Writing 'Prostitute' Lives:

Researching Dissident Sexualities in Contemporary Cuba

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"Ethnographic truths," according to James Clifford, "are […] inherently *partial* – committed and incomplete." In an ethnographic study of the sexual-affective economy of contemporary Cuba, how to best present interviews that were unstructured, contingent and often fleeting posed a particular problem. At times, as an awkward field researcher and a foreigner in Havana, the colonial potential of authorship was readily apparent; at others, it was not, and thus the danger of misappropriation and misrepresentation was even greater. This paper will explore practices of interviewing and writing deployed in an attempt (sometimes futile) to mitigate and interrogate the relationship between researcher and informant across unequal relations of power, sharp economic disparities, and a significant cultural divide. The circumstances under which research was conducted – that is, a political environment of censorship and repression of dissent – will also be included as a strong conditioning factor. Issues of interpretation, (in)translatability, reciprocity, and appropriation will be explored through a discussion of 'storytelling' as an ethical practice. Far from merely stylistic writing choices, this practice bears real ethical and political implications for the research produced and for the individual subjects implicated in its production.

This paper represents an attempt to offer some scattered reflections on the experience of researching the politics of gender and sexuality in contemporary Cuba – method and fieldwork, but especially creative writing as an ethical and political practice. My doctoral thesis, recently completed, deals with the supposed

resurgence of 'prostitution' on the island in the years since the fall of the Soviet Union, an event which plunged Cuba into a deep economic crisis and left many Cubans struggling to make ends meet. As the Cuban government opened its doors to mass international tourism in a bid to stop its economic freefall, individual Cubans too began to engage with foreigners as a way to confront and resist the austerity they faced. Some rented out rooms in their homes to tourists, while others offered snacks, full meals, rides in their 1950s American cars, or souvenirs for sale, and still others entered into affective economies of friendship, companionship, romance, and sex with foreigners. These interactions form part of a broader network of activities that is locally called 'jineterismo', a sort of shadow economy which straddles the boundary between the licit and the illicit, and which has become the sole means of subsistence for so many Cubans, especially urban youth. The Cuban government has set out to police this sexual-affective economy, but in so doing has revealed a number of embedded ideas about gender, race, and the 'good' citizen: it has primarily targeted young, attractive women of Afro-Cuban descent – the so-called 'jineteras' – in a campaign of police harassment, violence, and 'rehabilitative' incarceration.[1] It was the experience of this disciplinary governance that I set out to investigate, through an extended ethnographic field trip in which I met, observed, and interviewed young Cubans who have sexual relationships with foreigners, whatever form those relationships may take.

On my return, however, I ran up against a wall. How to best present interviews that were unstructured, contingent, and often fleeting posed a particular problem, and I was acutely aware – as a fieldworker and as a writer – of the power I held as a relatively affluent, white foreigner in Cuba. In the field, as an awkward field researcher in Havana, the colonial potential of authorship felt readily apparent at times; at others, it was not so obvious, and thus the danger of misappropriation and misrepresentation was even greater – this had an important impact on my writing. Storytelling became a means of not only addressing the complexity and confusion of the field experience, but also a means of flagging up and confronting moments of uncertainty or discomfort, and a way of engaging with the problems of interpretation, representation, and appropriation that haunt ethnographic research. Here, I will explore practices of interviewing and writing deployed in an attempt (sometimes futile) to mitigate and interrogate the relationship between researcher and informant across unequal relations of power, sharp economic disparities, and a significant cultural divide. The circumstances under which this research was conducted – that is, a political environment of censorship and

[1] See Daigle, Megan (2012) Sexuality, the Discourse of 'Prostitution', and the Governance of Bodies in Post-Soviet Cuba, PhD dissertation, Aberystwyth University; Cabezas, Amalia L. (2009) Economies of Desire: Sex and Tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press; Stout, Noelle M. (2008) "Feminists, Queers and Critics: Debating the Cuban Sex Trade", in Journal of Latin American Studies 40.4 (November): pp. 721-742; Fusco, Coco (1998) "Hustling for Dollars: *Jineterismo* in Cuba", pp. 151-166, in Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema (eds) Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition, London: Routledge; García, Alyssa (2010) "Continuous Moral Economies: The State Regulation of Bodies and Sex Work in Cuba", in Sexualities 13.2: pp. 171-196.

repression of dissent – acted as a strong conditioning factor and will also colour pages to come. Issues of narrative writing, interpretation, (in)translatability, reciprocity, and appropriation will be explored through a discussion of 'storytelling' as an ethical practice. Far from merely stylistic writing choices, this practice bears real ethical and political implications for the research produced and for the individual subjects implicated in its production.

