new job at the market freed her from depending on anyone but herself.

To rhetorically mold a complex history of dependence on kin or tourists into a tidy tale of personal independence was common among both men and women. Strategic relationships with tourists or income streams in the form of remittances from relatives were considered less dignified ways of maintaining a livelihood. Yusi, a single mother in her late thirties who ran two clothing stalls, further illustrated this implicit value hierarchy. On a bus returning to Havana from her hometown, Yusi struck up a conversation with a Northern European man. The older man, who was about to retire in his home country, asked her out. During the bus ride, she casually remarked where she worked and how to get there. But the next day, when the foreigner suddenly turned up at the marketplace, Yusi ran down the aisle to hide, embarrassed at the prospect of being considered a *jinetera*—an emic concept for someone engaged in a romantic relationship with a foreigner for strategic and material ends (Berg 2004). In Yusi's case, the marketplace offered not just a legitimate identity as a "worker," it was also a literal refuge from murky ways of earning a living. Months later, surrounded by other women who were listening to her story, Yusi laughed, declaring that she regretted hiding in the aisles that day. Instead, she could have kept the foreign retiree "warm," and he could have "sustained" her financially from abroad. She ought not to have cared so much about his age. But then she shifted gears, adding in a lowered tone, "I don't like to ask for money. My money is what I make here at the market."

These examples illustrate how Cuban women sought to make individuals of themselves. By becoming registered as market workers and earning money in ways they perceived as legitimate, women could imagine and establish themselves as valuable and distinct. For Yusi, the marketplace was an escape, even a literal refuge, from the lure of more dubious means. Licensed self-employment provided a legitimate occupational foundation upon which men and women asserted personal independence as "workers," illustrating the stubborn appeal of a "proper job" as a means to personal autonomy, despite concerns about the "end of labor" (Ferguson and Li 2018).

In this respect, the imagined individual personhood of men and women overlapped—yet it was not the same. Men tended to highlight their need to roam freely, without women holding them back. The marketplace facilitated the male balancing act between ideals of reputation and respectability. As a workplace outside the home, it detached men from the female-dominated households. Moreover, unlike most state jobs in the Cuban economy, where minimal wages failed to cover even the basic living costs (Spadoni 2014: 26), the formal private sector potentially provided a legitimate income that allowed them to support their families financially, as autonomous men ought to do. Like men, women leveraged their workplace identity to assert their independence as people who did not "ask" for anything. Yet unlike men, they prioritized their earnings differently, typically channeling income toward their households, and doing so with pride, purchasing tiles, paint, and construction materials; investing in *la casa,* while at the same time expecting that adult male partners contribute toward these investments. This laid the foundation for a different balancing act.

Balancing market labor and distributive labor

The definition of humans as more or less "dependent" has everyday consequences. During my field research, the extent to which Cuban men lived up to women's expectations as providers was a source of gossip and conflict. Female traders would complain that men deliberately used women's statuses as "independent" workers as an excuse not to help them financially. In the words of one young man, a certain species of assertive women—he called them "capitalist women"—did not "need" material help. "You just have to give them sex and affection." Crucially, however, this view of self-sustained market women contrasted the expectations of the women themselves. Female market workers would consider themselves personally "independent" but nonetheless expect men to "help" them by contributing to their household. The fact that a woman earned her own salary did not free a male partner or relative from his obligations to "help." Whereas men balanced between being reputable "dogs" and respectable "donkeys," women—and arguably *cuentapropistas* to a particular extent, due to their incomes —faced another balancing act, between asserting their independence as "workers" and being able to lay claims to their men's wealth. They balanced, in other words, their status as someone earning an income with their potential to do distributive labor (Ferguson 2015), that is, the careful effort that goes into laying legitimate claim to other people's wealth. In one moment, women could fiercely assert their independence by rhetorically disembedding themselves from social ties to claim personal value as an autonomous individual. In the next, they could strategically embed themselves to men, highlighting men's moral responsibility as providers.

The experience of Yudeisi, a 44-year-old market assistant, illustrates how delicate this balance could be. She had gone out with man in his thirties for a few months but was increasingly put off by his failure to "help" her. He took her out from time to time and picked up the bill, but did not contribute much financially to the household where she lived with her mother and her two daughters from a previous relationship. Yudeisi was particularly put off one day when the man commented that since she was a *cuentapropista* earning her own income, she did not need his help as much. He implied that she was now independent, echoing the notion of "capitalist women," who only required sex and affection and no financial support.

