

*No hay comunistas en Cuba*  
There are no communists in Cuba

by  
Frankie Di Renzo

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## **Abstract**

This study explores how Cubans organize their everyday livelihood strategies between the tacit principles of capitalism and socialism. Having conducted four months of ethnographic fieldwork in Cuba, I examine how individuals negotiate the contradictions that unfold within the island's economic system, where competing ideals of free market liberalization and social redistribution collide in discourse and practice. This collision is highlighted through ethnographic vignettes that showcase how Cubans who have grasped the legalized opportunity for self-employment have simultaneously been required to navigate difficult political economic circumstances, as committing oneself to these forms of independent labor also compels them to encounter their own in-formal ways to make up for systemic deficiencies. Blending semiotics and performativity with a political economic approach, I draw out how Cubans improvise beyond these structural limitations, showing how their performances of 'making do' often involve intermeshing seemingly contradictory socioeconomic dynamics.

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## 1. Introduction

Early one morning, I was walking along the cement road which led to my friend José's home. From a distance, I could make out the silhouette of his body arched over *la dirección*<sup>1</sup> of his 1957 Oldsmobile 88, which he'd later inform me he had only just removed from his car and set out directly in front of his house prior to my arrival. Dressed in his mechanic overalls, he was cleaning away the deposits of grease which had accumulated over time using what I came to realize as I got closer was a paint brush dipped in petrol. As José noticed me walking towards him, he paused his working movements for a moment and shouted out to me “¡Oye! Frankie, ¿Que bola?” [Hey Frankie! What's up?], in the friendly demeanour I had become accustomed to ever since he had taken me under his 'wing'. Teaching me, in his words, “*cómo hacemos para sobrevivir aquí en Cuba*” [what we do to survive here in Cuba].

I had met José almost five months earlier when I first arrived in Cuba to carry out an ethnographic fieldwork project, determined to seek out an answer to the question I had regarding the broader transformations Cuban society was undergoing and the relation these might have to sports. More specifically, I contemplated if the shift from socialist central planning towards the free market had destabilized the revolutionary fervor of sports fans, and if these transformations had something to do with the growing popularity of *fútbol* beginning to overtake their historically national sport of *béisbol*. José and I had been introduced to one another through a mutual friend on a day where José and two of his colleagues took our group of traveling Canadians on an exploratory voyage from a nearby tourist resort to their home city of San Juan. The three were self-employed working as *taxistas*, but they were also close friends who

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<sup>1</sup> *La dirección* translates literally as [the direction]. With respect to cars, it refers to the entire steering system. However, the component of the steering system which José was referring to was only the front axle.

organized between themselves as well as several other persons their own informal syndicate whereby they would assist one another in moments of necessity. While drawn to the ways in which they had structured themselves to negotiate the dilemmas that might arise in the course of their everyday affairs, as well as being fascinated by the manner in which they had worked to combine parts from different vehicles in order to sustain their pre-revolutionary American cars, my original project design would lead me away from the city of San Juan and to the larger city of Bayamón.

Spending nearly two months in Bayamón learning Spanish, I encountered a great deal of difficulty in negotiating what one might refer to as being the most critical and yet least predictable and controllable variable in any fieldwork project—the human element. Here, my own inability to ‘fit in’ made it difficult for me to establish any meaningful social connections with the sports fans I had intended to immerse myself amongst. While I was not invisible to those around me, I was largely perceived as a foreigner with dollars who would ‘undoubtedly’ be interested in rum and *mujeres* [women]. In retrospect, I still contemplate whether the contours of my identity had been filled in to correspond with previous experiences they had had with other ‘Others’. And, although I would spend a good amount of time watching sports matches with one group of friends, I’d never experience the sort of transformative event that might have allowed me to achieve “that mysterious necessity of anthropological field work, rapport” (Geertz, 2005, p.59). Nor, would I figure out a way to communicate “in [their] own terms” (Rabinow, 1977, p.49) how to escape this persona of being just another foreigner visiting Cuba. Failing, therefore, to perform in a manner that might have allowed me to give off an impression (Goffman, 1959) of myself that would indicate to others that while I was of course an outsider, I was not ‘that’ kind

of outsider who simply desired to indulge in the hedonistic pleasures Cuba offered, I felt unsure if I could move forward with my original research design while sustaining my own sense of self.

The volatility of this human dynamic would drive me to a point of personal discomfort which no amount of scheduled weekly work assigned in academia could prepare me for, as each day was unpredictable in the ways it both did and did not feel to resemble the previous day. On some occasions, it seemed as if I had achieved that all important element of rapport and hope for my project would be rekindled. On other days, the group wanted nothing to do with me or my project. When I would opt instead to hang out in public spaces like a Wi-Fi park or crowd of domino players/spectators to engage or be engaged by locals in conversation, the theme of these friendly interactions would often metamorphize into an attempted business transaction. In other words, most would become interested over the course of the conversation in selling rum and cigars, or even pamphlets with tourist information obtained from a nearby hotel. With the advice of more seasoned colleagues back home, I gradually decided that during the last week of this first trip to Cuba it would be best to return to San Juan and contact José to see if he would be willing to allow me to pursue a project with him and the informal syndicate that he and his colleagues/friends had organized.

Despite the inner turmoil brought about by this initial ‘plunge’ into the field, my time spent in Bayamón remains significant to my thesis. ‘Logistically’ speaking, during my time there I would learn enough Spanish to keep moving forward with a project in Cuba. Perhaps more importantly, however, I also managed to make a few friends who, despite their lack of fanatic enthusiasm for sports, would help to lay the foundations for my own understandings regarding how Cubans interpret the everyday lives they lead, as well as how people (fieldworkers included) inter-actively engage in the improvisational making of our shared social world. I’d learn how

culture is not about the perfect reproduction of models or scripts, but is perhaps more fruitfully approached as that which encompasses the active practices that work and struggle towards restructuring everyday life according to shifting social visions of what people feel reality is and what they believe it ought to look like. By taking the time to show me the dynamics of their own livelihood pursuits the friends I made therefore taught me an important lesson with regards to my own livelihood practice in academia. That "...improvisers must respond creatively to surprises that constantly arise during performances" (Berliner, 1994, p.374).

As I worked my best to listen and observe as well as participate where I could during the entire four months I lived in Cuba, the social idea which therefore resonated across these two diverse cities concerned how being Cuban meant becoming an expert at fixing for themselves "the agonizing contingency of all [humans] are and do", as people felt they could not depend upon any "taken-for-granted structures" to safeguard them from the indeterminacy of everyday life (Berger, 1963, p.147-8). A musician might say then, that Cubans understand their everyday usual or routine to sound like jazz, or, perhaps more culturally relatable, Cuban *son*<sup>2</sup>. That they evaluate their own everyday performances as being improvisational in the way that they constantly oscillate between formality and informality *seemingly* "without musical scores and without a specialized conductor to coordinate their performances" (Berliner, 1994, p.1), playing it 'by ear' and plucking notes out of 'thin air'. This is not to say that everywhere else people simply follow the 'script' provided by societal structures, as one might argue that improvisation is a consistent dynamic behind all social existence. However, there seemed to be a heightened

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<sup>2</sup> Cuban *son* is a "form *and* genre", or, as Robbins (1990) describes, "forms and genres" of music which holds symbolic significance for Cubans, as well as the Caribbean more generally, maintaining deep Afro-American historical roots (p.196). As with Jazz, it sustains its popularity largely due to its "flexibility". In other words, the manner in which it follows a "structure for improvisation" that "allows for considerable stylistic change over time" (ibid). Significantly, *son* is also characterized by a tendency to assimilate other genres in the creation of hybrid musical forms. This 'hybridizing' dynamic becomes an important component of my thesis (see chapter three).

awareness of this need to improvise in Cuba due to historical factors explored in the following chapters.

On the other hand, during my time spent in Cuba I came to recognize how, just like jazz, further exploration of these cultural improvisations revealed that they are not performances that emerge ‘out of thin air’. Acts of improvisation move between familiar convention and strange novelty as performers “[rework] precomposed material in relation to unanticipated ideas that emerge and are conceived in the course of the performance” (Kamoche et al, 2003, p.2025). As an anthropologist, therefore, I became drawn to the performative notion my friends held concerning the structuring of their own cultural arrangements, and how in Cuba they felt improvisation to be the cultural imperative. And, as a consequence of two seemingly irreconcilable musical melodies constantly colliding and collapsing into one another, specifically, those of free market capitalism and those of a centrally planned socialism, one might also argue that this background chorus of indeterminacy is indeed felt more palpably in Cuba.

### **1.1 *Hay que arreglar las cosas que tenemos***

It was during the last two weeks of my second trip to Cuba that I would spend time with José at his home as he worked on restoring *la dirección* of his car which he explained had recently begun to feel “*un poco flojo*” [a bit loose]. After shaking his hand and responding to his friendly greeting with my own “*¡Que bola!*”, he’d inform me how his plan to conduct this routine form of maintenance had confronted a significant interruption. As with the research design I had crafted *prior* to taking my first step in the field, a week earlier José had told me to pass by his home on this particular day of the week so that I might observe him as he planned to carry out this restorative work. However, the night before I arrived at his home to observe this

‘routine maintenance’, as he had been driving back to San Juan from one of the tourist resorts after having dropped off a client there, his transmission blew. Stranded on the road, he was subsequently compelled to call a friend of his who owned a tow truck to make it back home. Thus, in a single unforeseeable moment the planned maintenance which José had set aside five days to complete would now take two weeks to finish. This unavoidable disruption meant that greater unforeseen costs would be incurred. José would now be required to encounter additional replacement parts as well as perform the extra repair work needed to restore his transmission to working order. The extra time spent also meant that he would lose the compensation he would have otherwise received if he were working as a *taxista* during these nine unaccounted for days. As I had already learned, however, planning *for* reality can never truly encompass and account for the potential flows *of* reality. But this was a lesson in which José was already well-versed.

It was as he performed the tasks he had both laid out for himself and confronted unexpectedly throughout the course of his work—through skilled acts of improvisation seemingly rehearsed in their eloquence—that José would inspire me to recognize the common thread that ran through the diverse set of stories and lived experiences I had heard and taken part in during my time in Cuba. Especially, when he took the time to pause between a particular set of working movements to explain to me how, here in Cuba mechanics cannot simply replace parts when they break or aren’t working properly as they do “over there”, in Canada. “*Hay que arreglar las cosas que tenemos. Hay que inventar. No hay otra forma.*”<sup>3</sup> [We have to fix the things we have. We have to get creative. There is no other way]. Although José was one of many who I would meet that would express this everyday necessity to *arreglar*, it was the time I spent

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<sup>3</sup> The literal translation of *inventar* is [to invent], but in contexts such as this the translation [to be creative] feels more appropriate. ‘Inventive’ would also work, although I feel it prejudices the making of new objects and tends to discount improvising ways of doing and going about one’s daily tasks.

observing and trying my best to help him—in my very limited capacity—restore his car to working order that rendered the palpable quality of this performative concept at least somewhat comprehensible for me. In other words, it was “in-between” his showing me the doing of *arreglar* as he acted it out and José’s explanation of what this concept signified “‘as’ performance” (Schechner, 2006, p.30), which revealed to me how *arreglar* expresses more than the terminal act of resolving dilemmas that occasionally and abruptly make themselves felt in everyday life.

My improvised thesis, therefore, has remained concerned with analyzing the ways in which the government’s continuous tinkering with market socialism has, or has not, influenced the values held and pursued by Cubans in their everyday performances. However, rather than understanding these structural transformations as having inculcated the population to correct their performances to the values of either *homo oeconomicus*<sup>4</sup> [economic man] who plays to the capitalist tunes of individual maximization of pleasures and minimization of expenditures, or *el hombre nuevo*<sup>5</sup> [the new man] who is all about jamming to the socialist sounds of a shared material incentive, I have become interested in how Cubans improvise between and beyond the

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<sup>4</sup> Economic man (now perhaps better known as “the consumer”) is a model used by classical and neoclassical economists to define human behavior and can be found across most microeconomics textbooks. Perloff (2017) describes the three premises for the model of “consumer behavior” as follows: “(1) Individual *tastes* or *preferences* determine the amount of pleasure people derive from the goods and services they consume. (2) Consumers face *constraints*, or limits, on their choices. (3) Consumers *maximize* their well-being or pleasure from consumption subject to the budget and other constraints they face.” (p.83 [original emphases]). However, even behavioral economists have admitted to being confounded by “the problem of external validity or how to generalize experimental results to nonlaboratory settings” (Guala as cited by Brzezicka & Wisniewski, 2014, p.361).

<sup>5</sup> Che Guevara theorized the following: “To build communism it is necessary, simultaneous with the new material foundations, to build the new man. That is why it is very important to choose the right instrument for mobilizing the masses. Basically, this instrument must be moral in character, without neglecting, however, a correct use of the material incentive — especially of a social character.” (Guevara, 1988, p. 5). As with the model of the Economic man, Guevara was also concerned with the “dialectical unity between the individual and the mass” (ibid, p.3), and, he stipulated how “[the] new society in formation has to compete fiercely with the past... in which commodity relations still persist.” (ibid, p.4). The new man was to be created by “reacting against the man of the nineteenth century” (p.11), whereby the market would no longer be the mechanisms that coordinates isolated individuals, but where “organization is a result of the consciousness of the necessity of this organization” (ibid, p.14).

repertoire of performative dispositions afforded by both these structures. The argument which I thread throughout my project therefore contends that these structures which are designed to map as well as determine the interactions between individuals towards a common societal purpose, cannot anticipate the range of possible improvisations performed by persons as they respond to the interruptions felt while they travel along their daily commutes. Theories *inform* practice and history *shapes* being, but social interactions always seem to be improvising in-between the inflexibility of systemic designs and the indeterminacy which forms the background of everyday existence.

Despite making regular use of the concept of *arreglar* throughout my thesis to illustrate a Cuban understanding of improvisation as routine, I have chosen the title *No hay comunistas en Cuba* [There are no communists in Cuba] for my project. As with musicians who are asked to define what improvisation is, Cubans would also often describe their reality to me by expressing “what it was *not*” (Berliner, 1994, p.2 [original emphasis]). For instance, when I would ask my friends why it was that they had to go to such spectacular improvisational lengths in order to accomplish even seemingly mundane tasks<sup>6</sup>, they would reply with statements such as “here there is no economy” or “we do not have access to resources like you do over there, that is why we have to make do with what we have, fix what is broken”. They’d express how there were no rewards for being a loyal communist, José’s nephew telling me the story of how his dad had dedicated his life to the Revolution working at the same factory and had only ever received a poorly made bicycle as a gift on his ten year work anniversary.

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<sup>6</sup> On one occasion a friend described their struggle in having to encounter a single egg. They’d eventually make their way to the black market so that they might acquire and bring an egg to their nearby bakery which was also feeling the effects of this scarcity. This entire ordeal was performed in order to have a birthday cake made for their child.

“There are no communists in Cuba” was a comment made by José the first time we met as a critique of his own lived experience with communism. He confessed how although communism might appear great in theory, in practice it had not worked out for Cubans in this idealized manner. There were great injustices that were a product of this system just like there are those which are produced by capitalism<sup>7</sup>, and there are very few revolutionaries who actually “live communism”, José explained. He provided the example of Ernesto ‘El Che’ Guevara who, for him, was a ‘true communist’, having worked the fields with “*la gente*” [the people] rather than simply governing in luxury from his home in Havana. In this way, José simultaneously critiqued the leaders of the Communist Party who he felt enjoyed a lifestyle which was far more comfortable than that of the general Cuban population, and effectively described to me how Cuban communism was *not* what you read “*allá en el norte*” [there in the north], in your textbooks. On another occasion, however, José and his father would also critique Che Guevara and his revolutionary movement across Africa and South America for the deaths which it had caused.

The title of my thesis and the pages that follow leaves this inconsistency of opinions open, as I do not seek to define what is a ‘true’ communist—or market socialist for that matter. I also do not intend to suggest, as a literal reading of it might imply, that there is not a single person in Cuba who is a self-declared communist. Instead, I hope to show how *arreglar* becomes a generative performance which harnesses “contingency as a cultural resource for cultivating (rather than circumventing) creative intentionality and overcoming this frustration” (Wilf, 2013, p.607). Human interactions, as I discovered throughout my fieldwork—and perhaps most

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<sup>7</sup> On several occasions José would quote what he told me was a famous statement made by Winston Churchill to illustrate his point for me: “The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings. The inherent virtue of Socialism is the equal sharing of miseries” (Churchill, 1945, Oct 22).

palpably through my own performative mishaps—tend to fall short of perfectly reproducing the ‘script’. We are constantly intermeshing, rearranging and recomposing structural precepts producing our own impure admixtures as a way to account for systemic deficiencies and contradictions. In this respect, I understand ‘structures’ or “scripts for social and cultural life” (Hallam & Ingold, 2007, p.12) which organize “constituent parts according to an internal principle” as “clumsy meaning” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.117), unable to fully account for contextual and event-based discrepancies. Improvising performances socially classified under this heading of *arreglar*, constantly “...[shift] between precomposed musical ideas and those conceived in the moment” (Berliner, 1994, p.495), between the predetermined and the spontaneous, mediating this clumsiness.

## 1.2 The mechanics of *arreglar*

The more significant concept I have therefore borrowed from my Cuban friends to understand, interpret and describe the details they have taught me about their reality is the Spanish verb *arreglar*. *Arreglar* has many translations in English that may or may not be contextually appropriate. For instance; to restore, to fix, to mend, or to repair a material segment of reality. As in *tengo que arreglar mi coche* [I have to fix my car]. As well as to organize or to arrange relations between actors (human and nonhuman). As in *ella puede arreglarte un buen precio* [she can arrange a good price for you]. And to solve, to settle, to sort out, or to tidy up some ‘thing’ like a problem or dilemma. As in *quiero arreglar este asunto* [I want to sort out this matter]. But there also exists an abundance of other ways in which the word might be used that is somewhat difficult to capture within these predetermined definitions and without tracing the contours of the event or interaction in which the verb is embedded. One can, as I discovered, *arreglar* [repair] a friendship, *arreglar* [settle] a discussion, *arreglar* [arrange] a melody, or, as

the young child of one of my friends once expressed, envision pursuing a livelihood strategy in *arreglar cosas* [fixing things]. As a verb, therefore, *arreglar* symbolically indexes an active engagement or negotiation with the routine uncertainty described above. And, in this way, it is intimately connected to the concept of *la lucha* [the struggle], a commonly used utterance which “addresses the multiple ways Cubans are dealing with the widening gap between their current standard of living and the formal state apparatus aimed at addressing the material well-being of the populace” (Brotherton, 2004, p. 60). *Arreglar* also shares a significant overlap with several other verbs used across the literature on Cuba.

Researchers have often chosen to interpret and describe their experiences with extraordinary performances that proliferate across Cuba’s social environment by deferring to the concepts of *resolver* [to resolve] and *inventar* [to invent]. Both are verbs which have been explained as having become synonymous in the 1990s, when the Cuban state and its citizens were forced to confront the economic crisis of the Special Period (discussed in the following chapters). They work as “[euphemisms] for finding material sustenance where there was none” (Whitfield, 2008, p.37) and symbolically index the performance of “making something of nothing” (ibid, p.3). *Resolver* and *inventar* were defined during this economic crisis by one researcher, Jorge F. Pérez-López in his book “Cuba’s Second Economy”, where he explored how the second economy moved to “center stage” as a matter of necessity (1995, p.1). Under ‘Second Economy’ he included both black market activity and historically discouraged practices that were formally incorporated by the state, and, in this respect, he clarified *inventar* as to “[figure] out a way to solve a problem arising from [a] shortage of goods or services... Similar to *resolver*” which was defined as to “[make] ends meet; do whatever needs to be done” (ibid, p.187-8). The increased frequency with which these concepts were used by Cubans as well as the

blending of their definitions reveals a significant linguistic turn that immediately reflected Cubans' lived experiences and material interface with reality. A socioeconomic transformation where “[the] culture of ‘*compartir*’ (sharing) so propagated through the ideology of solidarity, gave way to a culture of ‘resolver’ (make ends meet through wheeling-and-dealing)” (Hernandez-Reguant, 2002, p.7). With the incursion of “enterprising strategies to creatively resolve (*resolver*) daily hardships” alongside the state’s “diminished capacities for social welfare”, the use of *resolver* and *inventar* have thus been said to reflect the island’s “neoliberal turn” (Perry, 2016, p.38).

Cemented as part of everyday discourses intimately connected to actions, *resolver* and *inventar* thus reveal an ideological shift realized across the population, where Cubans’ motivation towards addressing everyday difficulties “shifted from the interminable struggle of *luchar* to the results-oriented *resolver*” (Eastman, 2007, p.272). In other words, the terms of engagement in this struggle were redefined from “we the people struggling to overcome poverty as part of the revolution”, to “we the people working to address our own individual necessities alongside—but not necessarily in collaboration with—the revolution”. As such, *resolver* and *inventar* inflect an important transformation with regards to the dynamic character of the performances of Cubans that sought to move from emergent necessities to their terminal resolution, as “[vast] amounts of ingenuity were applied simply to meet ordinary and commonplace needs” (Pérez, 2011, p.296). They were now defined as operative verbs “describing the combination of ingenuity, creativity, and energy required to ‘resolve’ or obtain daily necessities” (Phillips, 2007, p.338) and meet everyday problems of existence. A need “to *resolver* and *inventar para vivir*” [to live] (Font, 2008, p.29).

Thus, while this linguistic/neoliberal turn does refract a transformation in the material practices of the people, it also indexes a rearranging of everyday relations away from state forms of organization and towards a “struggle to obtain a goal by relying on an informal network of people” (Hagedorn as cited by Brotherton, 2004, p.72). In other words, *resolver* and *inventar* are most often *collective* performances that involve “[turning] to networks of friends, kin, and acquaintances—*socios*—to obtain ‘on the side’ what could not [be] realized through formal state mechanisms” (Andaya, 2009, p.360). On some occasions this entails “circumventing some aspects of state regulations, legalities or moral codes” (Carter, 2008b, p.250). On other occasions it might involve calling upon spiritual assistance from “one’s network of *socios*” consisting of “individuals from the spiritual world” (Brotherton, 2012, p.42) as is done in the faith-based practice of Santería.

My decision to use *arreglar* rather than *resolver* or *inventar* is pragmatic as well as analytical. Pragmatically, it was the verb which I heard most frequently while I was in Cuba and thus best reflects my own experiences. Analytically, I opt to use *arreglar* rather than *inventar* because it feels better suited to provide an understanding of the improvisational qualities of everyday inter-actions. From my perspective, the difficulty with *inventar* is that it produces a sense of inventing from nothing, whereas I follow the idea that humans are historical beings (Marx et al., 1970). In this sense, I feel *arreglar* better draws out the discontinuity and continuity with the past that is synthesized through present day interactions, as well as sustaining an important “forward-looking and future-oriented” quality (Ralph, 2014, p.16) in searching to produce or return some ‘thing’ to a more desirable status. Moreover, I feel the definitions offered by other researchers which I discussed above note how *resolver* and *inventar* involve quite an abrupt turn away from *compartir* [to share]. At the same time, however, they also speak of a shift

by citizens towards elaborating their own informal networks. Subsequently, I understand it is not so much as marking a radical departure from the necessity of having to share with others, but as a refurbishing of the way in which these networks are organized and performed. It is one of the more prevalent ideas which I pick up on and attempt to illustrate throughout my project, that *arreglar* is a social practice and Cuban citizens have only roughly approximated what a neoliberal turn ought to look like as they continue to rely upon their own networks of *socios* [(business) associate/partner] and *amistades* [friendships] to ‘make ends meet’.

As for *resolver*, I feel that use of this concept might abbreviate the extra-ordinary quality of these everyday performances that are carried out by simply classifying them under the definition ‘to make ends meet’. Subsequently, it produces an understanding of actions that seek to *resolver* as simply being ‘result oriented’. While I do not disagree that intended results motivate the performance of actions, I prefer to use *arreglar* in order to draw attention to the doing of these performances that Cubans feel are a *continuous* part of their routine confrontation with everyday indeterminacy. By using *arreglar*, therefore, my intention is to elaborate upon the performances and relations that unfold in-between felt needs and their resolutions, or the *interindividual* activities (Voloshinov, 1973) that move towards overcoming the gap between desire/need and enjoyment (Simmel, 2004). My hope is that throughout my thesis, as I layer the concept within the stories I recount about my experiences in Cuba, a more contextualized description of *arreglar* allows it to assume a more palpable and perhaps even familiar quality.

### **1.3 Jazzing up the poetics of making the familiar strange**

My thesis builds upon a total of four months of ethnographic fieldwork performed in Cuba. Split into two separate trips, I spent two periods of two months with a one month rest in between both trips. There was no planned reason for this peculiar scheduling of time, I simply

never booked a round-trip ticket opting instead to buy only one-way passages to keep possibilities open. I returned to Canada the first time with the intention of reconciling a personal crisis I experienced during this initial fieldwork plunge. Specifically, the expectation I had of myself that I was to produce what would be perceived by others as being a 'legitimate' research project by maintaining those I interacted with at arms-length in order to limit my own bias, regarding them as 'informants', 'participants' or 'interlocutors'. In other words, I expected myself to interact with others and acquire the authentic "native's point of view" (Van Maanen, 2011, p.49) without succumbing to the "dangers of 'going native'" (Emerson et al., 2011, p.42). At the same time, I was to remain intimately concerned with the well-being of my participants as vulnerable agentic persons with whom I'd sustain a researcher-participant power dynamic throughout the duration of my fieldwork, and, somewhere along the way, I was also to take care of my own self as a person. In retrospect, I almost seem to have imagined that what had been demanded of me by the discipline of anthropology was to explore 'the social' without interacting with 'it' in a social way.

I now associate a certain feeling of schizophrenia with this initial fieldwork experience, as I felt I had to simultaneously live with the Other in their social world while performing the role of not becoming a subject of their world and simply be an object(ive) researcher. In other words, I expected myself to temporarily parachute myself into their world and engage in participant-observation but not actually contribute to the making of their social world. I was to go *there*, record and capture pertinent 'data', and then return *here* to process this data. The process seemed simple enough. And, implementing the latest methodological tools which I had cultivated in an institutional setting but now in the real time of face-to-face interaction, concepts of reflexivity, positionality, power differentials, researcher bias, a sensitivity to the 'other', etc.,

seemed sure to keep me neatly aligned on this predesigned road towards uncovering academic findings. In retrospect, however, conceptualizing the anthropological method in this way did not render the performance of ethnography more ‘objective’. What it did achieve was a feeling of instrumentalization in my own sense of self through an artificial compartmentalization of the research process. A process which shares striking similarities to broader culturally informed and predominately Western ideas of what the scientific method ought to look like. The performance therefore awkwardly felt like a ‘natural’ science in its pursuit of objectivity, fitting quite neatly atop the institutional background upon which it inevitably rests, but it also became a somewhat robotic endeavour in what contradictorily ought to be the study of everything human.

As significant as these methodological ideas may have felt prior to my departure to the ‘field’, it was only through my own embodied experiences cultivated over time that I came to realize the underlying message communicated across these diverse concepts (e.g. researcher bias, positionality, reflexivity, etc.). Specifically, that I could not think about ethnography as Scientific (with a capital S), equating it to a performance which may take the liberty of understanding its object of study simply as an object, describing it as being something isolated and/or frozen in time in the kind of essentializing manner that Abu-Lughod (1991) and others have written against. But I would also confront another taken-for-granted dynamic entangled within the method of fieldwork which I found somewhat disturbing and felt unprepared for, particularly when I look back to my memories of filling out the ethics clearance forms which I submitted prior to my departure, and, which only seemed to consider the researcher in relation to the well-being of my proposed participants and liability of the institution I represented. It almost seemed as if I was expected to become an “intermediary” in Latour’s (2005) definition of the word, some ‘thing’ that “transports meaning or force without transformation” (p.39). It seems contradictory,

however, to understand the people we study as simultaneously subject and object in the world while imagining the ethnographer as some entity who, through the use of certain methodological and theoretical tools, transcends the social fabric in a way that “strategically” allows them to simultaneously ‘immerse and distance’ themselves from it (Kamsteeg et al., 2013, p.179). To act as if they can temporarily suspend their subjectivity and act only as an instrument of scientific accounting in the other’s ‘world’, as if their subjectivity can become strictly an individual performance during their time over *there* rather than being relational.

It was during my initial plunge into ‘the field’ that I would end up reflecting upon this epistemological concern with the ethnographic method—as a culturally informed practice—where practitioners often seemed to begin their written accounts by problematizing the *sine qua non* of anthropology (i.e. fieldwork), in a way that appeared to separate participant-observation from writing as two distinct performances. Perhaps it was my own interpretation of ethnographic performance as Scientific, which, during my first two months in Cuba, called upon me to immerse myself within Cuban ‘culture’ while at the same time compelling me to distance myself from it in order to sustain this mystical status as an objective fieldworker. In this way, I performed my own loss of belonging as I no longer felt *here* nor *there*, believing that all times I was “supposed” to remain unabatedly aware of the “unnaturalness of the [situations]” I took part in, allowing my informants “simply to ‘be [themselves]’” while remaining in “control” of myself (Rabinow, 1977, p.47). I thought, therefore, that I was supposed to ‘fit in’ without becoming friends with the persons I interacted with in the ‘field’, as if this would leave the ‘variables’ in this ‘isolated’ space undisturbed. A famous anthropological notion which I was taught prior to my initial departure, and has stayed with me over the course of doing this thesis, has allowed me to reconcile some of these preoccupations I had with fieldwork.

It's been said that the goal of "good anthropology" is similar to that of "good poetry", an *ability* to "make the familiar strange and the strange familiar" (Spiro, 1992, p.53). At the same time, I'd like to consider how good anthropology is also a cultivated sensing ability similar to the "third ear" practiced by jazz students as they study, listen and play music. More specifically, how learning "this ultimate critic of the artist in action guides and evaluates the improvisation in the making", and "as audience members, artists routinely evaluate each other's inventions, sharing opinions with the social network of the jazz community" (Berliner, 1994, p.243). As 'artists' of culture, the performance of ethnography "requires us to transform ourselves" to become 'sensitive' not only to the 'wide-ranging criteria appropriate for the evaluation of [the other]', but to realize our own participation in these critical discussions and also recognize "what is ours as alien and what was alien as our own" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.120). We learn to attune to the ways in which every conventional performance is also somewhat innovative, and every innovative performance is also somewhat conventional.

Similar to the process of learning the principles of fieldwork in a preliminary institutional setting, jazz students also "...first discover jazz through recordings... [tending] to venerate recordings as ends in themselves, attaching more significance to the products of improvisation than to its processes. Students modify such views as they gain experience" (Berliner, 1994, p.486). As with the processual transformation realized in the social sciences more generally, the worlds anthropologists now describe are no longer imagined as being composed by static 'recordings' or "nouns", but verbs (Ingold, 2006, p.14). And, as with jazz,

"when artists use *improvisation* as a verb... they focus not only on the degree to which old models are transformed and new ideas created, but on the dynamic conditions and precise processes underlying their transformation and creation" (Berliner, 1994, p.221).

This results in a background or material interface with the world which is never exactly the same or entirely predictable, making even the most rehearsed performances peculiar.

My own understanding of the ethnographic method as an artform and improvising performance has, therefore, realized significant renovations. Throughout my thesis I have elected to firmly embed myself within the stories and narratives I tell, as I understand myself having participated as an Other ‘artist’ of culture during my fieldwork. Being privileged in the sense that I could afford to return home after my first tumultuous experience in ‘the field’, I began to realize the significance of continuity between sites—between the places where one writes and where one does fieldwork—which is perhaps disguised by the scientific renovation of this more poetic and jazz-like practice.

Moreover, fieldwork, as I’ve learned, does not just happen in the field but with “the performer’s constant preoccupation with musical (or cultural) ideas and notions of creativity” (Berliner, 1994, p.486). The work I committed myself to has continued to transcend the spatiotemporal demarcations between my chosen research site and place of writing. It was, in this sense, as much of an embodied “culture shock” when I first walked into a Cuban market as it was the first time I returned to Canada and walked into a Costco warehouse. Walking into a Cuban market, I learned to expect to find a single brand for each type of product sold as well as have routine encounters with the scarcity that plagued a number of items. The lines of waiting customers were intimidating in their apparent absence of organization—with the locals seeming to hold the supernatural capacity to constantly remain aware of their position amongst the sprawled-out queues. On the other hand, the sheer size of a Costco warehouse had become overwhelming when I returned to Canada. I realized how the shelves of this ‘warehouse’ were filled with more items than I likely would ever know what to do with, and how the lines of people inching slowly towards the army of cashiers were eerily mechanical. But if my fieldwork was to work in-between these seemingly disparate acts of making the strange familiar (the things

that happen over *there*) and the familiar strange (the things that happen over *here*), that meant engaging in the same kind of blending performances of *arreglar* which I observed José and other Cubans perform as they combined things which did not appear had been intended to fit together. In a metaphorical way, crafting this thesis has been similar to José's own project of constructing an "*entre dos*" [between two], a machined piece made to fit in-between and allow the interconnection of a substantially small Fiat transmission with his very large Soviet tractor engine (both of which reside within his pre-revolutionary American car). Or, to make fit, as best as possible, the incommensurability between lived experiences and cultures by way of fabricating this thesis which itself functions as an *entre dos*, a collaborative project of explanation, understanding and interpretation rather than simply being a report on the other<sup>8</sup>.