For me, the style in which I wrote my thesis evolved naturally out of the project; in fact, taking stock of the material I had gathered in the field left me with the impression that there was no other way I *could* write it. Naeem Inayatullah notes how capturing the intricacy and nuance of lived experience requires something "far more remarkable and more complex than what our theories can permit or carry."[2] I have chosen to write my thesis loosely chronologically, according to the phases through with my fieldwork progressed, and in a conversational, almost novelistic style. I feel that a narrative, chronological structure can provide the most genuine rendering of the Cuban setting and my time there. My fieldwork was a process of learning how to do this research – which questions to ask (and which not to ask), how to get interviews, how to understand these people and this scenario. It is my hope that bringing out the histories and personalities in my work will result in a more genuine representation of my interviewees' lives and the politics of their stories. I want my informants to live within the text as true-to-life, complex characters, as they are in real life. I have written their stories *as* stories to foreground their personalities and their lived experiences of the discourses, practices, and systems which I discuss, and to highlight the multiplicity inherent in any story – multiple perspectives, multiple voices, and multiple 'truths'. This paper represents an opportunity to go back and scrutinise a practice of writing that I took up spontaneously and almost instinctively at the time, though it appears very rarely in the discipline of international politics.[3] It is also, of course, a chance to offer two stories which had something to say about the unpredictability of interviewing, the complexity of lived experience, and the embeddedness and situatedness of the author in the field experience, all of which could so easily be lost in writing. The thoughts and reflections I have to offer are somewhat disjointed at best (and muddled at worst) but I hope they can contribute to a conversation about narratives, authorship, and representation in international politics.

The candle-bearer

Andre[4] was my very first interview. We sit down to talk on a warm night in March on the steps of the Banco Financiero Internacional. I had met Andre through a mutual acquaintance, Javier, who now sits on the step above me and watches the proceedings eagerly. A busy shopping street by day, Avenida Salvador Allende

[2] Inayatullah, Naeem (2011) "Falling and Flying: An Introduction", in Naeem Inayatullah (ed) Autobiographical International Relations: I, IR, London: Routledge, p. 2.
[3] Inayatullah, "Falling and Flying", p. 6.
[4] All names and important identifying details have been changed.

– known locally by its pre-Revolutionary name, Carlos III – is surprisingly quiet and I feel as if we're utterly alone. Javier is overbearing, brushing off my feeble intimations that he should leave us to chat in peace, and my recorder adds to this anxiety by refusing to work. Andre, on the other hand, is palpably at ease. He leans back, lithely resting his weight on his elbows.

To begin, I ask Andre about his family and childhood. Born and raised in Havana, he lives with his mother and has one sister, who is married with children. He recounts a happy youth filled with friends, parties, and trips to the beach. After finishing school, Andre took computer science at college. Today, at 25, he says he doesn't work in that field. I ask if he has an official job of any kind.

"Not right now."

I ask him to tell me about meeting foreign women in Havana, and his serene face breaks into a grin.

"I go out a lot, sometimes alone and sometimes with my friends. To Habana Vieja or around here, in Vedado, where there are lots of foreigners. Just try to chat them up, you know. Sometimes it's better to be with my friends, because we can meet groups of girls and go to a nightclub. The girls pay for us to go."

And what happens then?

Smiling, he says, "We might go home together. See how it goes. If we like each other, then we spend more time together. Maybe stay in touch. Maybe have a relationship."

I ask if he's involved with any foreign women at this moment, and he nods. Wondering to myself if it's a silly question, I ask how many.

"Eight."

My eyes widen and I look down at my notes to conceal my surprise. He seems pleased at my reaction, and goes on to tell me that, of the eight, there are two who know there are others. All of them return periodically to visit him, and some send him gifts of money from abroad.

"One of them is 25 years old, and another one is 52 – but she looks like she's 35," he says, grinning and exchanging looks with Javier. "The rest are between 30 and 45. That's the ideal age, when they're old enough to have good jobs and some money, but young enough to still look good. Some people like the really old ones – little old ladies and old men, you know – because they have money and they can get you out [of Cuba] sooner, but I want someone I'm really attracted to."

While I struggle to grasp to reality of carrying on eight separate romantic attachments simultaneously, I can still see why European and North American women take to him. Andre chooses his words carefully and articulately. He speaks English, Italian, and German. He's slim and handsome, with dark skin and large brown eyes, and he's simply but nicely dressed in a crisp white shirt and jeans – a far cry from the embellished, bright styles favoured by most young Cubans. When I struggle to find the right words, or to jot down all of his

comments, he pauses patiently. He's genuinely pleasant, particularly against the backdrop of Javier, who interrupts throughout our conversation.

