When a Yuma Meets Mama: Commodified Kin and the Affective Economies of Queer Tourism in Cuba

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In this article, I explore the kinship imaginaries that emerged between gay male tourists from North America and Europe and Cuban male sex workers and their families within the context of Havana’s queer-erotic economies. Whereas male sex workers throughout Latin America and the Caribbean tend to conceal their male clients from their families, Cuban sexual laborers in this study incorporated queer foreigners into kinship imaginaries. Such bonds often conferred the rights and obligations of kin, while “blood” kinship was increasingly described in and subject to financial terms. Motivated by money rather than “blood” or “choice,” kinship ties fostered between foreign gay men and younger male sex workers prompt a rethinking of non-normative kin ties as an alternative to dominant systems of kinship and suggest the political and economic roots of familial bonds more broadly. [Keywords: Kinship, tourism, gender and sexuality, sex work, Latin America and the Caribbean, Cuba]
In the widely circulated documentary *Habana Muda* (Brach 2012), viewers witness the creation of a transnational queer family through the relationship between Chino, a deaf Cuban farmer who is married with children, and José, a gay Mexican tourist who has fallen in love with him. During their year-long affair, José provides Chino with cash, toys for his young children, clothing and toiletries, household items, and manicure equipment for Chino’s wife to establish a home business. As time passes, José finds a boyfriend in Mexico. Not wanting to abandon his obligation to Chino and his family, José continues to send money and arranges for Chino’s emigration. The night before Chino is scheduled to leave the island, he and his family gather with José and José’s new boyfriend around a candlelit table. “We are all family now,” Chino’s wife says, pointing at each of the Mexican visitors. Emotional at the thought of losing her husband, she continues, “We are family, so you cannot abandon us; do not forget about us.”

The film meditates on the ambiguity at the heart of the men’s intimacy: is Chino sincere in his affection for José or merely using him to gain access to cash and the possibility of emigration? Perhaps trying to prevent spectators from drawing reductive conclusions, French director Eric Brach excludes the fact that the men’s relationship would be typical within Havana’s thriving homoerotic sex trade, which parallels that of other contexts such as the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Brazil (Cabezas 2009; Padilla 2007a, 2007b; Parker 1999; Prieur 1998). What is unique to the Cuban story is how, as the film’s denouement suggests, kinship terms and practices that were familiar both to tourists and to Cubans offered a common frame through which gay foreigners and Cuban sexual laborers could solicit ongoing types of affection, obligation, and care. For some Cuban men facing a bleak post-communist economic landscape beginning in the 1990s, sexual labor, economic survival, and familial ties had become isomorphic. By offering Cubans excluded from global economies a lifeline to various forms of mobility and capital, kinship imaginaries allowed them to inspire long-term financial patronage that kept their families financially afloat.

In this article, I analyze social situations such as those found in *Habana Muda* that I encountered during seven years of research trips to Havana to study queer sex tourism.¹ The Cuban case presents a distinctive contribution that builds on known scholarship on the homoerotic transnational sex trade in the Caribbean and Latin America (e.g., Cabezas 2009; de Moya and Garcia 1998; Kulick 1998; Padilla 2007a, 2007b; Parker 1999;
Prieur 1998). In the Dominican Republic, for instance, Mark Padilla (2007a, 2007b) has shown how queer tourists similarly establish long-term relationships with male sex workers, many of whom perform heterosexual identities in their everyday lives, and send remittances for extended periods of time (see also Cabezas 2009). Whereas Dominican sex workers go to great lengths to conceal their work from their families, particularly from older generations such as parents and grandparents (Padilla 2007b), in Cuba it is typical for male sex workers to introduce foreign clients to their families, who in turn incorporate tourists into kin imaginaries. In other tourist settings in the Caribbean and Latin America, kinship provides a boundary marker between foreigners and locals (see Frohlick 2013), but the transnational homoerotic bonds that I documented in Havana encompassed myriad intimacies among tourists and sex workers and their parents, wives, and children. These transnational kin systems appealed to gay tourists who came to accommodate sentiments of love and affection alongside the knowledge that financial incentives had motivated kin ties.

By analyzing tourists’ capacity to embrace both intimacy and instrumentality within affective kin economies in a post-communist milieu, I join with anthropologists and feminist scholars who have sought to illuminate the ersatz cultural distinctions between the economic realm and the arena of familial bonds (e.g., Collier 1997, Collier and Yanagisako 1987, Constable 2003, Freeman 2007, Friedman 2005, Hirsch and Wardlow 2006, Lipset 2004, Rebhun 1999). Through an analysis of the experiences I documented in qualitative interviews and participant observation with 30 gay male visitors from Europe, the US, and Canada who developed relationships with Cuban sex workers and their families, I show how forms of obligation and reciprocity were embedded within transnational declarations of queer familia. I argue that personhood and capital were generated through the creation of these bonds and lost through their dissolution. In our conversations, gay tourists often upheld traditional cultural distinctions between market and intimate domains, maintaining that money could not buy love, for instance. Yet tourists’ experiences and narrative accounts of those domains suggest that the boundaries between affection and instrumentality were difficult to discern in ways that resonate with the longstanding ambiguity of the ties among kinship, commoditization, and political life more generally.

While heterosexual sex tourism continues to gain attention as an example of the role of affect and kinship in reproducing contemporary
global capitalism, only a handful of scholars have explored the links between gay pleasure tourism and late-capitalist affective economies (e.g., Binnie 2004; Cantú 2002; Padilla 2007a, 2007b; Parker 1999; Puar 2002). Scholars have largely emphasized how heterosexual sex tourism, at times described as “romance” tourism, in the Caribbean and elsewhere can evolve into “non-commodified” forms of marriage, partnership, and parenting (e.g., Bernstein 2007; Brennan 2004, 2007; Cabezas 2004; Cheng 2007; Constable 2009; Frohlick 2013). Because some foreign tourists never pay directly for sexual services and spend extended lengths of time with sex workers, sex tourist encounters tend to blur the lines between transactional sex and less overtly commodified forms of intimacy (Cohen 1986, 1993; Odzer 1994; Pruitt and LaFont 1995). The absence of queer transnational kin practices from this scholarship can partially be attributed to the fact that marriage has served as a primary mode through which sex tourist encounters transform into kinship. Until recently, matrimony has not been a widely available means of solidifying ongoing ties between gay tourists and local sex workers. Yet, given the increasing prevalence of federally recognized same-sex marriage in Europe, Canada, and the US, extending these analyses to the transnational queer kin imaginaries fostered by homoerotic encounters in Cuba becomes all the more important.