Reorganizing my understanding of fieldwork as an improvisational performance, I see it now as a sensing skill which I have continued to cultivate using my own body as a "heuristic source of comparison" (Picker, 2017, p.263), contemplating and reflecting upon my experiences in Cuba as I continue to compare them with my lived experiences here. In this sense, the dialectic between "reflection and immediacy" (Rabinow, 1977, p.38) did not abruptly halt as I stepped off the plane at the airport in Canada, as the strangeness of this once familiar setting had now become more palpable. The single uniform for employees of 'both' genders, for instance, contrasted quite poignantly with the high heels, fishnet stockings and short skirts of female employees working at Cuban airports. And, although I have demarcated the experiences I recount throughout my thesis as particular to my 'fieldwork' site, I feel that it is important to remind both myself and inform my reader exactly how my understandings and interpretations

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<sup>8</sup> I return to the *entre dos* in greater detail in the following chapter.

have percolated over time through this ethnographic performance which blurs a strict separation between home and the field.

Returning to the field my second time around, I now perceived those I interacted with as friends rather than informants, participants or interlocutors. There is of course the suggestion that while conducting fieldwork the researcher should constantly remain aware of and negotiate their proximity to the Other, strategically coordinating their interactions to “[make] the familiar strange *rather* than the strange familiar” (Van Maanen as cited by Kamsteeg et al., 2013, p.169 [my emphasis]) as a way to “foster a capacity for the ongoing experience of surprise” (ibid, p.170). But after my first fieldwork plunge, I now believe that this methodologically grounded ideal collides against the reality of what it means to be part of as well as study the social.

First, it continues to imagine the possibility for meaningful data to be ‘gathered’ from a social interaction without a degree of amicability—or even enmity—arising, a participation in the social without the unpredictability of social consequences (what if your ‘interlocutor’ chooses to stay home rather than attend a scheduled interview). ‘Informants’ inform, ‘participants’ participate and ‘interlocutors’ take part in a dialogue or conversation, but it’s difficult to imagine how these nouns “co-author” (Clifford, 1986, p.17) ethnographic projects in a way which does not follow the preliminary research designs of the fieldworker. While these “nouns” do not paint the other passive, the information they transmit seems, if not entirely predetermined, at least heavily underwritten by the researcher. The expectations of hospitality that many anthropologists illustrate as being a significant cultural characteristic that the people they interact with maintain about themselves (and which I also noted in Cuba), seems to confound this idea. It implies that persons might try to move beyond their familiar routines in order to make the strange more comfortable—more familiar—for the anthropologist. The

ongoing joke that my Spanish teacher and her husband would make of me while I was there was how I really was “*Inglés*” [English] in my cultural style. Each day I arrived early to my lessons, whereas the expectations in Cuba followed what other researchers have explained to me as being ‘Latino time’, a generalization which conveys impunctuality as the norm. My Spanish teacher, recognizing my strangeness and acknowledging that many Cubans are often tardy, worked harder to always be prepared early. It is difficult, then, for me to describe my Spanish teacher and her husband as nouns due to their willingness not only to go along with my research but also to make my stay in Cuba more comfortable as well as insightful. Their expectation of themselves to be ‘good hosts’ seemed to inspire them to intermesh their own ‘cultural ideal’ of hospitality with an other’s cultural ideal of time, teaching me about both these cultural ideas in the process.

Second, while these nouns might take part in, participate and inform the research process, it’s hard to imagine how they interact back towards the anthropologist in a way that might affect the ethnographer. In this respect, there are a number of anthropological reflections that recollect upon the volatility and unpredictability of human interaction. The famous tale told by Clifford Geertz (2005), where he and his wife were only perceived and treated as persons once the locals had witnessed them running away from the police as they themselves had done. Or, the tale by Paul Rabinow (1977) where he eventually stopped suffering the “testing thrusts” (p.48) of an informant he considered a friend, halting the car as they were driving to let him out. From that point on, however, Rabinow also explains how the two got along “famously” (p.49) as he had communicated to them on their own terms that he was indeed a person.

I had a similar experience in Bayamón, but my tale does not contain the same happy conclusion. When I began to come to terms with the fact that I was not gaining the kind of rapport I desired with the group of sports fans I had gotten to know, I began to look for others to

interact with and become friends. I got to know one *taxista* who did not own a yellow cab that belonged to the state-run taxi enterprise but drove his own Russian Lada. He would spend his days waiting around for potential clients on a smaller street that was just around the corner from where the drivers who drove for the state-owned taxi enterprise would wait around. Because of my experience with José while I was in San Juan, I felt that this might prove a fruitful possibility to find someone who, if not willing to participate in my research, I might at least speak to and spend a bit of time with to escape my social isolation. After a few brief interactions, however, he'd end up asking me for money to buy a “*pizza de la calle*” [street pizza]. He'd ask for five convertible pesos for this thing I knew only costed five Cuban pesos<sup>9</sup>. I'd respond by declining, walking away from the situation after explaining that I did not have any money with me and was running late for an appointment. (I realize now, in retrospect, that the cultural idea of ‘Latino time’ may have rendered the excuse of punctuality somewhat questionable for him). The next day, as I routinely walked by his usual waiting spot, he shouted out to grasp my attention and turning my gaze towards him he used his index finger to draw a slashing movement across his throat after which he pointed towards me. Surprised, I blurted out “¿*que?*” [what?], to which he responded by repeating the gesture. Nothing ever manifested from what I interpreted was a direct threat to my person. I would, however, choose never again to walk by the street he'd wait on or consult him as a possible ‘participant’ for my research or as a friend to talk to. Across these three tales—Geertz’s, Rabinow’s, and my own, there is an active engagement by the other that I feel escapes the implied meaning of these nouns. An ‘as if’ quality that is conveyed about culture, that it is not a dynamic whole that the researcher can simply observe and question without

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<sup>9</sup> At the time 1 convertible peso was equivalent to 24 Cuban pesos.

contributing to its re-making by way of their embodied presence and interactions—as if one could simply study culture without doing culture.

Throughout my thesis I have subsequently opted to refer to those I interacted with while in Cuba as friends rather than participants, informants or interlocutors. I believe that it is a more fruitful way to consider them as being co-authors and actively engaged in the making of my project as this *entre dos*, which, could not have materialized without them. Moreover, I feel that it avoids an artificial desocialization of my person and speaks more candidly to the kind of research I conducted while in Cuba. I performed no structured or semi-structured, formal or informal, interviews. Aside from some pictures I took for my own keeping and some which José suggested I ought to take of his work, I also did not tape or record any of these interactions during the moments of their unfolding, only taking fieldwork notes thereafter. Planned meetings which were organized between myself and my friends were concerned with engaging in activities such as going to eat food, *tomar algo* [drink something] (usually beer) or spend time with them as they would carry out their everyday affairs. Mostly, however, the friends I made simply told me to drop by whenever and ‘hang out’.

The majority of my time was split between two groups of people. With José, who I introduced above, as well as family and friends of his whom he’d introduce me to over the course of our time together, and, who I choose to introduce throughout my thesis as they make an appearance for you, my reader, through my writing. A great deal of time I spent with José was as he fixed his car from within his home garage. However, he’d also bring me along when the occasion presented itself for us to “*disfrutar*” [enjoy], and, I was fortunate enough that he made room for me on one afternoon to accompany him as he went to retrieve clients from a nearby resort.

I also spent a great deal of time with Teresa, a woman who, along with her sister Mariana, mother and step father, operate their own family-owned restaurant located within their home. I'd visit daily to eat lunch and occasionally dinner with them after the usual rush of clients had been served. On several occasions I'd spend the entire day with them as they taught me how to cook *comida criolla* [creole food], even going through *una prueba* [a test] one day where I cooked a meal for them. Mariana would bring me to the nearby markets as well as *la feria* [the fair (or farmer's market)] to teach me how she goes about obtaining the ingredients her family uses.

In this way, becoming a friend and gaining this mysterious element of rapport were essential in my learning process. I could not have learned the details I recount over the follow pages without having myself interacted in a social way. Having kept those I interacted with at 'arms-length' might have helped to reduce researcher bias, however, it would have also greatly limited what my friends would have taught me about themselves and their livelihood strategies (I now wonder if this lack of insight can truly be described as unbiased). And, although considering those I interacted with as friends and co-authors does not dissolve "hierarchical arrangements of discourses" as Clifford (1986, p.17) points out, it does remind me of the contributions they keep making to my project as I write it up over here. Throughout the chapters I have worked on, I do my best to remain aware of my 'positionality' as a self-identifying white male from the global north by situating myself in my text. My presence undoubtedly contributed to the contours of these interactions, and my friends would often compare their lived realities with what they knew about the realities of Canadians, who, making up the largest portion of tourists they receive annually, Cubans know a great deal about. To protect the identities of my Cuban friends as best

as I can I have used pseudonyms to replace the names of persons, cities as well as certain objects such as cars which might be identified as belonging to a particular person.

My partner would accompany me for part of my second trip to Cuba. As a sociologist and self-identifying Latina, she greatly facilitated my research in several ways. First, as a sociologist she provided me with a second perspective. Having different theoretical interests than myself, she was attuned and familiar with certain conventions I was not. Second, as a self-identifying Latina she provided a sort of generalized understanding of Latin American cultural styles which allowed her to more readily familiarize herself with (and explain to me) the peculiarities of Cuban sociability. For instance, she'd comment on my being overly quiet upon meeting new people as a performance which might be perceived as rude. Third, and perhaps most significant, when I returned to meet José as well as his friends and family, her presence as my partner provided an embodied form of confirmation that I was not just a researcher looking to extract data. I was now a person in their eyes, and they seemed relieved that the stories I had told them about myself were indeed true (that I did have a partner who is originally from South America and this was not just a lie to gain rapport). Her native grasp of the Spanish language also allowed her to socialize in ways that I was not yet capable of. For instance, I'd only begin to gain rapport with Teresa and her family after my partner would state, in passing, a joke that they should teach me how to cook delicious Cuban food so then I might cook it for her when we return to Canada. There was of course a gendered dynamic embedded in this exchange. Living within a more "macho" society, the ladies at the restaurant seemed absolutely thrilled at the idea that I, a self-identifying man, was looking after my partner by cooking for her. Moreover, when I revealed my own enjoyment for cooking, we began to develop a more enduring friendship over this shared interest.

## 1.4 The road forward

In chapter two, I finish telling the story of José restoring his car to working order. The intention behind this opening vignette is to illustrate how *arreglar* unfolds dynamically across everyday life. To show, for instance, how José's performance of *arreglar* was often social, going beyond the individual labor of restoring the car in his own garage and involving the work of sustaining relations with others to encounter the pieces he might need or knowledge which might help him. By going into detail about the biographical intertwining between José, his family and the car—between person(s) and 'thing', I suggest that this relationship is more than purely instrumental or economic, it also consists of an important social dynamic and speaks to broader political circumstances.

In chapter three, I layer my own historical work alongside a conversation I had one day with a group of Cuban friends who would recollect upon their lived experiences during the Special Period. While supporting the claim that this was the historical turning point where Cubans would be compelled to re-frame their understandings of everyday life on the island—to follow this idea that *la gente tiene que arreglar sus cosas*, I challenge the premise that this was the period where *arreglar* emerged onto the social scene as if appearing 'out of thin air'. Instead, I argue that that it was during this time period that *arreglar* greatly expanded as a performance which would become normalized and socially recognizable as distinctly Cuban.

Chapter four explores the relation between *arreglar* and the concept of *por necesidad*, a notion which further espouses the idea that it is by necessity and not by choice that people engage in these extra-ordinary performances of making do. By looking more closely at a contradiction which arises when people describe two performances which do and do not fall under the guise of *por necesidad*, I stake the claim that the felt necessity underscoring the

statement that *la gente tiene que arreglar sus cosas* is also immediately historically informed and culturally mediated. As such, I argue that meeting one's *necesidades* [necessities] is not reducible to a sort of moral anarchy where any action goes. Instead, I attempt to show that economic action is always interlaced with culturally specific moralities, and what is necessary is always in dialog with what is desirable.

Chapter five explores how value is performed and produced between two competing value systems. Here, I look at how the two national currencies in Cuba have become differentiated not only by a quantitative comparison, but also by a qualitative judgement associated with their seemingly innate capacity in allowing people to *arreglar sus cosas*. If chapter three explores the historically informed circumstances underpinning *arreglar*, and chapter four the contemporary value judgements which surround this statement, then chapter five might be said to look at how inter-actions practically articulate this idiom of *hay que arreglar*. More specifically, I attempt to show how Cubans use these currencies to cement social connections in ways that undermine the idea that money flattens social relations and encourages anonymous transactions to flow seamlessly.

To conclude, I suggest that the 'magic' of *arreglar* consists not only in the explanation it provides for reality, but also in the way it reveals Cubans' performative contribution to the making of their social world.

## 2. Mechanics must make magic

As I watched José work meticulously at cleaning away the grease from the steering mechanism of his car, his mother began to shout from inside their family home. She yelled in anger at how the petrol he was using to clean away the build up of grease had emitted a pungent odor making breathing difficult for those in the household. In between coughing fits, she articulated how José's father had developed what appeared to be an allergic reaction to the fumes, and that many of their neighbors had complained to her about the smell. Frustrated, José replied “*¿mami, y donde quieres que yo vaya? ¡No hay otra que hacerlo acá!*” [mommy, and where do you want me to go? There is no other way but to do it here!]. José's father who was himself a retired mechanic did not complain however, but instead would come over to help when his coughing subsided and was feeling momentarily well enough to do so.

Working out of his own home as a self-employed *taxista* and performing his own duties as a mechanic, because, as José explained, Cuban mechanics employed at state-owned garages work in a very untimely and unreliable manner, a clearly defined separation between work and home does not exist for José—as well as many other self-employed Cubans. Alongside this privileged position in being a *taxista*, therefore, are certain precarious conditions which José must endure and *arreglar*. Conditions which he might otherwise not need to confront if he were to work at a large state-owned garage equipped with more tools and technologies, as well as safety apparel. The fumes released by making routine use of petrol as a cleaning product without an air mask and in a residential area are one example. Another is the physical layout of José's household garage, which, despite providing a convenient location for performing this repair work and allowing him not to depend upon state-employed mechanics, is also a space that permeates a sense of worry for his family while he is in there making ‘magic’.

As I watched him shuffle his body in and out from underneath this extremely heavy vehicle, raised by a combination of metal objects to provide stability and wood planks to adjust the height—none of which appeared to have been destined for this task—I asked him if he ever worried about the car falling on top of his body. “Of course”, he replied, describing an incident where it had already happened and how his hand had been pinned against the wall as he was working on the driver’s side and luckily not the undercarriage of the car. If the car had not been strapped to the ceiling using several pulleys, José explained how he wondered if the scar across his hand might have resulted in a more serious injury. Recounting the event in detail, he described how he had not been trapped for very long as his call for help had been answered by five women who live nearby, who responded by running over to him and attempting to push the car in order to rescue him. José described how he told his would-be rescuers to lift rather than push the car, a movement which then granted him enough room to slide away from further harm.



*Figure 2.1 José and his father working on the car. This picture was taken after he had finished restoring la dirección. It is visible here running from driver’s side to passenger’s side with two empty spaces where the tires will be installed.*

In this way, the body of the car signifies a sense of precarity for José and his family even while not being driven. His mother would explain how she still reflects upon the event where the car had pinned her son against the wall, remembering how she could no longer see him from

inside their home and could only hear his cries for help leading her to believe—in those moments—that “*el auto se lo tragó*” [the car swallowed him]. José’s wife would comment upon her mother-in-law’s reflection, mentioning that the entire family “*nos ponemos nerviosos*” [we become nervous] when the car is parked inside the garage and in a state of disrepair. On the other hand, to explain José and his family’s relation with the car in a purely economic way, as a willingness to concede to the precarious demands it might bear simply to gain access to the relatively high remunerative form of labor of being a *taxista* which it enables, neglects how this material thing might be endowed with several intersecting “value accents” which reflect and refract “differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community” (Voloshinov, 1973, p.23). From one moment—or event—to the next the car may be conceptualized differently, almost as if it were to consist of “...several possible social biographies” (Kopytoff, 1986, p.68).

Over the next few days as I spent time with José, I came to see how certain symbolic understandings his family held of the car refracted its physical movements and shifting material qualities across time and space, as well as the social intercourse within which it was currently and/or historically a part of. When operational, the car facilitated access to more difficult to reach locations across the island, such as where José and his family occasionally enjoy their own relatively secluded portion of beach area to relax. During Carnival it would allow José to pick up family and friends living across San Juan in order to celebrate at his home, and on his aunt’s birthday it allowed him and his father to visit and celebrate with her at her home in the countryside. Other destinations such as an aquatic nature park designated for tourists also became accessible for José and his family, as the only significant barrier to entry for Cubans is the lack of affordable transportation available from the city. Having become embedded in the

family's biography, therefore, they'd also recollect upon past events where the car had allowed them to immediately make certain journeys of particular significance. For instance, when they had left the same day to visit a family member who had abruptly fallen ill but lived several hundred kilometers away, a course of action which they explained would not be possible for many Cubans who did not own or have access to a car.

Restoring the car to working order subsequently became a performance which José and his wife explained “*que todos tenemos que enfocarnos*” [we all have to focus (on)], as this is a ‘thing’ which is important not only in the ways it “physically [constrains] and [enables]”, but also as it ensures a certain “normative behavior” (Miller, 2005, p.5), allowing José’s family to establish a sense of certainty in their everyday lives. However, contra Miller’s argument that “[the] less we are aware of [objects], the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by the setting the scene ensuring normative behavior, without being open to challenge” (ibid), I would suggest that José and his family are intimately aware of the powerful role the car performs in securing their everyday normal or routine. They would state explicitly how they considered the car to be a member of the family, further explaining that “*este auto es nuestra forma de vivir, nos deja vivir asi como vivimos*” [this car is our way of life, it lets us live as we live]. And, in this way, they contrasted their own standard of living with those of the Cuban population more generally. Understanding the car as being “a tool for *independent* movement” and “*individual* prosperity” (Jeske, 2016, p.492 [my emphases]), subsequently falls short of attending to the ways in which its movements are always traveling across and within a social terrain—even while being in a state of disrepair in one’s household garage. The frame for what is understood to be ‘normative’ encompasses but also extends beyond the individual driver as well as their immediate familial relations, consisting also in the “practical orientations and standards of

judgement characterizing a given society or institution” (Weiss, 2015, p.241). In this sense, the car ensures normative behavior in Cuba which is not enjoyed by the majority, and thus produces a social tension between those who do and do not have access to this ‘thing’.

In Cuba, a pre-revolutionary American car such as his, José explained, is financially valued at approximately 60,000 US dollars, and the newer cars now being imported from countries like China cost even more. The relative scarcity of cars on the island and the diverse modifications each driver incorporates therefore unravels how the peculiar technical composition of these vehicles has immediate sociocultural significance, allowing many to identify cars with their owners and owners with their cars. Driving through the streets of San Juan, José would name many of the parked cars which were vacant by referencing their owner, and the same social phenomena would unfold as people who knew him noticed his car driving or parked along the side of the road. “¡Oye! Pepe”, they’d often shout out while making a friendly hand gesture. A common Spanish nickname shared by José as well as his father José Manuel, “Pepe” further hints at the biographical interlacing of identities—or becomings—between persons and things. Inherited from his father, who had been restoring cars since the victory of the Revolution, it was passed down to José a number of years ago when his father fell ill and was nearing his retirement. After he recovered, the family decided that José should continue to drive car<sup>10</sup> as he had become quite successful economically, and his father was nearing retirement.

In this way, the blending of biographies between cars and their owners also refracts the island’s historical trajectory and political economic dynamics quite pronouncedly—whether driving or idle. Exposed metal parts corrode over time and batteries discharge. Oils, greases,

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<sup>10</sup> José’s colleagues, who all also own pre-revolutionary cars, have similar stories to tell about inheriting their vehicles from a family member.

seals and rubber parts gradually oxidize at a rate which corresponds to the local climate and must eventually be replaced. There is ‘routine maintenance’, which I discovered was often spontaneously performed, that is recommended even if a car accumulates zero mileage, i.e. dynamic change which occurs also as the car travels across time. Surviving the Triumph of the Revolution in 1959, sustaining these American cars fabricated in the 1950s has meant negotiating the economic embargo maintained against Cuba by the United States (US) for over 50 years and encountering the necessary parts which are often difficult to come by, a situation made more difficult since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s—Cuba’s most important trading partner at the time (see the following chapter for more information).

Despite these challenges, José and his father have performed a plethora of projects to maintain the car since having purchased it in the mid 1990s after selling their previous vehicle. They’d explain to me how they believed the chassis to be the only component which remains from the original factory model, as even the exterior shell has had a great deal of work committed to it. The necessary cost of maintenance, repair and obtaining new parts for these extensive projects subsequently compels them to make use of the car’s economic potential and the precarious conditions this entails. “*Si tienes auto, tiene que trabajar*” [if you have a car, it must work], José and his wife would exclaim. However, the energy they devote to repairing their cars often remains unseen by most, leading to a certain fetishization of the cars they drive as things appearing to be naturally endowed with the capacity to accumulate, and, therefore, make life easy. José’s colleague Leo would often sigh as he was working to resolve a certain mechanical issue with his own car, explaining that the people believe owning a car means “we don’t have to *luchar* to survive, that we are always on vacation. But the people don’t see the work we put into maintaining our cars”, he concluded.

There exists, therefore, a pronounced societal tension and contestation over the meaning of owning a car in San Juan. For those I spoke to who do own a car, these have become part of the family, furnishing certain affordances such as the daily reproduction of a more desirable lifestyle marked by regularity and routine, rather than the unpredictability and uncertainty which is more common in Cuba. But the car's movements are always social, and as this material segment of reality it is inflected with what might be described as being a "social *multiaccentuality*" (Voloshinov, 1973, p.23) revealing a struggle over the seemingly inherent qualities of its "objective substance" (Simmel, 2004, p. 57). More specifically, this is a social struggle over a peculiar valuation of the car and whether it innately possess within its material body the potential to grant access to this more desirable everyday normal—which is not normative in Cuba. In other words, the discussion consists in deciphering whether owning a car in fact means that one must not *luchar*—must not work to *arreglar sus cosas*, or whether the car is indeed a family member which also requires 'care' and participates in the ongoing struggle to cement a more desirable lifestyle.

## **2.1 In(ter)dependent employment**

Having cleaned *la dirección* to an extent which he was happy with, José decided that it was now time to bring it up the road to *el tornero* [the machinist] to be modified—or at the very least await modification. Strapping *la dirección*, a part which is long and very heavy, atop a children's wagon he had modified with slightly larger and more durable wheels made from rubber rather than plastic, we made our way up the road as he pulled it along the way. *El tornero* was a friend of José's who was also self-employed working alongside two other machinists whose homes were all connected by a short pathway running between them. The machinists had converted the outdoor sections of their individual homes (most likely patio spaces) into work

spaces, with each being populated by different machines intended to work on various other objects of diverse shapes and sizes. And, although they were self-employed, the machinists had combined their individual spaces and energies to work collaboratively. For instance, by making collective use of all three spaces and sets of tools/machines, as well as helping one another with their respective projects.

As we made our way there, José described how he had also worked as a machinist when he was younger, and thus was quite familiar with this form of labor. He could easily do this job he explained, but he lacked the machines. We spent a fair amount of time at *el tornero*'s while they went over the plan, discussing how José might not only restore this part but perhaps make it better. A social sharing of past experiences would unfold throughout the design-making processes of current projects being carried out in this space. José, *el tornero* and the other machinists, as well as others who had dropped by to observe or even lend a helping hand, debated various possibilities often making comments informed by previous experiences, i.e. mentioning what had worked for them and what had not. José's steering mechanism was measured and remeasured to determine what would be the ideal fit for the new bearings he wished to install. Ultimately, they decided that the bearings José had brought to be machined onto his steering mechanism were not an ideal size. They were 2 millimetres too large.

Bearings still in hand, José began to examine his steering mechanism which now lay alongside several others *el tornero* had to work through, and, squatting down, he concentrated on the width of the axle. Seemingly struck—as if out of 'thin air'—by a potential idea and modification he might incorporate during this project, he called out to *el tornero* asking for his advice on the matter. They would discuss the possibility for what he had imagined was a piece he might craft from a metal plaque, and which might offer a sturdier more reliable connection

between *la dirección* and the suspension. Challenging certain historically cemented prejudices which have separated the efforts of the artist and artisan, reducing the latter to a “‘skilled manual worker’ without ‘intellectual’ or ‘imaginative’ or ‘creative’ purposes...” (Williams, 2015, p.10), José first set out to craft the design which had materialized visually in his imagination. Reaching for an empty cardboard box which had once be used to house a commodity, he began to trace the “*plantilla*” [template] using *la dirección* as a reference point. And, cutting the cardboard to size, he’d check it over twice to be sure that it was the correct size. The template he crafted was for a square metal plate that would be large enough to cover the width or girth of the axle, and was intended to have enough room at each corner to drill and tap<sup>11</sup> a threaded hole so that a connection might be secured with the suspension which ran underneath from front to rear end of the car and overlapped with *la dirección* which ran from driver to passenger side. But as he carried out these series of actions, it became increasingly difficult to differentiate between the designing and the constructing of this imagined part as a process which unfolds in a linear fashion. The sequence he conducted between the designing and the building of this imagined piece was more circular in its movements, moving back and forth between planning and doing.

Returning to his home, José first walked into the living room to further discuss his plan with his father who was sitting watching television. Satisfied with the response he got, a simple nod and comment made which reminded him not to forget a particular detail during the undertaking, José headed to the garage to collect the metal to be used. Needing to craft two of these connector plates, he layered the cardboard template along the larger metal plaque and secured both together using a bench vise, and, with his petrol fueled torch in hand he began to trace the edges of the cardboard using the pressurized flame. As the fire made contact and

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<sup>11</sup> Tapping is the action that creates a thread into the side of the hole.

separated the surplus metal, it projected a distinct hissing noise accompanied by hot sparks which flew across the room, making contact with other objects that populated the room—including our own bodies—leaving charred traces behind. After reducing two metal plaques to size using this approach, he would then smooth the rough edges using a grinder. This part of the process was slow going, José pausing between plaques to shake his hand and forearm as he described how the constant vibrations than ran up his arm as he held the grinder steady as it wore down the uneven edges of the metal caused a fair amount of discomfort and soreness. “This machine is very dangerous”, he added, pointing to the grinding wheel and explaining how at any moment it can break off and jump out at you.

Finished with completing this part of the design, José positioned the plaques directly above the part of his suspension which would intersect with *la dirección*. Content with the result, we returned to the machinists to determine if the plaques would fit *la dirección*, repeating this procedure. Once he was satisfied, José reached over to grab one of the machinist’s soldering tool in order to make a temporary bond between the plaque and *la dirección* so that neither piece

would get lost from the other over the course of the next few days as *el tornero* worked through the various other projects he had to complete before reaching José’s. Noticing that José was unable to get the soldering tool to work,



Figure 2.2 The metal plaques resting above the suspension.

a spectator seated nearby observing one of the machinists at work walked over to the wall to flick on the switch which allowed power to flow to the instrument. The three of us would continue to watch the machinist while he was working on a metal component held secure by a bench vise, attempting to break off a particular segment using a combination of movements involving a metal hand saw and a hammer. Recounting how he remembered performing a similar task in the same manner, José described how the portion he wished to separate had somehow rebounded off the floor and hit him in the forehead after he struck it with his hammer. The machinist, seeming to absorb the underlying lesson communicated, would slightly shift his body out of the way of the imaginary trajectory which José had traced through the bodily re-enactment of his own performative mishap.

We would eventually revisit our conversation with *el tornero* who was now working on a metal part belonging to another client. This time the discussion was less formal, flowing between several diverse topics. After José briefly confirmed the consensus which they had reached earlier regarding what his project ought to look like when it was completed, they moved on to critiquing the political economic difficulties of being self-employed in Cuba. Another machinist, squatting down and working to clean the steering mechanism of a different person's car, joked as he held up an unused American part. “*¡Por el bloqueo!*” [Because of the blockade!], he said, mocking the blockade's capacity to prevent all US parts from entering the Cuban market. As the others laughed *el tornero* would follow the remark by commenting upon what he described was an endless ideological discourse disseminated by the Cuban government to the population. How everyday, from 8 in the morning until 8 in the evening, state media talks “*sin parar*” [nonstop] about the embargo imposed by the US against Cuba. “But the communists never talk about the difficulties they make for the people!”, he exclaimed, while the others nodded their heads and

voiced their agreement. *El tornero* would go on to support his claim by citing a historical occurrence where the Cuban government had informed the population that better and more affordable cars would be available in the near future. In doing so, they had inspired many to sell their older—predominately American—cars. The government would then commit a great injustice against the people who had opted to sell. The new cars, *el tornero* explained, never made it to the Cuban market, and with the removal of many which had previously populated Cuba's network of roads, the economic value of cars that still remained in circulation greatly escalated, leaving many previous vehicle owners stranded without the possibility of reacquiring a car. On a separate occasion, José's father told me a similar story which had framed the cause for the everyday struggles faced by Cubans differently than that which was disseminated by the state. How, during the 1970s, while the government was heavily engaged in ideological warfare with the US, Cuban police would stop American cars which had incorporated modifications using non-American parts, and would disassemble these from the body of the vehicle. He remembered one incident where he had been pulled over while driving, and the police removed the Russian tires he had just recently installed, leaving him stranded by the side of the road. In this way, he explained how the government was committed to making the Cuban population believe that anything made in the US was vastly inferior and likely to break down at any moment.

Leaving *el tornero*'s, José would explain as we walked that this was how things have worked ever since the victory of the Revolution. Resources and parts were not easy to come by, and they often had to be machined with tools one did not own and modified to fit an engine which then became a combination of parts from different vehicles. More importantly, the “collective enterprise” (Pálsson, 1994, p.902) which had been routinized at the machinists' place

of work was also defined as necessary. “The people have to share to survive”, José exclaimed. In this way, he explained how he was referring not only to the diverse tools and parts certain individuals might own or have access to, but also a practical know-how they had accumulated through their experiences and “situated [practices]” (ibid) whereby each negotiated not only the mechanical qualities of their respective cars, but also the specificities of navigating their social environment. And, while recognizing the profound effects the embargo continues to have on their everyday lives, the constant depiction of the US government as the singular source of their struggles had, from their perspectives, been used by the Cuban government *ad nauseam* and as a tool to escape taking responsibility for the actions it performs which might also make life more difficult for the people.

Veering at the small intersection before reaching José’s home, we made our way to a nearby *mercado particular* [private market] to buy some bearings from “*los vampiros*”. The nickname ‘vampire’, José explained, was used by the people as a metaphor to liken those who sold necessities dearly with entities who feed off blood. “*Te sacan la sangre*” [they steal your blood] in your dealings with them, he told me. Reaching the market, we walked through an open doorway leading into a walled off and unroofed area populated by a plethora of small kiosks. Each was owned by vendors who seemed to be selling anything and everything which had to do with vehicle repair, from light bulbs to bearings to break discs. Intimately familiar with this marketplace, José walked directly to a particular kiosk shaking the hand of the vendor working there and asking them for precisely what he was looking to purchase. Reaching below the counter, the vendor took out four Russian bearings which José inspected by comparing their shape and quality with those he brought earlier to *el tornero* and they had deemed unsuitable.

Content with the commodity offered, José handed the vendor 40 convertible pesos (approximately 40 US dollars).

Surprised at the ease with which the parts he needed were encountered, despite everything he and other Cubans had told me about the pervasive difficulties they had to negotiate in order to acquire even the most basic of necessities, I asked José about these private markets as we walked out its doors.

Frankie: Is it possible that the vampires don't have what you need?

José: It's difficult not to encounter these types of parts. They usually have what I need. If not at this market, there are others.

Frankie: Where do the parts come from?

José: They come from everywhere. These bearings I bought today are Russian. But they have parts from China, Germany, from everywhere. Most are stolen from the state.

A few weeks earlier, I had accompanied José and Leo as they visited a state-owned garage to engage in a similar 'black-market' transaction, however, on that occasion they had done away with the middle man, i.e. the 'vampire' who sold these stolen parts openly at one of these private markets. After purchasing a new car battery in a relatively discrete manner, José and Leo explained that when customers bring in their cars to be repaired at state-owned garages, the mechanics will often restore their old parts that still work fine rather than replacing them. They clean them up to make them look new and then reinstall them into the customer's car. The new parts which would have been installed in their car and is then noted down as having been sold for use under the accounting papers for this state-owned garage, can then be sold to someone the mechanics trust will not inform state authorities. For instance, a vendor from a nearby private market, or José.

Because the private market had emitted a familiar feeling of formality from my perspective, enclosed within concrete walls which granted it a semblance of permanence and

thus formality, I had not realized that the interactions which populated it might nevertheless move between formality and informality. In retrospect, both ‘sites’ problematize a rigid distinction between formality and informality.

## 2.2 There’s always something to maintain

The following morning when I arrived at José’s home he was already at work laying flat directly underneath the engine of the car. Making his way through the assemblage of parts, he was currently in the process of unbolting the 14 screws which held in place one of the several oil gaskets. As he finished removing the final bolt, he reached over handing me the gasket before shuffling his body out from beneath the car, his face, hands and mechanic overalls having become covered in engine grease. And, as we made our way to the back end of the garage José smirked in a disillusioned way raising both his hands and exclaiming “*este es trabajo de cerdo*” [this is the work of pigs].