"Some of them send me money, or give it to me when they're here, and that helps me take care of my family and support myself," Andre tells me, "But I really do prefer foreign women. They're more interesting to me. Even if they don't know how to move like a Cuban girl. Foreign women don't know how to move – not on the dance floor, and not in bed."

Amused by this last comment, I ask him if he would ever consider a relationship with a Cuban woman anymore, since he tells me he's been dating foreigners for three years now.

"Maybe, but just to fuck. [*Solamente para zingar*.] Cubans girls ask you for money, they have no shame at all, but foreigners don't do that. I want to get married and leave Cuba, so tourists are the ones for me. It's not just about money – I want to fall in love. My cousin was a jinetera and now she's married and living in Europe. She really paid her dues before she got out. [*Luchó mucho antes de casarse.*] She was a real *jinetera de clase*."

I ask what he means by that, and Andre explains that he sees certain 'jineteros' and 'jineteras' as more upstanding, more noble, more genuine than others. The ones who are looking for love, he says, are the *jineteros* and *jineteras de clase* – the ones with class. "I'm a *jinetero de clase*," he says emphatically. "In fact, I don't like that word, 'jinetero'. It's what people say, but I think it's a bit vulgar. I call myself a candelero."[5] He goes on to tell me that he thinks there are more women than men occupying the lower ranks of 'jineterismo', and this he attributes to greater economic need amongst young women who may already have children, or who may have migrated to the city from the countryside, leaving behind their families. They're looking to make some fast cash, and to them, falling love is a sign of weakness.

"I want a real relationship. The women I date – they're not ugly, not ugly at all, but I guess no one looks at them in Europe [*quizás nadie las mire en Europa*]. And they like me. They like black men, you know, because we have bigger dicks. And you know, if you fuck well, you're a good jinetero. [Sabes que, como zingas bien, eres buen jinetero.]" Again, he and Javier glance mirthfully at one another.

I ask him if he's ever had any problems with the police, and he considers the question for a moment, looking up towards the trees along the boulevard. "Yes, lots of problems. Talking to tourists is practically illegal. [Hablar con turistas es como ilegal.] They ask me for my *carné de identidad* a lot, and I know it's just to bother me. But I'm lucky – I've never been arrested."

[5] With this term, which translates as 'candle-bearer', Andre references the tendency amongst young Cubans to refer to tourism and tourists as 'el fuego' (the fire) – they ask one another, "¿Estás en el fuego?" ('Are you in the fire?'), or say, "Me voy al fuego" ('I'm going to the fire') when they are going out to meet foreigners. They use this term for multiple reasons – the fact that it is seen to be engulfing the country, the likelihood of getting burned and, in Andre's eyes, its irresistibility. Andre uses it to counter what he sees as the vulgarity of the term 'jinetero'.

He smiles wanly, and I ask him how he feels about it. In response, Andre puckers his lips and leans forward, with his arms on his knees and his chin cupped in one hand. "Wanting to talk with people or travel does make you anti-Revolutionary. Being a jinetero is something bad, according to the government. It's not in their interest. But Cuban society has adapted to the jineteros [and jineteras]. Here, everyone is *jineteando*. There's fear, the government is afraid, but everyone does it. Tourism is the principal source of funds that we have." He notes how young Cubans tend to refer to tourists and tourism as *el fuego* – the fire – and then, sardonically, "We're all in the fire. Cuba is on fire. [*Somos todos en el fuego. Cuba está en fuego*.]"

I'm struggling to write all of this down, so Andre pauses and relaxes back onto the steps. He seems to be thinking, and when I look back up at him, he starts again immediately. "Look, me, I'm Revolutionary, but I think that in Cuba, now, the Revolution doesn't get us anything [*no gana nada la Revolución*]. And when you're black, being a jinetera is the easiest thing. It's not difficult to find work. It's difficult to find work with the same benefits. Jineterismo has sex, money, and travel," he notes, counting emphatically on his fingers. "The most important things."

Asking Andre about his dreams for the future produces a more subdued response.

"One day," he says, "I'll leave here. I'd like to live in England. I've met a few English girls and I liked them. I think I would like it there."

Anything else?

"No, just that. I just want to make my life there."

Closing my notebook, I thank Andre for his thoughts, and he seems surprised that we're finished so quickly. I tell him I've exhausted my questions and ask if he has any for me, but he just shrugs. It isn't until we've stood up to say goodbye that he catches my eye with a pointed look.

"Are you against us?"

No, of course not, I reply. I tell him his story is fascinating, and that I want to learn more about people like him and what it's like to be a young person in Cuba, dealing with hardship, shortages, travel restrictions, and political repression, all the while surrounded by foreigners with money to burn. Andre smiles and seems satisfied. Javier, with one arm thrown around Andre's shoulders, is becoming boisterous again, and they wave goodbye as they turn to head down the street.