Attending to the bonds between gay tourists and the families of sexual laborers, I therefore seek to revise longstanding anthropological notions that gay kinship offers an alternative to dominant systems of inequality (Carrington 1999, Weston 1991). In particular, Kath Weston’s iconic studies of gay kinship in the 1990s in San Francisco indicated that the formation of gay families empowered those marginalized by society and their “blood” kin to create lasting support networks. Since then, anthropologists have explored gay domestic reproduction by focusing on gay and lesbian childrearing (Carrington 1999, Lewin 1993, Sullivan 2004) and the rise of same-sex marriage (Hull 2006) in the US. A driving question of such scholarship has been whether gay family-making could potentially unravel the power hierarchies of gender and sex embedded in normative hetero-kin relations. My analysis of kinship discourse and practices within Havana’s homoerotic post-communist economies reaches outside of the US to add another layer to this discussion: I show how queer kinship practices, while subverting dominant notions of biological kin, can be inextricably tied to forms of market capitalism.
Studies of Cuban sex tourism have typically focused on heterosexual, middle-aged, single white men who travel to take advantage of bargain prices for sexual services—relationships that serve as an embodiment of the neocolonial and heterosexist underpinnings of the tourist trade (Alcázar Campos 2009, Cabezas 1998, Fusco 1998, Marrero 2003, Roland 2011). When queer tourists are studied, as Puar (2002) observes, they are often conceptualized either as activists invested in political travel or as pleasure tourists seeking sun, sand, and sex. This analytical binary makes it easier for depictions of gay foreigners to border on stereotype and obscures how queer transnational encounters complexly affect everyday local life. Whereas Cuban male sexual laborers have been widely studied (e.g., Allen 2007, 2011; Fosado 2005; Hodge 2001, 2005; Sierra Madero 2012), their gay foreign clients remain largely absent from these accounts. This article uses such accounts to provide a more accurate view of how tourists blend notions of love and financial support to forge ongoing ties with Cubans and their families. In doing so, I show how performances of kinship are as central to the functioning of homoerotic sexual labor as are performances of masculinity and sexuality. Understanding this significance helps to uncover what these relationships might mean in the broader framework of contemporary political economies of love in the Caribbean (cf. Padilla et al. 2007).

Hence, I frame these relationships, and the discourses and practices that they inspired, as kinship imaginaries in order to analyze how Cubans and foreigners used familial terms to generate a variety of new financial and affective outcomes. The model of a kinship imaginary emphasizes the forms of creativity at play in shaping kinship, as new forms of sociality generate novel family formations (cf. Rapp and Ginsburg 2011:383). In doing so, I aim to stress the heterogeneity and provisional nature of kinship arrangements rather than to imply that a unified social imaginary or singular “Cuban” or “tourist” kinship systems exist. Instead, Cubans and tourists co-created and participated in multiple kin imaginaries that often operated at cross-purposes and dissolved over time.

My analysis draws on nearly two years of research in Havana between 2001 and 2007, during which I spent time with gay male tourists in their hotels, at restaurants, city tours, and nightclubs, on dates with their Cuban partners, and during visits to the families of these Cuban sex workers. I also conducted follow-up interviews with gay tourists from the US in Miami and New York City in 2011 and 2013. I met the majority of my
respondents in Havana’s informal queer nightlife, on the Malecón seawall or in nearby parks, or through the Cuban sex workers whom I had befriended. They were predominately white, with a smaller number of black, Latino, and Jewish respondents, and were between 35 and 66 years old. The Cuban sexual laborers they hired spanned the color spectrum, as white foreigners tended to pursue light-skinned Cubans, and black and Latino tourists tended to prefer Cubans who were darker skinned. The majority of the tourists considered themselves middle to upper-middle class in their home countries, with a few “starving artists” in the group, although all were wealthy by Cuban standards. Most were repeat visitors and had been traveling to Cuba for more than two years in a row. While the tourists were all interpellated through kinship ties, they interpreted the rights and responsibilities of kin in distinct ways that reflected their class, ethnic, national, and generational differences.

Although my tourist interlocutors understood that I was a researcher, they often treated me as a fellow traveler, relying on my language skills and personal connections to enhance their vacation experiences and including me in their activities and personal networks while in Cuba. As an anthropologist, I was a type of long-term queer tourist myself, and I was able to understand the complexities of these bonds through my participation in transnational queer families, including through forms of financial obligation that I maintain today. I first became aware of the prevalence of kinship discourse within tourist–Cuban relationships when a male Cuban sex worker began telling his friends and acquaintances that I was his half-sister por parte de padre. My first instinct was to dismiss this as his playful effort to explain why we were together so much but not sexually involved, but I soon realized that these somewhat ambiguous yet generative kinship terms were directed at a foreign as well as a Cuban audience. Although my relationships with sex workers were platonic and based on my research, I began to understand the potency of these kinship sentiments to foster intimacy and incorporate tourists into ongoing systems of reciprocity.

**Love and Money in Post-Communist Kinship**

Since homoerotic sex, prostitution, and, to a lesser degree, relationships with foreign tourists were stigmatized in post-Soviet Cuba, it seems remarkable that rather than conceal their clientele, young hustlers would introduce gay foreigners to their parents, their siblings, and even their
wives and girlfriends. After the dissolution of the Socialist Bloc in the early 1990s, Cubans lost massive Soviet subsidies and suffered extreme shortages of food, electricity, and fuel. The severity of the post-Soviet crisis re-oriented both the national economy and household budgets around hard currency gleaned from the nascent international tourist trade and family remittances. This growing dependence on foreigners and family abroad set the stage for the emergence of commodified kin relations within the homoerotic sex trade.