Figure 2.3 Recently removed gasket.

Although this restorative work was not urgently needed, José explained that having to remove the gasket to access the blown transmission had presented a sensible opportunity to perform this routine form of maintenance. “If the car leaks oil I can get a fine”, he continued, “*siempre hay algo para mantener*” [There is always something to maintain]. José would combine a series of work movements to clean the metal gasket as well as change the inner rubber seal it contained. Replacing this inner seal, however, proved much more difficult than I had anticipated, with José explaining how the rubber becomes extremely stiff over time due to the heat produced

by the engine while the car is in use. As he began to work at removing the old rubber seal, he first tried to hammer it loose while holding the edge of the gasket in his hand, but this set of actions quickly proved futile. Attempting to make use of a stronger grip, he positioned and tightened the gasket between a bench vise, after which he continued to hammer away. Gradually, José was able to coerce the rubber seal free after multiple strikes in varying locations, and with only the metal gasket remaining in his hand, he walked over to the large concrete sink in his garage to clean away the sediments of grease as well as the silicone which had been used to seal the assemblage between the gasket and another machined metal surface. After vigorously scrubbing the metal using a stiff brush dipped in petrol the gasket appeared renewed, ready for the insertion of an unused rubber seal.

The task of bringing these two pieces together, however, proved more challenging. José would begin by trying to use one hand to hold part of the rubber seal in place while gently striking at it with the hammer held in his other hand. Unsuccessful, he attempted again to make use of a firmer grip, incorporating a set of pliers in his free hand, but the outcome was largely the same. The circular inner seal simply seemed too large to fit within the encompassing gasket. Turning to the energies furnished by other sources, he let water flow into and reside within the crevices of the gasket as he held it under the faucet of his sink. Bringing the gasket out from underneath the faucet, he held it in mid-air and began to heat the metal, approaching it from underneath as he directed the flame being produced by a soldering torch he held in his other hand. The idea behind this set of actions was to cause for the thermal expansion of the metal, with the water which had begun to boil within the crevices of the gasket intended to facilitate the process.

While slightly more successful, José was still far from getting the rubber seal to fit neatly in between the metal gasket. And, as he continued to re-apply this methodological approach several more times, the small success he had initially achieved realized no further progression. Gradually becoming more frustrated with his lack of success, and, with his father who had walked over to observe and then to inform us how the task ought to be carried out, José walked into the kitchen and turned on one of the gas burners atop his stove. Positioning the gasket directly above the flame being produced by the burner and then placing a large metal pot he had filled with some water above the gasket, he then walked over to the fridge to store the new rubber seal inside the freezer. Waiting for these complementary processes of thermal expansion and contraction to progress, José recited something he had told me quite often during my fieldwork;



Figure 2.4 Restored gasket with fresh layer of silicone.

how in Cuba, mechanics cannot simply replace old parts with new ones when they break or are not working optimally, like they do ‘over there’ in Canada. “We have to *arreglar* the things we have, we have to *inventar*, there is no other way”, he said. After several minutes of waiting, José tried once more to fit the rubber seal within the metal gasket, and this time the energies he had devoted and channeled towards his task were rewarded with a triumphant outcome. Successful, he could now begin the concluding task of applying silicone around the edges and threaded holes (where bolts are screwed in) of the gasket allowing it to connect more intimately with the adjacent metal component in the broader assemblage of the engine, and thus reduce the

possibility for fluid leakages. Seated as he carried out this task, he joked that it looked as if he were a baker decorating a cake.

Tracing the edges carefully with the new application of silicone, José momentarily paused his working movements, holding up the silicone gun while providing me with a brief lesson on the political economic dynamics in Cuba.

José: You see this (drawing my attention to the silicone tube). I need it to do almost everything. But the government doesn't sell it to independent workers. I have to buy it from the private markets, where they (the vendors) buy it from factory workers who steal them from the state-owned garages and factories.

Frankie: But how does the government think that you can do this work without providing the things that you need?

José: I don't know. The black market is necessary for the work I do and for all *trabajos particulares* [private forms of labor (self-employment)] in Cuba. The government doesn't care if my car is in the garage being repaired or on the road, they still charge me taxes. I used to work for the state-owned taxi agency, but they charge you even more taxes and you still don't get what you need. *Así es el comunismo, mata tus aspiraciones* [This is how communism is, it kills your aspirations].

Having finished with the gasket, we returned to the entrance of the garage as José would begin working out what had gone awry with the transmission.

### 2.3 *Entre dos*

With the little room there was to maneuver underneath the car, José had—over the years—devised an approach to safely remove heavier parts while lying flat on the ground. By positioning a raised car jack directly below the transmission, he could loosen and remove the bolts which secured it to the engine while it remained suspended in place, and with the transmission now disconnected from the engine it could slowly



Figure 2.5 The transmission

be lowered to ground and then shuffled out to the side from beneath the car. Together we then lifted the transmission onto another metal box-shaped object positioned directly in front of his garage, which would allow neighbors and passersby to observe the work José was engaged in and ask questions. While occasionally interrupting his work, José seemed to enjoy these opportunities for social interaction and the neighbourhood role he had seemingly acquired in providing others with his knowledge as a mechanic.

Seated on a small blue metal chair, José began to look for what had gone wrong. Taking his time as he disassembled the transmission, he paused between the removal of its diverse components inspecting the integrity of each piece. It wasn't long, however, before he encountered the problem. One of the "*dientes*" [teeth] which belonged to the transmission's main drive input had splintered breaking off. Arguing with his father about the optimal course of action to pursue in effort to *arreglar* this dilemma, they debated whether he should simply reinstall the four speed transmission which had been part of the engine assemblage prior to installing this smaller five speed Fiat transmission



Figure 2.6 The broken tooth is noticeable on the gear immediately left of the bearing that is situated between it and the main drive input.

which was now broken, or, as José wished to do, attempt to find a replacement part to restore it. He described how restoring the broken transmission was a more desirable path to take, as replacing it would require him to undo all the modifications he had made in the more distant past to install the smaller Fiat transmission. And, although both models had functioned perfectly fine in allowing him to operate the car, he found the five-speed transmission more comfortable to

drive with. In this sense, *arreglar* is not just about making do by meeting one's basic necessities, but also involves moving towards a more desirable state of affairs (chapter four explores in greater detail this movement between necessity and desirability). Walking over to the patio to collect his phone, José made several calls to see if he could find a person he knew with the part he now desired and needed. Several calls later, he encountered someone who claimed they might have what he was looking for, however, José would have to wait until the following day when this person had returned from out of town so that they might verify their wares.

Content with the possibility offered, José returned to sitting on his small blue chair and began to fiddle with the transmission, tilting it slightly in alternating directions and probing the exterior shell with his hand. It was several minutes before I realized that he was looking for an explanation regarding what had gone wrong. Removing the plug to the chamber of the transmission, he slowly tipped it over allowing the fluid to drain into an empty metal bowl so that he might begin disassembling the entire part, but after only a few moments we heard the familiar clinking noise of metal striking metal. Reaching into the bowl, José pulled out the missing tooth. With this additional discovery he now began to contemplate more intensely, piecing together the series of actions which might have caused his transmission to blow.

The search for the relationship between cause and effect became one of the themes for conversation with all those who stopped by over the following week. But there was also a pragmatic side to the interest José showed in discussing the conclusion he had arrived at with others who might have experienced a similar occurrence. Those who stopped by to ask how his project was unfolding would hear how he believed that during the last project where he had tinkered with the transmission, the main drive input had felt somewhat loose. And, although this feeling had therefore not escaped his attention, he had finished that project without resolving it.

While he admitted that he could not be sure about the validity of his conclusion, it nonetheless informed the way he approached the repair work he was now performing. Through this “self-correcting [technique]” of recognizing possible errors made and improvising successive alterations (Lave, 2011, p.76), José learned through a dialectical process of self-reflection and immediacy during his mechanical work. Over the course of this restorative project, he would triple-check the fit between every component making sure they were snug.

The following day as I was walking towards his home, José was smiling as he shouted out to me that the person he had called had delivered the piece he needed. And, when I arrived at the front of his home, I realized that not only had he already finished disassembling his transmission which now lay in pieces on the ground, but the replacement ‘piece’ he had come by was in fact another entire Fiat transmission of the same type and model. “I paid 120 CUCs (approximately 120 USD) for that”, he said as he indexed the part. But while purchasing this part gave way to the claim made by José that “life here is expensive, that’s why I have to work everyday”, he also explained how since he only needed a main drive input for this project, he could make use of the additional components he had now acquired in having purchased an entire other transmission.



Figure 2.7 Part of the disassembled transmission.

Piece by piece, José would begin to inspect his old transmission, encountering only a single small bearing which was marked by imperfections he warned might cause issues in the future. “No problem”, he said in English, “*tengo repuestos*” [I have spares]. Commencing with the empty transmission case, José would begin to clean each individual piece. First by scrubbing away the grease in the front of his house using petrol, and then carrying them to the back of his garage where he’d rinse them in the large concrete sink. And, although his mother would begin to shout at how now even the back end of their home was contaminated by petrol fumes, José continued this process working at both ends of the garage—squeezing by the car as he made his way across. Going through a second inspection after having been cleaned, the parts which José was satisfied with were then laid out on a large piece of cloth in the front of his home to dry.

Several neighbors would pass by throughout the entire ordeal, but unlike before when José had welcomed conversation, his concentration had now intensified to the extent that he even ignored a good friend of his who walked by joking as he asked, “how’s the opera?”.

Making this statement, he referenced not the sounds of metal parts and tools striking one another—as throughout this process of inspecting and cleaning there were none, but rather the ordeal of orchestrating the diverse parts which would then make up the harmonious composition that was the transmission. Continuing to work on



Figure 2.8 The inside components of the transmission ready to be installed side by side within the main chamber (visible towards the front of the photo)

recombining all the individual pieces, José did not speak until he reached over to grab a peculiar piece he seemed eager to describe.

Holding a strange metal plaque in his hand, José explained to me how in order to fit the smaller Fiat transmission to his larger Eastern European tractor engine, he had to design and fabricate this “*entre dos*” [between two]<sup>12</sup>. The thick flat metal plaque which José was now holding in his hand contained an inner row of threaded holes which allowed it to be firmly bolted to the smaller transmission, as well as an outer row of threaded holes that would then allow it and the transmission to be bolted to the larger encompassing engine. “*El tornero* helped me to make it”, José informed me, and as he finished reassembling the transmission he’d ask me if I had ever watched the television program “Grease Monkeys”. Having never seen it, he explained that it is similar to the work he does, but that the mechanics on the show have access to more resources.

The designation *entre dos* is poetically interesting as it symbolically indexes the role this part ought to perform without specifying any unique or universal qualities it might consist of (e.g. size, color, shape, element, etc.). One might therefore be inclined to argue that *entre dos* hints at a particular style of crafting or making do with whatever one possesses—such as using a stove top and freezer to coerce an inner rubber molding into position within a gasket. Locating this piece—as well as the actions which constitute its making—within the broader frame of Cuba’s political economic circumstances and describing its relationship across this current social environment reveals something which I believe is symbolically meaningful. *Entre dos* indexes a part which is imagined, designed and crafted—or, in a single word—improvised in-between two

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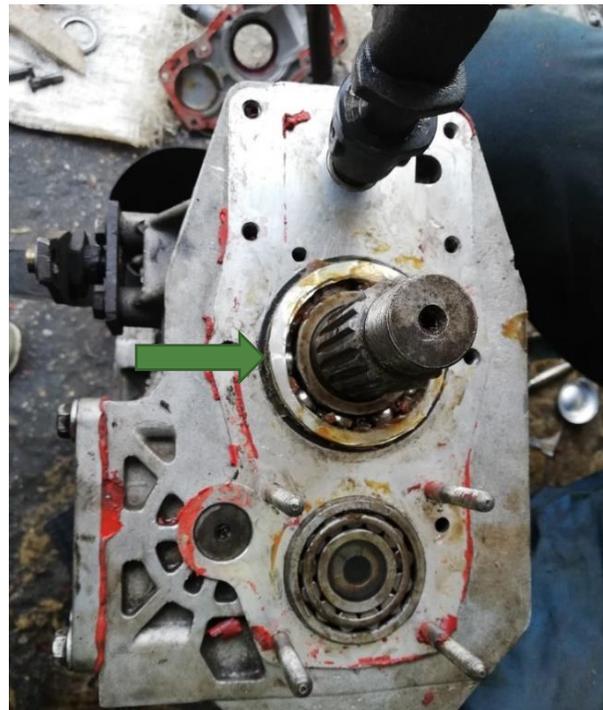
<sup>12</sup> The *entre dos* is noticeable in figure 2.5 as it is still attached to the transmission.

other seemingly incompatible parts. It describes the formation or becoming of a thing which only accomplishes its designation by successfully and *continuously* bringing together these two other ‘things’ in a mutually contingent manner. In this way, the *entre dos* is both literally and metaphorically bound up with the practices of individuals who work collectively within the porous space between seemingly antagonistic systems espoused by competing nations. Literally, it is a part which is fabricated due to the broader political state of affairs ongoing in Cuba. Metaphorically, its fabrication is tied up with the practices of Cuban citizens who must negotiate both the awkward restrictions imposed by their own government and the spread of market mechanisms it does allow for (e.g. allowing for forms of self-employment but not granting legal channels through which one might obtain the necessary means to do so), as well as the tightening of the economic embargo imposed by the US against the island.

Living within and responding to these difficult circumstances, over the years José has acquired a large variety of parts and components that are scattered across his garage, kept in one of the rooms inside his home and even hidden under his bed. Parts from different car models and vehicle types, as well as seemingly arbitrary elements such as the simple metal sheet he had used in fabricating the plaques which would later connect his suspension and *dirección*, were collected and retained in their complete or even partial form based “on the principle that ‘they may always come in handy’” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p.18). An *entre dos*, however, is not rigid in its functional fit to a structural whole. I realized quite early on as José began restoring the car to working order, that the heterogeneous things and/or elements he collected on the basis (from broken metal plaques to wooden 2 by 4s) that they might one day become ‘handy’, were *not* “pre-constrained” by being limited by a “particular history” or “restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their

freedom of manoeuvre” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p.19). While it did indeed seem to be the case that José’s “first practical step [was] retrospective” in the work that he performed (ibid, p.18), drawing upon his own experiences as well as those of others such as *el tornero* and the machinists, there were orchestrated slippages in the re-shaping of things that populated his garage. In this sense, he “coupled his own movements and gestures—indeed, his very life—with the becoming of his materials” (Ingold, 2012, p.435).

With the last bolt now tightly screwed in place, José would begin to fiddle with the main drive input to determine if the fit was tighter than it was the last time he had tinkered with the transmission—before it had blown. Unhappy with it, he began to disassemble it again to encounter the problem. Discovering that there was too much room for movement where a bearing met the main drive input as it entered the chamber of the transmission, he shouted out his wife’s name asking her to bring him an



*Figure 2.9 The stack of aluminum washers is noticeable towards the center of the transmission (follow the green arrow).*

empty Cristal can (a Cuban brand of beer) from inside the house. Using a pair of scissors, he pierced the can cutting off the top and the bottom, afterwards making an incision vertically so that he might flatten the aluminum material out. And, positioning the bearing atop this makeshift sheet, he creased a circular shape into the aluminum material by putting weight onto the bearing and spinning it in place. With the pair of scissors he used earlier, José then cut along the circular template. Moving the scissors approximately one inch inwards within the outer boundary of the

circle he had just traced and cut, he cut another circle so that that the interior might be hollowed out and serve as a washer. While the improvisation was successful and the washer was easily coerced into position around the main drive input, the fit was still not quite to José's liking. "*Mejor, pero falta un poco*" [Better, but it's missing a little]. He would repeat the process several times over, calling for two more Cristal cans—which he, myself, and his wife would have to drink empty. José would craft six of these washers from 3 Cristal cans before finally being pleased with the results. After three days of searching for the necessary replacement parts, assembling, disassembling, and reassembling the transmission, the transmission would finally pass his tests and could be reinstalled into the car. Finishing this assemblage work José looked at me as his familiar joking demeanour returned, smiling as he told me how "mechanics in Cuba must make magic".

It might be said that for José it was the practical step of retrospect which determined the answer to the dilemmas he confronted throughout this multiplicity of projects converging into the restoration of the car as a whole. The template for the connecting pieces that were fabricated to fit between the suspension and *la dirección* were undoubtedly quite similar to the *entre dos* he had made between the engine and the transmission. However, I would argue that it was not simply the success he realized at the end of this process—the result which gradually emerged but "had already been conceived... at the beginning, hence already existed ideally" (Marx, 1992, p.284), that he was describing as the work of 'magic' mechanics must perform, and which he would simply reproduce in future projects. It was in the realization of "his own purpose in those materials" (ibid), through these improvisational performances and "...not in the exact replication of operations... but in their variation in response to the conditions at hand" (Ingold, 2018, p.161), that José would define his work as 'making magic'.

Observing how he had refashioned several aluminum Cristal cans into washers for his transmission, as well as used his stove top and freezer to perform this scientific maneuver—of thermal expansion and contraction, the things and elements José collected on the basis that they might one day ‘come in handy’, could also be *made* to come in handy. And, although these things did realize their own formations outside of human interaction, rusting over time and deteriorating, they did not just “wander in and out of the capitalist commodity status” (Tsing, 2013, p.37). A beer can did not simply find itself emptied and wandering over to become a washer, just as a cardboard box did not discover that it no longer held a commodity for sale and thus could begin to trace within itself a design template. And, in their being coupled with human energies, the things worked with were never confined to “represent a set of actual and possible relations” as ‘operators’ which “can be used for any operations of the *same* type” (Levi-Strauss, 1966, p.18 [my emphasis]). Just as the bridge between formality and informality at the private market involved the coupling of movements between things and persons across boundaries of what is and is not permitted by the state, so did the transformation from simple metal sheet to *entre dos*.

## **2.4 The value of making money**

Over the course of the next few days tensions grew within José’s home. A week had passed since we had visited *el tornero*, and there remained another person’s *dirección* to repair before reaching José’s. And, although José had begun to work on other projects also described as ‘routine maintenance’—which involved mostly galvanizing parts that were beginning to show signs of deterioration, when his father arrived from visiting *el tornero* and informed us how his *dirección* would not be ready until sometime the following week, José became enraged. “¡Lunes! ¿No sabe que tengo que trabajar lunes?” [Monday! Doesn’t he know I have to work Monday?],

he shouted rhetorically. Visibly upset, he continued working calling out to his wife for help as he asked her to press and release the clutch pedal from inside the car while he made the necessary adjustments underneath it to the transmission. As he shuffled his way out from underneath the car, a neighbor passed by asking how things were going. In a disgruntled tone, José replied by explaining how he had brought *la dirección* several days ago to *el tornero* and it was still not ready, and, having already lost a week of work—as a *taxista*, he would now likely lose another. “How am I supposed to make money”, he’d pose in the form of a question while revealing his lack of desire for a response as he turned away and continued working. Several more neighbors would walk by and inquire into the process of restoring the car, which José responded to in the same way. Removing the gearbox from his car which had once belonged to an old Bulgarian tractor and was connected to the rear brakes procured from a Mercedes ambulance, he began working on restoring this part.

Several days later as we sat on José’s patio—directly adjacent and peering into the front end of the garage where many pieces and parts still lay across the ground, he explained to me how *el tornero* had been visited by a friend from out of town during the weekend. Deciding to drink rum rather than complete the project José required to be done prior to being able to pursue further remuneration as a *taxista*, *la dirección* remained in a state of disrepair. As such, José had spent that morning as well as the day before, devoting his energies to helping *el tornero* complete the other project he had which was scheduled to be completed before commencing with José’s *dirección*. In this way, his gift of labor contained a strong element of individual self-interest (Mauss, 2002, p.4) and revealed a tension residing within the necessary sociability of self-employed workers. Despite self-employment painting the image of independence and self-

reliance, these workers become interconnected within a deceptively social capitalist organism (Marx, 1993, p.84).

Seated on the patio tinkering with one of his car's front headlight fixtures, José was still visibly disappointed that he had now lost this entire week of work as he was forced to rearrange the informal contracts he maintained with several Cuban clients, where he agreed to transport them back and forth daily from the tourist resorts at which they worked. Having temporarily transferred these weekly arrangements to a friend of his who also worked as a *taxista*, this meant that even if *el tornero* were to finish some day before the end of the work week José would nonetheless have to wait until the following week to return to his remunerative job as a *taxista*. While passionate about the work he committed to as he restored his car, when I then asked him which job he preferred doing his response was given without hesitation. It was the energy he expended while working as a *taxista* which José valued more, as this was the work which earned him the money he required to maintain not only his body and those of his family members, but also the car itself.

Parts are scarce in Cuba, and this contributed to two interrelated phenomena which bound José to the precarious conditions he confronts daily—and which would also compel him to see his labor as a *taxista* as that which was economically productive. First, it was difficult to find original parts that would fit seamlessly within the body of this car now over 60 years old. Over the years this meant that the pieces which were incorporated to maintain it were from various other vehicle types and models, compounding the difficulty of bringing together all these disparate elements not meant to fit together nor within the encompassing body of the car. A 1957 Oldsmobile 88 with a Fiat transmission, breaks from a Mercedes ambulance, a gear box from a Bulgarian tractor, a suspension from a Ford pickup truck, a tractor engine, etc. Each additional

part seemingly incompatible with the rest had to be reconciled with its immediate neighbor and within the ‘whole’ body of the car. Second, it meant that the parts which were sold, were extremely expensive relative to the wages earned by state employees. Together the bearings and additional transmission would cost José 160 convertible pesos (approximately 160 US dollars), a price tag that state-employed workers could not feasibly afford as they make substantially less than this amount per month. The Cuban government privileged providing its limited supplies—difficult to come by due to factors such as the US economic embargo—to state mechanics or *taxistas* who drive for the state-owned taxi agency, rather than selling them to independent workers. For this reason, José explained he must go through the ‘black-market’ to obtain what he needs to do the work he does.

Here, one begins to notice how the black-market is intimately connected to the formal economy in a mutually contingent way. It is the hard currency accumulated through capitalist ventures, as well as tax revenue retrieved and money spent by workers such as José, which has allowed the Cuban government to reproduce socioeconomic and political stability on the island since the Special Period (See chapter three). In this light, the state might be said to require the hard currency obtained from the workers who travel along Cuba’s topography between capitalist resort and Cuban city, however, these workers often need the black-market to do their work. The two economies therefore bleed into one another, discouraging any rigid separation between them<sup>13</sup> (See chapter five).

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<sup>13</sup> It is for this reason that I have elected to often hyphenate the relationship between formality and informality throughout my thesis, characterizing many interactions as ‘in-formal’ due to this mutually contingent connection between the two.

As José finished working on removing the broken glass from the headlight fixture so that the remainder of this part might be used, he explained how his friend who works for the government had gifted it to him. Using the blade from a utility knife and pair of pliers, he carefully removed the broken glass cleaning the reflective interior using a Canadian brand of wet wipes. “The factory would have simply disposed of this broken part”, he explained, “but since I know how to do this work my friend brought it to me”. While the headlight which was already installed in his car still worked well, José was of the disposition that it was always good to have spare parts that could be *made* handy when confronted by difficult circumstances. Driving through the streets of San Juan, it is easy to recognize the greater possibilities the car affords—such as expanding one’s range of movement and opening access to the highly remunerative realm of tourism. However, as José and his wife explained, it is necessary for owners to combine the car with their own labor in order for its body to be sustained. Parts are scarce and costs are high, meaning that these cars from the 1950s make their own historically informed and contemporarily specific demands upon their owners. One cannot simply purchase an identical replacement part to complete a restorative project like the mechanics do ‘over there’ in Canada. Money, while granting certain affordances such as providing the possibility purchase parts sold for 160 US dollars, does not presuppose that one is freed from participating in *la lucha*. “*Hay que arreglar tus cosas*”, as José repeatedly told me, you must make ‘things’ work within and alongside the whole.

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to provide an ethnographic foundation for the concept of *arreglar*, my intention being to illustrate several elements I believe are essential in order to grasp its meanings. First, that it is a performance which is immediately social, drawing upon the collaborative work of friends, family and *socios*. In fact, establishing and maintaining

social connections often seemed the most significant—implicit—qualification in determining a person’s capacity to *arreglar* (e.g. knowing who to talk to at the market or who to call to get a particular part). Second, the act of ‘making magic’ does not only explain the conditions Cubans confront in their everyday lives, but also describes their practical engagement with their social world and the energy they contribute to its re-making. While being a performance which is intimately concerned with ‘resolving’ dilemmas, *arreglar* is also often deployed to highlight the series of actions and events that lead up to a solution, i.e. the back and forth process between planning and doing. Third, that there is a tension which surrounds *arreglar*. While being recognized as a performance which is necessary and even admirable—with José’s neighbourhood popularity being influenced by his capacity to do this work, this normative behavior hints at a state of affairs which should not be (Chapter four). If Cubans had access to resources like they do ‘over there’—in a country like Canada, as José explained, they would not have to ‘make magic’. This differential access to resources is also felt within the geographical boundaries of the island, where a social hierarchy is becoming increasingly cemented as the state moves towards incorporating capitalist practices more thoroughly. Thus, those who have gained access to the realm of tourism, for instance, have access to different possible means to *arreglar* their circumstances—making ‘hard cash’ a more desirable thing to have across a social landscape increasingly configured by market relations. At the same time, having money does not necessarily dissolve the need to *arreglar* in a social way, as scarcity continues to undermine its ‘power’ as universal equivalent (chapter five).

The following chapter explores the historical formation of *arreglar* as part of everyday socioeconomic praxis. Juxtaposing the conversation I had with a group of Cuban friends—who’d recollect upon the extra-ordinary historical event known as the Special Period—alongside my

own research, I argue that the ontological character of *arreglar* stretches further back than the early 1990s. But, while the Cuban ‘style’ of improvisation and synthesizing forms did not emerge during this historical turning point, it greatly *expanded* in terms of its visibility and ubiquity. This expansion would lead to the modification of relations between state and citizen(s), whereby the latter no longer felt the kind of solidarity with the revolutionary project they might have once maintained.

### ***3. Hay que arreglar***

I was one of several people sitting and conversing within the gated patio space in front of a Cuban friend's home when the topic of the Special Period was introduced by one of the conversants. Citing the specific moment in time when Fidel Castro had announced to the Cuban population that the nation had entered "*un período especial en época de paz*" [a special period in a time of peace](Castro, 1990, Sept 28), my Cuban friends would begin to describe how it was to live through this turning point in the history of the revolution, where austerity and "undernourishment" had abruptly formed the background of their everyday lived experiences (Perry, 2016, p.35-6). By this point, I had already read a great deal on the history of Cuba. I had learned how across the island partial marketization had been cultivated by the government as a response to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's most significant economic as well as political ally, and how the Cuban state faced increased pressures from across the Florida strait and the complicated historical relationship it shared with the US, which made participation in the global market all the more difficult. However, the insight my friends would provide through these recollections also illustrated for me the extent to which non-state actors had moved alongside these formal reconfigurations of the economy. Thus, they highlighted not only the 'special' actions taken by the government to redress these economic woes but unraveled the forms of inter-actions they had improvised as they negotiated the precarity of their circumstances.

As the Special Period became the central topic of discussion, the affective contours of the conversation shifted towards a shared sense of somberness as my friends remembered the difficulties which they confronted in having to meet everyday subsistence needs under conditions of extreme scarcity. Indexing things that populated the patio, they sublimated the particular

“biographies” of individual objects to the broader relationship they shared with the shifting landscape of goods and the island’s historical trajectory (Kopytoff, 1986). José would begin telling a story by first pointing at the old Eastern European manufactured motorbike that was leaned up against the side of the wall. “*Son buenas estas*” [These are good] he described, “*manejan bien y son confiables*” [they drive well and are reliable]. Despite this reliability, however, he went on to explain how during the Special Period it was difficult to continue making use of these kinds of things. Until then trade agreements with the Soviets had been extremely favorable for Cuba, allowing the island to sell sugar at above global market prices and purchase important resources such as gas at subsidized prices<sup>14</sup>. Gas had subsequently become extremely scarce during the Special Period, and, when it was available, it was usually unaffordable by the general population. José would also explain how, in the event that a motorbike required a replacement part for maintenance purposes, these were increasingly difficult to come by as they were no longer being sold at below market prices by Cuba’s ex-Soviet allies, and thus no longer as readily available as they had once been.

Making his way around the circle of people seated on the patio, Alejandro, the owner of the household and family relative of José, served coffee which his wife had just prepared. And, as he handed hot espresso cups to José and I, he apologized for the lesser quality of the coffee explaining how they had no more of the “good” coffee from *la tienda* [the (dollar) store], and, therefore, had no other choice but to serve ground coffee obtained from *la bodega* [ration

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<sup>14</sup> Since the 1960s, Cuba had maintained extremely favorable trade agreements with the Soviet Union. However, these began to be reevaluated by Gorbachev when he came into power in March 1985 as he moved to “reinvigorate the Soviet economy” (Bain, 2005, p.770). While in 1985 Moscow paid 11 times the global market rate for Cuban sugar, in 1989 it only paid 3 times the standard rate (ibid, p.777). Following the official collapse of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991, these privileged exchange rates were dissolved. Concerning fuel, “Soviet oil and petroleum by-products, delivered at prices below world market, had accounted for an estimated 90 percent of Cuban energy need... Soviet oil imports decreased... from 13 million tons in 1989 to 1.8 million tons in 1992” (Pérez, 2011, p.292).

distribution center]<sup>15</sup>. But when both myself and José reassured Alejandro that the coffee was actually quite good, he responded by acquiescing that “*supongo que por lo menos tenemos café para disfrutar*” [I suppose that at the very least we have coffee to enjoy], potentially referencing the lack of basic necessities and luxury goods during the Special Period, but quite possibly also the conditions of scarcity that continue to mark everyday life in Cuba. In this way, throughout this conversation, things and the possibilities they were connected to in the present would inspire those taking part in this discussion to recollect upon their lived experiences throughout the Special Period. And, underscoring these was the routinization of performances, which, while having perhaps once appeared as consisting of a more spectacular character, now felt ‘necessary’ to acquire these things. Thus, while these were moments of collective ‘remembering’, I also came to understand over time how these discourses were not simply passive and fleeting recollections of a historical event once experienced.

### 3.1 Revolution as process

During the conversation on Alejandro’s patio, the past was not simply remembered at a distance, as an eclipsed moment in time no longer experientially recognizable from the vantage point of the now. Instead, the struggles endured during these years were cited and compared to the present in a way which revealed an “organization of the current situation in the terms of a past” (Sahlins, 1985, p.155). What I would like to draw particular attention to throughout this

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<sup>15</sup> While I provide a more detailed ethnographic description of these in the following chapter, for now it is useful to note the following: According to most Spanish-English dictionaries, *bodega* translates loosely as a [grocery store], [cellar], [pantry], or [package store]. When used in Cuba, it typically refers more specifically to the state distribution centers found across the island which distribute rationed products to the population. Physically, a *bodega* consists of a small store front and counter that separates workers from consumers, with visible shelf space located behind the counter and out of reach of the consumer. Products are also stored in a back room. Only Cuban nationals can obtain necessities here at an extremely discounted price through the use of their *libretas* [ration booklet]. *La tienda* (literally the store) refers to the dollar stores which were built during the Special Period so that the government might better capture much needed hard currency that was increasingly flowing into the island. These look more like the supermarkets that one encounters in the global north. (For more information and pictures see: Chomsky, 2015, p.128)

chapter, therefore, is how during these moments of social remembering, people were not simply reflecting upon the extra-ordinary character of this historical event and of the collective struggle that ensued as being a global development met by a series of government reforms that were simply experienced by the people. It was during this conversation that my friends would discreetly trace for me the social expansion of the performative idea that *la gente tiene que arreglar sus cosas* [the people have to fix their things]. And, recognizing the rapid spread of grassroots level reactions responding to these emergent difficulties induced during the Special Period, they'd reflect upon a significant transformation in their understandings of what being Cuban signified. Especially, as they spoke about the shift towards a shared felt necessity for individualized social action to intervene in and re-negotiate everyday dilemmas of social reproduction as the peculiar form of structured socialist reality they had grown accustomed to was undergoing radical renovations.

Alejandro would remark how they, the Cuban people, were the only population who had not gone to war but had endured war-like conditions that lasted for the better part of a decade. “*¡Casi diez años!*” [Almost ten years!] he'd exclaim while shaking his head. Despite enduring these war-like conditions, however, I don't believe that persisting political dispositions can be explained as Cubans simply being compelled to *either* accept or reject revolutionary “value-beliefs” (Gordy, 2015). In fact, during the conversation on the patio explicit political attitudes towards “*los comunistas*”<sup>16</sup> were mostly absent from the dialog. And, when they did occur, they were most often made in passing by those who held more decided opinions. I interpreted this as having less to do with the implications of my presence, as during previous interactions these

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<sup>16</sup> Many who I interacted with and had become disillusioned with the Cuban government, would refer to political actors as *los comunistas* citing the ruling political party in Cuba still operating under the title *el Partido Comunista de Cuba* [the Communist Part of Cuba].

same individuals had seemed more than willing to express their political perspectives at length by providing historical justifications. On several occasions, for instance, José and his father would express resentment at the fact that when Castro came into power, he nationalized not only businesses owned by foreigners but also those owned by Cubans. Instead, the conversation on the patio revealed a “metacommunicative” message embedded in these recollections of the Special Period, which was more pertinent to my friends than reflecting upon their steadfast or shifting political ideologies and allegiances (Bateson, 1972, p.178).