Storytelling as method

That first foray into interviewing brought home to me the impossibility of the 'perfect', by-the-book interview. Over the course of my conversation with Andre, the naive mental image I had had of a smooth, professional interview was shattered by interruptions, a malfunctioning digital recorder, and my own stumbling. Simply relaying the 'results' of the interview in my writing would have concealed all of this from the

reader. Storytelling therefore allows me to be honest about what a continual process the fieldwork was, and how the project evolved over time. I can be open about how fuzzy the line between work and life really was, how personal some of my field experiences were, how my position impacted on my work, how what I learned at each stage affected what happened later. In short, I do not have to pretend that I knew things at certain stages that I simply did not know yet, as indeed, some of the most fascinating things I learned came entirely accidentally. For example, I spent weeks asking my interviewees if they had ever had any problems with the police, and was met with shrugs and shakes of the head. It was not until later that it suddenly dawned on me that most of these people had, in fact, been targeted for identification checks on the street, arrested without cause, intimidated, or otherwise harassed – but that these events were not seen as extraordinary in the slightest in Cuba today, and thus not 'problems'. This is important not just to the development of the thesis, or even of my facility as an ethnographer, but to the politics of the project.

What is more, even deciding *who* I wanted to interview was not always easy. Sexual-affective relations between Cubans and foreigners are ambiguous, ranging from long-term committed partnerships to fleeting and transactional affairs, none of which can be said to be devoid of emotional content, so attempting to determine who is and who is not a 'jinetera' is useless. It is the *idea* of a category of people called 'jineteras', and the presumption of who fits the bill, that matters. For that very reason, many young women who engage in sexual-affective relationships with foreign men reject the term 'jinetera', creating their own alternative names, or eschewing labels altogether. My own understanding of what I was looking for in an interviewee – people who call themselves 'jineteras'? people who have been treated as 'jineteras' by the police? people who look like 'jineteras'? – never truly settled into a single profile.

What I had been taught of methodology in international relations relied heavily on notions of objectivity, neutrality, and, quite frankly, the ability to predict – and to control – what will happen in the field. I contend that these are impossible (and not necessarily desirable) ideals in the context of an ethnographic, feminist project dealing with marginalised subjects across lines of 'race', gender, class, and culture.[6] The experience of ethnographic fieldwork often left me feeling that I was the last person with any sway over the outcomes of my work, as I was totally dependent on others who had no obligation to help me. As a result of these challenges, I had to work hard to gain the trust of potential informants and I very rarely had the luxury of naming the place and time of an interview. Opportunities were fleeting and appointments rarely kept, so I had interviews which happened at 2:00 in the morning, which took place inside noisy clubs and bars, or on the beach; interviews where I took notes on the backs of bus tickets and receipts, and even one where answers came in the form of nods and shakes of the head. As Maria Stern and Lorraine Nencel both observe, learning

[6] See Zalewski, Marysia (2006) "Distracted Reflections on the Production, Narration, and Refusal of Feminist Knowledge in International Relations", pp. 42-61, in Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True (eds) Feminist Methodologies for International Relations, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 46.

to understand and interpret silences and exclusions – what was *not* said – became nearly as important as what was said.[7] My curiosity was usually not rewarded with straightforward answers. I learned something new from each of them, but not in ways that could have been predicted in advance, and I often did not learn what I set out to learn. Circumstances constantly changed, and the meanings of ideas, categories, and words shifted before my eyes. A high degree of flexibility had to be built into the design of my research, both methodologically and conceptually. These elements themselves – how events played out, how I came to meet certain people, why I asked certain questions of some and not others – are not just gaps that need to be explained through narrative, but crucial parts of the project itself. Recounting them as a narrative story allows for honesty and also for a more complete, nuanced picture of what life in the Cuban setting was like, for me and for the people with whom I worked.

Perhaps more importantly, using narratives in my writing showcases the multiplicity inherent in any lived experience or human relationship; mine was just one of many possible voices, and over time I became increasingly convinced that the very same project done by someone else would look very different. Each person I interviewed had a perspective and an interpretation of the events of their own lives which varied – sometimes slightly, sometimes markedly – from the others, and this worked to further dissolve the category of the 'jinetera' in my eyes. I quickly learned, as Cabezas had before me in the course of her research, that the "unified object of my research, the 'sex worker', did not exist, was ambiguous, or at the very least was quite an unstable subject."[8] This made it all the more important to challenge the singularity of the state's narrative that young women who engage in sexual-affective relations with foreigners are universally selfish, naive, reckless, and morally lax. Annick Wibben notes that, "the imposition of a particular form becomes a tool to dismiss alternatives."[9] Enframing events and identities within a narrative is never a neutral undertaking. Offering alternative interpretations of the meanings of experiences, identities, and relationships – with the implication that no one amongst them can ever be the 'correct' one – through stories which contest, subvert, or re-appropriate dominant understandings is thus a key way of challenging totalising narratives, or "arguing against the primacy of a particular plot."[10]