From the perspective of communist Cuban government officials, the reintroduction of international tourism was a necessary evil after the complete collapse of the Cuban economy in the 1990s (Espino 2000:362). Unlike other Caribbean leaders, the Cuban National Assembly resisted whole-hearted neoliberal economic restructuring by refusing to privatize national resources and rejecting loans from multinational governing agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Instead, leaders acquiesced to certain limited forms of capitalist investment in the tourist industry, which would remain largely state owned. Within the first decade of Cuba’s opening to tourism, 1990 to 2000, the annual number of foreign visitors to the island increased from 370,000 to 1.8 million (Brundenius 2002:383) and continued to rise to 2.53 million by 2010, a number greater than the entire population of Havana that year.7

The remarkable growth of prostitution after the reintroduction of tourism in the 1990s stands out all the more because, for decades, the socialist government had claimed its eradication as the crowning jewel of revolutionary socialism. But as the tourist industry grew, other forms of employment in the public sector continued to diminish. With jobs in the tourist industry limited and Cubans becoming increasingly dependent on foreigners’ hard currency to purchase the necessities of daily life, some young Cubans created their own ad hoc transnational networks through black market connections in the capital.8 Sex work with foreigners proved to be among the most lucrative forms of work in the black market and, consequently, an illicit homoerotic sex tourist trade grew and thrived in Havana. Young men looking to earn black market salaries through sexual labor were often referred to as pingueros (literally “dick workers”), a new type of worker who made use of the traditional notion that a man could have same-sex liaisons without adopting a homosexual identity, as long as he maintained the “masculine” or penetrative role in sex (Allen 2007, 2011; Fosado 2005; Hodge 2001, 2005; Sierra Madero 2012).9 In 2002, an
income study of residents in Havana demonstrated the economic advantages of performing sexual labor: a woman working as a sexual partner to foreigners typically earned between $240 and $1400 a month, whereas a university professor made no more than $22 monthly, a physician grossed between $12 and $25, and a cabinet minister received no more than $23 (Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López 2005:75). Homoeotropic economies offered comparable earnings and became a risky yet profitable way to acquire the currency needed to purchase the kinds of daily necessities that had previously been provided by state rations.

The appearance of kinship sentiments within these queer erotic economies reflected specific forms of post-Soviet liberalization in which Cuban familial relationships were becoming tied to the marketplace through a growing dependence on family remittances. Although Cuban revolutionary leaders intended the paternalism of the communist state to supersede kinship as a fundamental source of sustenance, the evacuation of state rations and services in the post-communist era encouraged a resurgence of familial networks as a primary means of support. During the crisis, Cubans migrated in high numbers and often supported those still living on the island (Eckstein 2004, Eckstein and Barberia 2002). According to Cuban reports, in 2002, at the start of my research, remittances from abroad were around $820 million, and 60 percent of the population was receiving money from abroad (Eckstein 2004). On average, Cubans received more from foreigners and Cubans living abroad than the average annual earnings of state workers (Mesa-Lago and Perez-Lopez 2005:78). Hence, as Cubans’ relationships with Cubans abroad and foreigners became increasingly important, they also became fraught, as Cubans came to rely for survival on the loyalties and hard currency of those living overseas.

In all of the cases presented here, male sexual laborers maintained a yuma (foreigner) and a wife or girlfriend in Cuba—a relationship that a gay client might read as evidence of social homophobia in Cuba, while the Cuban wife explained the homoerotic relationship as motivated by economic hardship. Unlike the heterosexual sex trade in which female sex workers fostered illusions of fidelity by calling their clients their “boyfriends” (Alcázar Campos 2009, Fernandez 1999, Fusco 2001), queer transnational families incorporated male sex workers’ foreign clients alongside their female partners. It was when gay foreigners found themselves in cramped kitchens and overgrown backyards with the female partners, parents, and siblings of Cuban sexual laborers that kinship imaginaries emerged.
and became salient. Male sex workers did not introduce the foreigners as maridos (husbands) or novios (boyfriends), but family members often addressed the tourists as “son,” “brother,” or “uncle” to make sense of these unprecedented encounters. Kin terms allowed Cuban relatives of sex workers to domesticate what Douglas (1966) calls matter out of place—here, a queer outsider whose relationship to the sex worker remained implicit but never acknowledged. Cuban families recognized these kinship gestures as instrumental, but also described them as attempts to connect with outsiders and to creatively adapt to novel, post-communist forms of transnational sociality.

Queer kinship imaginaries formed through homoerotic tourist economies were a decidedly contemporary phenomenon, but the building of familial alliances has long blurred affective sentiment with economic and social aspirations. For example, the use of kinship as a strategy of advancement has been well-documented during the Cuban colonial era. In a post-slavery context, as Martínez-Alier (1989) shows, marriage and fertility were a primary means through which white creole families consolidated their position in the social hierarchy. During a moment of rapid social and economic transformation, endogamous marriage offered a vehicle for assuring socioeconomic stability as creole families mobilized discourses of racial and sexual purity to confine white daughters to marital unions that would benefit the families’ social and economic standing. Meanwhile, mulata women would likewise seek relationships with white men to gain class mobility. These colonial kinship practices focused on the production of offspring in the form of inheritance for white creole daughters and the “whitening” (blanqueamiento) of children for darker-skinned women. In the post-Soviet era, partner choice and family relations became linked to financial incentives in ways that resonated with this historical legacy and chafed against longstanding socialist ideals of “true love” fostered outside of the grips of economic necessity (Andaya 2013).