Discussing the Special Period had entailed commenting upon the shifting relationships and reorganization of their social environment, which was now routinely marked by improvisation and informality, as opposed to depending more heavily upon institutional nurturance and administration. The inter-actions they described thus revealed what I believe to be a widespread transformation recognized by citizens more generally, and a shift towards improvising their own networks and methods of making do as they negotiate this political economic and “moral breakdown” (Simoni, 2016, p.458). In this way, there has been a “passive revolution” which has unfolded “beneath the surface of society” (Gramsci, 1992, p.46) and has continued to move “alongside” a “revolutionary framework” (Boudreault-Fournier, 2008, p.354). Passive, in the sense that individual self-sufficiency while seemingly a ‘contradictory’ value for the Communist Party to pursue, has been a gradually re-expanding *and* state nurtured response mobilized to cement economic and political stability. Since the Special Period, the government has more willingly made room for self-employment, cultivating a desire for greater deregulation. On the other hand, while reworking the extent to which incorporating market reforms is a necessary “reality”, the impression given by the Communist Party concerning its ideological position as a socialist state performing “revolutionary values” (Wilson, 2014) has also been

sustained through both a selective renewal of tradition and continued stance against imperial domination.

The monument of José Martí, hero of Cuban independence and critic of the overwhelming encroachment of the US across Latin America—which stands in Havana, contrasts quite vividly against “the abundance of cars and the variety of brand-name products” (Fernández, 2009, p.185) that now populate the Cuban social landscape. But it is through this ‘pragmatic idealist’ approach, as Gordy (2015) describes it, that Castro and the Communist Party have ‘mixed and matched’ conceptual dispositions characteristically associated with presumably antithetical political economic systems (Maurer, 2002, p.649). While not a novel phenomenon in Cuba, what has changed is the degree to which this practice of blending has visibly expanded since the collapse of the Soviet Union as it has become ‘the routine’ rather than ‘the exception’.

By interweaving bits of the conversation I had that day on the patio and comparing these lived experiences alongside some historical work, throughout the follow pages I seek to unpack how a distinctly Cuban form of *arreglar* greatly *expanded* in terms of its social recognition during the Special Period. I stress the idea that the concept of *arreglar* did not in fact emerge during this time period but has always been an important dynamic of Cubans’ way of being, and, that the pragmatic orientation which is often credited to important revolutionary actors has also been a fundamental characteristic of the everyday inter-actions transpiring between non-state actors. In this respect, the theoretical approach I take throughout this chapter as well as the entirety of my thesis, considers the relationship between ‘individual’ and ‘structure’, or ‘society’ as a “structure of structures” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.118), as being characterized by a sort of “feedback loop” (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p.38), whereby the improvisations of state actors are not only experienced but reacted to in various ways by citizens—perhaps incorporated or rejected,

grudgingly modified or vehemently preserved. These reactions subsequently elicit further responses and improvisations by other actors—including the government—producing the self-generating and self-referential process referred to in performance theory as ‘feed loop’. I understand this continuous circular relationship as being one of the principles underwriting what society is as well as how it moves forward historically, with moral breakdowns such as the Special Period being extra-ordinary events that compel actors to reevaluate certain prejudices and forms of authority. Making a “demand for coherence” these events fuel the modification of interpretation and comprehension regarding what reality is (Fairfield, 2011, p.76), and also visions of what it might become.

### **3.2 Historical and cultural dimensions of *arreglar***

“*Fue terrible*” [it was terrible] noted Alejandro, drawing out the collective acknowledgement and shared exasperation from the others on the patio as the conversation took on this more solemn character. Cuban friends of mine who were sitting on the many chairs that occupied the space of the patio would take up this theme concerning the conditions they confronted during the Special Period. More specifically, they highlighted how the people would very quickly have to learn to make do without access to the same level of state provisions they had once relied upon. As the conversation continued, Alejandro’s daughter Maria would exclaim how she still remembered when her father would boil plantain peels which he would then eat. “*Que asqueroso*” [how disgusting] in reference to the taste of boiled plantain peels, explaining that she was still unable to comprehend how he could have stomached eating food she described as being essentially inedible due to its bitter flavor. The room would reach an agreement regarding the sentiment that life had been nearly impossible for Cubans during this period. At this point, Maria grimaced as she physically re-enacted the sense of distressed shock she had felt

when having realized that her mother would routinely go without eating her entire portion of rationed goods—already having had greatly diminished—so that the rest of her family might have a bit more to eat.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and dissolution of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) during the late 1980s and early 1990s would call upon Cubans to confront these pervasive as well as abrupt changes in their everyday lives (Pérez, 2011, p.291). This historical event signalled the end of a politically forged alliance. And, while not always harmonious due to ideological differences between Castro and Moscow<sup>17</sup>, the relationship they had cemented sustained a political economic connection which had been vital to the perseverance of the revolutionary government’s moral project, and, by way of correspondence, the reality that Cubans had grown accustomed to. For Cubans, the Special Period would become the Event—with a capital E—that would call upon them to modify the way in which they frame their everyday circumstances in response to the radical transformation of organizational principles that would unfold during the years that followed. And, as the “spatial and temporal bounding of a set of interactive messages” where “modified rules” would come into play (Bateson, 1972, p.191), this historical event would henceforth be remembered as *the* source of persisting instability and distress that continues to inspire the social understanding that it is *por necesidad* that people engage in this work of *arreglar*. As José explained, before the Special Period “we lived like people over there, in Canada, but from one day to the next everything changed”. While this statement may or may not have been an exact comparison between these disparate living situations, I continue to understand it as being meant to index for me the magnitude of change realized between the decades lived after the triumph of the Revolution and

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<sup>17</sup> See: Eckstein, 2003; Gordy 2015; Pérez, 2011; Bain, 2005.

leading up to the Special Period, in juxtaposition to the years which followed. Having completed her ethnographic field work between the years 1988 and 1990, Rosendahl (1997) provides support for this interpretation, explaining how Cubans had enjoyed a “comfortable standard of living” during the years immediately prior to the Special Period, having stable access to rationed goods and necessities (p.29). At the same time, however, Rosendahl also points out how scarcity was a difficulty faced even before the Special Period, as Cubans had “too much money since there was little to buy” due to “deficiencies in distribution” brought about predominately by the trade embargo (ibid, p.176). However, while appearing in the foreground as the event which has seemingly cemented the social recognition of uncertainty as the defining characteristic of Cubans’ current living conditions, the Special Period also cannot be disentangled from the specificities of the island’s broader historical trajectory.

In the decades following the Revolution, Castro had attempted to move the island towards economic diversification but had ultimately been unsuccessful in escaping a historically shaped dependence upon sugar. The “inherited economy” (Eckstein, 2003, p.3) which the revolutionary government had won over sustained a significant and problematic historical connection that stretched back to the outcome of the Haitian revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, where Cuba had assumed Haiti’s role as the dominant sugar producing nation across the global market (Suchlicki, 1997: 58). And, although independence leaders during the 19<sup>th</sup> century had ultimately mobilized against the Spanish, declaring the Cuban insurrection an “economic war” in 1895 and orchestrating “sugar fields [as] battlefields” with the planter class becoming the enemy, the productive activity of sugar cultivation would persist throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Pérez, 2011, p.123).

Intended to mark the beginning of an independent republic, the signing of the Platt Amendment in 1901 introduced the beginning of a period between independence and revolution that has been described by many as an epoch of “neocolonialism” and the formation of a “pseudo-republic” (Chomsky, 2015, p.20; Kapcia, 2008, p.8; Wilson, 2014, p.39). The amendment granted the US control over Cuba’s foreign and economic policy, as well as the “right of intervention under certain circumstances” in island affairs as a measure to ‘preserve’ Cuban independence (Sanchez Cobos et al., 2014, p.16). But activity on the island was also largely coordinated by the US through a new strategic approach of governing at a distance, as the spread of capitalist relations on the island allowed for a different form of economic control. Cubans were now employed predominantly in the activity of wage-labor for industrial complexes often owned by the US as sugar production would continue to be organized through large-scale production sites known as *centrales* rather than plantations<sup>18</sup> (Kapcia, 2008, p.12). Other activities such as tourism also proliferated as Cuba became a prominent vacation destination for North Americans, and alongside this development came the spread of other practices such as prostitution (Pérez, 1999; Roland, 2011, p.29-31; Skwiot, 2010). And despite slavery having been formally abolished in 1886, racial tensions remained high as political laws were established that prevented non-whites from engaging in particular activities<sup>19</sup>. For some Cubans who lived through the triumph of the Revolution, the victory in 1959 remains a symbolic reminder of both the unjust limitations which preceded it and the expanding possibilities that followed for people of color. As a friend once explained to me, “although there is still racism today, before the revolution there was “*racismo oficial*” [official racism]. She also emphasized how it had been

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<sup>18</sup> *Centrales* are large centralized sugar mills that grind cane from multiple surrounding suppliers (Scott, 2014, p.87).

<sup>19</sup> In 1912, black Cubans formed the Independent Party of Color to stage a political protest against systemic discrimination; after being violently suppressed Cuba’s blacks were condemned to a “permanent second class-status in the new Republic” (Kapcia, 2008, p.16)

illegal for people of color such as herself to be employed in many forms of labor, and, how her own education and employment as a university professor, having only been a teenager in 1959, would have otherwise remained illegal if it were not for the Revolution.

It is useful to pause for a moment during this pre-revolutionary time frame to gain further insight into this history of *arreglar* as a Cuban performance which I interpret throughout my thesis as the blending of different—occasionally conflicting and seemingly contradictory—forms. The famous Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz produced a sociological analysis in 1947 where he described how “the real history of Cuba is the history of its intermeshed transculturations” (Ortiz & Fernández, 1995, p.98). In line with an earlier analysis he had developed about Cuban culture, where Ortiz described how Cuba

...being an *ajiaco*, its people is not a finished stew, but rather a constant cooking. From the dawn of its history until the hours that now scurry by, the pot of Cuba has always known the renewing entrance of exogenous roots, fruits, and meats, an incessant gush of heterogeneous substances. This is why the composition is changed and *cubanidad* has a different flavor and consistency depending on whether it is scooped from the bottom, from the fat belly of the pot, or from its mouth, where the vegetables are still raw and the clear broth bubbles (Ortiz et al., 2014, p.463)

From my perspective, Ortiz’s concepts of intermeshed transculturations should be read alongside his metaphor of Cuba being an *ajiaco*, to understand that “[*cubanidad*] is not only in the result, but also in the complex process of its very formation, disintegrative and integrative” (ibid, p.463).

With these ideas in mind, we might develop a different understanding of what transformation signifies with respect to Cuban ontology. Disentangling the concept of transformation from notions of linear progress, it might be redefined not as the transitioning from one category to the next but as a constant and open stewpot-like process of complex transmutations. For example, we might consider how black culture in Cuba became “equated with mainstream Cuban culture” during the 1940s and 1950s, first in the “eyes of tourists, and

eventually by Cubans themselves” (Roland, 2011, p.29). American tourists seeking authenticity off the beaten track, but also believing that it was to be found in ‘traditional’ AfroCuban forms, provided the inspiration and economic room for many Cubans of color to engage in cultural performances which had become stigmatized in Cuban society. It is also possible to reach further back in time for more examples. During independence, for instance, Emilio Sabourín raised funds through baseball to provide support for José Martí’s<sup>20</sup> populist movement, and, in doing so, inspired various networks of young Cubans in Florida to engage in the same purposeful activities (Carter, 2005, p.254). Baseball, a game popularized by *criollos* (Cuban born elites) to naturalize an identity of *cubanidad* and foster the image of an independent Cuba, had been imported to the island in the suitcases of *criollos* studying in the US (ibid, 247-8). And, in the letters between *criollos* it had been described as “enlightened spectacle”, in contradistinction to the Spanish practice of bullfighting which was devaluated as “barbaric”. It was also a practice that could be appropriated by the masses “[offering] the possibility of social mobility and blurring of class lines” (Pérez, 1994, p.506-8). Transmutation, however, does not always result in these ideal mixtures. The same friend who had praised the Revolution for having moved to overcome at least some of the more structural racial prejudices, was also distressed by the appearance of a contemporary distinction between Cuban and tourist. The latter, she explained, had become privileged by authorities because of the hard currency they brought to the island—granted certain permissions on the island that even Cubans were not. For instance, when tourism became greatly encouraged in the 1990s, Cubans were not legally allowed to visit the resorts which were built unless they were employees. And, although this law has more recently been

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<sup>20</sup> José Julián Martí Y Pérez (1853-1895) is considered “the founding hero of Cuban independence” (López, 2014, p.xi). Killed on a Cuban battlefield during the final war for independence, he was also considered the “intellectual author of the revolution” by Fidel Castro (ibid, p.xiii). Martí’s vision for the future encompassed bringing democracy and freedom across the Americas.

repealed, Cubans still face major economic barriers in not being able to afford visiting the world-renowned beaches the island has to offer.

Identifying this connection between *arreglar* and transculturation as socioeconomic and cultural transformation that is about blending (or transmutation) rather than transitioning<sup>21</sup>, is quite significant in an understanding of Cuban history. It allows room for improvisation to unfold through individuals' activities that synthesize past and present qualities, as they expand their circle of comprehension forward, learning to make do and overcome immediate challenges which destabilize certain prejudices. And, as I elaborated in the previous chapter through the use of a jazz metaphor, this is the Cuban style—a style characterized by its polyrhythmic<sup>22</sup> methodology rather than its linear movement from communism to capitalism as a predictable sequence of melodies. Framing reality according to these models *for* action (i.e. the economic man or the new—socialist—man described in my introduction) tends to envelope and obscure the improvisational peculiarities that almost seem necessary to sustain them.

Following the announcement of their triumph on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1959, the provisional government passed 1500 decrees within the span of 9 months, many of which were intended to redress the social injustices which had persisted or emerged throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gordy, 2015, p.61). Fidel would also seek out better trade agreements, accepting oil sold by the Soviets for a price lower than that which was offered through Western companies. In response, US owned refineries on the island refused to process the crude oil now being imported by their global rival. Following this reaction, Fidel would decide to nationalize these refineries,

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<sup>21</sup> For a greater discussion on the problematics of discussing some communist or socialist states as simply transitioning to capitalism (see Barsegian, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Polyrhythmic is defined as: “Involving or using two or more different rhythms, metres, etc., esp. at the same time.” (OED Online).

and, over time, all US and foreign based enterprises—a move that would provoke Washington to impose the economic embargo against Cuba which has lasted over fifty years (Eckstein, 2003, p.31-2; Pérez, 2011, p.247). After countering the threat of US hostilities and the failed invasion which unfolded at the *Bahía de Cochinos* [Bay of Pigs] on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1961, the Cuban government would continue to align itself more intimately with the Soviet Union. Fidel would declare only several days following the failed incursion that ““this is a socialist regime””, and, by November of that same year, that he was “a Marxist-Leninist” and would remain one “until the last day of my life” (Pérez, 2011, p.251-2). It was also during the early-to-mid 1960s that Fidel progressively set into motion an ideological plan for Cuba’s “push for communism” (Eckstein, 2003). A move that was, at least in part, instigated by US hostilities.

Throughout these years, Cubans were called upon to support ‘communist’ reforms such as redistributive mechanisms, the state’s absorption of private property and the nationalization of productive activity, as well as the rejection of social distinctions such as those based on race, gender and class. Castro broadcasted to the population his vision for the future which combined ideas from Marxist thought as well as Cuban independence heroes such as José Martí<sup>23</sup> (Eckstein, 2003, p.31-41). However, as part of the effort to fund this push for communism, Castro continued to make ‘reluctant’ use of sugar cultivation *and* the global market. To accelerate this transition the goal was set to reach a yearly cultivation rate of 10 million tons of sugar by 1970, and, to inspire the population to commit to such strenuous labor demands, Castro appealed to the theoretical work elaborated by Che Guevara concerning the need to “build the new man” (Guevara, 1988, p.5). The Cuban population was called upon to privilege “moral

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<sup>23</sup> The connection between Castro, the revolutionary movement and José Martí is quite significant. In his speech History Will Absolve Me, he mentions how Martí was “the inspirer of the 26<sup>th</sup> of July”, the failed uprising at the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba on July 26, 1953 (Castro, 1967, p.20).

incentives over material ones and collective material incentives over individual ones” (ibid), as part of what many critics would deplore as an ‘idealistic’ vision for the future. However, as Gordy (2015) explains, there were also pragmatic reasons for this improvisation. It “made sense” for the Revolution to draw upon its greatest resource—of human capital—in light of the absence of industrial infrastructure and/or finances that would be necessary to build a reasonably self-sufficient national economy in a relatively short period of time (p.91-3). Moral incentives thus indexed not only an idealistic vision for the future, but also the historical contingencies which the revolutionary government could work through while aspiring to remake Cuban society.

Failing to achieve this goal, the Cuban population would only reach a yearly cultivation rate of 8.5 million tons of sugar by 1970. More problematic, however, were the reasons why they missed their mark as well as the subsequent consequences. Soviet cutbacks in subsidies due to ideological differences, as well as the freefalling price of sugar that had at least partly been a consequence of Cuba’s flooding of the global market, and, a growing sense of alienation regarding the population’s revolutionary fervor. The failure had less to do with the collective contribution made as it did with the vulnerability drawn out in depending upon sugar to fund the Revolution. By the late 1960s people grew weary of the material sacrifices that were demanded of them with worker absenteeism as well as black market activity becoming more pervasive as a consequence. Castro’s response to the failure was to offer his resignation, an offer which the attending Cuban crowd evidently refused (Eckstein, 2003, p.39-41).

Following this failed ‘ideological push’, during the beginning of the 1970s Castro would set into motion his reactionary strategy, a “retreat to socialism” that entailed the need for further revision work. This led to closer ties with the Soviet Union and a greater approximation of their economic model, as well as increased political participation through the OPP (Organs of

People's Power)<sup>24</sup>. Despite the Sovietisation of its macro policies, however, everyday life in Cuba intermeshed more conspicuously with the US. The physical proximity allowed Cubans to pickup radio and television signals and they learned more English than they did Russian. A retreat to socialism also signified the restoration of *some* material incentives, increased experimentation with markets and the legalization of some forms of private-service activities such as automobile repair work. Upward trending sugar prices throughout the 1970s would also allow for greater investment in “social goals” (Chomsky, 2015, p.49) such as education and health, and while diversification was reemphasized through activities such as increased contracting of human capital abroad—for both economic and political reasons, sugar remained important and its production actually increased throughout the decade (ibid, p.46-9; Eckstein, 2003, p.42-7).

Towards the end of the decade, Castro would continue to sprinkle this “dash of capitalism” to the Communist Party’s strategic approach, encouraging foreign investment and joint ventures in 1977, which in 1982 would undergo reform to grant “foreign investors up to 49 percent ownership in local enterprises” (Eckstein, 2003, p.46). Despite the incorporation of capitalist practices, however, thinking of this stage as a leap towards the free market neglects how many of the foundational socialist innovations like state distributed rations and free health care persisted. Moreover, the manner in which this creative intermeshing was explained also revealed how past ideals had not been entirely abandoned, even by those who supported the incorporation of these market mechanisms. Advocates for developing this “economic calculus” discussed the incorporation of practices previously characterized as ‘evil’, as “making conscious

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<sup>24</sup> The Organs of People’s Power consists of “the electoral system, and the administrative political division” that is practiced in Cuba (Salazar & Breña, 2014, p.18). The population takes part in local neighbourhood meetings, voting for a local representative who then participates in municipal councils and these delegates elect representatives to the provincial and national assemblies (Chomsky, 2015, p.47).

use” of a “knowledge of certain objective economic laws, such as the law of value” (Gordy, 2015, p.112), rather than confessing a faithful adherence to these ‘market principles’.

It wasn’t until 1986, a year marked by particularly “poor economic performance”, that Castro embarked upon his “Rectification Process”, re-emphasizing Che Guevara’s moral incentives and an “anti-market orientation” to confront the proliferation of social issues such as income inequality as well as declining productivity (Farber, 2011, p.147-9). This was not a return to communism, however, as Castro “warned against idealist errors of the past”. Articles which appeared in *Granma* (the state-owned newspaper) throughout the 1980s, blamed firms and their accountants for the poor execution of this economic calculus rather than the principles it espoused (Gordy, 2015, p.118-20). Private activity was increasingly restricted although it continued to be permitted for individuals in some sectors, whereas *mercados liberados* [liberated markets]<sup>25</sup> were expanded to increase the possibilities for making purchases in hard currency. The government would also reintroduce the voluntary labor program of the early 1970s, as well as having increased its dedication towards seeking out foreign investment by creating *sociedades anonimas* (semiautonomous state agencies) to carry out this task (Eckstein, 2003, p.62-70). Ultimately, this pragmatic disposition was insufficient in preventing Fidel’s announcement in 1990 that Cuba had entered a special period in a time of peace. “Special”, not so much in the sense that it involved a novel incorporation of capitalist practices of accumulation, as Fidel and the Communist Party had never truly done away with the social formation of these productive forces. Intermeshing concepts had allowed the government to *arreglar* the difficulties faced by

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<sup>25</sup> While going into ethnographic detail in the following chapter, for now it is relevant to note that although these state-owned market sites are typically referred to as ‘parallel markets’ across the literature on Cuba, I have chosen to refer to them as *mercados liberados* [liberated markets] because it was how several of my Cuban friends cited them when describing to me what these are. The “parallel market system” was first established in the 1970s by the government so it might sell “surplus quantities of both rationed goods and luxury items [that] were made available through these outlets, at nonsubsidized prices set by the state” (Eckstein, 2003, p.65).

Cuban society since the triumph of the Revolution, but in doing so they had also surrendered room for the “further forward movement” and gradual ubiquity across the island of these capitalist practices (Gramsci, 1992, p.106). What did change, however, was how pervasive and intense this polyrhythmic performance would become across everyday life.

The deepening reliance on the global market greatly accentuated the difficulty in having to confront the loss of trade subsidies provided by Moscow who, as of 1991, refused to pay for goods at above global market prices. Moreover, it also meant that goods which had been provided at lower than market valuation would no longer be available at these reduced prices. Things such as trucks and buses, replacement parts for existing machinery and supplies for productive activities became increasingly difficult to purchase compounding the difficulties confronted by Cubans and the revolutionary government. “Production floundered” as there was a large decline in necessary items such as fertilizers, animal feed, herbicides and machinery, and by the year 1993 the total cultivated sugar would only reach 4.2 million tons—a decline from 8.2 million tons in 1991 (Pérez, 2011, p.294). From a quantitative perspective, Cuba lost 70 percent of its purchasing power between 1989 and 1992, and there was a drop in average daily consumption estimated amounting to 33 percent by 1993—a presumed reduction in the average daily intake for Cubans from approximately 2800 to 1800 calories (Andaya, 2009, p.358; Eckstein, 2003, p.93). While people might not have been facing conditions of extreme starvation, they were indeed experiencing hunger due to this rapid decrease in food intake. Moreover, the drastic drop in foods available simultaneously signified a decline in variety that led to the spread of malnutrition affecting the eyes and legs for many Cubans (i.e. scurvy)(Rosendahl, 1997, p.169). Solutions had to be “invented” quickly if the Revolution was to survive.

### 3.3 The patterning of *arreglar*

It was in response to these circumstances that learning to overcome conditions of underdevelopment and being undersupplied through highly imaginative performances reached “fetishistic proportions” in everyday life for Cubans (Venegas, 2010, p.36). As we continued to discuss the Special Period, José and his partner Laurena brought up how electricity was routinely unavailable for up to 14 hours at a time, blackouts being a relatively common occurrence under the austerity measures incorporated by the state (Rosendahl, 1997, p.169). Both discussed how they learned to make do under these austere conditions by way of combining alternative energy sources. Learning to use wood, gas or electricity to cook, for instance, would allow them to reach a similar result through different energy pathways. In this sense, having to make do with what was momentarily available to them, they would be inspired to modify their epistemological approach to everyday life—improvising to subdue current circumstances of uncertainty. For instance, on the occasions that two energy sources would be available concurrently, one could also potentially be saved for future use. Here, Laurena described how petrol could be used for candles fabricated from empty toothpaste tubes as these were still made from aluminum in the early 1990s. Producing an incision lengthwise down the empty tube, flattening this material out and then reshaping it into a container allowed this toothpaste tube turned candle to be continually refilled with petrol and used as a light source by igniting a piece of cloth strung from inside it. At this point José interjected with a smile, exclaiming how those who were particularly good at inventing even pierced two looped holes at the top of these containers so that they might be hung to metal coat hangers, lifted and moved around as well as suspended in different locations without the person having to touch the hot aluminum directly. “Yes José”, Laurena replied,

“*todos sabemos que eres un experto en inventar*” [we all know that you’re an expert at inventing”].

Stories like these would situate the Special Period as the historical time frame whereby the notion that in Cuba, *la gente tiene que arreglar sus cosas* expanded quite dramatically as a socially recognizable and “legendary element” across Cuban society that could also be judged in terms of the perceived quality of its performance (Venegas, 2010, p.35). Gradually assimilated under this guise of the performative, as the normal way of doing things *por necesidad*, many Cubans expressed how they essentially have had to become skilled “experts” in what a friend once described to me as being a capacity to “*inventar de la nada*” [to invent out of thin air]. Skilled in the sense that they interpret their lives following the unfolding of this historical event as having more often than not required them to work “Cuban-style magic”, to “adapt” to the drastic socioeconomic transformations as *inventar* “reached unbelievable levels” and as they continuously work to imagine new ways to *resolver* everyday indeterminacy (Rosendahl, 1997, p.175). Significantly, stories such as these find themselves emerging not only in daily discourses, between individuals at home on their patios, but are also broadcasted and mythologised at a national level. The story of the “repatriated chicken” offers one example of this occurrence. During the 1990s, Cuban crew members who worked the daily flight between Havana and Mexico City learned that “classifying the chickens as ‘repatriated’” meant that unused chicken dinners could be redistributed amongst workers rather than discarded. Under the law, “unused meals did not meet the criteria for food destined for Cuba”, however, classifying the chickens as repatriated would allow them to bypass this regulation. When radio host Arnaldo Coro exclaimed to Cubans that ““a country that invented the repatriated chicken can make anything work””

(Venegas, 2010, p.35-6), he was symbolically indexing this practical social skill of *arreglar* and the performative cloak under which it had become draped through its normalization.

The routinization of *arreglar*, however, does not entail that solutions which are encountered remain in place as the ‘norm’. Confronting dilemmas that need to be fixed means devising “solutions to better meet needs” and desires, but every solution also precipitates new problems—reveals “new weaknesses” (Winslow, 2016, p.225). The performance of finding and/or developing solutions, therefore, does not presuppose the fixing of definite solutions. Intended to negotiate the indeterminacy that forms the background of everyday life, it is the performances and their respective expression of “creative energies” which are ‘judged’ as either appropriate or not for this social category of *arreglar* (Graeber, 2001, p.67; Lambek, 2013). A great improviser is not necessarily someone who creates something spectacularly unfamiliar. As with great jazz players, they “enrich performances with minute, controlled fluctuations in their interpretation of the beat” (Berliner, 1994, p.245). In this sense, José judged his ‘superior’ performance based on its “transformative potential” (Graeber, 2001, p.47) to reach what he interpreted as being a better, more desirable solution by improvising upon a design which was already in play. The candles he produced and which express this creative energy that underscores his performance of *arreglar*, reveal a dynamic potential to cope with historical contingencies as well as contemporary structural limitations in a way that moves between the boundaries of these determinations. Like the communist party adding dashes of capitalism throughout the Revolution’s history, the people also add their own dashes of improvisation.

The performance of *arreglar* might subsequently entail approaching the same things differently. As fluid and dynamic, “highly changeable over time”, things are purposed and repurposed to meet shifting needs and desires (Winslow, 2016, p.218). Earlier I mentioned that

José had discussed how the use of motorbikes during the Special Period was most often brought to a standstill as people did not have access to maintenance parts and fuel. In this respect, scarcity in the realm of transportation was also confronted through this work of pragmatic and symbolic revision. Bicycles were reimagined by the government under the need for a “transportation revolution” and they would be advertised as the “Vehicle for the Twenty-First Century” in copies of *Granma*. Their widespread distribution was explained not only as a measure to replace automobiles and allow people to get to work, but also to promote good health (Eckstein, 2003, p.111; Pérez, 2011, p.294).

But while performances within the political sphere might shape/inform citizens’ capacities to *inventar*—for instance, with the passing of certain policies, the dialog between the social and the political does not always reach or remain at a consensus regarding how economic performances ought to be enacted. On that day, on Alejandro’s patio, the bicycle (not the motorbike) which was leaning on the wall behind Maria was also indexed as a symbolic reminder of the struggle faced during 1990s. Bicycles, Alejandro’s wife explained to me, were disassembled for parts. The chain was especially useful to serve as a belt to hold up people’s pants as an undesired weight loss had become a reality for many Cubans. But other parts might also be used to different ends. The wheels were also valuable in their malleability, for instance, to craft footwear which Laurena would explain was not very well suited to the Cuban climate as the black rubber would absorb the heat whilst walking, causing blisters. This is not to say that the repurposing of state distributed bicycles to fashion clothing items can be defined as an overtly political act meant to undermine revolutionary designs. It was done, as my friends explained, *por necesidad*. In this sense, the performances of citizens—as they’ve ‘invented’ solutions—are distinctly situated performances that respond to the immediacy of different albeit interrelated

conditions of precarity. Bicycling, Cuban political leaders would claim, “guaranteed ‘health for all’ and contributed to a modern ‘ecotopia’ by not polluting” (Eckstein, 2003, p.111). However, bicycling also increases appetite and burns more calories, which, during the Special Period, was problematic for the majority of Cubans.

Throughout the 1990s, rapid and extensive transformations such as the transportation revolution were incorporated by the government in an effort to confront the urgency of unfulfilled economic needs that were no longer being met as Soviet provided subsidies evaporated and Washington tightened the sanctions it imposed through the blockade<sup>26</sup> (Pérez, 2011, p.299). Cubans were made aware through public announcement of the difficulties that this period had inevitably brought about and were called upon to perform their work in a more diligent and efficient manner. To inspire the population Castro recalibrated Che Guevara’s theoretical ideas, this time by ‘sprinkling’ more of José Martí’s humanistic perspective<sup>27</sup>. Thus, another hegemonic revision of ‘tradition’ as “a deliberately selective and connecting process which offers a historical and cultural ratification of a contemporary order” was to be performed (Williams, 1977, p.116). The underlying problem, however, remained essentially the same. There was a need to encounter ways to incentivize the population to increase their productivity. And, while Castro would still index the past by maintaining through his discourse that the “instrument” used to mobilize the masses “must be moral in character”, what would have to be revised was this “...correct use of the material incentive” (Guevara, 1988, p.5).

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<sup>26</sup> For instance, the Torricelli act passed in 1992 forbade foreign subsidiaries of US companies from trading with Cuba.

<sup>27</sup> In his fight for independence, José Martí would defer to the notions of *luchar* (to struggle) and *sacrificio* (sacrifice). “Shaped by a political idealism”, Martí envisioned “a political utopia based on *lucha*, and stressed unity and morality over individual rationality and self-interest” (Brotherton, 2005, p.359).

Regulatory schemes were revised and reevaluated by Castro as well as party members, as they described a seemingly contradictory need in having to “think like capitalists but continue being socialists” through the expression of a new slogan of “capitalism yes, capitalism no” (Eckstein, 2003, p.103). Carter (2008a) describes how there was a transformation in the activities of some party members, from “party apparatchiks into business managers” as their purpose shifted towards the recruitment of foreign capital investment in economic projects such as tourism, and in extractive industries such as the joint mining ventures it established with Canadian companies. In the realms of sport and medicine, the government also contracted Cuban talent to work abroad (Carter, 2008a, p.203-4). And, as a response to public pressure “contained private activity” was also authorized (Eckstein, 2003, p.107). But despite the early 1990s often being cited as the historical moment where Cuba suddenly became a ‘mixed’ economy, the encroachment of capital might be better said to have intensified—rather than having emerged—during these years.

Likely the most significant of these capitalist practices, the effects of tourism have been extensively documented throughout the literature on Cuba. To put it succinctly, Pérez (2011) describes how “[this] was a dollar tourism in a *peso* economy”, and the very rapid influx of tourists produced sharp as well as very visible contrasts with the living arrangements Cubans were currently experiencing (p.309). This quick and radical proliferation of capitalist practices of accumulation, as well as the subsequent uneven development for those who did and did not have access to these highly remunerative forms of labor, would re-exacerbate class, racial and gender dynamics. And while these may not have disappeared entirely following the Revolution, they had been negotiated in a way that many had found desirable. Castro would defend this reworking of political economic arrangements, arguing for an anti-dogmatic position that came to terms

with the necessity of allowing capitalism to contribute to the building of socialism. However, this was not the first time he had done so throughout the history of the Revolution (Eckstein, 2003, p.102). One only needs to look between the headings of major events throughout Cuba's history that indicate a 'transition' into some other form of economic organization to recognize revolutionaries' continuously pragmatic dispositions and improvisational tendencies. Throughout the 1980s, for example, Castro played between both fields of the geopolitical and economic divide, re-exporting Soviet subsidized oil to the West for a profit (ibid, p.88-92).