[7] Stern, Maria (2001) Naming In/security – Constructing Identity: 'Mayan-Women' in Guatemala on the Eve of 'Peace', Gothenburg: Department of Peace and Development Research, Gothenburg University, p. 84; Nencel, Lorraine (2005) "Feeling Gender Speak: Intersubjectivity and Fieldwork Practice with Women who Prostitute in Lima, Peru", in European Journal of Women's Studies 12.3: pp. 345-361.
[8] Cabezas, Economies of Desire, p. 8; see also Nencel, "Feeling Gender Speak", pp. 345-361.
[9] Wibben, Annick (2010) Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach, London: Routledge, p. 44.
[10] Wibben, Feminist Security Studies, p. 51.

Push and pull

With four sets of eyes boring into me, I try to gather my thoughts. Ana, Sara, Yoaní, and Taimí all come from Batabanó, south of Havana, and they range in age from 18 to 28. They've agreed to speak to me as a favour to a mutual friend, but so far I would venture to say that it's going very poorly. The five of us are sequestered in the upstairs room of a contact of mine, with low ceilings and semi-darkened windows. We're sitting on a pair of rusty, creaking twin beds, and it's too hot and sticky in the room to turn off the electric fan that drones loudly in the background. I am keen to hear about the tourist men who regularly approach them in the nightclubs of Havana, but our entire conversation had remained tense and stilted, no matter how hard I try to put them at ease.

Would you like to stop?, I ask them, resignedly. They look at me, then at each other, and silently shake their heads. Yoaní raises an eyebrow and regards me with a look of exasperation, while Taimí flops back on the bed, puts on the sunglasses she has snatched from me earlier, and closes her eyes, as if washing her hands of me. I take a deep breath and carry on. Through a painfully long series of one-word answers, I manage to discover that Ana trained as a nurse, and that Taimí and Sara are still in school. Yoaní is close to seven months pregnant, and I've known since before we met that the father is an Italian boyfriend of hers from whom she hasn't heard since the day she told him the news. She tells me she quit college and has no intention of going back, now that she is going to be a mother.

Finally, I stumble blindly onto some relative success when I bring up the question of labels. As I list a few of the names used in Cuba to describe young women who date foreigners – 'prostituta', 'puta', 'jinetera', 'atrevida' – they begin to tell me what each word evokes for them. They still speak with a sullen air of resignation or sadness, saying that they do not see themselves reflected in any of the terms, but at least now they are talking, disagreeing with each other, and expressing some of their own opinions. The last one I pose to them is one that I have only recently encountered: 'luchadora', or one (specifically a woman) who engages in the struggle to get by.[11] Ana, seated directly to my left, smiles for the first time and her face positively lights up. She says she likes that one, that it seems strong and beautiful.

The mood in the room lightens considerably now and all four of them appeared as if a weight was lifted from their shoulders. The change is extraordinary – soon Taimí and Sara are regaling me with stories of the Germans, Russians, and Canadians they've met. When I ask them what they like about foreign men, Taimí quips, "I like white chocolate," and collapses in paroxysms of laughter. The others roll their eyes and smile, going on to tell me that European and North American men treat them well, and they see no reason why they

[11] 'La lucha' is a very evocative and relatable concept in Cuba, used often to refer to struggles ranging from the guerrilla warfare of the Revolution to the current economic strife the country is experiencing. Situating relationships with foreigners within 'la lucha' is a powerful way to legitimate them as an acceptable and even laudable part of many Cubans' efforts to make ends meet for themselves and their families.

shouldn't pursue the kinds of partners who can take them out for dinner, give them nice gifts, and help them support their families.

"They open the door and let you go through first," says Sara.

"And foreign men don't hit," says Ana.

This shocks me, but Ana seems surprised that I'm so astonished. Matter-of-factly, she shrugs as she tells me she has never had a Cuban boyfriend who did not hit her, and never a foreign date who did. Yoaní, leaning back and resting one hand on her belly, remarks – as if to drive home Ana's point – that she fully intends to find another foreign boyfriend once her baby arrives.

"It's the only way," Ana says. "I have a little boy I need to support. The jobs here – they don't get you anything. It's the only way to have a life. It doesn't always make me happy, but it's better than the alternative."