The tactical use of kinship in the post-communist era, therefore, should not be heralded as the incursion of market values or political life into a distinct domestic domain of familial love. Instead, transnational queer networks of financial support and emotional care represent the latest incarnation of kinship’s reproduction through contemporary forms of capital that travel via transnational circuits generated by sexual and familial intimacies. Declarations of familial and romantic love have always been imbricated in the production of capitalism because it was only when a
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market sphere of labor came into existence that one could lay claim to its opposite—a domestic sphere of love and care (Collier 1997, Collier and Yanagisako 1987, Constable 2003, Freeman 2007, Friedman 2005, Hirsch and Wardlow 2006, Lipset 2004, Rebhun 1999). Cultural understandings of kinship thus both inform and reflect the economic movement of labor and wealth, inspiring and naturalizing identities and social hierarchies (Franklin and McKinnon 2001:9). As Yanagisako (2002:13) has argued in her study of Italian family firms, familial relationships and kinship processes that are often assumed to exist in opposition to the market actually remain instrumental in the production and reproduction of forms of industrial capitalism. The Cuban case illustrates a form of queer kinship in which the fundamental ties between exchange and obligation merely become more transparent than most.14

While the tourists I worked with did not consciously deconstruct enduring notions of “familial love” as linked to the economy, their willingness to accept kin terms and obligations bound to Cubans’ needs and desires for financial support suggests a significant expansion of the ideology of queer domestic familial bonds. Just as Cubans were increasingly discussing familial obligations and romantic relationships in financial terms at the same time as remittances from émigrés became central to daily survival, tourists were finding discourses of marriage and family more central to their gay communities at home. Large-scale post-communist transformations—including the rise of a gay tourist trade, increased migration, and the importance of remittances—were not merely a backdrop to the rise of queer transnational kin ties, but were aspects of contemporary capitalism that were shaped by and informed the transnational queer kin networks that emerged.

Ironically, the incorporation of queer foreigners into Cuban kinship networks presents less of a challenge to official Cuban approaches to gay tolerance, which center on the family as a site for advocating sexual equality, than do some non-Cuban gay rights organizations. Whereas such organizations risk projecting a Western model of individual rights and activism onto a historically socialist Cuban context, gay foreigners operating through familial ties could appear less threatening to Cuban models of sexual equality. The most public gay advocates in Cuba tend to support a depoliticized movement that works within preexisting state structures to promote sexual equality, in lieu of a separate political bloc that would oppose the government bringing about social and political change (Stout
2011). For example, according to Mariela Castro Espin, Director of the National Center for Sexual Education, gay tolerance should not occur in the ballot box but rather be fostered within the psychology of the Cuban family, where parents must learn to accept their gay children (as quoted in Jimanez 2004). The fact that the familial bonds of gay tourists and Cubans, however, originate with transnational sexual labor grates against socialist ideals of economic equality and defies the Cuban government’s strict prohibition of prostitution.

**Tourists Seeking Acceptance, Access, and Esteem**

When I asked Anthony, a 39-year-old gay African American photographer from Brooklyn who had been visiting Cuba for over ten years, whether he had ever been invited to meet the family of a Cuban hustler, he said, “Of course—that’s the first thing they do. That’s hustler 101.” Handsome, fluent in Spanish, and able to pass as Cuban, Anthony established numerous novios (boyfriends) during his trips to Cuba. Rather than pay for discrete sexual acts, Anthony would provide a place to stay, gifts such as clothing, jewelry, and sneakers, and food for his boyfriends and their families. He continued to send money on an ongoing basis to one of his former lovers. “The first thing [hustlers] want to do is take you home, especially if they’re from the countryside,” Anthony explained. “[They have] a natural curiosity about foreigners, but they’re also trying to make you feel like part of the family. Your novio’s mother starts calling you ‘son,’ his sister calls you hermano, and before you know it you’re sending money for the next year.”

What power did these terms of endearment hold for tourists who felt compelled to make financial contributions over time? Many tourists, like Anthony, described the satisfaction they gained from feeling “seen for who they really were” and simply loved by Cuban families. While tourists might label male sexual laborers as opportunistic, they often described hustlers’ families as generous, accepting, and empathetic. Many of my interlocutors were astonished to have older generations of Cubans, such as sex workers’ mothers or grandmothers, wholeheartedly embrace them, constantly offer food when supplies were limited, and protectively watch over them. Many black and Latino tourists whom I interviewed described how these gestures powerfully combined with racial dynamics to make the tourists feel even “more at home” in Cuba than in their hometowns. For example, Anthony often told me that he felt more comfortable with his
Cuban “family” than in the small Midwestern US town where he grew up because he so easily blended in with black and *mulato* Cubans.

This juxtaposition of sexual labor and familial affection, however, often created mixed feelings for tourists. For example, in describing his first trip to meet a Cuban family in their home, Anthony seemed ambivalent. “By the seventh day [we knew each other] Osvaldo had convinced me to go to meet his family in the countryside—ten hours driving. I did it because I wanted to see the country and to get into their lives, get pedestrian, travel, and live like they do.”\(^{15}\) He had been enthusiastic about the journey, but later realized that the trip was a common ploy to solicit money. In our conversations, he wanted to set himself apart from other tourists whom he imagined might be duped into thinking that they were going home as a gesture of “pure” love or commitment. Yet, when describing that first trip, he also said that Osvaldo’s mother called Anthony her son and referred to her younger son as Anthony’s little brother. “The little brother was 13, beautiful, wide-eyed, and friendly,” Anthony said. “He was not faking it. I called him my little brother and he really seemed to love me.”

Anthony’s story illustrates how sex workers’ families used kin terminology to incorporate yumas into the household, and how gay tourists—familiar with building gay kinship networks at home (Weston 1991)—enjoyed this interpellation as “brother” or “son,” often conforming to the obligations it entailed.\(^{16}\) Sharing material and financial resources among American gay kinship networks, as Weston (1991) points out, was especially common among working-class gay men and lesbians. Indeed, throughout the ten years that I corresponded with Anthony, he adopted a number of what he described as “gay sons,” black teens who lived in surrounding neighborhoods in New York City and who were struggling, often financially, at the same time they were trying to “figure out who they were.” Just as the Cuban matriarchs would care for Anthony in Cuba, he would watch out for these young protégées. Anthony periodically offered them a place to stay, provided food when they were hungry, and taught them practical survival lessons from how to stay safe while cruising to where to go for AIDS/HIV testing. As Anthony’s story suggests, tourists brought different understandings to kinship relationships based on their own class, racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds, which inspired various interpretations of meeting the family.\(^{17}\)

Like Anthony, many of the black, Latino, and white working-class tourists I interviewed were more likely than their wealthier counterparts
to identify kinship gestures as part of the performance of sexual labor, but still developed feelings of intimacy and reciprocity alongside a belief that they were desired for their financial contributions. For these tourists, kinship work was inextricable from sex work. These tourists felt that the familial bonds were part of la mecánica (the hustle) and yet gained pleasure and validation from their interpellation into Cuban kin imaginaries. To them, incorporation into Cuban families carried the expectation that to be part of a family meant to provide for those who were struggling. In the context of Cuban tourism, this ability to accommodate market motives in the construction of queer family suggests a critical challenge to ideas that familial love must be distinguished from sexual labor, with any suggestion of financial motivation obscured.