While not 'Special', therefore, in the sense that this was the origin point of capital incursion throughout Cuban society, it is possible to identify during the Special Period both a dramatic growth in this legendary Cuban ability to 'create magic' (at both the state and individual level), as well as another revision in state discourses concerned with increasing worker motivation and productivity. It was during the early 1990s that Castro "hinted at incentives for all workers 'who do more, and a little less in the rationing card to those who do less'" (Eckstein, 2003, p.109). An idea which shares an intimate connection with market values of individual self-sufficiency, and, which the Communist Party seems to be creeping towards today as it explains how

Work is a right and a duty, as well as a source of motivation for every citizen's self-accomplishment, and must be *remunerated in accordance to its quantity and quality* (Communist Party of Cuba, 2011 [my emphases])

This is quite a significant change in comparison to the ideal proposed during the early 1960s which suggested that people should not need the market or money salaries to gain access to goods and services (Chomsky, 2015, p.44). Concurrently, it was also during the early 1990s that the black-market economy realized its largest "boom" in activity. As a social response to this individualized call to action, people now felt it necessary to extend beyond the structural delimitations of the institutions within which they worked in order to reach a more desirable

standard of living (Kapcia, 2008, p.158). While the coffee that José and I had been served was obtained through *la bodega*, the “good coffee”—which was not mixed with soya beans and came from *la tienda*—was marked by prices most could not afford if they relied solely upon a state salary. On the other hand, activity pursued through *la bolsa negra* [the black market] continues to allow people to purchase and sell these superior quality goods which have made their way across this informal economy often through the theft conducted by state employees. While clearly illegal, these acts are also entangled with a moral dilemma. Products such as coffee beans are produced in Cuba by workers paid wages which do not actually permit them to purchase these in their higher quality forms. For the most part, these higher priced goods are designated for export, but they are also sold at *la tienda* being affordable for those who maintain access to more remunerative forms of labor in Cuba such as tourism or who receive remittances from family and friends living abroad, as well as the many tourists who frequent this popular island destination. Thus, despite promises made by the government in 2010 to prevent “the emergence of a new class based on the ‘concentration of property and wealth’” (LeoGrande, 2017, p.357), differential access to products such as these index the nourishment of class distinctions on the island stretching at least as far back as the 1990s.

I’d like to make a second pause here to consider the black market as activity which actually appears as sets of relations through which people *arreglar* what would otherwise be an even greater unequal access to goods. Not only through the greater affordance these networks provide individual consumers to purchase superior goods at reduced prices, but also via the collective sharing between family, friends and *socios* which unfolds thereafter—during consumption. On various occasions, for instance, when I would ask friends where they had purchased the ground coffee they had brewed for us, they would chuckle whilst replying “*la*

*bolsa negra*”. The black market, however, is an ephemeral space. It is not some fixed occult location, but instead symbolically indexes the interactions between individuals working both within and outside formal institutions organizing transactions at some ‘place’ and some ‘time’. Thus, while being “outside of the scope of public regulation”, these interactions are by necessity social as well as intimately connected to the formal or “first” economy (Pérez-López, 1995, p.7-12). But the black market also reveals something of a contradiction if we follow a market logic too closely. Through it the spread of private activity as well as an official push for citizens towards independence and self-sufficiency has been counteracted by these performances that move fluently between the formal and informal sectors of the economy. And, this is achieved through cementing social connectivity rather than playing out a clandestine individualism. Secrecy in these transactions and the movement of goods between the formal economy and this second or informal economy takes place between individuals who, if they are not friends, are at the very least *socios* as these exchanges unfold through a degree of trust. Moreover, even after making an illicit purchase of these black-market goods and being grasped by the hands of the ‘individual’ consumer, these often remain social things.

Shleifer and Vishny (1992) have critiqued socialist economies arguing that “the reason for pervasive shortages is self-interested behavior by ministry bureaucrats who set the planned prices and output. These bureaucrats intentionally plan shortages in order to encourage bribes from rationed consumers” (p.3). The “major theme” of their analysis thus contrasts their own assumption which posits that “the planners of socialist economies are self-interested” with those they problematize as being prevalent across the literature on market socialism and assumes “a benevolent central planner” (ibid, p.15). While I did not have an opportunity to interact with these planners of the Cuban economy, I did spend time with several state employees meeting

them as friends of friends at social gatherings. What I noted, however, problematizes both positions that take as the starting point of their analysis the assumption that planners are *either* benevolent or self-interested. Throughout my fieldwork, I observed as well as was told about the extensive exchange of goods between the state sector economy and the informal economy. These were often carried out by state-employed workers. For instance, one day arriving at the home of a friend during the final days of carnival, my partner and I took part in a friendly discussion with several others surrounding a large keg of beer (36 liters). This conversation took place on the apartment owner's patio several stories above ground level, and was therefore out of plain sight. Those who were present had their cups continuously refilled by the host. But it was only later during the day, while we all sat on the living room couch, that the means of procuring the keg of beer was explained. The owner of the home had a friend who managed a state-owned restaurant, and one of the responsibilities this friend was tasked with was to send accounts to the government of the goods necessary to keep the restaurant stocked and running. While not a planner of the economy, this person did order things such as beer kegs at a reduced price for state enterprises so that they might then be sold to customers at the state-regulated price for consumers<sup>28</sup>. Inventory-keeping, however, is a fickle performance, and managers might take the opportunity of ordering one or two extra kegs per month to be sold personally at a discounted price—to those they trust will not reveal their secret. Setting the price of these excess kegs in between that of the reduced state-distributed price and that of standardized retail price, the beer keg might then be purchased at a price *more* affordable by a greater portion of the population. For instance, those who are employed at beer producing factories, or, by the host of the party held that afternoon—a doctor. But after making purchases from, or bribing, these state workers

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<sup>28</sup> Most state-run establishments sell goods at regulated prices that are consistent. For example, one can of beer would cost 1 dollar in a *tienda* or at a restaurant.

for goods, actors do not necessarily ‘de-socialize’ and appropriate these things for personal consumption. These goods often remain ‘social’, shared within families and between networks of friends—which might include the person who sold them the beer or even a visiting anthropologist from abroad<sup>29</sup>.

It appears both essentializing and reductionist to assume that universally the actions of individuals such as planners would be motivated solely by self-interest *or* benevolence, as if their performance is forced to follow a single linear rhythm without realizing momentary variations or even simultaneously playing multiple conflicting rhythms. Interactions between people that seek to *arreglar* their lived realities often blur a hard distinction between individual gain and collective benefit as they coordinate their own everyday activities and networks in ways that blend formal and informal mechanisms. And, in framing their reality as something which the people *tiene que arreglar*, one notes an important reorganization in this understanding of ‘we’ and the sense of belonging which accompanies this pronoun: from “we, the Revolution” to “we, the people” and “they, *los comunistas*”.

### **3.4 The meaning of revolution**

Alejandro returned to the patio conversation after having left for several minutes to retrieve his old work bucket. He tilted it forward and indexed the bottom of the bucket with his hand positioned as though he were actually holding the meat that he would hide there, and which would then be smuggled out of the processing factory at which he worked. Before having left to go find this symbolic and objective substantiation for his story, he and his daughter had explained to me how their family’s life had improved drastically during the Special Period after

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<sup>29</sup> I include this ethnographic example here to illustrate one of the ways in which the black-market functions. The following chapters delve more deeply into the intersection between the formal and informal dynamics of the economy.

he had encountered this employment, however, not because of what the job had legally afforded him. By fabricating a false compartment out of the same metal material that constituted his work bucket, Alejandro was able to improvise a way to provide his family a better standard of living. On a separate occasion, Gerardo, a visiting Cuban now living and working abroad, told me a similar story. His father, having worked at a beer producing factory, had managed to smuggle beers out by hiding them under his belt, allowing him to sell these to his friends at a lower than state regulated price.

In describing to me these disparate yet similar performances that sought to re-establish a standard of living which had been recognized as ‘normal’ prior to the Special Period, I believe that Alejandro and Gerardo also indexed a historical “‘molecular’ social transformation” which had taken place beneath the surface of society (Gramsci, 1992, p.46). Throughout my time spent in Cuba, I found that people continuously worked between and beyond the boundaries of institutional determinations, making the argument that ‘the system’ does not provide what is necessary for the people to survive. José would even express how “*el comunismo mata las aspiraciones del ser humano*” [communism kills the aspirations of human beings]. But ‘kills’ is perhaps too fatal a concept, as the hegemonic activities coordinated by the Communist Party seem better understood as working between the “‘spontaneous consent’ given” and a “coercive power which ‘legally’ enforces discipline” (ibid, p.12). And, while moving to consolidate their “domination” over the Cuban population through means such as rhetorically establishing a more intimate connection to celebrated independence heroes of the past, the Communist Party has, at the same time, made room for counter-hegemonic forms which mobilize similar market-oriented logics as a way to encounter new solutions to the dilemmas of indeterminacy (Williams, 1977, p.112-3). Ironically, my memory of the first person I noticed wearing communist apparel other

than a t-shirt depicting the face of Che Guevara, was the person who wore a t-shirt with the communist star and sold me stolen cigars from *la fábrica* [the factory]. Thus, to suggest that in Cuba economic interactions are “determined” by a communist, socialist or capitalist ‘base’ and to capture at least somewhat effectively the interactions that unfold in everyday life, would be to employ a very different understanding of what ‘determines’ means. One which would understand determines as “setting bounds” (ibid, p.84), and bounds, as my Cuban friends revealed to me, are porous, they are meant to be played with through this improvisational work of *arreglar*.

Both Alejandro and Gerardo would describe how their families had managed to live reasonably well in San Juan during the Special period. On the other hand, the sisters who ran their own family restaurant had a different perspective to share with me. Having lived through the Special Period in the countryside, they explained how living conditions in the countryside were not as difficult as those of the city since they did not suffer from the same degree of hunger. Life was difficult because physical labor was hard in the countryside, a circumstance exacerbated by the reduction of technological resources such as mechanized means of production as well as other goods like proper working shoes. Factors undoubtedly influenced by the state’s difficulty in acquiring necessities after the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as the economic sanctions being tightened by the US. But across these conversations, a familiar point was raised with respect to this shared sentiment Cubans maintained that the people *tiene que arreglar sus cosas* and restore for themselves a sense of certainty. This feeling signified going beyond the reworking and repurposing of objects and techniques, and, more importantly, it meant sustaining for oneself a social network(s) that collaborates in this work of *arreglar*. A dynamic which connects these two conversations on the patio and at the restaurant, I would discover, is the cementing of friendships and exchange networks between city-dwellers and those who resided in

the countryside. Although hard cash might have lost some of its power to act as a universal equivalent during the early 1990s due to inflation and a general lack of goods in stores, my friends would explain how they had bartered objects of necessity through informal channels. The trade of food from the countryside for clothing and work gear from the city was one example they offered.

The concept of revolution is perhaps ascribed a certain contemporary prejudice which understands it as “the complete upheaval and transformation of society” (Carter, 2014, p.736). However, it has also been understood rather differently in the past, as a “*restoration of* monarchical power to its former righteousness and glory” (Arendt, 1990, p.43 [my emphasis]). Understanding the Cuban revolution as an ongoing process which has unfolded between a “struggle of renewal” and the bringing into being of a new conception of what society might be, i.e. between ‘restoration’ and ‘upheaval’, allows for a more complete picture regarding the proliferation of this claim that one must *arreglar sus cosas* (Gramsci, 1992, p.106). In this sense, the Cuban work of “magic” as José and others referred to it is not activity which is entirely novel—a making or fixing from nothing. Nor does it represent a radical departure from tradition and upheaval of current political institutions. As they’ve attempted to restore for themselves their own sense of certainty, my friends described how they have done so largely by drawing upon the affordances provided by the state, while also going beyond institutional limitations. By repurposing bike chains as belts rather than using them as designated by the transportation revolution, and, especially, by organizing their own social networks and practices—what the literature on Cuba references as a move towards *sociolismo* and away from *socialismo* (Brotherton, 2005; Eastman, 2007; Gold, 2014; Wilson, 2014). A sort of “buddy socialism” which is neither new in its appearance across Cuba’s history (Brotherton, 2003, p.203-4;

Eckstein, 2003, p.21), nor is it necessarily unique to the island with countries such as Russia experiencing a similar phenomenon (Humphrey, 2002; Ledeneva, 2006; Makovicky & Henig, 2017).

As José and I were leaving Alejandro's home, Alejandro pointed to the two small patches of unkempt grass that surrounded the pathway and led to the street. "Here I used to grow *boniatos*" (a root vegetable part of the sweet potato family), he exclaimed, "but the people would often steal them during the Special Period". When I asked him if he did anything to prevent this theft, however, he shook his head and replied "no, the people who stole were hungry like I was". Events like the Special period might therefore be characterized as moral breakdowns due to the pervasive extent in which they interrupt everyday 'routine'. The idea of a 'breakdown', however, obscures how interruptions, problems, dilemmas, etc. might also be socially generative moments, inspiring actors to reevaluate how they ought to make do and improvise 'creative' solutions. Discourses of remembering thus highlighted for me the necessity felt by Cubans that they had no choice but to *arreglar sus cosas*. But while being a socially recognized phenomenon which has persisted in its ubiquity until the days where I conducted my fieldwork, nearly 30 years after the Special Period, it continues to be understood as a way of being performed *por necesidad*—and a performance that should not be routine.

In this chapter I have explored the expansion of the concept of *arreglar* since the Special Period, arguing that the ensuing sense of uncertainty confronted by Cubans has led to the widespread social recognition that *la gente tiene que arreglar sus cosas*. Thus, while contemporary interactions are shaped by historical experiences and events, they are not determined by these. I follow these ideas in chapter four by looking at how Cubans currently make moral sense of this constantly felt necessity of having to improvise between the "coequality"

of “competing” value systems (Gregory, 1997; Robbins, 2009, p.284). In other words, I look to explore how Cubans negotiate the felt need of having to draw upon coexisting yet seemingly antagonistic modes of organization. I do not offer a straightforward conclusion to this moral dilemma, however, as the movement between a capitalist individualism and the collective benefit espoused by a revolutionary philosophy is not an either/or question for many with whom I interacted. Instead, what I discovered throughout my fieldwork was that the performances which Cubans often characterized as being performed *por necesidad* (a concept introduced in the following chapter) often escaped a reduction to some biologically determined notion of necessity. *Por necesidad* [for necessity] underscores the flexibility which Cubans demonstrate in their everyday interactions, blending aspects theoretically understood to be of a capitalist or socialist framework. More specifically, how through the forging of in-formal social(ist) networks, people’s socioeconomic practices have been inflected by a buddy socialist “accent” (Voloshinov, 1973, p.22) intimately concerned with moving towards what they consider to be the ‘good life’.

#### **4. *Aquí, no hay economía***

Following the lunch time rush of customers one afternoon, I remained seated at the only table in Teresa's family owned restaurant, which was also her family's dinner table as their home was their place of work. On that day, I was helping to sift through the uncooked *frijoles* [black beans] Teresa had bought from the nearby *mercado liberado*, separating the small stones and "ugly" beans from those which would later be used in preparing the meals for that evening's customers. While I assumed what we had joked was the role of apprentice cook, working tediously through the seemingly endless supply of black beans as Teresa labored to tidy up the kitchen in anticipation of the approaching dinner shift, the two of us spoke freely about various topics. And, with the kitchen and dining room area being separated only partially by a counter-like wall slightly higher than waist level, Teresa was able to maintain a watchful eye over my work.

As the time passed by and the separate piles of black beans grew larger, Teresa's sister Mariana as well as their mother joined us in the room, both taking seats at the small dining room table. But as Mariana sat down, her attention lingered upon the Facebook posts she had recently registered on her phone whilst browsing the internet at the nearby Wi-Fi park. Coming across a post she found particularly amusing, she urged us to pay attention to her as she read aloud the text. The joke she told described the familiar story of a Cuban who had managed to defect to the US by way of the Florida Strait. However, this time the story contained a peculiar and ironic twist. In effort to complete the journey this person was explained to have packed themselves into a tuna can that would then serve as a sea vessel of sorts. And, having successfully completed the voyage, they were met with the foreseeable astonishment of those who had witnessed their arrival upon the shores of the US in such a spectacular fashion. However, when they were asked

to comment upon precisely how they had managed to carry out such an extraordinary performance, the Cuban defector replied somewhat unexpectedly. “Packing myself into the tuna can was relatively easy”, they said, “what was difficult was encountering a tuna can to begin with”.

The joke drew laughter from all of those present in the room—myself included, as it provided a comedic critique regarding the socioeconomics of everyday life in Cuba. In particular, the irony rendered explicitly visible through its telling symbolically indexed the unreasonable difficulties many Cubans felt they must contend with in order to acquire something as ‘mundane’ as a tuna can. But the joke also commented upon another felt injustice that people occasionally expressed throughout my fieldwork, and which Teresa and Mariana confirmed when I would ask them about it later that day. Many Cubans felt that it was “*una locura*” [something crazy] that in Cuba, an island surrounded by ocean, fish was only seldomly available to buy, and, when it was, it was typically very expensive relative to the wages earned by most. The act of joking subsequently mobilized humor as “a vehicle for expressing sentiments that are difficult to communicate publicly or that point to areas of discontent in social life” (Goldstein, 2003, p.5). And, while I traced the intensification of these sociopolitical and economic tensions historically to the Special Period in the previous chapter, I feel that it is worth briefly mentioning several additional and significant details which reveal how this historical period is not only a distant memory, but also shapes the contours of the present.

As the improvisational performances of revolutionary actors have been compelled to further draw upon capitalist practices and the global market, while, at the same sustaining their socialist vision for the island, systemic ideals have collided into one another. During the Special Period, for instance, agricultural reforms were made to improve domestic production and

increase exports. Much of the land which had been nationalized in the 1960s was redistributed in the 1990s for private as well as cooperative ownership, and farmers were now authorized to sell their surplus product after having completed their contribution to the collective by meeting a monthly state quota for production (Pérez, 2011, p.306). Every solution, however, precipitates emergent problems—new ‘things’ to *arreglar*. What had once been available for acquisition at *bodegas* through *la libreta* [the ration booklet], would have to be increasingly reduced since the 1990s in light of the reorganization of agricultural land and the manner in which cultivated produce would henceforth be distributed (Anderson, 2014, p.102). Although the Cuban state would and has continued to perform the role as the nation’s primary food provider and the ration system is indeed still in play, now the state also acts as the “official buyer of agricultural products from independent farmers” (Premat, 2009, p.51), thereafter selling these goods to the population. As a result, during my fieldwork I discovered that many Cubans obtain a fair amount of their necessities by relying upon their individual wages, shopping at these state-owned *mercados liberados*.

Once referred to as “*la tienda de los ricos*” [the store of the rich] (Pérez-López, 1995, p.47), these marketplaces originally offered additional ration goods without quantitative restrictions for prices several times higher, as well as luxury items not available elsewhere. And, while these *mercados liberados* continue to sell many of the same goods which are obtained through the ration booklet, scarcity has become a common recurrence for a number of items. This has resulted in long queues and the improvisational line waiting strategy incorporated by Cubans referred to as “*el último* system” (discussed in the second half of this chapter). But while shopping at these *mercados liberados* has undergone this peculiar process of normalization, the 1990s would also be marked by another extra-ordinary development.

Across the island, the government would begin to construct *tiendas* to accumulate the hard currency it desperately needed in order to negotiate these conditions of precarity. And, although originally intended for use by foreigners only, the right to shop at these *tiendas* would eventually be extended to Cuban citizens (Eckstein, 2004, p.320). Now, luxury goods as well as necessities that are occasionally unavailable at *bodegas* or at *mercados liberados* are sold at these “dollar stores”, occasionally also referred to by Cubans as “*el shopping*”, for prices many cannot afford on a routine basis (Pérez-López, 1995, p.176). These luxury items might include things such as the ‘good coffee’ as well as packages of black beans or rice which have already been sifted through and do not need to be verified for imperfections. And, after spending several afternoons helping with this work, I realized that for the sisters, who do everything “*desde el principio hasta el final*” [from start to finish] for their business, these ‘luxuries’ would readily be incorporated as ‘necessities’.

State actors would also intensify their search for foreign investment. Particularly, with regards to the domain of tourism, but also through the authorization of remittances received by Cubans from family and friends living abroad. The arrival of tourists would increase from 350,000 to 1.4 million between the years 1990 and 1998, and “by 2008 tourist revenue was 1,410% greater than in 1989”. Remittances increased drastically “from an estimated \$50 million the year the Soviet block broke apart to over a billion annually” by the early 2000s (Eckstein, 2010, p.1049-50). But while these pragmatic maneuvers afforded the Revolution as well as the Cuban population room to survive and even recover, they have also increased tensions within Cuban society as tourists who walk freely around the island, as well as nationals who receive remittances from abroad, advertise what appears for many to be greater opportunities furnished through the market. The tension which resided in the joke Mariana told that afternoon

corresponds to this lived experience shared by many Cubans. And, although the joke drew laughter on this occasion, other more serious conversations I was part of were more disturbing for me as a Canadian “*del norte*” [from the north], a person with whom Cubans detailed the everyday injustices they recognized were going on in light of these global market processes and capital circuits of desire. As a friend once explained to me, “years ago *la tienda* sold chicken breast in packages at a reasonable price. But now these get shipped north to the US through Canada, and all that is left for us Cubans is the remaining pieces of the chicken that people over there don’t want”.

#### **4.1 Porosity between systems**

I began this chapter with a joke told not because I wish to downplay the lived experiences of Cubans, but because I encountered laughter as revelatory of “both the cracks in the system and the masked or more subtle ways that power is challenged” (Goldstein, 2003, p.5). Of course, my Cuban friends were intimately aware of the value “struggle” or “conflict” (De Angelis, 2004; Robbins, 2007; Simoni, 2016) which has characterized sociopolitical relations across the island as well as within the global arena. But when Mariana would later laughingly explain to me how “*aquí no hay economía*” [here there is no economy], she expressed what I believe to be an important understanding held by many Cubans regarding the peculiar character of their livelihood strategies and how these collide with the notion that one must choose a political side, either left *or* right, and fervently uphold its respective tenants. In this respect, many I spoke to felt that the coordination of their own everyday activities could not rely upon state institutions and the systemic ideals they cemented, since, as the sisters explained to me while continuing to giggle, “the Revolution is like a fan whose electric cord is disconnected (as Teresa pointed to the fan in the room which was in fact disconnected), you can keep waiting for it to start working but

it never does”. And, although the government has more recently facilitated the move towards self-employment, the awkward restrictions it continues to sustain against these independent forms of labor, and the continued difficulties imposed by the US economic embargo against Cuba, also makes it difficult for individuals to follow the script of a market economy. For these reasons, I found that the Cubans I interacted with often seemed compelled to draw upon the possibilities afforded to them by this ‘dual’ economy. Improvising between structural limitations as they moved to *arreglar* apparent contradictions and bring into being their own modified conception of what they considered the good life ought to resemble (Graeber, 2013, p.59; Gramsci, 1992, p.9). The moral contours of their actions were thus concerned with patterning their own movements in a way that would cement a sense of certainty. In other words, people were morally motivated to “make things stick” (Barber, 2007, p.25).

*Aquí, no hay economía* therefore shares an important connection with the ‘tuna can joke’, as both offer insight regarding how people make sense of and through this felt need to *arreglar*. Both reveal an interpretation and explanation concerning how things are “here” in Cuba, where the organization of socioeconomic life is understood to be characterized by disorganization and where even the most mundane of tasks and necessities are difficult to come by. At the same time, both evaluations also articulate a comparison. That ‘over there’, in economies such as Canada, people’s livelihood strategies follow the designs of ‘the market’ and are therefore not required to engage in this constant work of *arreglar*. One does not need to tediously sort through the imperfections when a good bag of already sorted black beans can readily be encountered and is easily affordable. Embedded within the joke, therefore, I believe we might analytically tease out two interconnected performative assumptions that structure the overarching claim made by my Cuban friends, that the people have to *arreglar sus cosas* because they cannot rely upon the state

as revolutionary actors' constant tinkering with the 'rules of engagement' on the island—of mixing and matching capitalist with socialist practices—has consistently left a trail of unfulfilled promises.

The first of these assumptions presupposes that this constant performance of improvisation is conceptualized as being exceptional rather than 'normal'. In other words, it concerns the idea that everyday life should follow design and that "creativity" should describe the individual actions that appear extra-ordinary against a background of determinacy. The second assumption—enveloped within the first—suggests that for Cubans the exception appears to be the norm, and people anticipate that they have no choice but to *arreglar* the contradictions between seemingly contradictory forms. That they *must* constantly *buscar soluciones* [search for solutions] in their everyday economic practices, and, as they do so, are intimately aware that their performances most often do not strictly adhere to the determinations framed by either the communist party or a free market ideology (Butler, 2010, p.151-2). In other words, the joke reveals how there is a social recognition of improvisation as being the Cuban "cultural imperative" (Bruner, 1993, p.322), while also suggesting that this should *not* be.

I have spent a fair amount of words thus far interpreting the meaning of this joke because I believe that there is a moral connotation entangled with the poetic function it served to draw laughter from those of us in the room. Its telling hints at a relationship between two significant social concepts that emerged quite frequently during my stay in Cuba, and a connection that is established between the two through these performances of *arreglar*. First, that it is *por necesidad* that people engage in these spectacular improvisational acts—such as fitting oneself inside a tuna can—on a routine basis. And second, that the shift away from *socialismo* and towards *sociolismo*—the "buddy socialism" discussed in the previous chapter, reflects and

refracts a felt need expressed by Cubans whereby *la gente tiene que arreglar sus cosas*. The sentiment shared on that day, that it is by necessity that *la gente tiene que arreglar sus cosas*—since the Revolution resembles a disconnected fan, is not exclusive to my interaction with the sisters on this particular afternoon. Whilst he was fixing his car, José would regularly sigh as he expressed that “it’s thanks to the Revolution that we (Cubans) have this work”, concomitantly explaining to me how ‘over there’ the people don’t need to *inventar* ways of fixing things because they can simply go to the store and replace the broken part. It is for this reason that Cubans are experts at *inventar*, he’d confirm.

My intention throughout the following pages is to look more closely at the moral and relational dynamic (that life ought to be like it is ‘over there’) embodied through this improvisational work of *arreglar* performed *por necesidad*. I begin by briefly considering how the literature has interpreted this idea of *necesidad*. After which, I analyze two performances which complicate the concept of ‘necessity’ through the peculiar value “judgments” (Lambek, 2013, p.143) made by those involved—intimately concerned with comparing philosophical notions of what it means to ‘survive’ and what it means to ‘live’.

#### **4.2 *Por necesidad***

There were moments throughout my fieldwork where I did not realize myself as having encountered a performance which was especially insightful, but where the work of writing this thesis has compelled me to reconsider and revise some of my own learnt “prejudices” (Bontekoe, 1996, p.5). One afternoon, I decided to stay behind remaining in the room we had rented at a *casa particular* [private homestay] while my partner accompanied the daughter of José as they visited a nearby hairdresser to get their hair done. Working from within her own home, the hairdresser mentioned something that my partner found immediately interesting with respect to

my project. As she worked away at trimming my partner's hair with a pair of worn metal scissors, which, despite their questionable appearance did little to spoil what would later be described to me as being an exceptionally good job, the hairdresser expressed how "*allá ustedes viven, acá nosotros solo sobrevivimos*" [over there you guys live, over here we only survive].

When I reconvened with my partner later that day she repeated the statement made, and although it did not initially strike me as particularly insightful I recognized while I revised my fieldwork notes that what was said by the hairdresser on that day was indeed significant. How, in the repetitive almost mundane quality it consisted of, it expressed a sentiment that was shared by many I interacted with articulating an important detail concerning the way Cubans judge how their lives are and how they believe they "ought" to be (Graeber, 2001, p.3). In particular, with regards to the comparison made regarding how the performance of livelihoods are imagined to be 'over there'—in a country such as Canada. However, my interest with this statement has less to do with the comparison made in terms of material wealth, and is more concerned with the articulation of a "value based" judgement (Lambek, 2013, p.143-4) made concerning an "enduring goal" of what is considered to be 'living' (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004, p.361).

Specifically, how everyday actions should *not* be continuously preoccupied with improvising and making do with a pair of old metal scissors as they are in Cuba, but should be organized to follow the prescriptions of design and the routine that people enjoy 'over there' as it is not necessary for them to *inventar* since they have regular access to 'necessities'. I would like to take this interpretation slightly further, however, as I believe that it is between this elaboration of how life "is" and how life "ought" to be (or ought not be) that we might draw out in more detail the performative moral claim embodied within this speech utterance.

Revisiting this concept of *necesidad* which has been said to make a pervasive appearance across “the social environment of contemporary Cuba”, I found that its usage across the literature predominately (and justifiably) understands it as Cubans making a “qualitative assessment of their current poverty” (Holbraad, 2017, p.87). Described as an indigenous framing device that provides an interpretation for the morally questionable performances that have proliferated during the economic crisis of the Special Period, it has therefore been conceptualized as a justification for actions that fall outside of what might be otherwise considered morally correct, but are performed in order to ‘make ends meet’. Subsequently, the shifting ‘social environment’ which has followed the Special Period has been described as a time where “the overall objectives of the Cuban revolution have been de-emphasized in favour of addressing more immediate and personal *necesidades*” [needs] (Eastman, 2007, p.271). At the same time, however, this shift towards a ‘logic’ of *necesidad* does not, in my experiences, presuppose an inevitable and invariable movement towards moral anarchy and/or rampant individualism.

In discussing how Cubans understand and deploy of the concept of *necesidad*, Holbraad (2017) describes it “as a force” (p.93) that is “more than just a background condition” but “is experienced as something that *exerts* itself” (ibid, p.87; [emphasis in original]). However, I feel this conceptual configuration reproduces a structuralist interpretation of everyday life through *necesidad*, proposing it to be a “script *for* social and cultural life” (Hallam & Ingold, 2007, p.12 [my emphasis]). This leads to a potential essentializing reading whereby performances are judged as being enacted simply to satisfy these ‘more immediate and personal’ necessities, and as reflecting an unavoidable structurally determined “shift from *luchar* to resolver, from social(ist) interest to self-interest” (Eastman, 2007, p.272). Most interpretations appear somewhat less universalizing, describing the shift made with respect to only select forms of employment—

such as medical practitioners, but whose performances now also inevitably search for “alternative ways to garner the new capital necessary in post-Soviet Cuba” as they “do what they have to do” (Andaya, 2009, p.367). Significantly, this interpretive argument offers a similar critique as that which was provided to me by the sisters when they explained how for most Cubans, it is necessary to achieve “independence from the instability of the state” (Premat, 2009, p.41) as the population is forced to contend with three intricately related and unjust socioeconomic phenomena. First, the reduction of rationed goods made available through the social benefit system. Second, the scarcity which has now become characteristic at the *mercados liberados* where Cubans might otherwise afford to shop. And third, a need for wages greater than those offered through state employment in order to make regular purchases at *la tienda*.

While I do not disagree with the notions which have been ascribed to the concept of *necesidad*, I feel that a closer look at how notions of collective benefit and individual gain are being reworked through it holds potential insight regarding how it might signify more than just an ‘assessment’ of reality. Instead, I would argue that everyday economic performances and the desires they pursue are *not* inevitably and invariably being “disembedded from the moral order of socialism” (Holbraad, 2017, p.93) and incorporated within the “moral center” (Browne & Milgram, 2009, p.5) of the global market as needs become increasingly fulfilled through *tiendas* rather than *bodegas* and *mercados liberados*. Subsequently, I suggest that while having emerged during what is frequently defined as a “moral crisis” (Kapcia, 2005), *necesidad* still reflects and refracts a moral ordering that is performed by Cubans rather than being some disembodied force whose contours are determined by economic conditions. And, as the sisters as well as the literature argue, this does seem to involve a shift away from depending upon the state to provide

basic necessities and towards relying upon one's own personal capacities. The idea of *personal* necessity, however, is somewhat misleading.

What is often characterized as a transformation *towards* a post-socialist state<sup>30</sup> cannot necessarily be read as a step into capitalism as this sphere of activity which is either void of moral principles, or which “hails” (Althusser, 2014, p.190-1) Cubans towards an idealized mode of human organization and the reproduction of a world consisting only of “free individuals” (Carrier, 1997, p.2; Patico, 2009, p.219). During my time spent in Cuba, I came to understand the improvising work of *arreglar* as a social performance that not only seeks to satisfy immediate individual needs, but also as that which encompasses the coordination of actions between individuals that collectively move towards “visions of the good life” (Patico, 2005, p.490). And, while these interactions might occasionally agree with the hegemonic designations of the Communist Party, on other occasions they also underscore what appears to be “alternative” practices (Williams, 1977, p.112-3) mobilized by ‘the people’.