I ask her if she would consider leaving Cuba with a foreign boyfriend if the opportunity arose, and Ana shakes her head, but the others nod vigorously. Yoaní says she would like to move to England, and Taimí solemnly concurs. Sara says she would prefer Spain, so she wouldn't have to learn another language.

As our conversation winds down, I ask these four young women if they have any questions for me, since they've largely just answered the ones I've posed to them. Shrieking again with laughter, Taimí asks if I've got a brother she could meet, but Sara cocks an eyebrow at me and I know she's got something to say. With a smile playing at the corner of her mouth, she asks me, "Would you do it?"

For a moment I feel like I've lost the ability to speak, but almost immediately I hear myself saying yes, as if by instinct. It isn't until later, walking away from that interview and thinking carefully about why I responded the way I did, that I realise how important the *telling* of the story really is. The more I thought about it, the more I realised that when faced with deprivation, scarcity, and isolation from the outside world, one might start to look for companionship, support, love, and even sex amongst those with the means to alleviate those stressors. As Viviana Zelizer argues, this does not invalidate or contaminate the relationship; rather, financial support often plays an affirmative, reinforcing role in intimate relationships: "money cohabits regularly with intimacy, even sustains it."[12] The way that relationships are differentiated is not through the exchange of funds, but through 'relational work' – signposting and labels, attendance at family and social events, cohabitation, symbols such as rings or other gifts – and people are usually vigilant about clarifying "whether the relationship is a marriage, courtship, prostitution, or some other different sort of social tie."[13] Telling the story of the relationship is one of these signifiers which frame a sexual-affective liaison as 'genuine' in the eyes of everyone involved.

[12] Zelizer, Viviana (2005) The Purchase of Intimacy, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 28.
[13] Zelizer, Purchase of Intimacy, p. 18.

The Politics (and Ethics) of Storytelling

Telling stories in their entirety, and bringing out the personalities and perspectives of the people I interviewed, is also part of the ethical stance that I have tried to cultivate between myself and the subjects of my study – a personal ethics of research that was as important to me as 'ethics board' ethics. I struggled to make my interviews as reciprocal and conversational an experience as possible, in an attempt to mitigate these problems. Many of my interviewees asked me questions, like Sara did, and I often found these experiences as interesting as the questions I asked them. In James Clifford's words, each was (and is) a "speaking [subject], who sees as well as is seen, who evades, argues, probes back."[14] I cannot claim to have relayed their voices or their opinions with complete accuracy – and I would contest the idea that such an accuracy truly exists – but this problem speaks to multiplicity and indeterminacy of narratives. My meeting with Ana, Taimí, Sara, and Yoaní also made me think about how my interviewees saw me: there were times when I believed that some saw me as a friend, but some seemed not to like me at all; in other cases, I am certain they spoke to me in the hopes that I could pay them or introduce them to affluent foreigners; some of my male interviewees, I know, hoped to sleep with me. To navigate all of these issues – of my interviewees' feelings, motivations, curiosities, and resistances – I relied often on feeling, which Lorraine Nencel also mentions in her study on women-who-prostitute in Peru[15], to help me flag up and examine moments of conflict, deception, and camaraderie alike.

What is more, the differences between me, a white, middle-class, English-speaking Canadian woman from a university in the United Kingdom, and my informants, who were mostly young black and mixed-race women who had grown up in Cuba in relative poverty, were significant and certainly influenced our perceptions of one another. We were often close to the same age, but otherwise looked at one another across a gulf of experience with few commonalities. As a "character-bound narrator"[16], I was as situated and biased as they were, and there were probably more moments than even I realised wherein we did not understand each other. A narrative style of writing helped me to make these lacks of clarity visible to the reader and major part of the resulting project. Even so, there were moments during my time in Cuba in which I felt some unease with my role or my choices in the field. This uneasiness made me consider the role that I played for my Cuban informants. I often felt cast in a role, as Patai did[17], but that role changed from time to time. Some of the young people I met forbade me to use their experiences in my writing, but nonetheless wanted to share them

[14] Clifford, James (2010) "Introduction: Partial Truths," pp. 1-26, in James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds), Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, 25th anniversary edition. London, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 14.
[15] Nencel, "Feeling Gender Speak", pp. 345-361.
[16] Wibben, Feminist Security Studies, p. 47.
[17] Patai, Daphne (1991) "U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?", in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds) Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History, London & New York: Routledge, p. 140.

with me, while others implored me to 'tell their story'. As a foreigner and, in the eyes of most Cubans, a perpetual tourist, I felt forever on the outside – which may have had its advantages at times[18] – and my very topic of research marked me out for many as at best peculiar and at worst a "moral transgressor and thus *una mala mujer* [a bad woman]."[19] More than once, I heard reports that young men I had interviewed later claimed to have slept with me. I found this distressing in the moment, but with time, it became just one part of a landscape of emotions and tensions that simultaneously troubled and constituted my experience of ethnography.