In contrast, many wealthier white North American and European tourists whom I interviewed tended to describe going home with Cuban men as a critical turning point in a relationship at which it became clear that they were, as one tourist explained, “more than just a client.” For wealthier European and American tourists, incorporation into Cuban familial life offered many of my respondents what I describe as “patronage esteem”—the sense that they were generous and that this big-heartedness reflected their character and worth. Patronage esteem seemed to qualify them in their social circles as charitable. For instance, John and his partner of 20 years, Michael, had been traveling from Los Angeles, CA to Havana twice a year for five years. John was a handsome entertainment lawyer in his late 40s and Michael, also in his 40s, was a successful real estate entrepreneur. The couple sent money every month to the Cuban sexual laborers whom they had been visiting for years, even after they ceased having sexual relations with the younger men. John and Michael had become active in Afro-Cuban religion and had gone through an intensive initiation ceremony during one of their trips. They had paid for the emigration of two young Cuban sex workers to California, who stayed with them briefly before moving to Miami. When John and Michael vacationed in Havana, they always visited the families of the men who had migrated. I accompanied them on these visits and watched as one young man’s mother cried and thanked them for their help. These visits, where John and Michael were referred to as “brother” and “son” by the Cuban families, left the tourists feeling appreciated and as if they had “done something that mattered” with their wealth.

Forms of patronage esteem among gay tourists resonate with a growing humanitarian tourist industry, in which tourists from the global North often
pay to provide medical assistance, infrastructural support, or material relief in host countries. Often based on notions of benevolence and rooted in histories of transnational development projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, the volunteer efforts of humanitarian tourism in Cuba are largely organized around notions of leftist political solidarity and opposition to the US embargo. A small sector of this movement is composed of queer activists who are interested in developing collaborations with Cuban state-run organizations and learning about gay life in Cuba (cf. Feinberg 2009).

While my interlocutors, similar to humanitarian travelers or queer activists, saw their contributions as a symbol of their altruism, the gay tourists I interviewed remained indifferent to solidarity politics. Patronage esteem was distinct from humanitarian efforts and transnational queer activism in that sexual pleasure and desire were unapologetically motivating the original bonds these tourists made with Cubans. Whereas sex was often present in the “reality tourism” or humanitarian efforts of various organizations, its presence was either disavowed or reluctantly recognized as a byproduct of cultural immersion (Stout 2014:166).

Although the gay tourists I interviewed were not motivated to establish connections with Cubans for explicitly political purposes, leftist political leanings, an interest in Cuban culture, and a somewhat idealized attachment to the Cuban revolution often informed their interest in Cuban life beyond the island’s sandy beaches. Across their class, ethnic, and national differences the majority of my respondents were interested in becoming intimately acquainted with the Cuban landscape. They were united in their desire to “get pedestrian,” to access the “real” Cuba—a desire which often spawned their initial meetings with hustlers’ families. For example, Theo was an attractive 36-year-old white Canadian novelist from a working-class background who didn’t feel as if he were in the “authentic” Havana unless he was living alongside his boyfriends in the poorest conditions, even by Cuban standards. Becoming “part of the family” helped many of the gay tourists whom I interviewed to position themselves as partial insiders in a landscape that the Cuban government hoped to make impenetrable to foreigners. Cuban officials maintained strict forms of segregation that demanded foreigners use designated tourist hotels and separate taxis, restaurants, hospitals, nightclubs, and shops that dealt in hard currency (Babb 2011). By insulating tourists from Cubans, the government contributed to the idea that tourists must stray from the beaten path to access the “real” Havana. In the absence of official gay clubs or
neighborhoods, for instance, tourists were forced to cross these unauthorized borders to meet Cuban men in Havana’s informal, public queer nightlife, what Sierra Madero (2001) has described as an ambiente homoerótico (homoerotic scene). This nightlife centered around informal, nightly gatherings along the Malecón seawall, at private gay parties with an admission fee of a few dollars, or at the gay beach just outside of Havana. For tourists coming from cultural contexts in which sex represents the ultimate access, sex offered a bridge for tourists to get beyond state-sanctioned tours. By incorporating themselves into the families of young sexual laborers, the men could gain even greater entrée into Cuban life. For many queer tourists whom I interviewed, transgressing state-imposed boundaries added an air of adventure and discovery to their experiences and provided a sense of superiority over other tourists who never made it past the air-conditioned buses, overpriced cocktails, and buffet-style hotel food. Tourists’ desires to become part of an authentic daily experience of Cuban society often set apart long-term patrons, including me, from other gay tourists who visited Cuba once or twice and never established kin relationships with hustlers’ families.