### **4.3 The un-necessary performance**

Begging was the activity which first appeared throughout my fieldwork experience that initially complicated my understanding regarding which performances may or may not be socially recognized as being performed *por necesidad*. As this was also my first time in Cuba, the friends I made at the beginning of fieldwork assumed what they explained as being a responsibility in teaching me about the dynamics of Cuban culture. With respect to the fact that I

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<sup>30</sup> The use of concepts which tend to generate dichotomous perspectives might trace the trajectory of a country like Cuba, which is realizing quite extensive transformations, as following a linear *transition* towards some idealized form of development. These inherent prejudices thus neglect the creative ways in which similar elements such as privatization and liberalization are combined and recombined to reproduce distinct hybrid forms (Reid-Henry, 2007), and, therefore obscure how transformation is not something which follows a “predetermined path” but is contested, altered by local dynamics and relations (Sobe & Timberlake, 2010).

was also learning Spanish, my first friends were not only self-appointed cultural guides but had also worked as teachers at universities and schools. Interestingly, I noted how during my lessons both Spanish professors I learned from—one in the mornings and the other in the afternoons—would creatively draw upon their personal interests and lived experiences to mediate the learning process. Susana, being a staunch revolutionary who had lived through the victory of the Revolution, would occasionally cite revolutionary heroes as well as the spectacular performances they accomplished while she explained to me the meaning and conjugation of particular words. “*Nació* is the third person past tense of *nacer*” [to be born], she explained, “so you can use it in saying things like Ernesto Che Guevara *nació en Argentina*” [was born in Argentina]. Sabana, on the other hand, disliked the topic of politics and chose not to broach the subject. Instead, she would talk about her interest in traveling across the various provinces in Cuba as well as what she knew about life ‘over there’, in Canada. She would often get me to practice speaking by asking me to talk about the places I had visited in Cuba and the things I had seen. While both these individuals were quite different in the topics they brought up for discussion, the improvisational strategy they mobilized as they attempted to motivate my learning was actually quite similar.

On multiple and separate occasions, however, both Susana and Sabana eagerly taught me about their ration booklets. They explained how these small blue booklets were particular to Cuba. “No other country has these”, Susana exclaimed as she tapped her finger on the book’s cover, “they don’t exist anywhere in any other country”. The booklets granted Cuban nationals, and only Cuban nationals as I was repeatedly made aware, access to products distributed at *bodegas* (Chomsky, 2015, p.118, 127; Wilson, 2014, p.64). And, as they flipped open the pages of their respective booklets, they would describe the products that were available at rationed

prices. For instance, one 125 gram package of coffee could be purchased at the rationed price of 4 Cuban pesos (at the time 25 Cuban pesos was equivalent to 1 US dollar). Certain limits were, of course, placed on the maximum amount that could be bought by each person per month. For example, one coffee bag could be purchased per person per month. However, the amount also varied based on state defined individual needs.

This state determination of the relationship between individual need and collective redistribution was a common point of contention for the different groups of people with whom I formed social bonds. For instance, José's family expressed their frustration about the system complaining that their son, who was about to turn seven years old, would no longer receive milk through his ration booklet and would instead be given coffee. "*Que locura*" [What craziness], they proclaimed, shaking their heads in dismay. Sabana and Susana would both read me through the various necessities they received at rationed prices, describing the various differentiations made between persons based on state determined needs. For instance, explaining how individuals with anemia get a monthly allocation of beef which the rest of the population did not, or how diabetics get a different kind of milk. Both would also express how the rationed amounts provided were simply not enough to reach the end month. "Some years ago, the government reduced the amount of sugar rationed per month from six to four pounds per person", Susana explained, "now I have to spend more to buy the missing amount that my family uses". However, it wasn't until Sabana took me on a 'real world' learning experience determined to teach me Spanish as we walked through the streets of Bayamón, that I realized a need to revise my understanding of what is and is not performed *por necesidad*.

As we walked through the streets, we encountered a young beggar wearing ragged and torn clothing asking for donations. Sabana's demeanour quickly soured as she whispered to me

not to support “that” kind of activity. “*Ser un vagabundo*” [To be a vagabond], she explained, is not necessary to survive here in Cuba. At this point, I could not help but ask her why she felt that way seeing as, on previous occasions, she as well as others had explained that the majority of basic necessities provisioned through their ration booklet was simply not enough to ‘reach’ the end of the month. Sabana explained that she worked hard and earned a small state salary as a professor at the medical university teaching would-be doctors how to speak English because it was required to purchase missing necessities as well as enjoy occasional luxuries such as ‘good coffee’. But it was the interpretation she provided with regards to begging as a form of economic activity that made me realize the cultural interplay that was inextricably bound with this concept of *necesidad*, and how it extended beyond being a simple assessment of poverty. Continuing with her explanation, Sabana expressed how Cubans could ‘survive’ even without working, by making do with what is afforded through rationing system. The food provided by the state was “enough to survive”, she explained, and although they might feel hunger pains people can always do things to fix this feeling. For instance, they could eat plain bread with sugar sprinkled on top to “*hacerlos sentir llena*” [make them feel full]. And, as we continued walking, she explained how she perceived begging as an act of laziness. For Sabana, it exposed a lack of desire to search for solutions in order to *arreglar* one’s own circumstances—and was most often characteristic of a person who had succumbed to the “national vice” of alcohol.

By begging, however, Sabana meant something quite different from that what Rosendahl (1997) describes, when she mentions how in everyday interactions Cubans occasionally engage in performances of “begging” as they make requests from friends for something desired (p.44), but where sustaining an ongoing social relationship “haunts” the sensibilities of those involved and compels reciprocity (Mauss, 2002, p.81). Conducting the majority of our Spanish lessons

from within her household, Sabana often left the door open to the hallway that the different lodgings shared in this apartment complex. And ,while she jokingly complained about the frequent visits she received by one particular neighbor, who she remarked came around begging for her share of coffee every time she smelt it brewing—which had become every time we conducted a lesson after I mentioned my fondness for coffee—these requests actually seemed to be encouraged and enjoyed. “I just gave you coffee”, Sabana would bellow laughing as her neighbor asked for more holding her glass out extended in mid-air. “Ayyyy Sabana but I spilt it, I need another!”, her neighbor replied although being aware that we had both witnessed her gulp it down quickly.

Taking a seat in the small living space of Sabana’s home—which also served as our classroom, our Spanish lessons remained socializing opportunities rather than becoming formal instruction. Lessons would roughly approximate the script recited above as this neighbor, as well as others, would drop by frequently to take a seat and even be asked by Sabana to join in and contribute to my learning—helping me to “attune” my ear to different voices, accents and tempos. The coffee she served she had purchased at the nearby *mercado liberado*, with the salary she obtained from her state employment at the university, as well as the dollars she accumulated through the private Spanish lessons she provided for me. Nevertheless, she described how the extra work she—as well as many other Cubans—performed as being *por necesidad*, the extra income it provided allowing her to indulge in and share more of what she explained was both a “necessity” and “vice”. Being a vagabond, however, was different. This was a performance which entailed asking from anyone, even from those you do not know or have no intention to maintain social connections with, for their intervention in helping to resolve your problems. And, it seemed to signify for Sabana that the person was unwilling to make any attempt at developing

their own capacity to *arreglar*, thus extinguishing the likelihood for reciprocation in the future and participating in the *social* performance of helping to make things stick. Especially with a person so young, she explained—describing the vagabond we had just interacted with, they needed to be studying to develop their “capacities” so they don’t have to resort to always asking from others who are not rich and who also need to participate in *la lucha*.

In a social environment where people characterize their realities as consisting of this constant confrontation with indeterminacy, helping one another to stabilize uncertainty appears invaluable for most. At the same time, from my perspective, begging also appears to conflict with another dynamic of *arreglar* that Sabana hinted at when she explained her aversion. One could survive with what was provided by the state as she would explain. The simple improvisational act of sprinkling sugar on bread could *arreglar* momentary hunger pains as the food provided through the rationing system was indeed enough to subsist and meet immediate minimal biological needs. Begging without intention to reciprocate therefore conflicted with what the Cubans I interacted with claimed was essential to being “a good person” (Rosendahl, 1997, p.41). In this sense, being a good person meant collaborating in this collective performance of engaging in *la lucha*, otherwise defined across the literature as negotiating the “personal hardships of everyday life” (Brotherton, 2012, p.16) by engaging in the “daily hustle” (Perry, 2016, p.7). Thus, I would be inclined to interpret this notion of ‘*personal hardship*’ by understanding it as an interindividual struggle, whereby individualism and collectivism become interwoven as what connects one to the whole—and this shared struggle for survival—is one’s willingness to *arreglar* their own things. In this sense, everyone receives enough to ‘survive’ from the socialist state, but one must *arreglar* their own circumstances in order to ‘live’. The latter connects individuals in a more intimate manner as they circumvent the institutional

frameworks elaborated by the state which seem more anonymous in the way they connect individual livelihoods.

In the following section, I look at the economic performance of re-selling which involves purchasing routinely unavailable goods sold by the state for ‘cheap’ and then selling these to other Cubans for ‘dear’. Here, the act of quantification which unfolds between social relations through in-formal market transactions is not felt as “violent” (Graeber, 2011, p.14) and/or perceived as morally incorrect. Instead, it is a performance which ‘unexpectedly’ (if one were to follow a market logic) falls under the performative guise of *necesidad*.

#### **4.4 Re-selling socialist produce for capitalist gain**

After struggling early our first morning in San Juan to encounter a place where we could eat food which did include not street style pizza, my partner and I made the decision that we would take advantage of the small kitchenette in our room to cook our own breakfast. Returning to our *casa particular* we inquired with *la dueña* [the owner] where we might buy certain foods like fruits and eggs. While fruits would be easy to find, she informed us that there only exists a small possibility that eggs might be available at the nearby Galtero market, as she mapped out the directions to this *mercado liberado* using a combination of hand gestures and speech utterances. “Walk two blocks that way”, she said while gesturing towards the direction she expected us to travel, “and after turn to the right and the market will be there on the left side of the street”. Upon reaching the market, we noted how the interior space designated for buying and selling was demarcated by a combination of concrete wall and fencing, and scattered in front on the extended sidewalk were several groups of people engaging in what seemed to be arbitrary everyday small talk. Walking by these individuals without paying a great deal of attention to what they were doing, we made our way through the open gates of this *mercado liberado*.

As a “material embodiment” of Cuba’s now self-proclaimed market socialism system, *mercados liberados* reflect and refract a reality of interactions differently orchestrated from those which characterize a typical market model. In this sense, they appear to occupy a space in-between the remnants of an early push to communism represented in the “dingy” *bodegas*, and a more contemporary push towards establishing joint ventures with foreign investors which has manifested in the spread of *tiendas* resembling the “supermarkets flashing brand-name items” of North America (Hernandez-Reguant, 2009, p.12). Whereas *bodegas* distribute basic necessities at a rationed price and *tiendas* sell luxury goods at market-oriented prices, *mercados liberados* were institutionalized in 1973 to “expand the basket of goods [Cuban consumers] can purchase legally beyond the limits set by the ration system” (Pérez-López, 1995, p.47) with prices higher than those of *bodegas* yet lesser than those of *tiendas*. However, the economic activities that contribute to the daily re-making of these market sites occur just as much within the walls cemented and organized by the ‘system’, as they do immediately outside their physical-ideological delineations.

As I reached the kiosk which should have been selling eggs, I noticed that *huevos* was not inscribed in chalk on the collapsible blackboard that conveyed the list of available products and their respective prices. This indicated for consumers that the vendor had either already sold out or had likely never received any eggs that morning to start the day with. Unsuccessful, therefore, in my goal to bring about a sense of routine to my early mornings, I returned to our *casa particular* where *la dueña* of the household consoled my frustrations explaining how it is normal in Cuba that “*las cosas se pierden*” [things get lost]. As the tuna can story had made me realize through the laughter it drew from those in the room, the unpredictable availability of goods was something Cubans are forced to routinely confront. And, they might express these routine

frustrations with having to negotiate the ‘cracks in the system’ through performances such as joking, or as *la dueña* had done, by repeating an extremely popular local expression as she exclaimed that “*¡la vida aquí no es fácil!*” [life here is not easy!] (often abbreviated simply as “*¡no es fácil!*” [It’s not easy]). However, in her attempt to console my frustrations, she would mention something that perked my interest in the way it destabilized my own understandings of how a market ought to function. As she continued to reassure me, *la dueña* told me not to worry as tomorrow a shipment of eggs will be arriving at Galtero. However, she’d also inform me that it would be unlikely that I would be able to purchase any. Curious, I’d ask her to elaborate.

F: Why not? Why won’t I be able to buy any?

*Dueña:* Because by the time you complete the queue, they will most likely all be bought out by *los revendedores* [the resellers]. But don’t worry you can still buy them nearby the market. That’s where they sell them. Ask around, if there’s someone selling eggs in the area the people will know where.

F: Really? But what are they doing? Are they charging more for them?

*Dueña:* Obviously. They’ll probably charge about 45 or 50 Cuban pesos per carton. Don’t pay more than 50, unless you really want them.

While a day earlier she had explained that the *mercado liberado* sold a carton of 30 eggs for 33 Cuban pesos (approximately \$1.65 CAD or \$1.25 US dollars at the time), now this simple transaction implied finding a reseller who would sell them at 50% above the state regulated price. Engaging in this economic activity of reselling, or being a “*colero*” as Rosendahl (1997) dubbed the performance of waiting *la cola* [the queue] in order to buy cheap from the state and sell dear to other Cuban consumers (p.38-40), I assumed that resellers would most likely situate themselves in a hidden location, which, while having been explained to me was within the vicinity of the market, would presumably be out of plain sight. Determined as I was to pursue my goal of buying eggs I made my way to Galtero early the next morning, but again my assumptions were proven wrong. I discovered that directly in front of the entrance, sitting atop the short

concrete wall that formed part of the structure which housed a large tree, was a person seated next to a knee-high pile of egg cartons reselling these to the public.

Surrounded by others conversing socially and seemingly unworried about any form of law enforcement, the reseller would take the time to pause their socializing activity and whisper the question “¿huevos?” to me as I walked by. I discovered, therefore, that while Galtero is a space formally designated for a particular form of activity which might roughly be captured under the heading “market socialism”, closer attention disclosed how interactions went beyond what might be visualized through an abbreviated description such as “a combination of central planning and capitalist-style market incentives” (Chomsky, 2015, p.44). Here, possible actions were embodied and expressed through the performances of people who spent their days socializing and economizing. And, in this respect, there was an un-organized element of improvisation which was continuously re-articulating boundaries as ‘the people’ stabilized their own routines.

Over the course of several mornings I would note how a large crowd often numbering approximately 50 people would make their way to the market early every morning in order to wait for its gates to open. Five minutes to opening a guard would emerge from within this open-air market, and, as if on cue, the dispersed crowds of conversing individuals would fluently move to form three separate and relatively straight lines. Performing this seemingly spontaneous “ensemble work” (Barber, 2007, p.33), people had already registered and kept track of their position as well as those of others who had been waiting. And, participating in the informal practice dubbed “*el último* system”, they were then called upon by the guard to form these three more ‘conventional’ lines. Allow me to pause my observations at Galtero for moment to explore *el último* system as a social practice which refracts the in-formality of everyday life in Cuba.

I first encountered and participated in *el último* system when attempting to convert Canadian dollars into convertible Cuban pesos at a bank in Bayamón. As I entered the institution, there were several employees chatting with each other, one of whom was seated behind a desk working as a receptionist directing clients to the appropriate waiting area with respect to their explained needs. After confirming my desire to convert monies, the receptionist would inform me to take a seat amongst the others who were waiting in the center of the room. Somewhat confused about the process and how to organize myself alongside this collective movement, I asked if I was going to receive a slip of paper which would have inscribed upon it the hand-written number that declared my position in the queue. As this had been the procedure on the previous occasion where I had frequented the bank, I had expected that this routine would simply be rehearsed. However, on that day the receptionist would inform me that the employee who was normally responsible for the distribution of these numbers was not present, “*está almorzando*” [s/he is having lunch], they explained. Subsequently, I was told to simply call out *el último* and establish for myself a position in *la cola*.

The procedure of *el último* system is relatively straightforward, but I believe that it is quite symbolic of the tension that emanates between individual and structure which characterizes the Cuban social environment. Specifically, it reveals how Cubans citizens participate and work collectively to smooth over the fractures of a bureaucratic system famous across the island for its dis-organization. Shouting *el último*, you call upon the last person to have arrived at *la cola* to respond “*¡yo!*” [me!]. In this way, as they identify their status as *el último* (literally translating as [the last one]) you simultaneously confirm your arrival and assume their position as *el último*. Keeping in mind the person who came before you, as well as affirming to anyone who might arrive afterwards that you are *el último*, you therefore interactively maintain your position in *la*

*cola* by bearing in mind your relationship to others who are also waiting or intend to join the wait. In this respect, I found that *la cola*, typically interpreted as [the line] or [the queue], assumes its more literal translation as being [the tail], in that its movements become less predictable. Rather than simply moving in a uniform and linear fashion towards some end point, it can drift left to right and even curl or spiral so that there is no longer a clearly observable beginning and end to the line if one does not ask for verbal confirmation and interact with those who are waiting.

This is what *la cola* made itself appear to be when I first perceived it that day at the bank. A large room consisting of people sitting in one of several rows of chairs lined up and each facing the same direction as if organized like a school classroom. Those who were joining *la cola* would simply call out *el último*, take note of who had arrived directly before them and then sit on *any* available chair. The leading person waiting in *la cola* might therefore be positioned in the middle of this sea of chairs, or perhaps towards the back rows, or possibly be standing talking to the receptionist at the entrance of the bank. There is no physical movement necessary to advance one's position within *la cola*. All which is required is to be aware of who came before you, and take note of when this person from whom you have assumed the status of *el último* escapes the liminal state of waiting as they are called upon by a bank teller shouting “¡*el próximo!*” [the next (one)!].

Taking on this form of appearance as an informal yet collectively coordinated performance, maintaining *la cola* becomes a socialized affair which often unfolds within formal institutional arrangements. At times, however, it may also become a sort of scattered ordering. For instance, a person may temporarily move outside the immediate space in which *la cola* physically moves, so long as they are not called upon while away. It is quite typical for Cubans

to remember the positions of individuals several places ahead as well as behind them so that they may judge how much time they have to potentially carry out other tasks, or even to simply take a seat at a nearby park under the shade of a tree while waiting. The risk of losing one's 'spot' in *la cola* is mitigated by asking others to maintain your position. Thus, although my first experience with *el último* system at the bank that day had caused me to become rather anxious, worried that my position might be unfairly appropriated by another due to my own ineptitude in following this social ordering, throughout my fieldwork experiences I discovered that the 'integrity' of *la cola* was something quite rigorously maintained by those waiting. Not because there were none who sought to perhaps jump a few positions in the line by appropriating another's spot, but because there seemed to be a mutual interest in cementing order<sup>31</sup>. One might even say then, that a "social contract" is elaborated between citizens as they *arreglar* the inadequacies of state bureaucracy.

While everything had run smoothly that day at the bank, at the market I noted how the occasional "failed" performance (Austin, 1962), by an individual who had perhaps 'forgotten' their position and advanced several places in *la cola* at the precise moment the security guard called upon the dispersed crowd to form three 'conventional' lines, would draw out the collective repair work of others who were also waiting. "You came after him/her!", several would shout on one occasion as if intentionally in unison, redressing the failure. And, in this "form-giving [process]" (Barber, 2007, 28-9), individuals engage in a collaborative performance that allows *el último* system to endure as a 'cultural practice'. As the gates were opened, one line of people would make their way to the kiosk inside the walls of Galtero that sold dairy products, while another walked to the kiosk selling meats, and the third would make their way to the largest

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<sup>31</sup> See Roland (2011, p.48) and Rosendahl (1997, p.38) for more information on *el último* system.

building in the center that sold various products such as bread, alcohol, etc. In this way, despite the formal barrier that separates the inside of the market from the seemingly uncoordinated groups of individuals chatting outside, interactions which unfolded outside the institutional arrangements of the market began to show themselves as being interconnected even prior to crossing this walled threshold.

I'd observe, for instance, how an older gentleman continuously made his way to this market site daily taking a seat upon a small concrete slab and talking with others as he sold plastic bags—making up for their absence within the walls of Galtero. Occasionally a person already inside would call out to him from across the walled section composed of fencing rather than concrete, asking to purchase a bag. In this way, these particular exchanges would take place between this porous barrier. The streets adjacent to the market were also marked by the presence of independent market activity, populated by privately-owned mobile kiosks drawn mostly by bicycles and occasionally by horses. These sold fruits and vegetables as well as a range of other commodities—from plumbing pipes to clothes pins. Services were also offered directly outside the walls of the market; from shoe cleaning and distribution of the national newspaper *Granma*, to bike and bag storage. Many of these goods and services offered outside were not present inside Galtero, and, in this way, the two spaces complemented one another. And, while many of the private vendors operated legally paying monthly taxes to the state, where these individuals obtained their goods may be difficult to trace. As René, a friend of Teresa's once explained to me as we walked through the city streets, what is sold at these kiosks might be artisanal, crafted at home or grown by the vendor themselves on private or cooperatively owned land. They might also have been purchased or stolen from *la tienda* to be resold to others at a higher price or

imported within the luggage of traveling Cubans or visitors with the intention of being given as gifts or sold.

As the number of egg cartons possessed by the reseller slowly diminished through the purchases made by others, I decided to pause my observations for the day in order to buy eggs for myself. As I retired to my *casa particular*, on this occasion visibly carrying the successful outcome of my day with a carton of eggs in hand, *la dueña* inquired if everything had worked out in the manner which she had explained it might. And although I confirmed her advices as being accurate, I also spoke about how my experience throughout this entire ordeal had left me somewhat stumped at how the economy works here in Cuba. I explained how I encountered the person selling eggs directly in front of the entrance to the market—visible to all those around, and asked the question which had been on my mind, “is reselling legal?”

*Dueña*: No, clearly not.

F: But they were selling eggs right in front. Don't the police stop them?

*Dueña*: Sometimes. Unfortunate ones. Ayyy life here is not easy. The police can give them a fine and take back everything they bought. But they (the resellers) have to do it *por necesidad*.

At this point, it was not the illegality of the performance of reselling conducted out in the open that surprised me, but rather *la dueña*'s sympathetic tone towards these individuals. I had presumed, following a 'rational' calculating logic, that anyone whose actions illicitly increased the price of things would be perceived as making life more difficult for others and would therefore undoubtedly be perceived in a morally depreciative way. But resellers, unlike beggars, were explained as doing what they did *por necesidad*. Moreover, this was the interpretation given not only by *la Dueña* but was also articulated by the sisters at the restaurant as well as José and his family when I later asked them about my experience. They all simply shrugged their shoulders replying the all too familiar statement: “*Aquí, es así. Hay que arreglar tus cosas,*

*resolver tus problemas. No hay otra forma.* [Here it's like this. You have to fix your things, solve your problems. There is no other way].

By engaging in their own particular act of “in(ter)vention” (Pope, 2005, p.62-4), resellers draw upon an already “existing state of affairs” to perform this “mercantile” activity as they work to “buy cheap and sell dear” (Gregory, 1997, p.65). In doing so, they play upon situations of scarcity buying out momentarily available stocks of certain goods and then raise the price for other consumers. And, although I felt that this maneuvering ought to draw out sentiments of resentment towards these individuals, as they inevitably made the purchase of these items more costly, when I asked people about this performance it was most often classified under the category of *necesidad*. However, it wasn't until a later date that I realized the informal networks within which these resellers were embedded, as well as the series of relations and actions that contributed to the final transformational act I participated in as I purchased these more costly eggs. As René would explain to me, resellers cannot simply walk up to a kiosk vendor and buy out all the eggs, there are actual quantitative limits imposed by the state for certain products which are routinely unavailable. What they do, he continued, is give the government worker a *propina* [tip] so that they look the other way, and, as for state officials who might then give these resellers trouble, of course they also get their dues.

#### **4.5 The value of *amistad***

The connection between these two distinct performances and their relation to this conceptual arrangement of *por necesidad* exposes what appears to be quite a glaring contradiction. On one hand, many Cubans expressed how they felt they simply could not rely upon the state provision of necessities—symbolically indexed through their ration booklets—to meet ‘immediate needs’. At the same time, Sabana also acknowledged how survival could be

achieved through these basic provisions, as any discomfort felt could be addressed through this work of *arreglar* (the simple sprinkling sugar on bread was enough to resolve this dilemma). Having revisited this concept of *necesidad* described across the literature and comparing it to the performances I encountered, however, I feel that only a partial analysis is provided when explanations overwhelmingly emphasize a shift from ‘social(ist) interest to self-interest’. It was my experience that although ‘individual’ pursuits were working to move from what they evaluated as being a current state of ‘surviving’ and towards what they valued as ‘living’, the social fabric within which they were immersed was not simply composed by dispersed actors all trying to maximize their own individual benefits while minimizing their expenditures. This work of *arreglar* often presupposed a degree of in-formal social coordination, as improvisation nestled and flourished “in the dynamic potential of an entire field of relationships to bring forth the persons situated in it” (Hallam & Ingold, 2007, p.7). And, although the relationship between consumer and reseller might be characterized as a “casual [acquaintance]” (Rosendahl, 1997, p.40)—not quite making the leap to a true *amistad* [friendship], these actors were part of in-formal networks sustained through ongoing transactional sequences organized between individuals. Resellers are often known to others such as *la dueña*—who sympathize with their plight, interacting socially with their ‘customer base’ frequenting their site of business and who are also within this shared reality of *la lucha*.

Returning to where I began this chapter for a moment, later that day at the restaurant when Arturo passed by and we spoke in the family’s living room before he returned to the countryside, he explained to me how “*acá hacemos las cosas por la derecha pero todo pasa por la izquierda*” [here we do things for the right but everything passes for the left]. Implying, therefore, that there is a *collective* desire to proceed through formalized channels but describing

these as impossible to follow. However, rather than emphasizing how this utterance further exposes the performances which now populate Cuba as having been “corrupted” by “extraneous ends” (Fairfield, 2011, p.113), inculcated by the proliferation of market practices and a deregulated individualism, we might follow a different argumentative path. Carrier (1997) has discussed how imagining people and firms which operate within a “market model” as always conforming to its predilections, neglects how even though “market actors may be autonomous some of the time... many of them abandon that autonomy and the competitiveness that goes with it, and instead develop moral relationships with each other” (p.9). With this in mind, the statement made by Arturo and his configuration of the pronoun “we” reveals the need to consider how scripts—and the relationships between actors they describe—emerge “within” rather than “for” performance (Ingold, 2007, p.12).

A significant component of Fidel and the Cuban government’s hegemonic strategy was and has always been to incorporate the population within their revolutionary project. In order to do so, they have built upon Che Guevara’s ideas which stipulated how inspiring the people to commit to this alternative vision for the future meant having them concretely contribute to its formations (Rosendahl, 1997, p.119-20). For those I interacted with, however, an important distinction was made between “we” the people and “they” the revolutionaries which revealed how these are felt to be two formations moving alongside one another rather than in unison. And, although this shift towards “we” ‘the people’ is discussed throughout the literature as a movement towards “informal [systems] of reciprocal exchange involving hard-to-find goods and/or services” (Gold, 2014, p.47), or a ‘buddy socialism’ where individuals depend upon one another “forging networks for exchanging ideas, goods and services outside the circuits of socialist redistribution” (Eastman, 2007, p.277), the cementing of these alternative formations is

not always defined by individuals who follow the accumulation of material wealth as the “paramount value” which orchestrates the “relation between all other values” (Robbins, 2007, p.297). Although the accumulation of wealth is undoubtedly juggled as one of the motivations for actions taken, the ethnographic contexts discussed above suggest that there remains a shared incentive towards cementing the reproduction of selves.

It is here that I believe we might connect these two performances of reselling and begging. Unlike reselling, the act of begging was criticized and excluded from this category of *necesidad* by Sabana. Being a vagabond, she described, was unnecessary disparaging those who enacted this performance as they did not work towards developing their own capacities to intervene in and redress their own circumstances. But I would also argue that a familiar tension was presented here, where there was a lack of “mutuality in relation to self-interest” (Gudeman, 2016, p.54). In this sense, the performance of begging suggested not only the vagabond’s lack of desire to overcome their own personal hardships, but also to participate within this *collective* performance of *arreglar*. I stress collective because, in contradistinction to begging, there were also those who were criticized for being overly self-interested despite being successful at *arreglar sus cosas*. The additional work that professors like Sabana perform might have also become perceived as being motivated by self-interest, for instance, if she refused to share coffee with her neighbors—who then helped with her Spanish lessons. And, although the performance of reselling projected the immediate appearance of a socially alienating moment actualized through the transaction rendered between seller and buyer, where the eggs came from remained interconnected within a network of in-formal relations. Moreover, what the money would later be used for remained open to possibilities not determined—although perhaps influenced—by a

market morality of accumulation (as had happened with the example of the ‘stolen’ beer keg then sold being shared in chapter three).

Thus, as some individuals have become increasingly successful—economically—in relation to the general population, they have approximated what was described to me as being a sort fetishistic desire for material accumulation. One day, as José and I were speaking about the owner of the *casa particular* I was staying at, who was also the wife of José’s colleague, I explained to him how her husband seemed to have become angry with her for giving me and my partner so many “*regalitos*” [small gifts], he nodded his head replying “he’s a strange guy, he doesn’t understand that money is for spending”. Being heavily motivated towards a desire to accumulate material wealth, therefore, was criticized in its ‘strangeness’.

Across these interactions, therefore, there is a sort of swaying continuity between self-interest and mutuality. And, although the activity of reselling reveals what is potentially a forced mutuality, as police officers and state-employed workers might make stronghanded demand for their ‘fair’ share of the profits, self-interest might also coalesce with an incentive towards the collective through a shared desire to smooth over the indeterminacy of everyday life and the ruptures of a disorganized system (as one might say happens with *el último* system and a collective interest to maintain the integrity of *la cola*). In this respect, I would argue that across the ethnographic contexts I explored what motivated people to maintain relationships with others was indeed often economic. However, it was also immediately and inextricably social and political. For most, reaching for a greater sense of individual control and stability over their circumstances meant organizing their own communal networks—‘passing for the left’ to establish a sense of routine. In this sense, cementing a greater sense of certainty across everyday life became foregrounded as a worthwhile value to pursue—and the reason why the people could

not pass for the right, even if it simply signified the capacity to purchase good coffee on a routine basis for oneself and to share with one's "*compays*" (Cuban slang for *compañeros* [companions]). What my friends strained to show me, therefore, was that my own culturally informed ideals, which performatively assumed that business is business and "friends and profits do not mix" (Holloway & Parmigiani, 2016, p.474), simply could not fit the social environment of Cuba.

In this way, the statement *aquí no hay economía* does not index an incoherency between a "moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions" (Kopytoff, 1986, p.64), or the absence of one or both of these structures. Instead, what became noticeable throughout my fieldwork was how, despite these 'individual' improvisational performances of *arreglar* often *appearing* to be motivated by purely self-interested ends, these were in fact social orderings which had cemented for themselves their own informal economics networks. Thus, while at the beginning of this chapter I mentioned how Cubans did not seem overly concerned with the reorganization of a value hierarchy unfolding at the scales of national and global politics, I would edit this claim by adding how they have re-orchestrated their own everyday affairs, their own emergent economies, according to this so-called "buddy socialism" system.

One day as we were celebrating at his friend Mateo's home, José would proudly show me a picture on his phone of when his work colleague, as well as his friend, had been in an accident on the highway. "I towed him that day from the beach back to the city. A distance of 40 kilometers each way", he described. Returning his phone to his pocket José would explain how "*nosotros compartimos todo. Compartimos los tiempos buenos y compartimos los tiempos malos. Esa es la manera de sobrevivir acá*" [We share in everything. We share the good times and we share the bad times. That's the way that we make it to survive]. Later than night after

having departed from Mateo's home, José stopped the car as we were driving along a small road. Here, he felt it necessary to elaborate for my partner and I what it means to 'survive' here in Cuba. José would explain to us how, despite the fact that his friend Mateo is a communist and he vehemently disagrees with this perspective, he has no trouble setting aside their ideological differences because maintaining friendships is simply more valuable for Cubans. My partner would reply with a statement to confirm that we had properly understood the broader message José was trying to convey.

P: *Las amistades también tienen que ser arreglados* [So friendships also have to be fixed].

José: *Las amistades también. La ideología, la política, esas cosas pasan. Pero las amistades no las dejamos pasar* [Friendships as well. Ideology, politics, those things pass. But friendships, we don't let pass].

The actions that embody and re-produce this value of friendship, I would argue, cannot be reduced to being either purely economic orientation, or "gratuitous behaviour" which carries no "hidden element of calculated self-interest" (Makovicky & Henig, 2017, p.2).

In this chapter I have explored the moral dynamic which underwrites the claim that it is *por necesidad* that *la gente tiene que arreglar sus cosas*. In doing so, I have problematized an understanding of necessity which see it as encompassing any and every action (or thought) whereby an individual moves towards meeting some minimum biological set of requirements. While necessity is undoubtedly about 'making do' with what one has and within the limitations a person confronts in their everyday life, it is also about moving towards a more desirable standard of living—i.e. as being between surviving and living (*sobrevivir* and *vivir*). There was, however, a tension that made itself felt here, as *arreglar* connects Cubans to the whole by way of this individual yet collective struggle (*la lucha*). We might reflect upon José calling private market vendors "vampires" (chapter 2) because of the high prices they charge for the things one needs, and how this contradicts the explanation that he and his family—as well as others—later

provided (that these individuals engage in this activity *por necesidad*). Thus, while on the one hand these vendors ‘steal your blood’ because of the prices they charge, on the other their work falls under the category of *necesidad* and thus appears to be considered morally appropriate. I believe that the contradiction here speaks to the broader set of circumstances Cubans face in their everyday lives. While someone who in their own efforts to *arreglar* their ‘self-interested’ affairs raises prices for others might be called a ‘vampire’, their economic activity is made possible by already existing conditions of scarcity which all Cubans must face if they want to *vivir*. In this light, it is the act of begging that is seen to be unnecessary to *sobrevivir*. This activity does not connect the individual to the whole—through this shared individual struggle—as they simply rely upon others and the state to *arreglar* their affairs without expending their own energy to improve their capacity to do so for themselves.