Most crucially, however, narrative writing allowed me the space to reflect openly on the risks inherent in 'speaking for', especially when it comes to representing the lives of marginalised individuals. There is a power relationship inherent in interviewing, and particularly in interviewing vulnerable individuals, with one party demanding and the other providing information. This almost unavoidably extractive and "colonial"[20] relationship behoves the ethnographer to be mindful in taking a reflective and self-critical approach to interviewing. It is not enough, as Daphne Patai argues, to assume that a feminist or anti-racist standpoint will act as a safeguard against exploiting others – it is a "messy business" from beginning to end.[21] The problems of paternalism and colonialism are very real and, as Wibben highlights, "narrative makes it possible, both in fiction and life, to express the vision of another."[22] The people I interviewed have been spoken for all too often, with a vehement debate amongst both foreign and domestic commentators over whether they are compelled or enter freely into 'jineterismo', whether the blame lies with them or the state, or whether they are good or bad people. Noelle Stout characterises this polarising academic debate as follows:

> Cuban scholars and women's rights advocates, charged with the task of explaining the re-emergence of sex tourism, have suggested that *jineterismo* reflects a crisis in values, that sex workers are seduced by superficial desires for commodity goods, and they have supported mandatory rehabilitation for *jineteras*. In response, some analysts in the United States and Europe have characterised Cuban critics of *jineterismo* as unsympathetic to the plight of Cuban sex workers and the realities of poverty they face. More pointedly, a number of foreign analysts have described Cuban women's advocates as stuck in a 'Victorian past' by promoting repressive

[18] Nancy Wonders and Raymond Michalowski argue that, "[a]t some level, we remain global tourists ourselves. Given our research focus, however, we believe that this vantage point has its advantages." This is in reference to the very different (but also unpredictable) ways in which Cubans may respond to a foreigner as opposed to a fellow Cuban. See Wonders, Nancy A. and Michalowski, Raymond (2001) "Bodies, Borders and Sex Tourism in a Globalised World: A Tale of Two Cities – Amsterdam and Havana", in Social Problems 48.4 (November): p. 548.

[19] Cabezas, Economies of Desire, p. 9. Nencel also discusses the unintelligibility of women who are not 'prostitutes', and especially those who are foreigners, but who exist in and around the world of 'prostitution'; see Nencel, "Feeling Gender Speak", p. 351.

[20] Wahab, Stéphanie (2003) "Creating Knowledge Collaboratively with Female Sex Workers: Insights from a Qualitative, Feminist, and Participatory Study," in Qualitative Inquiry 9.4: pp. 637; again, see also Nencel (2005) "Feeling Gender Speak".

[21] Patai, "U.S. Academics and Third World Women", pp. 139, 150.

[22] Wibben, Feminist Security Studies, p. 49.

> racist and elitist ideologies, defenders of the status quo who falsely claim to champion women's rights, and towing the same party line as right wing Western politicians.[23]

The voices of the individual subjects who are implicated in this discourse, however, are rarely heard, and certainly not in discussions of Cuban politics. I hope that by presenting stories in their entirety, rather than picking and choosing quotations to support an argument, that I can foreground the voices of the people I met, mitigate the risks of appropriation, and work against 'speaking for'.

Here, the Cuban setting presents a particular problem as well. Given that I was studying a group of people that is not only marginalised, but actively targeted by the state, my meetings with them were often nothing more than brief snapshots of their lives. While many, including Maria Stern and Lorraine Nencel, argue that the process of writing ethnography ought to be reciprocal, and the interviewees should be able to read and comment on the finished product, this was never possible for me. Stern refers to her interviewees as 'co-authors' of her text, since she consulted them on multiple occasions and got their feedback on the narrative produced by their conversations.[24] Many of my interviewees, on the other hand, preferred never to see me again after our interviews, for their own safety and peace of mind. They often had no telephone in their homes, much less access to cellphones or email, so contacting them for a second meeting or to send them any of my writing has not been possible, leaving me with yet another gap to bridge (perhaps vainly) in my writing.