Tamara, the 21-year-old shoe seller, experienced the same problem. After she had landed the job as a shoe seller, her mother, who received remittances, stopped sharing the money with her. Tamara was annoyed at how people assumed that she no longer needed help simply because she had a market job. According to female *cuentapropistas*, romantic partners and relatives often misunderstood, or willfully *misinterpreted*, their financial status. To declare personal independence, aspiring to be a woman who does not "ask," was therefore a double-edged sword, since men could start to act as if they no longer needed "help." Yudeisi's boyfriend learned the hard way that the imagined individualities of Cuban men and women are not the same. After three months of going out, she broke up with him, hoping to meet someone more "mature."

Strategic embedding and disembedding

To summarize, Cuban self-employed workers cultivated their imagined individuality—a durable status as persons cut out from the social fabric—on the basis of their access to legitimate labor and in accordance with dominant gender ideals. Yet, rhetorical efforts to detach oneself from the social fabric could also serve more immediate goals. In one moment, it could be meaningful or useful to rhetorically disembed oneself from friendship and kinship relations, emerging as self-contained. In other circumstances, people could rhetorically turn 180 degrees to highlight their personal *inter*dependence. Such switching of perspectives illustrates

how individuality is not a fixed state of being, but a dynamic social evaluation. It is a status that people can both strive for—a story that they tell about themselves—and a tool to handle social pressures. Two final examples illustrate how people can strategically disembed from social relations and obligations in one moment, and in the next, re-embed themselves to navigate shifting situations.

Pedro and his cousin Javier often argued over money at the marketplace. Their disagreements would usually erupt after they hauled in a "catch." "We are blood, we're family," said Pedro one day, pointing to the veins on his forearm. He argued that Javier owed him a dollar after having handed him a customer. As "family," the cousin should not treat Pedro with such cold indifference. Javier, stone-faced, paid Pedro no mind. When pressured by kin in this way, Cubans would sometimes say dismissively, "That's not business." Such exchanges reveal little about whether Cubans are growing more or less "individualistic" or if economic life is more or less embedded in social structures. Rather, they illustrate how people can deliberately switch between perspectives that embed them to, or disembed them from, socially "thick" relations.

Pedro's mother, Carmen, provides the second illustration. One day, she decided to expand her income beyond clothes sales at the marketplace. She planned to open a room rental in her house where men could "escape" with their girlfriends or sex workers. One of the long-time assistants who worked in her clothing stall mentioned that he was interested in renting a room. When I asked Carmen if she would charge him, she decisively downplayed their friendship as separate from her new business. "Friendship is one thing, business is another," she stressed. This act of strategic disembedding narrowed the man's possibility to ask for a free pass or a discount. However, later that week, when Carmen met with Frank, another business associate, she adopted the opposite perspective, strategically re-embedding their business and friendship.

Frank provided Carmen with clothing merchandise from Panama, and she regularly went to his house to purchase goods in large batches. We met up with Frank in the yard outside his ground-floor apartment. He was busy constructing a new room for his apartment, shoveling gravel into a wheelbarrow. "What a shameless [person] you are!" exclaimed Carmen's stepson, half-joking. Carmen had earlier told the importer to let her know if any opportunities for work appeared, since her stepson was looking for a job. Discovering that Frank had started the construction alone, the two lightheartedly admonished him. Frank had asserted too much autonomy, or rather, the wrong kind, which provided grounds for the Carmen's allegations.

Contrasting the separation she had made just days earlier, with Frank, Carmen now stressed that their business indeed had a friendship dimension. As she sat down to negotiate the price with him, Carmen kept at it. "What do you take for the T-shirts?" Frank fell silent, restacking clothes and shoes. "Let's see, at nine pesos, what do you think?" Carmen broke into a smile. "OK, I'll give you nine, because you are my friend!" The irony lay in Carmen's attitude, as if she was doing *him* a favor by accepting the low price. Again, by leveraging their supposed friendship, Carmen implicitly called upon Frank's obligation to give her a "fair" price. To be able to create and switch between perspectives that disconnected the domains of business and friendship in one moment and reconnect them in another was key for getting ahead in the Cuban business world. Yet, such maneuvers are not exclusive to the Cuban setting (Martin 2018; Martin and Yanagisako 2020; Yanagisako 2002). Analyses that focus on individuality as a fixed cultural schemata, distributed differently on a "Western"/ "non-Western" axis, is poorly positioned to understand these struggles over meaning and power, whereby people and social processes highlight or hide human interdependencies.