However, *arreglar* is itself also a social performance, and, in this way, it often involves the work of sustaining social connections. *Aquí no hay economía* was meant to draw out the historical transformation described in chapter three, whereby a shift in this sense of belonging (from “we, the Revolution” to “we, the people” and “they, the revolutionaries”) would modify the rules of Cubans’ contemporary socioeconomic reality. Where the value of *amistad* and maintaining one’s own social connections is now perceived as being more productive in regards to cementing a sense of everyday certainty, and has become prioritized over that of sustaining one’s commitment to ideological principles (i.e. systems such as communism and capitalism which are seen as fleeting and unreliable). The following chapter takes up this charge to explore how value is re-produced *socially* through inter-actions unfolding between structures—of capitalism and socialism. In this sense, I explore the relations between livelihoods that work between formality and informality, structuring their own ‘rules’ of engagement through the

material medium of money. A medium whose role is not simply determined by the macro relations unfolding within and between nation-states, but is also authored 'from below' by individuals working collectively.

## 5. Moneda nacional

That afternoon José and I were driving along the highway making our way to one of the nearby resorts to pick up *los artesanos Cubanos* [the Cuban artisans] who had been selling their crafted wares to visiting tourists at the beach. These were Cuban clients that José explained he worked and maintained informal contracts with throughout *la temporada baja* [the low season]<sup>32</sup>. To fulfill his part of this informal contract, José's performance entailed transporting the artisans to and from the beach everyday except Sundays. He explained how first he would wake up early in the morning to pick them up *por la madrugada* [at the crack of dawn] at their respective homes in San Juan. Later, during the afternoon, he would return to the beach to retrieve the artisans at a time which both parties had agreed upon either during their early morning ride, or as had happened on that day, with a quick phone call. As we drove along the road, I noticed José waving and gesturing to the drivers in other cars who were making their way in the opposed direction. How did you know that driver from so far away? I'd ask him. "I knew him for the car he drove", he replied. "Every car here is distinct. Each has its own modifications that the driver has put in." The roof rack José had installed atop his 1957 Oldsmobile 88 was a testament to how even a functional modification that granted greater economic possibilities (e.g. the capacity to transport foreigners who brought their own bicycles and desires to engage in sport tourism cycling the communist landscape of the island<sup>33</sup>) was immediately social. Occasionally the interactions performed between drivers appeared less spontaneous and more rehearsed, seemingly determined to communicate a more elaborate message that went beyond the cheerful

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<sup>32</sup> Peak tourist season begins in December and ends in March.

<sup>33</sup> Cuba's history with communism, while not explicitly advertised as an attraction for tourists, has nonetheless become a point of interest for many visitors (See: Babb, 2011; Sugden, 2007; Wilson & Látková, 2016).

greetings of a thumbs up. In a short amount of time, several cars would pass us by flashing their head lights while José responded flicking his windshield wipers.

Following the apparent call to action performed by the other drivers moving in the opposed direction flashing their headlights at us, José would place the small yellow plastic sign that read ‘taxi’ in its outwardly visible location atop the dashboard of his car. While he performed this maneuver, he explained to me how he chooses not to pay the higher monthly tax rate that would permit him to remain parked—legally—at the main entrance of tourist resorts and wait for potential foreign clients to emerge in a more spontaneous manner<sup>34</sup>. On that day, however, we were making our way to the side entrance that was for “Cuban employees only”, a space which José was legally permitted to park and wait for clients. As such, he explained how there would be no foreseeable problem if he identified himself as a *taxista* to the relevant authorities, confessing that it was a good idea to do so in order to avoid any possible complications. As we continued traveling a few kilometers further along the highway he gradually brought the car to a slower pace whilst gesturing respectfully to the police officer who was standing waiting by the side of the road monitoring the flow of traffic.

The economic significance of roads for José is relatively straightforward with respect to his livelihood strategy as a *taxista*. These pathways between places compress and accelerate the “long-distance cosmology of everyday life” (Dalakoglou, 2012, p.572) as they are the medium he travels while transporting clients between San Juan and any of the several nearby tourist resorts. But as we were driving along the road the social interactions performed revealed how there is more at play than this ‘compression’ of individual movements and economic pursuits

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<sup>34</sup> Although José is not permitted to remain parked in front of tourist resorts and await emerging tourists, he does drive by stopping briefly to avoid being caught waiting.

facilitated by this material segment of reality. Disparate livelihoods become interwoven in ways that cannot be entirely anticipated and/or governed by a body politic despite their shared use of the island's planned network of roads (Wilson, 2004, p.525). For José, who works in the transportation of people and things, as well as others such as the artisans whose work unfolds at the opposite ends of the road traveled, crafting wares at home in the city to be sold at the beach resorts, organization of everyday life often involves an intermeshing of formal and informal elements that move between demarcated spaces in improvisational ways. On that day, this manifested with both parties traveling to and from the same places architected for capital accumulation, both engaging legitimately in their own peculiar livelihood performances, while, at the same time, sustaining contracts between themselves that fall outside the purview and taxation of state authorities. In this sense, livelihood strategies may be performed and *arreglar* in ways that simultaneously comply with while also reaching beyond the official framework for reality as they move towards cementing their own sense of everyday certainty. But as these interindividual pursuits produce these frequent commutes between cities and “niche tourism sites” (Roland, 2011, p.11), Cubans also collaborate in navigating the same macro geopolitical struggles confronted by the Cuban government that are felt locally.

Having designed and sustained this network of roads revolutionary actors have also had to improvise as they ‘go along’, negotiating the constraints imposed by the US embargo and fluctuations of the global market. And, as they’ve layered a “tourist enclave industry on top of revolutionary socialist ideals” (Roland, 2011, p.90), blending monetary compensation with moral incentives (Brotherton, 2008, p.265-7), the Cuban government has worked with and *arregló* [arranged] possibilities not entirely of its own making. The road we traveled that day formally cemented the connection between “the real Cuba” as José referred to it, encountered in cities

Cubans actually reside in, and the Other activities that unfold in spaces officially designated for “the commodification and high-visibility packaging of the ‘Cuban experience’” (Sugden, 2007, p.249). However, despite being designed with this specific functional purpose, the meanings of the road were and are never entirely determined by these structural determinations.

## **5.1 Concrete currency**

Throughout this chapter I explore how both state and non-state actors have improvised to re-arrange the possibilities afforded through the cementing of certain pathways of exchange. Roads offer a metaphorical lens through which I analyze how these ‘pathways’ and the interconnections they designate are not simply followed in a predictable manner, but also how actors might veer in ways that are un-predictable, blending and even folding orientations as they move along these seemingly linear surfaces. Reflecting upon the statement made by Arturo and discussed in the previous chapter, how “here (in Cuba) we do things for the right but everything passes for the left”, while perhaps seeming irrational from a linear perspective of reality, reveals something significant which was communicated about the lived experiences of Cubans. How does one move right but go left?

Here, I’d like to challenge my own conceptual understanding of reality where ontological notions of time and performances of exchange are often objectified into measurable units; where people and things move along a determined spatial orientation towards some quantifiable end (one can imagine moving up-down, left-right within a sphere or pathway of exchange). As such, in the following pages I work against any attempt to examine the inter-actions which populate a social world as entities which can be fully “bounded by a surface” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.25), or captured by a structural definition. Following Lakoff and Johnson (1980), I approach metaphors as phenomena which are “pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in

thought and action” (p.3). Roads are interesting metaphorically, being material infrastructure designed to allow movement to and from particular destinations, while at the same time allowing certain “social forms” to be brought into being (Harvey & Knox, 2015, p.187). In this light, roads may become entangled with linear ideals of progress and development, as in taking “the road to democracy” or the “path of capitalism” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.251). People often discuss “the road taken (or not taken)” as they decipher interactions with a “right” (but also: correct, conservative, neoliberal) and left (but also: incorrect, liberal, communism) choice. They might discuss how they are “at a crossroads” or “a fork in the road”, as they choose a road to follow from “point A” to “point B”, eventually reaching “the end of the road”. And, although deviations do exist as one may travel “off the beaten path”, it seems inevitable that if a road is followed it will allow its traveler to reach a peculiar end-point. While Arturo’s statement was not specifically about roads, he described how although they (Cubans) attempt to follow the ‘right’ orientation, the actions they improvise inevitably pass for the left.

Before moving forward, I’d like to also consider the qualities of roads in a more pragmatic way by analyzing the shifting materiality of concrete. As this “substance that binds the material and ideational promises of modernity and also allows us to observe how and where fractures appear” (Harvey, 2010, p.32), concrete provides a ‘concrete’ way to observe the tensions and contradictions which may be unfolding between distinctly situated actors. For instance, the cementing of the road that led us that day to the beach resort while allowing for the material and bodily flows that carry greater remunerative possibilities, were often also complained about by José and the other *taxistas* I spoke to due to their conditions and subsequent difficulties this caused with regards to their livelihood strategies. On more than one occasion they would mention how it was not the weather that causes problems for their cars like it does

“over there (in Canada), with the harsh winters and snow you receive”. Instead, they explained how much of the damage sustained by their cars is caused by the often-unavoidable cracks that proliferate across Cuban roads. Thus, although concrete appears as material that “combines [an] initial flexibility with a powerful fixing capacity” (ibid, p.30), as with any attempt to structure reality it requires continuous re-working. As it hardens and is used to pattern the flows of everyday life—becoming this “vital element in a state’s territorializing project” (Wilson, 2004, p.526), concrete’s constructions show themselves to be “exceptionally inflexible and brittle” (Harvey, 2010, p.46), unable to resist environmental conditions as well as fully anticipate the possible flows of social interactions that travel along it.

The many fractures that characterize Cuban roads reflect and refract how these “mundane material [structures]” are also “fundamentally relational entities” (Harvey & Knox p.3, 6), whereby the generative practices of individual citizens working ‘socially’ and state officials working ‘politically’ unfold and collide, creating gaps “between the intended effects of infrastructural projects and the way those intentions play out in actual practice” (ibid, p.5). Gaps that visibly erupt between the practices organized by individuals that mobilize alternative ways to avoid further capture of the dollars they work to accumulate within the realm of tourism, and the constant policy reformulations made by the state that seek to absorb more of this revenue in order to sustain its socialist project. These gaps become apparent when one considers how, as less capital is made available for the state to pay for the maintenance of roads, the possibility of reducing individual costs for drivers and their cars moves further out of sight. Taxes are subsequently increased as infrastructural conditions deteriorate, inspiring users to continue searching for alternative ways to avoid taxation. In this way, the ‘objectivity’ of a road appears immediately as “social material” and “its specificity consists precisely in its being located

between organized individuals” (Voloshinov, 1973, p.12). In other words, the improvisational movements, those gesturing performances enacted by José and the other drivers moving along the opposite side of the road that help one another navigate the indeterminacy of this material surface, re-produce not only abstract meaning but also concrete conditions “in the very process of use” (Ingold, 2011, p.78).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how this concept of *arreglar* is also about the continuous re-arranging of relations and possibilities afforded through these “hard surfaces of life” (Geertz, 1973, p.30). In this respect, I understand pathways such as roads as not simply being traveled and followed in a predictable way by users, as the full extent of the possibilities these pathways allow for are only realized in and through their use (sometimes one must go left to go right, or perhaps vice-versa). My intention in describing the material qualities of roads and the concrete that constitutes these pathways as that which is continuously re-worked socially, however, is to use these as a metaphor to explore the usages and meanings of currencies in Cuba. As with the concrete that structures roads, I would like to extend the argument that money should not only be understood as being a “vehicle to facilitate exchange”, as some ‘thing’ that represents “mere mathematical knowledge” which determines the nature of economic transactions as things with an inevitable end-point (Di Muzio & Robbins, 2017, p.2; Seitz, 2017, p.115). Money is itself also a “social relation” entangled within these networks of legal and extralegal interactions that are performed through it (Gilbert, 2005, p.359). Its uses, while underwritten and oriented by nation states (Hart, 1986, p.638), are not predetermined to follow some linear path. And, despite money having acquired a reputation across analyses of market economies to attract quite polarizing moral claims, often imagined as being this “abstract and ‘impersonal’ element” that “makes us treat every social encounter as a mathematical problem” (Weber and Simmel as cited

by Dodd, 2017, p.130), here I follow the idea that money's meanings are animated through "its connection to principles of actions that determines the goodness or badness of its effects" (Seitz, 2017, p.122). In other words, I argue against a reifying perspective which proposes how "Money is that Money does" (Walker, 1878, p.405), and for an understanding of money's 'abstract' or symbolic character as also immediately refracting a concrete or "objective social validity" (Marx, 1990, p.226).

I begin where I left off, traveling the road between city and tourist resort with José. It is during this social interaction after having picked up the artisans where I was first compelled to reevaluate how the meanings of money are also authored from 'below'. In this respect, I continue to follow the theoretical idea discussed in chapter three, where the relationship between individual(s) and society is characterized by a 'feedback loop', and where the commensurable qualities of money is an inter-active improvisational formation, in 'dialog' with—but not determined—by peculiar "regimes of value" (Appadurai, 1988, p.4) or "political spheres of valuation" (Ross et al., 2017, p.9). For this reason, I take a historical detour following this highway confusion where I trace the actions of both state and non-state actors as they define themselves and their situations through their interactions and the "intermediaries that they put into circulation" (Gilbert, 2005, p.369-70), and, more specifically, through the uses of currencies. After which, I continue with discussing ethnographic insights to show how behind ideas of money's apparently innate power to decide in-equalities and grant access to a more desirable life is underwritten by a political struggle to "define what value is" and how it ought to be pursued (Graeber, 2013, p.228). In this sense, I attempt to show how state administered currencies have not simply configured pathways of exchange to be followed by the population, but that people have also *arregrado* possibilities afforded in accordance to their own felt needs and desires

## 5.2 Pesos. Pesos. ¡Divisa!

Arriving at the resort, José parked the car in front of the smaller side entrance that was for employee use only. Here we encountered a grey metal gate which grants and/or denies entry to this Other reality that appears so distinct from that of ‘the real Cuba’ but which was attended by a single security guard. Escaping the heat from inside the car, we seated ourselves on the concrete bench that was shaded by the overhang structure protruding outwards from the cement wall that surrounds the resort, in this small area designated for public transportation pick-up. And, as we waited José stared intently at the rear-end of his car in silence. Several moments later, however, and seemingly spurred by a sense of restlessness in having to wait for the artisans to make their way to the pick-up point, he opened the trunk of his car grabbing his tool box and setting it beside the rear left-side wheel. Popping the hubcap off, he started tightening the bolts which connected the wheel to axel, declaring this to be a normal part of maintenance meant to keep the car in order. The wheel, had felt a bit ‘loose’ along the drive here, he explained, “*hay que mantenerlo*” [there is but to maintain it].

A fair amount of time would pass after José had completed this spontaneous yet routine act of maintenance before one of the artisans emerged from behind the gated passage. As he approached the artisan began to speak in a loud but friendly manner to José reaching out in order to shake his hand while asking if it were possible to pick up his wife and child from school before dropping them off at home. “Of course”, José replied, refusing as if he were insulted by the additional money that was offered by the artisan for the disruptive detour. Shortly thereafter, two more artisans would make their way to the car carrying with them bags and cases of different shapes, colors and sizes, returning to this Other Cuba to gather more things and repeating this process until the entire trunk and part of the back seat was filled. Having

introduced myself, I took a seat in the front of the car next to José and one of the artisans, while the two others seated themselves in the space that remained vacant in the backseat.

Driving along the road for only several minutes as we made our way back to San Juan, José made what was for me an unexpected veer onto a small dirt path that led to a concrete home situated along the side of the highway. Here, the artisans began to unload their goods storing them inside the house of the family who owned it and with whom they also maintained informal arrangements. As the last bag was unloaded, the artisan who had brought it inside returned from within the household carrying a pamphlet about Christianity in his hand that was given to him by the home owners. He read what was inscribed in large letters across the front page of the pamphlet as each of us returned to our seats in the car. A familiar metaphor which conveyed how “*las cosas mas importantes de la vida no se compran*” [the most important things in life cannot be purchased]. In response to this reading, José openly expressed how he felt unsure about its validity. And, still holding the pamphlet in his hand the artisan would reply by stating how he believed health to be something that a person could not buy with money. “But better healthcare can be paid for”, José disagreed in a friendly tone as he piloted the car back onto the highway. However, as he adjusted the steering wheel allowing the tires to straighten and the body of the car to align with the fractured surface of the road, José reconsidered his position. “*Puede ser que la amistad es la unica cosa que no se puede comprar con dinero*” [It might be that friendship is the only thing that cannot be bought with money], he’d confirm.

The conversation continued as we traveled along the road, but the debate about what could and could not be bought with money was suspended as another of the artisans began to discuss how work had been that day. In this retelling he expressed a sense of precarity that was shared by the others in the car. “I only sold for 7 pesos today” he said, “but what is there to do,

*hay que trabajar* [there is but to work]”. The second artisan acknowledged the statement, adding to what was said by explaining how although it might be the low season now even the high season has been getting worse with each passing year. Citing the amount of crafted wares he’d sell daily a decade ago and comparing it to the diminished amount he now expects to sell, he expressed a sense of worry regarding the declining amount of pesos he might make in the coming high season.

It was at this moment that the third artisan sitting directly behind me eagerly embraced the conversation speaking passionately and at length about the alternative possibility of working in the state sector. He mentioned how he felt that the pay is simply too low for the work performed and that there is great deal of corruption engaged by higher level employees who secretly pocket more than others. “*Un comunismo asqueroso*” [a disgusting communism] José sighed while driving and as the artisan continued unabated with his example. “Look at the tobacco industry, it’s the fourth most profitable industry in Cuba and the factory workers make so little. Imagine yourself only making 500 pesos a month when last year a single factory made 8.5 million pesos... *¡divisa!*”

While this is only a brief overview of what was said about the tobacco industry, wage inequalities and the corrupt activities of factory managers who made suspicious purchases of goods that workers occupying lesser positions could only imagine making—such as the example of a new refrigerator given by the artisan, it was this final poetic emphasis made after stating peso that I wish to draw attention to. Specifically, how the rising intonation used as he exclaimed “*¡divisa!*” would disturb my own understanding of the dual currency system in Cuba. Although money had been a central actor in the conversation we were having, until that moment no one else in the car had felt the need to specify which currency was being discussed other than stating

“peso”. Subsequently, I had not recognized the shifting between currencies that was unfolding throughout the conversation. For instance, I had learned throughout my stay in Cuba that the monthly salary of 500 pesos cited by the third artisan indexed a salary paid in *pesos Cubanos* [Cuban pesos]—often also referred to as *moneda nacional* [national money]—understood as being typical for a person employed within the state sector. But there exists a second national currency, *el peso convertible* [the convertible peso], which also circulates across the island extensively and whose economic value is artificially pegged to that of the US dollar. The 7 pesos the first artisan had complained about undoubtedly referenced this currency, as the customers the artisans sold their crafted wares to were foreign tourists staying at resorts where visitors are typically only allowed to exchange their own international currency for Cuba’s designated international currency—i.e. the convertible peso.

While originally being designed for use in Cuba’s international business transactions, the convertible peso is nowadays also often used by locals in their everyday transactions. And, although in the past tourists may not have been legally permitted to obtain or hold Cuban pesos, being forced to use only convertible pesos, during the period in which I conducted my fieldwork foreigners were able to make use of both domestic currencies. For instance, the resort I stayed at for several days when I arrived in Cuba did not allow the purchase of Cuban pesos, however, across the road there was a currency exchange kiosk which did. Subsequently, as the boundary between currencies has become blurred over the years (for historical reasons discussed in the following section), and convertible pesos are now routinely being used in the everyday lives of Cubans living in the city—in the ‘real Cuba’, the need has emerged for individuals to distinguish between the two currencies when the economic value of things being spoken about cannot be

clearly identified simply by stating peso<sup>35</sup>. In these circumstances, the convertible peso might be referred to as *el peso convertible*, or more rarely it might be pronounced in the same way its acronym is spelt—i.e. as “CUCs”. However, there were also moments throughout my fieldwork where the convertible peso was referred to as *divisa*. It is at this juncture that a symbolically significant relationship between the three currencies makes itself felt. *Divisa*, while translating literally as [foreign currency] and typically only used by Spanish speakers to cite any currency other than one’s own domestic money, is used typically used by Cubans to specify US dollars (Brotherton, 2012, p.7) or convertible pesos.

There is a continuity, therefore, that is elaborated between the three currencies. Between the Cuban peso and the convertible peso as both might be referred to as pesos, and between the convertible peso and the US dollar as both might be cited as *divisa*. In this way, the convertible peso seems to bridge the separation between peso and dollar. And, it is this continuity which has led me to question a peculiar conviction often encountered across economic analyses of Cuba. Specifically, the idea that the depenalization of US dollars in 1993 created two economies—or even two islands. This presumption tends to reflect upon the Cuban peso and the dollar as cementing two economies which “are, for the most part, mutually exclusive” (Brotherton, 2012, p.159). And, imagined in this way as being two “exclusive spheres, each marked by different institutionalization and different moral values” (Bohannon, 1959, p.492), the peso economy—or *moneda nacional*—is perceived as encompassing lower quality goods and services that are affordable for those who work within the state sector, whereas this Other capitalist economy—or *divisa*—is ‘traveled’ only by those who are privileged and maintain jobs remunerated in convertible pesos or US dollars. In this sense, money has been made responsible for the

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<sup>35</sup> During my fieldwork, the exchange rate between the Cuban peso and the convertible peso was 24-to-1.

inversion of the “social pyramid”, as professionals such as doctors who are understood as making an essential contribution to society earn much less than those who drive taxis or rent rooms to tourists (Andaya, 2009, p.366). While I don’t disagree that the transformations enacted during the Special Period resulted in the spread of inequality and emergent class distinctions, I feel that this interpretation grants money a “transcendental position” allowing it to “stand behind” all other valuables (Holbraad, 2017, p.89). In other words, it suggests that money itself has cemented these two hierarchically distinct as well as separate spheres of production and exchange. My intention in the following sections is to draw out how peoples’ valuations of things and actions that belong to either sphere is connected to the ideals they associate with the mode of production that underpins them—but also to emphasize how these two ‘distinct’ spheres remain mutually contingent as they are reproduced through inter-actions which travel within this porous space in-between capitalism and socialism. Subsequently, I am interested in how Cubans evaluate—in a moral as well as economic sense—the sphere of *divisa* (entangled with capitalist production) in relation to the sphere of *moneda nacional* (entangled with socialist production). The following section therefore explores the history of this currency interplay to provide a foundation upon which my subsequent analysis might rest.

### **5.3 The currency shuffle**

Most analyzes situate the early 1990s as the point in time where Cuba became a “dual economy” (Loss, 2009, p.106) “[operating] on two entirely distinct registers” (Binkley, 2009, p.330). The story goes that following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, there was little option for existing communist regimes other than “[reintegrating] into the global market economy for trade and financing, irrespective of any efforts to regulate market features domestically” (Eckstein, 2010, p.314-5). This reading of history thus begins with the actions taken by the Cuban

government in August 1993 when, prior to the creation of the ministry for tourism and announcing the need to attract large scale foreign investment, the US dollar was depenalized (Alejandro, 2008, p.90; Whitefeld, 2008, p.47). The intention of this ‘temporary’ measure was to institutionalize the dollar for “external-sector products and transactions, and the Cuban peso for wages and most domestic transactions” (Anderson, 2014, p.103).

Academic research that followed would explore the “crisis of values” (Humphrey, 2002) that erupted as a response to the visible income inequalities and uneven possibilities for consumption which appeared as a result of these transformations (Porter, 2008; Simoni, 2016). Those who were able to gain access to dollars, typically by working with or within tourism, or, by receiving remittances from family abroad, were perceived as moving up the hierarchy and thus participating in an entirely separate—capitalist—economy. But as only a small segment of the population was seen to have been liberated from the shackles of *la lucha* in this way, these transformations have been interpreted and explained as creating tensions across a social landscape where possessing US dollars conjures the belief held by many that “*¡Vivir con dolares en Cuba, es como si no estuvieras viviendo en Cuba!* (Living in Cuba with dollars is like not living in Cuba at all!)” (Brotherton, 2012, p.159). On the other hand, Cubans employed in the state sector and who are paid in Cuban pesos maintain what appears to be little to no access to this Other Cuba. The symbolic materialization of this exclusion is perhaps most visibly apparent in the proliferation of *tiendas* across the island that attract crowds of “window-shoppers” (Holbraad, 2017, p.92), Cubans whose earnings only afford them the possibility of peering in at what might be purchased if they were to have access to these better dollar wages. From one perspective, these transformations are explained as having been a consequence of the Cuban government’s desire “to keep market mechanisms from contaminating the rest of the social and

economic fabric” after having eventually come to terms with the necessity in allowing dollars and other decentralizing mechanisms to penetrate the “internal logic of the economy” as a way to alleviate economic pressures (Gordy, 2015, p.171). The comingling of currencies—as well as their jockeying for ‘position’, however, stretches further back than the depenalization of US dollars by Fidel Castro in 1993.

By the end of the independence war in 1898, one third of the Cuban population had been decimated and economic organization was highly disordered. Both Spanish and US currencies occupied the pockets of the remaining island inhabitants, and it was not until 1914 that a Cuban currency first emerged onto the scene (Molina, 2005, p.11-2). This new national currency would continue to coexist alongside the US dollar, which sustained a strong presence in the Cuban economy well into the 1950s. Change followed the victory of the Revolution as a new national currency was minted in 1961, and the private possession of US dollars became prohibited—although would continue to circulate “clandestinely” (Ritter & Rowe, 2002, p.101-2). For instance, the buying and selling of extra rationed goods between households, as well as “home-based” productive activities of “self-employed persons with assistance from family members and perhaps friends” who participated in a large underground market economy that existed from the 1970s onwards (Ritter, 2004, p.11-2). Having already populated the Cuban social environment, the demand for US dollars might subsequently be explained as having intensified rather than emerged between the years 1989 and 1993. This demand would significantly expand practices and capitalist relations that had continued to persist on the island—to varying degrees—since the beginning of the century (as explored in chapter three). With regards to tracing the path of Cuba’s historical trajectory, therefore, it does seem necessary to consider how “the market element of market socialism” did in fact come “prior to the socialist element”, and that this

'market element' was never completely dissolved from the island despite revolutionary efforts (Belkin & Roosevelt, 2015, p.7). While the effort had been made to move towards Che Guevara's vision of eliminating people's need for money to access goods and services (Chomsky, 2015, p.44), this move would first have to overcome the prejudices of socioeconomic practices which had cemented the use of money. In this sense, the re-organization of the economy in 1993 to designate the US dollars as its international currency reveals an awkward historical continuity. And although this peculiar improvisation sustained monetary stability throughout Special Period, it also strengthened the island's turbulent relationship with the US.

For Cuba, the loss of "Soviet patronage" would also mean that the constraints imposed by the US economic embargo would become more perilous as the island had become dependent upon the Soviets "as a provider of imports and purchaser of exports, but mostly as a source of subsidies and subventions" (Pérez, 2011, p.298). Having lost this Soviet connection to the global market, by the early 1990s Cuba's import bill decreased by 70 percent" and its national output declined by more than 50 percent (Gordy, 2006, p.391). And in a move to accelerate the anticipated demise of the Revolutionary government, a number of debilitating executive orders were issued by President George H.W. Bush in 1992. Ships engaged in trade with Cuba were banned from US ports for six months. The Toricelli act was passed preventing US corporations operating in third party countries from conducting business with Cuba prohibiting "trade in food, medicine, and medical supplies, which in 1992 represented 90 percent of Cuban trade with U.S. subsidiaries" (Pérez, 2011, p.298-9). Through the act, foreign aid was effectively curtailed and Cuban-Americans were limited to sending 500 dollars a year as financial aid to family members and friends living on the island. And while the state rationing system would prevent inflationary pressures that might have translated everyday necessities into absurdly unaffordable prices, the

demand for some basic necessities which had become scarce stimulated the population's movement towards an already existing informal market where the dollar-to-peso underground exchange rate exploded from 1-to-5 in 1989 to 1-to-95 by 1994 (Ritter & Rowe, 2002, p.102-3), or, by some accounts, to 1-to-130 (Eckstein, 2010, p.1049). In light of these additional details, another reading might interpret historical actions taken by the Cuban government as negotiating the shock of the Special Period by drawing upon "a tradition inside Cuba that saw creative innovation as a key element of Cuban socialism" (Gordy, 2006, p.393). Innovation which was not unilaterally authored by the State.

On November 7, 1993, at the international conference center in Havana, Fidel would explain how new circumstances would "oblige" this boost to tourist activity (Castro, 1993, Nov 7). These 'new circumstances' he would elaborate, had a great deal to do with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this respect, government responses were couched in a familiar argument that was made by the Cubans I interacted with on an everyday basis, they were performed *por necesidad*, or, as Fidel would put it, were a "necessary evil" (Castro as cited by Scarpaci et al., 2016, p.385). And, the US dollar was at this moment incorporated as the unit of measure in this sector because it was *almost* impossible to use any other currency.

*Ya que el dólar se ha vuelto la moneda que sirve como medida, pues resulta casi imposible medir en otras monedas, porque a veces son miles por un dólar, o cientos por un dólar. Usemos el dólar (Castro, 1993, Nov 7).*

[Since the dollar has become the currency that serves as a measure, it is almost impossible to measure in other currencies, because sometimes they are thousands for a dollar, or hundreds for a dollar. Let's use the dollar]

During this speech, Fidel also expressed remorse with regards to the historical path Cuba had taken. He explained how the "prejudices" which the Revolution had maintained against the development of tourism—as an "important economic resource"—maybe ought to have been "*vencido*" [overcome] at an earlier date (ibid). But it is also worth noting that a revolutionary

vision for the future had not been entirely dissolved. Reflecting upon this urgent need to further incorporate market mechanisms Fidel exclaimed during this same speech how “*La pureza no está—y debemos comprenderlo así—en una urna de cristal*” [purity is not—and we must understand it this way—in a crystal urn] (ibid). Years later, the argument for “dollarization of one part of the economy” continued to be seen by Cuban economists as “necessary to offer a currency more stable than the Cuban peso for economic activities that would function as the motors of recuperation” (Alejandro, 2008, p.92). However, it was also a response that would now admittedly be explained as being performed to accommodate and incorporate the already “pervasive” and rapidly expanding presence of dollars throughout the island since 1989 (ibid). A presence which had been cultivated and sustained through “*mercados informales*” [informal markets] (Alejandro & Villanueva, 2013, p.9), i.e. the black-market or submerged economy as others have coded this ‘extralegal’ realm.

Although the US government had tightened restrictions for the transfer of remittances in 1992, between the years 1990 and 2000 these still increased from 50 to 700 million US dollars, largely through the covert activities of “informal neighborhood-based middlemen” or “*mulas*” (Eckstein, 2004, p.316-8). Depenalization meant that Cubans would no longer have to navigate restrictions imposed by both the US embargo and Cuban government, resulting in the growth of these activities. Legalization also meant that the Cuban government could better capture some of the much-needed hard currency that was flowing from abroad as it “[extended] shopping rights” for nationals (ibid, p.319-20). Cubans receiving remittances as well as working in tourism could now spend their US dollars making legitimate purchases for desired goods<sup>36</sup>. And, as the

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<sup>36</sup> “By the early 2000s Cubans spent an estimated 75-80% of their remittances at the dollar stores”. In 1998 sales accounted for in *tiendas* amounted to 870 million dollars, in 2003 over 1.3 billion (Eckstein, 2010, p.1049-50).

literature on Cuba argues, these actions would indeed bring about visible inequalities between those who did and did not have access to work paid in dollars or remittances sent from abroad. At the same time, it also meant that social benefits like the state rationing system could be better sustained through the finances now recuperated from the hands of the informal sector.

The coordination between domestic and international activities would thus appear to have been compartmentalized, remaining interconnected as “the upholding of the social system was largely due to intersectorial transfers making use of the dual exchange rates” (Herrera & Nakatani, 2004, p.87). This meant that dollarized firms such as those in tourism receive public investment and are granted “management autonomy to allocate the dollars they [earn]”, but also channel their surplus dollars to a central fund (ibid, p.88). In turn, traditional sectors such as social services have been enabled to finance their purchases by buying dollars from this central fund at a rate of 1-to-1 (Cuban peso to US dollar). Due to this improvisation, goods and services which have been important achievements realized by the Revolution—like education and health care, could continue to be provided to the population for free or at very minimal costs by being linked to capitalist practices. And, political ideology would refract these ‘necessary’ transformations. Before the 1990s, Cubans who had emigrated were described by the communist party as “*gusanos, escoria, and apatridas*, as worms, social degenerates, and unpatriotic” (Eckstein, 2010, p.1050). Following the shock of the Special Period crisis, however, diasporas were “reframed” as “the ‘Cuban community abroad’... long-distance nationalists” who supported the revolution as they transferred dollars to island inhabitants (ibid).