In situations in which tourists sought access or esteem, the knowledge that familial bonds were produced in part to inspire foreign patronage did not detract from the pleasure or power of the emotional attachments resulting from these ties. The kinship imaginaries produced by and through erotic economies therefore indicate new forms of intimacy that were no longer defined mainly in opposition to market exchange. Tracing a historical shift in the consumption of sexual labor in the US, Bernstein (2007) describes a similar trend in the rising prevalence of desires for “bounded authenticity,” in which a female sex worker provides the emotional connections of a girlfriend as opposed to industrial-era models of sexual release devoid of emotion. Bernstein attributes this change to global economic restructuring beginning in the 1980s, which blurred the public and private spheres in ways that transformed the meaning and possibilities of commodified sex. Indeed, in late-capitalist service industries such as tourism, performances of “emotion work” are just as important as physical labor (cf. Jones 2004), as emotions become increasingly central to these workplaces (Berlant 2008, Illouz 2007). The blending of familial intimacies with affective and sexual labor in contemporary Cuban erotic economies suggests a significant expansion of the forms of emotion work that have become crucial to the reproduction of transnational economies.
The relationships my respondents forged in Cuba have emerged as an unexpected component of a broader movement of “gay globalization” through which we see the increasing prevalence of queer identities, commodities, media, and activist movements outside of the global North (e.g., Altman 1997, 2001; Boellstorff 2003, 2007; Donham 1998; Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002; Manalansan 2003; Parker 1999; Povinelli and Chauncey 1999; Rofel 1999, 2007). Concerned with the impact of these gay movements and commodities as they cross national boundaries, anthropologists have shown that non-Western, nonconforming gender and sexual communities will neither be “modernized” nor “contaminated” by flows of Western-style gay identities and activism (Boellstorff 2007:22). The specific role of queer tourism within these movements, however, remains slightly more complicated because tourism is founded upon neocolonial racial and economic global inequalities. On the one hand, scholars have criticized how the North American and European gay tourist industries exoticize destinations in the global South. These gay tourist trades perpetuate orientalist assumptions about “the West” as a place of sexual rights and freedom, and offer a problematic version of queer liberation based on consumption (Cantú 2002, Puar 2002). On the other hand, other analysts have resisted interpreting relationships between queer foreigners and locals as exploitative simply because they cross uneven racial, national, and sexual boundaries (Binnie 2004:106, Parker 1999). As my findings suggest, transnational encounters are complicated by gay tourists’ diverse national, racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds (cf. La Fountain-Stokes 2002). Indeed, the experiences of my respondents show how marginalized people can reap the unequal rewards of neocolonial privilege in a neoliberal era in which tourism has been a driving force of economic restructuring in the Caribbean, while tourists also provide crucial forms of economic support to hustlers and their extended families.

Controlling the Terms of Reciprocity

The kin connections established through Cuban homoerotic economies are characterized by specific forms of temporality, which complicate the assumption that family is forever. Studies of gay kinship have often identified the lasting nature of the bonds as crucial factors that distinguish friendship from kinship (Weston 1991). Yet the networks of exchange
established among tourists, sexual laborers, and “blood” relatives departed from these dominant models in that tourists would often cut ties after years or even months. Given the precarity of lasting support, keeping in touch with foreigners proved to be a crucial and difficult aspect of maintaining transnational networks once a tourist had been incorporated into a hustler’s family. Early on in my research, for example, between 2001 and 2007, Internet access was not widely available to the general population, and international phone calls were prohibitively expensive. If a foreigner ceased traveling to Cuba, his sense of obligation often lessened over time, and the tourist would typically stop sending money. Lest this attribution seem to diminish the importance of these kin imaginaries, however, or to qualify these bonds as friendship rather than kinship, it is important to note that the fragility and dynamism of these bonds reflected tensions that also existed among “blood” relatives who had left the island: the flows of assistance between blood relatives in the post-communist era could likewise be challenged by time or distance.

Although the obligations for reciprocity within queer kin imaginaries often mirrored expectations for contributions from blood relatives, the demands of Cubans who would approach gay foreigners with affection and material requests, as they would treat wealthy relatives, often risked causing friction. While foreigners ultimately defined the nature and pace of their contributions to the families of male hustlers, Cubans constantly contested the terms of exchange in ways that could cause problems. For example, Orlando, a white, 44-year-old lawyer from Spain who made month-long visits to Havana every three months, told me that he had supported Juan, a 23-year-old novio, and his family for three years despite the fact that they were no longer sexually involved. Within a month of meeting Juan, Orlando visited Juan’s house, where he was shocked at the miserable living conditions. Orlando moved the family into a furnished rental and paid the rent for six months. He also “adopted” Juan’s three-year-old nephew, who learned to call Orlando “papa.” Despite what Orlando felt was a generous level of financial assistance, Juan’s mother was adamant about receiving more money. Orlando told me,

I do everything for the family. I got them a house. I give them money for food. I buy the kids clothes...Juan was crying in bed last night because he can’t stand his mother. She’s always telling him to ask for money and things from me so she can have them.
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Orlando describes his position as the provider for Juan’s family and expresses frustration that Juan’s mother does not understand the limits of his patronage. He sees Juan’s mother as ungracious, if not conniving, in her attempts to extort more money. Juan’s mother, however, behaves in a way that could be considered reasonable, although irksome, between wealthy and poor relatives. Her expectations were not uncommon for Caribbean cultural contexts in which a relative with immense recourse to financial wealth would be expected to generously distribute his wealth to his immediate family. These systems of financial obligation typical of the region had been exacerbated by decades of socialist egalitarianism in Cuba in which the distribution of wealth was relatively equal. In this changing social landscape, the redistribution of wealth from new foreign participants in everyday life could loosely stand as a form of defiance when faced with the new realities of inequality. From Orlando’s perspective, however, his obligation to Juan was paramount and his aid to Juan’s family members was a sign of generosity rather than a concrete familial obligation.

As Orlando’s case indicates, when hustlers forced foreigners to consider economic realities on their terms, tourists might describe Cubans as materialistic and unrealistic about the spending power of the foreigners with whom they had relations. Although gay tourists could recognize that these attachments were formed around necessity, foreigners imposed limits on the relationships of exchange. On many occasions, I heard tourists complain that their Cuban boyfriends were never satisfied with the gifts they brought for them, no matter how extravagant. They often failed to realize that sexual laborers needed money, but asking for shoes or gifts instead of cash helped to soften the financial motivation of their relationships. When dealing with wealthier clients in particular, it was easier to ask for commodities that one could sell on the black market. Whether or not they continued to offer cash and gifts was entirely up to foreigners, often leaving Cubans sexual laborers and their family members feeling desperate.