Conclusion: The cost of being "self-made"

Within anthropology, arguments have long simmered over whether the notion of the "indi-

vidual" or "self" is peculiar to Western society in a cross-cultural perspective (Bloch 2012; Sökefeld 1999; Spiro 1993). This article has explored a different take on the "individual." My starting point has been the observation that Cuban market traders, in self-reflective moments, rhetorically detached themselves from social relations of everyday existence, seeking to emerge as autonomous agents. To sustain this image of personal independence, men and women need to act socially, in ways that, in the eyes of others, serve as markers of valuable individuality. Typically, adult men sought to position themselves both as reputed, free-ranging "dogs" and as respectable, breadwinning "donkeys" who distributed resources to lovers and kin—the latter particularly as they came of age and became fathers. Valuable independence for male adults relied on balancing between these ideals. Women engaged in a different balancing act. Similar to men, female *cuentapropistas* mobilized their position as "workers" to assert personal independence, but women often found that such declarations of independence undermined their ability to lay claim to men's wealth, which they considered a moral right. Female assertions of independence on the basis of non-domestic labor potentially came into conflict with their capacity to lay claims on the wealth of men.

Yet, both women and men would forgo momentarily these projects of individual self-assertion to highlight the obligations of others toward them. They deploy different techniques of the self, calling out or hiding the moral and material dependencies that make the illusion of the self-contained individual real.

This battle over who or what gets to be described as "dependent" or "independent" is more than a performative play with words; it involves cultural concepts that are created through history, within the institutional and economic realities of the present. The historic legalization of the *cuentapropista* opened an opportunity for Cubans to use their workspace as a foundation upon which to mobilize gendered moral codes of independence. Yet, to cultivate a sense of oneself as separate from others was, in Cuba as much as anywhere else, also a question of economic resources. In short, to emerge as "independent" was costly. Tamara, the young newcomer who got a job as a shoe seller, provided a stark reminder of the fact that people can be free to assert personal independence, yet material realities do not guarantee that they are able to live up to such ideals. With her new job, Tamara had started to hope that she would no longer rely on money from her baby's father abroad or need to embed herself with tourist men but instead would take care of herself. However, as market sales dwindled over the months, Tamara realized that she did not earn enough to fulfill her own definition of being self-sustained. Soon, she began considering other ways of making a living. "I want to leave," Tamara said one day, glancing at market customers passing by. "From the country?" I asked. She spun circles with her index fingers. "Leave all this." It could mean the United States or finding another job. Recently, she had passed by a tourist area, casting long looks at foreigners. Lowering her voice, Tamara, who spoke no English, suggested I help her *jinetear* by operating as an intermediary between her and the tourist men. They would perhaps fall in love with her and provide a pathway of personal dependence toward a better life. "*Jinetear*?" I asked, and Tamara put a finger over her mouth, whispering, "It makes me embarrassed." Reframing her idea in less objectionable terms, she added, "I'm not doing this for the money, now it's for necessity." As her options exhausted over the next months, a downtrodden Tamara kept entertaining the idea of engaging with tourist men to generate income. She also swallowed her pride and finally called her ex in the United States to ask for money, defying the proverb that dictated that, "he who deserves does not ask." Nonetheless, her debts piled up. Her wallet was scraped, and she owed money both to neighbors and the rotating savings scheme at the market. The 21-year-old embodied the paradox of living in a society where asking for help is crucial for survival but where moral codes vilify "asking." Yet, Tamara's fate resonates far beyond Cuba.

The idea of being "self-made" can attract people across class divides, but only a privileged minority is able to live out such imagined individuality without brute contradiction—that is, without regularly having to face reminders of their dependence on others in the form of an empty wallet.

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