The problem of representation is therefore one which can never be fully resolved. An awareness of the intersubjectivity and impact of 'race', gender, class, and cultural difference cannot, as Nencel highlights, "erase the divide" between researcher and researched, but it can help mediate these problems and create a space for respect, trust, and even humour[25] – and consciousness of these issues can make for a more honest and accurate representation of the field experience. As the orchestrator and manager of the narratives produced by the conversations I had with young Cubans within the sexual-affective economy, I felt keenly aware of my precarious ethical position towards the people I met and the stories they entrusted to me. Stéphanie Wahab expresses something similar:

> I was acutely aware of what felt like a colonial position I was taking, if nothing else, by virtue of managing their/our words and stories. Furthermore, I dreaded the sensationalising process that

[23] Stout, "Feminists, Queers and Critics", p. 723.
[24] Stern, Naming In/security, p. 70; Clifford also argues that, "Western texts conventionally come with authors attached [...] But as ethnography's complex, plural *poesis* becomes more apparent – and politically charged – conventions begin, in small ways, to slip." Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths", p. 17.
[25] Nencel, "Feeling Gender Speak", p. 348.

> occurs once knowledge and experience are uttered and recorded. We were already swimming in sensationalism and sexiness given the topic we were exploring.[26]

The role of the author in ethnographic accounts is one of "both getting out of the way and getting in the way"[27] – far from invisible or neutral (nor should it be), and not always even helpful to the unfolding of the text. But, as Clifford notes, life stories are contingent and allegorical: it is the telling – as my informants told them to me, and as I have retold them in here – that is the most important.[28] "Ethnographic truths," according to Clifford, "are thus inherently *partial* – committed and incomplete."[29] I do not feel that this text has been of my own making, and I hope that is because their lives have been fairly represented and their voices are here with my own in these pages.

Conclusion: Scattered Reflections

Academic writing supposes a precarious fiction.
It assumes the simultaneous absence and presence
of the writer within the writing.

~ Naeem Inayatullah[30]

What I am left with is a series of narratives which are inevitably always *my version* of the stories of my interviewees, but this – I think – is precisely the point. I set out in my thesis to destabilise the dominant narratives about the sexuality and sexual relationships of young women of colour in Cuba, and by using a narrative style that highlights uncertainty, divergence, and indeterminacy, I can reveal that no single meaning can be applied to relationships or identities, least of all from the outside. The fact that I encounter these problems in my writing, and discuss them explicitly and openly, is part of the end game in itself: there is no one single truth – not the state's, not any particular one of my interviewees', and not mine either. The stories or vignettes that I have fashioned out of my encounters with the Cubans I interviewed are the products of specific situations, circumstances, and personalities coming together. They do not represent a definitive telling, much as they may have something valid to offer. I present these vignettes as "fictions"[31] not in order to oppose them to truth, but to highlight the constructedness of life stories, which are more than simple chronologies: they represent each individual's articulation of self. Or, as Stern puts it,

[26] Wahab, "Creating Knowledge Collaboratively", p. 637.
[27] Green, Deborah quoted in Lather, Patti (2001) "Postbook: Working the Ruins of Feminist Ethnography", in Signs 27.1: p. 207.
[28] Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths", p. 7.
[29] Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," p. 7.
[30] Inayatullah, "Falling and Flying", p. 5.
[31] Clifford refers to ethnographies and life stories as "fictions"; see Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths", p. 6.

> A focus on the discursive, constructed character of stories, or lives, does not deny that people *really* live, experience threat and harm, or safety and wellbeing, to disclaim that this were so would be silly. We act, experience and live, but the *meanings* we give to our actions is continually constructed within a web of different discourses. Similarly, we as subjects are continually reconstructed or reinscribed through narrative and representation."[32]

Rather than working through 'two levels of distortion' (my interviewees' and my own) as someone recently said to me, this form of writing denies that any 'real', factual bedrock exists beneath this so-called distortion. 'Truth', in the end, does not really matter, since we all create our own truth – it is the *telling* that matters.

There is a tension amongst the reflections I have offered here between storytelling as an ethical practice towards the subjects of my research, and narrative as a way of incorporating the complexity of fieldwork and, I know, a certain amount of auto-ethnography. It seems to me, however, that there is no really meaningful line to be drawn between ethnography and auto-ethnography, their narratives or mine. The personal element of research and writing, as Inayatullah notes, is often "excised in order to produce the expert."[33] This 'expert', as I have argued above, is itself an impossibility, and the implication of the author in the text, as a character and as an obstacle to 'objectivity' or 'neutrality', is one more way of addressing this.

Throughout the process of writing, I have often wondered to myself if each of the people I have discussed would recognise her or himself in what I have written, if they would be satisfied with it, if they would have known that every word – the conflicts, the dismissals and misunderstandings, the silences – would prove interesting and be included in my account.[34] For the most part, I cannot approach these people to ask their opinions on what I have written, but I hope that in continually asking myself these questions, I can go some distance towards challenging and destabilising the problem of representation.

[32] Stern, Naming In/security, p. 66.
[33] Inayatullah, "Falling and Flying", p. 4.
[34] Patai also reflects on these issues; see Patai, "U.S. Academics and Third World Women", p. 141.

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