Rather than attribute the unequal power dynamics in these systems of reciprocity to their queered nature, I maintain that these frictions and instabilities mirrored the relationships between Cubans and relatives abroad. The fact that Orlando and others sent money on a regular basis while they were in their home countries paralleled the kinship ties of Cuban émigrés who sent remittances to their families in Cuba. Yet, it is not clear whether gay remittances were any less reliable than those of “blood” relatives, who would often cease support due to personal circumstances and a growing
distance from their responsibilities on the island. Many Cubans similarly criticized their wealthy relatives living abroad who would insist on purchasing flashy electronics or expensive gifts during their visits, when food, medicine, and hard currency were needed. Family members were left bitter and resentful as support dwindled over time and visits to the island become more infrequent. One 23-year-old sexual laborer from Havana, for example, often expressed disdain for his father who had left the island years earlier and had slowly decreased support—skipping scheduled phone calls, canceling visits to Cuba, and eventually establishing a new family in the US. While this is an extreme case, many Cubans faced similar situations in which their daily lives became precariously dependent on the generosity of family abroad. The pressures that hustlers and their families exerted on gay foreigners therefore mimicked the burdens and tensions that had come to characterize transnational kin ties more generally. In a post-Soviet urban landscape dependent on foreign tourism and remittances for survival, critical new understandings of reciprocity, debt, and relatedness emerged.

**Beyond “Blood” and “Choice”**

“Love makes a family” has become a popular rallying cry for international gay rights activists in recent campaigns for marriage equality. Drawing on the notion that affection and care, as opposed to gender and sexual conformity, determine the validity of one’s kinship bonds, the motto invokes a powerful cultural ethos that a timeless familial love transcends petty politics and social prejudice. According to this narrative, kinship forged either through “blood” or “choice,” such as partner choice and adoption, should be protected from social criticism and legal discrimination. The use of familial love to defend same-sex partnerships against inequality has provided a radical political tool, and yet, as critics have pointed out, it has also suggested normative assumptions about proper forms of queer familial love. In particular, these recent discourses defending gay marriage tend to exclude queer kinship bonds that transgress generational and national boundaries or those that appear fleeting and “tainted” by market forces.

Motivated by money, rather than “blood” or “choice,” the kinship ties established between foreign gay men and younger male sex workers within the Cuban homoerotic sex trade suggest how transgressive forms of queer kinship might challenge dominant representations of acceptable gay families and, for anthropologists, encourage a rethinking of
the economic undertone of normative and non-normative kinship bonds alike. The tourists in this study, who considered themselves savvy about hustlers’ motivations, could accommodate an understanding that their relationship was based on material interests alongside a legitimate feeling of being loved by the families of young Cuban men. These “intimate events,” as Elizabeth Povinelli (2006:191) suggests, reveal the otherwise obscured connections between “micro-practices of love” and “macro-practices” of capitalist production.

By connecting love and intimacy to broader social systems that foster inequalities, we can better comprehend how capitalist and non-capitalist practices converge in unexpected ways. Kinship sentiments both challenged and perpetuated the power dynamics inherent in unequal encounters between wealthy tourists and Cuban sexual laborers. On the one hand, kinship ideologies effectively incorporated foreigners into networks that provided Cubans with critical forms of financial assistance in an unstable economic landscape in which Cubans experienced a dramatic evacuation of state support. On the other hand, kin terms could render invisible the domestic, sexual, and affective labor of Cuban sex workers and their relatives, enabling foreigners to see themselves as “patrons” or adoptive family rather than consumers. The gifts and money that tourists “gave” to hustlers and their families offered access to the “real” island and served as symbols of their own affluence and generosity, often providing forms of profit and cultural capital for the men in their home countries. Likewise, foreigners ultimately controlled the terms of exchange in a way that often left Cubans disappointed and resentful when gay patrons cut ties. I maintain, however, that these “failed” familial commitments were not unique to queer transnational bonds. Instead, they mirrored the fraught kin responsibilities of Cubans in the diaspora whose financial and social commitments to family often frayed when confronted with distance, economic hardship, and time.21

Cubans’ ability to accommodate social inconsistences, such as the commodification of kin or a yuma in the family home, became a hallmark of the particular blending of capitalist flows with socialist principles and lived realities in Havana. The creative recombination of socialist and neoliberal practices and discourses on the sexual margins reflected broader trends in which people in a range of sectors embraced seemingly antagonistic discourses, for example, developing “socialism with commercials” in nascent Cuban state-run marketing industries (Hernández-Reguant
2000) and “socialist entrepreneurs” in Cuban health tourism (Brotherton 2008). The embrace of paradox in Cuba paralleled other post-communist nations where new capitalist goods and services were cannibalized by socialist discourse and practice (Burawoy and Verdery 1999, Buyandelgeriyn 2008). The case of commodified homoerotic bonds within the particular post-communist landscape of Havana provides a unique perspective on this process of recombination because it reveals how notions of intimacy and love, frequently positioned as outside the reach of the market, were also reframed through a combination of socialist and capitalist terms that were brought to bear on lived experience.

In 1991, Weston cautioned that redefining “family” simply by adding same-sex unions to a world of normative marriage and kinship, rather than by deconstructing the term, would backfire. Her premonition is increasingly relevant as the fever pitch of gay marriage saturates American popular culture, from live gay weddings at the 2014 GRAMMYs to the rapid growth of a gay wedding industry. In this cultural moment, it is all the more imperative to draw attention to non-normative kinship practices that disrupt these images of queer kinship—contexts in which family is not forever and money can buy love. In post-Soviet Havana, the collision of socialist and capitalist understandings of reciprocity intensified opportunities for creative bargaining between hustlers and tourists that were often formulated as equivalent to familial debts and obligations. Foreign gay tourists were inspired by the performances of same-sex hustlers to co-create alternative kinship systems, bonds solidified by the remittances that passed between them. In this article, I have moved away from distinguishing “real” family from instrumental bonds toward understanding the value and meaning of kin imaginaries in lived, daily practice, and how kinship forms are implicitly bound up in political economies. The deployment of kinship within queer erotic economies produces forms of reciprocity and indebtedness specific to the historical context of post-Soviet socialism, but it also represents the affective economies endemic within global capitalism more broadly. By recognizing how declarations of kinship—claims that “we are family now”—can shrink the distance among nations, economic lives, and sexual identities, we continue to clarify the enduring power of kinship to simultaneously reproduce and subvert dominant systems of power.
Acknowledgments:
This article has benefited from insightful feedback from Faye Ginsburg, Bruce Grant, Elissa Hansen, Roy Richard Grinker, and two anonymous reviewers. Research in Cuba was supported by the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard and by the National Science Foundation. Field research in the US was supported by the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University.

Endnotes:
1My analysis draws on nearly two years of research in Havana, with the longest stretches conducted between 2003 and 2004 and in 2007. During my fieldwork, I conducted 30 interviews with gay men from Spain, Mexico, Canada, England, and the US, with a few from the Bahamas, Aruba, and Scotland. Although I interviewed 12 Cuban Americans who were returning to Havana as tourists, I decided to focus on non-Cuban tourists as a way to examine how foreigners with little direct contact with the island imagined their presence in Havana. In 2011 and 2013, I conducted extensive follow-up interviews in New York and Miami with three of the male sex workers and four of the gay tourists who had participated in my original study. Throughout the article, I use “queer” kin ties, as opposed to gay, because sex workers did not necessarily identify as gay. All names of respondents have been changed.

2As Brennan (2007) and Faier (2007) have pointed out, reducing these relationships to categories such as “authentic” or “market-motivated” ignores heterogeneous understandings of love and money. Moreover, these distinctions obscure how all forms of kinship and family-making are imbricated in market relations.

3In a related vein, scholars have also focused on the relationships between sex workers and their “blood” kin, such as spouses and parents (Gros-Green 2013, Padilla 2007b).

4This emergent literature, however, risks becoming myopic in its focus on cosmopolitan gay families in the US (Levine 2008).

5Here I am also drawing on Strauss’s (2006) argument that the notion of an “imaginary” demands “person-centered ethnographic methods” rather than a psychoanalytic “imaginary” that turns culture into an abstraction.

6The tourists’ perspectives analyzed here were also influenced by the interview context. When interviewed outside of Cuba, for example, American tourists tended to have a more critical perspective of their relationships with Cubans, often describing Cubans as more instrumental in hindsight.

7The 2010 statistics are taken from the section of the US State Department website featuring Cuba (accessed from http://www.state.gov/2/pa/ei/bgn/2886.htm on January 15, 2010). These estimates include “medical tourists” from other Latin American countries seeking treatment in Cuban facilities.

8These difficulties were exacerbated for non-white Cubans, as white Cubans were hired preferentially in the tourist industry (Roland 2011).

9Pingueros articulated a wide range of sexual identities (Allen 2011, Sierra Madero 2013), often performing heterosexual identities with Cubans and queered identities with foreigners.

10In an environment in which a waiter’s tips from a single night could surpass the six-month salary of a university professor, highly skilled labor migrated toward low-skilled jobs (Martínez et al. 1996).

11The distribution of remittances is hard to measure, but Cuban analysts estimate that although 35 percent of total households received them in 2001, only five percent went to the lowest income bracket (Figueroa et al. 2001). Afro-Cubans were at a particular disadvantage as they had historically migrated less and therefore had fewer relatives abroad than wealthier white Cubans who saw revolutionary socialism as a threat to their private earnings and property.

12The transnational networks of support inspired by incorporating a gay foreigner into a Cuban family reflected common practices throughout Latin America in which outsiders are positioned in the role of comadre or copadre (e.g., Albro 2001, Behar 1993).

13Cuban socialists had rallied against capitalism for the ways that it constrained authentic, romantic, and familial love, here drawing on Engels’s (2010) arguments that marriage and kinship solidified the ownership of private property for the bourgeoisie. Early revolutionaries argued that state communism, with its equitable distribution of property and labor, would provide for citizens in ways that would lessen their dependence on familial networks for sustenance. Cubans, in the context of communism, would be free to choose partners based on love rather than material considerations.
Building on classic anthropological models of kinship as a system of exchange, scholars have illuminated how marriage and family-building, often considered outside of the marketplace, are subject to types of exchange that typically go unnoticed (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006).

Rather than displace or deconstruct the links between procreation and kinship, urban gays in Weston’s (1991) study challenged the idea that “blood” was the only way a family could be made. Weston suggests that gay men and lesbians did not identify kinship as socially construed, as anthropologists did, but accepted the coexistence of biological and social systems of kin relations.

For the majority of my respondents, debates over the sexual identities of young Cuban men were largely absent. Instead, in our discussions, they worried about the sincerity of the young men and their families and wanted to protect themselves from being “fooled” or taken advantage of. For more on tourists’ perspectives of post-Soviet Cuba, see Babb (2011).

These policies were repealed by Raul Castro in 2008, but de facto segregation remained as many Cubans lacked the hard currency to purchase tourist amenities and services.

A handful of my respondents wanted to travel beyond a beach resort vacation for professional or artistic reasons. Theo, for example, told me that his incorporation into the families of two of his long-term boyfriends had given him a view of Cuban daily life that would become the subject of his next novel.

This finding suggests an expanded form of “tourist realism” in which the staging adds to the intrigue of the site, rather than making it less authentic or exciting (Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989:457).

Although some foreign gay tourists were able to invite Cuban boyfriends or hustlers out of the country, the state-sanctioned option of marriage was not available to most gay foreigners in Cuba at the time of my research.

Studies of post-Soviet societies have highlighted the gendered dimensions of post-communist transformations (e.g. Bloch 2003, Gal and Kligman 2000, True 2003, Yang 2010), but transformations in non-normative sexualities have been explored less often (see Rofel 2007).

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Foreign Language Translations:
When a Yuma Meets Mama: Commodified Kin and the Affective Economies of Queer Tourism in Cuba
[Keywords: Kinship, tourism, gender and sexuality, sex work, Latin America and the Caribbean, Cuba]
Cuando un yuma conoce a mamá: mercantilizado parientes y las economías afectivas de turismo queer en Cuba
[Palabras clave: El parentesco, turismo, género y sexualidad, trabajo sexual, América Latina y el Caribe, Cuba]

 Cuando يلتقي يوما وماما: سلعية علاقات الأهل واقتصادات علاقات المثلية السياحية في كوبا
[كلمات البحث: الأهل، السياحة، الجنس، الجنس، العمل في مجال الجنس، أمريكا اللاتينية والكاريبي، كوبا]