But as is the case with the maintenance of concrete roads, while this work re-arranged possibilities by drawing upon and expanding capitalist relations which had persisted throughout the triumph of the Revolution, new fractures would be felt. An affective disillusionment grew

amongst a population that remembered hearing a rhetoric of “state nurturance” while witnessing an increase in inequality and wealth brought about by the rapid surge in development of “practices unthinkable a generation ago” (Andaya, 2013, p.740-1). Practices such as tourism which remain necessary almost three decades after they were first announced as being “temporary [measures]” initiated to “enable the economy to recover” (Bailey, 2008, p.1083).

De-dollarization of this dual economy might also be considered with respect to performances that fall between what is necessary and what is desirable. This was a project coordinated almost at the same time as the dollar was made legal, with the creation and circulation of the convertible peso in 1994 (Molina, 2005, p.5). But it also seems to have been an improvisational maneuver less concerned with what was immediately necessary, the “smoothing” of fault lines that had erupted during the Special Period (Herrera & Nakatani, 2004, p.86), as it was a response that moved along a historical road of political economic uncertainty. Specifically, the complicated political economic relationship with the US, which Cuba had now become precariously more connected to in accepting dollars as its international business currency. The initial existence of the convertible peso had been very marginal until the years 2003 to 2004 (Alejandro & Villanueva, 2013, p.9), and, prior to these years, the Cuban government had also incorporated other historically significant market mechanisms—albeit still highly regulated by the state—to promote recovery. The single bank system it had maintained since February 1961 was decentralized as commercial and investment banks were institutionalized across the island. A new acronym was created to reflect this symbolic transformation as on May 28, 1997 the national bank of Cuba (BNC) became the Central bank of Cuba (BCC). The committee of monetary politics was then founded in 1998 (Molina, 2005, p.12, 19; Herrera & Nakatani, 2004, p.87), and a parity was thereafter established and sustained

between the convertible peso and the US dollar at an exchange rate of 1-to-1, while the Cuban peso was *formally* separated from these international—capitalist—practices that were becoming increasingly pronounced (Alejandro & Villanueva, 2013, p.10). Although quite a drastic reconfiguration of economic policy, these changes did appear to allow for the gradual—albeit not complete—recovery of the economy by the late 1990’s (Anderson, 2014, p.98), as well as stabilization of the Cuban peso to US dollar exchange ratio at 21-to-1 (Herrera & Nakatani, 2004, p.87). The question then becomes why the abrupt change of heart in 2003 and 2004? Why the sudden incorporation of stricter currency exchange controls for Cuban businesses working with US dollars, and, why the revitalization of restrictions<sup>37</sup> (not prohibition) of transactions using US dollars that were now compelled to use the convertible peso as the currency for international exchanges (Molina, 2005, p.5)?

Realistically speaking, a confluence of factors would contribute to the intensification of these ‘convertible’ tensions beginning in 2003. While the economy had been successful on paper, it now faced new internal and external issues. Internally, enterprises were generating enough currency to be self-sustainable, but were evidently “failing to act with the financial discipline necessary to ease Cuba’s binding foreign-exchange constraint and contribute to its domestic production and social programs” (Quiñones Chang, 2013, p.46-7). In other words, enterprise managers were not performing in a way that sought to maximize profits during a time where structural conditions had reached a critical point of deterioration. Deterioration which was visible in the roads that José and his friends complained about, as well as a growing number of homes (39%) that were being assessed as either “fair” or “bad” as of early 2004 (Castiñeiras

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<sup>37</sup> “The government ruled in late 2004 that Cubans could no longer use dollars as domestic currency (although dollar possession remained legal)” (Eckstein, 2010, p.1051).

García, 2013, p.160) and a major electricity breakdown that happened later that year due to ageing infrastructure and “deferred maintenance” (Quiñones Chang, 2013, p.47). And, despite the Cuban government moving to payback its large amount of foreign debt, coming to an important agreement with Venezuela to exchange human capital for resources—trading educational and medical personnel for oil, falling tourism rates after September 11, 2001 worsened these already difficult circumstances (ibid).

Externally, as the coded distinction between the US dollar for international use and the peso for domestic use had gradually become blurred over the years, Washington began to fine banks that were assisting with Cuba’s transactions in US dollars (Anderson, 2014, p.103). In 2004, 48 hours following his re-election, George Bush classified Cuba as well as five other countries as forming an “axis of evil” (Cornwell, 2005, Jan 20) and further tightened the restrictions imposed by the blockade<sup>38</sup>. That same year, the Federal Reserve would fine Switzerland’s largest bank 100 million dollars “for allegedly sending dollars to Cuba, Libya, Iran and Yugoslavia in violation of U.S. sanctions against those countries” (NBC News, 2004, May 10). While framed primarily as a response to the illegal sanctioning acts carried out by the US, or, as Fidel explained, “the new pressures of the Miami mafia and the United States government” (Castro, 2004, October 25), it seems that a collision of forces and events contributed to the hasty replacement of the US dollar by the convertible peso. However, it wasn’t simply the replacement of the US dollar by the convertible peso as Cuba’s international currency which was enacted. Further revisions would follow in 2005 with the re-centralization of financial resources (Alejandro & Villanueva, 2013, p.8) and with “all hard currency [being] placed in a single

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<sup>38</sup> “The Bush administration, following the recommendations of the so-called Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, in 2004 restricted Cubans residing in the United States to only one family visit to Cuba every three years, and limited visits to immediate blood relatives (parents, children, siblings). At the close of 2006, the economic losses to Cuba caused by the four-decade-long U.S. blockade were estimated at \$89 billion” (Quiñones Chang, 2013, p.92).

unified income account at the Central Bank” (Quiñones Chang, 2013, p.101). A veer to the left and return to central planning.

The Cuban government would eventually announce the *necessity* to unify the two pesos in October 2013. On this occasion, the need to reformulate economic practices on the island followed “a balance of payments crisis” experienced by the Cuban economy in 2008 and 2009, where during these years the BCC would have to issue more convertible pesos domestically than it could cover due to a decline in international earnings (Alejandro & González-Corzo, 2010, p.202-3). Cuban economists attribute the cause to “three external shocks”: (1) the deterioration of trade agreements, (2) an intense hurricane season in 2008, and (3) increased dependence on external sectors coupled with the global crisis (ibid). And as with previous crises the Cuban government would have to improvise to make financial order of these dilemmas. Another round of significant policy changes were subsequently announced by Raul Castro in 2010 and 2011. Transformations that were also enveloped within a discursive shift as the government expressed a need to increase productivity by promoting “equality of opportunity” rather than “egalitarianism” (Wilkinson, 2017, p.20-1), clarifying for the population that “socialism means social justice and equality but equality of rights and opportunities, not salaries” (Raul Castro as cited by Andaya, 2009, p.371-2). But while appearing to be a radical veer to the right and back to decentralization, this ideological revision also expressed continuity with the past in espousing a need to modify rather than abandon. A need to leave “behind prejudices against nonstate sectors of the economy” (LeoGrande, 2017, p.355), while, at the same time, not adopting “wholesale privatization” (Wilkinson, 2017, p.21).

Seeking to increase productivity, the government slowly moved to allow greater possibilities for self-employment. Increasing productivity, however, has been a desire confessed

by government officials since the 1960s (Chomsky, 2015, p.8-10), and, in this regard, there have been continuous attempts to find the ‘correct’ blend of moral and monetary incentives mobilized through the different forms of labor programs devised during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s<sup>39</sup> (Kapcia, 2008, p.169). And, while socialist regimes have been criticized for having “no clear idea, no worked-out vision, of what a socialist transformation might entail”, being described as “[veering] wildly in their economic policies” from left to right, right to left (Belkin & Roosevelt, 2015, p.4), this criticism presupposes that socialist regimes have been unilaterally in control of the ‘road taken’. On the other hand, tracing these veers between centralization and decentralization reveals that historical moments where the Cuban government has critically reevaluated its economic strategy have been greatly influenced by internal and external factors never completely within its control (i.e. geopolitics and global events, the environment, and responses innovated by citizens moving within the informal sector). Speaking to this point, the need for greater flexibility regarding the move towards greater self-employment opportunities that Raul has been advocating in a more pronounced fashion as of late, discusses formally allowing activities that have also already been unfolding informally. In other words, this is not a move that simply seeks to create more forms of self-employment, it also seeks to capture the earnings of an already existing “submerged economy” within a “new regime of social security contributions” and the promotion of a “tax-paying culture”<sup>40</sup> (Anderson, 2014, p.105-6). A similar maneuver performed on a much smaller scale was enacted in 1978, when Decree Law 14

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<sup>39</sup> Programs such as the *microbrigades* devised by Fidel in the 1970 and revitalized—as well as redesigned—in 1984, gave teams of workers paid leave from their state sector employment in order to direct their energies towards the building of their own neighbourhood infrastructure (Mathéy, 1989).

<sup>40</sup> Self-employment has also always existed to varying degrees throughout the Revolution’s history, predominately in agriculture but also in other activities (Anderson, 2014, p.105). Following the changes in 1993 there was a “cautious turnaround” and the number of self-employed workers grew, and by 2005 about 3% of the workforce was registered as self-employed—although many had found taxes too high reverting back to and continuing to work informally (ibid).

legalized 48 categories of self-employment already happening within the informal sector (Pérez-López, 1995, p.93).

Having laid the historical foundation for this currency interplay, in the next section I look at the pragmatic interchangeability between the Cuban peso and the convertible peso that characterizes most everyday transactions for Cubans—despite the government’s delayed movement towards unification. And, how despite the value claim made by one of my Cuban friends, that ‘money is money’ and what matters is quantity, the quantitative ideal that 1 convertible peso simply equals 24 Cuban pesos also speaks to a qualitative differentiation.

#### **5.4 The value of a peso**

Having dropped off the Cuban artisans at their homes in San Juan, José parked at a nearby Panamericana<sup>41</sup> to pick up some mayonnaise as well as a few other select goods not offered at the *bodegas* or *mercados liberados*. As the cashier tallied up the total, he reached for the wallet in his back pocket and removed convertible peso bills. Not enough to cover the entire amount projected on the small digital screen facing outwards towards consumers, José grabbed several more bills from a different compartment flap within his wallet, paying the balance in Cuban pesos. As we walked out of the Panamericana I’d ask him about the ‘logistics’ of the transaction. But while I was drawn to the potential significance that such a fluid act in using both currencies simultaneously might hold, José simply brushed it off when I asked him about the two currencies. “*Es una locura*” [it’s a crazy thing], he replied, “*algo muy incomodo*” [something very uncomfortable/inconvenient].

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<sup>41</sup> Panamericana is a chain dollar store (*tienda*) found across the island of Cuba.

Unification was first explained publicly not as a maneuver that would redress the current economic downturn, but to restore the value of the Cuban peso and “modernize” the economy (BBC Mundo, 2013, Oct 22). The intention was twofold. First, to reduce “*el peso*” [the weight] of the government in the economy (i.e. central planning), and thus facilitate the growth of small private ventures, as well as improve the accountability and fluidity of transactions between larger Cuban enterprises. Second, unification was intended to eliminate the inequality between Cubans that had been propagated by the presence of the convertible peso, as it would “*revalorizar*” [revalue/strengthen] the Cuban peso. The relationship between the two currencies, and, more specifically, the convertible peso having been explained as being “25 times stronger” than the Cuban peso, were pinpointed as the reason for Cuba’s hierarchal division into “two islands” (ibid). The original article in Granma expressed how

*Todo el que tuviera acceso a moneda fuerte tenía privilegios que no tenían quienes solo recibían sus salarios en moneda nacional o peso Cubano. (ibid)*

[Everyone who had access to strong currency had privileges that those who only received their salaries in national currency or Cuban peso did not.]

One month later the Cuban government would provide several additional reasons as to why it chose the Cuba peso specifically as the currency *to be* unified<sup>42</sup>. Stating first, that it was the historical currency. Second, that most family savings are in Cuban peso and the population maintains confidence in this currency which is reinforced by the idea that it will return to being the sole money in circulation. And third, that salaries are paid in Cuban pesos, paying their equivalent in convertible pesos would make more evident the low level of salaries paid in the state sector (Alejandro & Villanueva, 2013, p.13). What I’d like to draw attention to is the

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<sup>42</sup> The Cuban government has spoken for some time now about unifying the Cuban peso and the convertible peso into a single national currency. State actors have not gone into great detail regarding how this goal would be accomplished, and thus there is much speculation surrounding the process. What has been explained is that unification will result in the simultaneous devaluation of one of these currencies alongside the revaluation (i.e. strengthening) of the other. Wilson (2014) has pointed out, however, that both Cuban currencies “are pegged to the US dollar like [the] pre-revolutionary pesos”, and thus monetary unification might actually intensify inequalities (p.115).

“qualitative-quantitative” assessment (Echterhölter, 2017, p.44) made here concerning the quality of ‘strength’ each currency embodied in relation to the other which could be expressed and compared through a quantitative evaluation (purchasing power).

Qualitatively speaking, simply gaining access to the objective substance of either peso would grant or deny a person access to greater socioeconomic living conditions. At the same time, this qualitative judgement whereby the convertible peso was evaluated as superior and the Cuban peso as inferior, is bound to an economic comparison in their shared social existence whereby both act as “general [forms] of value” that “can only arise as the joint contribution of the whole world of commodities” (Marx, 1992, p.159)—which includes the commodification of labor. I begin with the assumption that the rate of exchange had apparently mystified for Cubans earning Cuban pesos (according to the government’s claims) the relative purchasing power of their salaries.

Seated at her dining room table one afternoon having just finished eating, I confessed to Teresa that I was confused by how Cubans dealt with the multiple currencies so fluently. The constant switching between currencies and even making transactions that awkwardly combined them, I explained my frustration in not being able to understand how Cubans could make sense of which currency was being spoken of when they simply said “*peso*”. “Ay Frankie, that’s easy” she replied, continuing with her explanation

Teresa: People just know the price of the thing being talked about. For example, if I say this avocado (holding up an actual avocado in mid-air) is worth 8 pesos, you know that I am talking about *moneda nacional* and not convertible pesos. You wouldn’t pay 8 convertible pesos for one avocado.

F: Ah, so people just know the prices of things.

Teresa: Of course. If you, for example, don’t know the price of something you want then you have to find out if it’s convertible pesos or *moneda nacional*. Remember that 24 CUPs are 1 CUC (here Teresa would pronounce the acronym representing each currency as it is spelt). 1 US dollar is 25 Cuban pesos.

F: Okay. But are there things that you can buy only with Cuban pesos and not with convertible pesos?

Teresa: Na. People just want money.

Other clients would pass through the restaurant that day offering their own clarifications. One person would explain how “if someone asks for 1 peso for a glass of water (holding up their glass) you know that they’re talking about *moneda nacional*, not convertible pesos”. When I asked about state salaries people were knowledgeable of those earned across the different sectors of employment as these were, for the most part, regulated by the government. It was much more difficult for people to give a precise number for the salaries of those who worked with *divisa*, for instance, a taxi driver or artisan, as salaries were much more uncertain in this sphere being predicated upon the flow of tourists and of international currencies. Workers in the sphere of *divisa* were therefore often cited as making “*hasta*” [up to] a certain amount per day. Significantly, however, this potential amount made in a day matched or even exceeded what the general population working in the state sector was expected to make in a month.

This form of knowing, however, was more than just the memorization of price-values for things that belonged to ‘mutually exclusive’ spheres of exchange. People easily made translations between the currencies for the same item or wage as they explained to me the rate of exchange. Scaling up and down the quantity of the item being purchased, the same person who had given the example about water avoided awkward fractions as they explained how “garlic costs 2 pesos per unit. So you can buy 12 units for 1 dollar”. Just as currencies could be quantitatively re-arranged to represent things appropriate to either sphere, so could the things themselves. In light of the ease with which Cubans make conversions within their multi-currency reality, it becomes difficult to maintain the argument that there has been a mystification of the relative earning power between these ‘two islands’, between those earning *moneda nacional* or *divisa*.

On the other hand, following the government's qualitative-quantitative assessment, it did seem to be the case for many I interacted with that there was an understanding of the relationship between both currencies that rested upon a moral-economic evaluation. While the few people seated at the table had begun talking about the changing rate of exchange between the US dollar and Russian ruble, I brought up to Teresa how although 1 US dollar might be more or less equivalent to 70 rubles or 1 convertible peso, what can be bought with the equivalent of a dollar in Russia varies greatly from what can be bought in the US or Cuba. Aware of these differences in purchasing power, Teresa cited her experience with currencies traveling abroad. She compared her time spent in Bolivia with that of visiting a family member in Russia, describing the quantity of food that she could buy at similar style restaurants that served "*comida rápida*" [fast food] in both countries. Several years ago, with two dollars in Bolivia she explained how she was able to buy a meal that included a large piece of "real" chicken, while in Russia 10 dollars only bought the most basic hamburger trio. Perceiving the former as being the 'better deal', she explained this difference in purchasing power as being because "*Bolivia es un país subdesarrollado*" [is an underdeveloped country]. And, as she related the value of the currencies to the perceived development of the nation it was attached to, Arturo would intervene within our conversation, adding that "the US dollar is strong, it strikes like a bullet".

Returning to the restaurant on the next day, I continued to pay attention to the relationship between value and price. As Teresa brought out some *galleticas* [cookies] for me to eat, I remarked upon how much better I felt these cookies tasted compared to those I had bought.

Teresa: Where did you buy them?

Frankie: At Galtero Market.

T: Ahh, that's why.

F: Why?

T: These are *divisa*. (while holding up the bag of *galleticas* shaking it up and down) ¡CUC! Not CUP.

F: So they're better than those sold at Galtero?

T: Of course. Private is better. Look at this fruit (holding up a guava she had been peeling). It's better than those you bought the other day when we saw each other at the market, no?

F: It looks better. It's bigger and smoother (less bruised).

T: State workers use tools that make the guavas fall from the trees. When they hit the ground the guavas bruise. That's why they are not as good.

Despite both currencies having become increasingly interchangeable and accepted across society, many Cubans I interacted with held the idea opposite from that put forth by the government in 2013. Better quality goods such as the cookies Teresa brought out for me might be purchased with either currency, however, it was goods and services identified with the sphere of *divisa* and the private—capitalist—form of production associated with it that were perceived as being inherently superior. For citizens, therefore, the convertible peso appeared to be the currency that maintained a greater value of confidence, and, in large part, this seemed to stem from its more intimate often blurred relationship to the US dollar and the greater possibilities for self-employment associated with the free market.

Despite the government's second claim (that the Cuban peso was the 'historical currency'), as mentioned before the US dollar has been present within the pockets of island inhabitants since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this sense, this historical relationship between both currencies may be said to have been marked by their association with certain structural ideologies. Here, Holbraad (2017) discusses how he encountered socialist planning as having been earmarked through the Cuban peso, while the US dollar has been connected to its historical role in saving the country from the crisis of the Special Period (p.92-3). And, although I did not overhear any explicit connections to the past, the devaluation of socialist planning was a large part of the value claims I did encounter. For instance, José being able to *arreglar* his own car was expressed as being a great source of pride for himself and his family. However, while being

admirable, it was also understood as something performed *por necesidad*, whereas he preferred working as a *taxista* because that was how he accumulated money. Being his own mechanic was valuable because the work of maintaining his own car granted him a greater sense of independence from socialist central planning, as he did not have to rely upon state-employed mechanics. And, in the event that he was unable to do this ‘unremunerated’ work himself, he explained how he typically chose to hire someone he knew who was also self-employed and that he can trust will do “a good job”.

The contradictory ‘cracks’ that appear across these discourses reveal how money is valued in ways that are not entirely quantitatively and functionally determined. While people would regularly claim that money is money and what really matters is quantity, they often indexed the sphere of *divisa* as invariably connected to higher quality goods as well as labor. In the debate between José and the artisan holding the pamphlet that read ‘the most important things in life cannot be purchased’, there was disagreement surrounding whether health was something that could indeed be bought. And, in this way, a crisis of values is indeed refracted through the practice of healthcare where, in the current social landscape, paying does grant access to better quality of care due to infrastructural reasons—such as lack of equipment and long wait times in the cheaper public sector (Brotherton, 2012). Ironically, while the government has made the claim that *moneda fuerte* (the convertible peso) is 25 times stronger than *moneda nacional* (the Cuban peso) and grants privileges to those who have access to it, it has also argued that *moneda nacional* maintains greater confidence amongst the population. Thus, despite state and non-state actors articulating the same value ideal, a desire for the government to reduce its “weight” in the economy (i.e. decentralization), their conclusions diverged. For the government, modernizing the economy meant unification under the guise of the historical currency—the

Cuban peso—and a renewal of tradition through its ‘revaluation’. For the population, however, I would argue that statement is contradictory. As the value of the currencies are connected to the trajectory of the nation and a history of socialist planning that was ‘saved’ by the ‘incursion’ of capitalist mechanisms, the Cuban peso appears lesser when compared to the alternative of self-employment offered by convertible pesos.

But while access to the *divisa* economy continues to appear as if it grants more earning potential and access to better quality goods and services, there is a mutual contingency that is often neglected whereby “new forms of capital” also depend upon “the socialist system” (Brotherton, 2012, p.164). And although proponents of free-market policies might argue that a “singular and purified capitalism” can exist without certain “systemic impurities” (Hodgson, 1996, p.381), in the Cuban context the coexistence of non-capitalist forms alongside capitalist practices both seem necessary to sustain the integrity of the system as a whole. I noted earlier how social services such as health and hospitals could purchase surplus dollars accumulated in industries such as tourism at a 1-to-1 exchange rate with the Cuban peso. At the same time, for some tourists the communist flavor Cuba offers, which one tourist described as being “the last Marxist resort” (Babb, 2011, p.53), is what draws them to the island. We might, however, take the example of healthcare one step further, as it reveals how possibilities for capital accumulation are also intimately tied to the reproduction of human talent that emerges from a socialist formation of people. Free state education allows for the training of Cuba’s world-renowned medical talent. And, doctors provide both an important social and economic role in contemporary Cuba: sent abroad on missions to other countries, they are employed by the state to provide their services for economic as well as social and diplomatic motivations (Huish, 2014). Moreover, on the island there has been a capitalization of doctors’ labor, where a “two-tiered

health care system” has become cemented as those who pay receive expediated service (Brotherton, 2008, p.266). On the other hand, there is also pervasive gift giving that unfolds within networks of people that includes relations between doctors and patients (Andaya, 2009), where having a friend or *socio* allows Cubans to “resolve their problems in one way or another” (Brotherton, 2008, p.265). Patients might make informal visits to doctors living nearby asking for advice or help in exchange for favors (e.g. food or free taxi rides). In this way, money’s ‘innate power’ to grant and/or deny access to this Other Cuba begins to unravel as social detours are elaborated between spheres.

On my last day in Cuba, Arturo would express how “friendship is the most important thing. You can have money but still be unable to buy what it is that you need because you cannot encounter it. If you have a friend who has what you need, you can ask them for it and they can just gift it to you. You don’t need money to buy the thing.” When there are routine shortages of things and one *must* encounter as well as invent ways to procure their everyday necessities, the “social power” that money assumes in “becoming the private property of any individual” and a “radical leveller” for a world of commodities produced by a social division of labor (Marx, 1992, p.230), is dis-oriented. As it no longer provides access to everything which might be needed or desired, many I spoke to explained how communal organization has become an important productive force which might counteract the unpredictable tendencies of variable exchange rates and the market. The next section builds upon this point, exploring how money does not—by maintaining some innate quality of strength—actually determine relations of exchange and production. Rather, its ‘power’ is realized in the formation of practices that put it to use in their own peculiar ways.

## 5.5 Performing between two economies

Following Hugh-Jones & Humphrey (1992) as they look at how barter “like the gift, includes ideas, values and visions of the transacting other” (p.3), in this section I consider performances that involve monetary-based exchanges as interactions through which people continuously “[create] the bonds of society” (p.8). Throughout my fieldwork, I found that the “‘sociable’ or non-commercial aspect” that these authors describe as being a “prominent feature” of barter exchange (p.6), was also pervasive across the monetary transactions between friends and *socios*. By looking at three different cases and the “‘paths’ of commodity exchange” they articulate, I hope to show how these are not simply “made and maintained by those with the power to do so” (Ferguson, 1992, p.59). Paths of commodity exchange are social, and the proliferation of capitalist mechanisms and of ‘extraneous ends’ to increase productivity (individual accumulation) has not inevitably “[corrupted]” internal practices (Fairfield, 2011, p.113) to the extent that these can be reduced to some ideal economic form free from moral decision making.

My partner and I met Nicolas late one afternoon while visiting friends we had made in the countryside. He introduced himself with an enormous smile as the childhood friend of a friend, and with an overwhelming enthusiasm he talked about his story. Specifically, how he had grown up in the city of San Juan as a neighbor and schoolmate of our mutual friend but had eventually relocated to the countryside where he now works. His job, he explained, was to process cuts of meat and then sell them at a fixed price to the state. Nicolas sustained a great sense of pride that radiated through his movements and hand gestures as he explained his livelihood strategy. “*Vengan, vengan!*” [come, come!], he said excitedly, as he walked us along the dirt path and across the cement road to his home. “I’m going to show you how I do my work.

I have chickens and pigs”. And as we walked, he continued to describe the character of his work. “*Yo lo compró, lo crío, lo mato, lo dehueso y lo vendo*” [I buy it, I raise it, I kill it, I debone it and I sell it]. Not everyone was skilled enough to do this work as he would inform us. “*Yo hago todo, desde el principio hasta el final. En otros países pagan miles de dolares por este trabajo*” [I do everything, from start to finish. In other countries they pay thousands of dollars for this work]. While what may have been a quantitative exaggeration, I believe indexed the qualitative value that Nicolas attributed to his semi-independent wage-labor (explained below).

As we made our way to his home, he avoided the front door and led us straight to the area behind the concrete structure. Walking barefoot across the ground covered in grass and heavily populated by trees and other foliage, he pointed to his chickens that scuffled freely across the terrain. He then guided us to where he kept his pigs, underneath a roofed pen constructed from cement. “*No tenemos riquezas pero tenemos todo*” [we don’t have riches but we have everything], he said. “Every morning we just pick up the eggs where they fall. There are fresh fruits and vegetables everywhere and we have meat.” He then began to explain the logistics of his labor, and, indexing the physical difficulty of his work, he raised his forearms asking me to feel how hard the muscle had become over the years. Despite the strenuous nature of doing this work mostly by hand—with little to no mechanized assistance. For this legitimate form of state labor Nicolas explained how he only receives approximately 500 Cuban pesos per month. “Only 20 dollars” he’d translate for us. This amount was not enough to sustain even the modest living conditions he shared with his wife who also worked the same job as he did. Proudly, he pointed to the roof of his home—made from concrete—and not from wood like most homes in the countryside. But it wasn’t until a later date, while I was having a conversation with Ramiro, that I realized the significance of Nicolas’s repeated references to the roof of his home. Ramiro

would explain how many Cubans who live in the countryside only have homes constructed from wood that cannot withstand hurricanes, and, in the event of such extreme weather, family and friends who live within the vicinity would take shelter at the homes of those who did have houses made of concrete. To afford these better material conditions, Nicolas would eagerly show us his other labor.

Walking us inside his home, we encountered a room that was barren of any furniture or aesthetic decoration, but which contained a single mechanical instrument located in the center that was attached to a medium sized metal keg. This was the distillery system he used to produce his own alcohol, purchasing and mixing the cane sugar that was readily available in Cuba with yeast. Distilling alcohol, Nicolas explained how he could invest 300 Cuban pesos and make up to 1500 Cuban pesos. However, while this allowed him to sustain his modest living standards, he also confessed how it was illegal for him to engage in this activity. “If the government were to catch me”, they can take everything from me”, he tell us. For this reason, he explained that he could not sell the alcohol he made to strangers. That he can only sell to friends or those he trusts. And the pricing mechanism he had developed revealed the social proximity he maintained with his ‘clients’. “20... 15 pesos a bottle. ¡pesos Cubanos!”, he smiled. In this respect, Nicolas moved within the space between state sector employment and self-employment in the submerged economy. He worked out of his home of his own accord, using his own earnings to re-invest in animals to be raised, but the primary buyer of his product was the state. Re-investing some of these earnings in his illegal distillery allowed him to earn substantially more. Before leaving, he would gift us several pieces of his cured ham as well as glasses of his homemade brew, repeating something he had told us as we crossed the road only moments earlier. “*La amistad es la cosa mas importante*” [friendship is the most important thing].

While not as wealthy as some who work within the sphere of *divisa*, Nicolas found a way to move towards what he felt was a more desirable standard of living through this informal work. And, although he maintained great pride in his state employment as a butcher, the manner in which he spoke about it contained only traces of Guevarist ideology; that man's work "represents an emanation of himself, a contribution to the common life in which he is reflected, the fulfillment of his social duty" (Guevara, 1988, p.8). But there is also a play between boundaries that occurs here that I wish to draw attention to. On the one hand, Nicolas values his state sector employment taking pride in the hard work that he does, although this evaluation is intimately concerned with his own individual energies spent and remuneration earned. His distillery operation appears as an extension of this morality, a means through which he can move towards a better standard of living earned through his individual productivity. However, this possibility for individual accumulation only exists alongside the continuous re-cementing of social ties, as he can only sell to friends or *socios*—those he trusts are not "*chivatos*" [informers]. And trust is a variable not easily accounted for in neoclassical models of the rational economic man or savvy consumer, despite its pervasive presence in the "universal contractarian framework of utility-maximization" (Hodgson, 1996, p.389).

Making more than the average monthly wage (Scarpaci et al., 2016, p.385), being legally self-employed does not necessarily presuppose that one is free from participating in "Cuba's national sport of *la lucha*", as different forms of precarity become felt as people improvise ways to negotiate everyday indeterminacy. While Teresa, Mariana, and their mother work hard to remain self-employed, their home as a site where the separation between socialism and capitalism collides and collapses reveals the difficulty in straddling the intersection between both systems. Waking up as early as 5 a.m. they work throughout the day preparing food before lunch

and then supper, as well as late into the night as they prepare on-the-go foods to be sold the next day (mostly *barras de maní* [peanut bars]). They cater almost exclusively to a Cuban clientele as they choose not to pay the extra monthly taxes that would allow them to hang an advertisement outside their restaurant. As such, the tourists who do walk in are typically accompanied or told about this place to get *comida criolla* [creole food] by a local. Meals are therefore sold at prices affordable by the general population, with a salad, a soup and a dish with meat and rice costing 25 Cuban pesos or 1 convertible peso (payment with either is accepted). They also allow for take-out orders so long as the customer brings their own container. The turnover rate of clients varies from day to day, and, as Teresa explained to me, in order to make a profit they must sell all that they cook in a day. The precarity of their situation, however, is magnified by the manner in which the government collects taxes.

Each month on a random day, a government employee visits the sisters' restaurant and spends the entire day seated, observing the flow of customers. His work involves counting the number of clients that frequent their restaurant and purchase a meal, multiplying this number by the amount charged for a typical meal, and then multiplying this number by the number of days in the month. This provides the state with a rough estimate of the revenue made by the restaurant for that month, which can then be taxed accordingly. A particularly good business day can therefore be disastrous if the remainder of the month is less successful, and, in this respect, a slow business day is much more desirable when this government worker makes their rounds. Moreover, as with other forms of self-employment, there is a fixed business license which the sisters must pay monthly, and this fee is extracted regardless of whether the restaurant is working or not. However, if they were to choose to temporarily cancel their license because of an expected seasonal decline in customers, re-obtaining it in the future is not guaranteed (Scarpaci

et al., 2016, p.380). While being self-employed presents these distinct set of challenges, Teresa and Mariana explained that they would never return to working for the state, with Teresa expressing that “*la vida aquí no es fácil, pero tampoco es tan difícil*” [life here is not easy, but it’s not that difficult either]. The sisters would describe the in-formal organization of arrangements that are part of everyday life, exchanges that unfold between state inspectors and the self-employed that work as a “safety valve to correct the rigours of the system” (Concepción, 2016, p.1716). For instance, inspectors who are “in” on the activities of re-sellers at market sites—as discussed last chapter (Wilson, 2014, p.137). Providing a gift of food and/or money to state inspectors may therefore result in a lower recorded account of customers for the day. And this social connection between the submerged and formal economy, despite being characterized by a degree of friction as the sisters do not hold state workers in high regard, reveal how non-state actors also “actively shape the law, rather than simply [living] within its confines” (Phillips, 2007, p.326).

Informality and social bonds based on trust that fall outside of official recognition and structural design, however, do not always imply illegality. Last chapter I introduced Susana, one of my private Spanish teachers and a retired state-employed professor. Having retired several years early due to family health issues, Susana was not entitled to the entire pension which would otherwise be offered by the state. Receiving only around 220 Cuban pesos per month, she explained how she and her husband find it difficult to make do with this amount for the entire month. To supplement her income, therefore, she does two things. First, when the opportunity presents itself, she gives private Spanish lessons to both Cubans and foreigners—with whom she maintains ongoing social relations by sending and receiving post cards through the mail. Second, she works for the state-run communications company ETECSA (*Empresa de*

*Telecomunicaciones de Cuba S.A.*). Susana would explain to me how because ETECSA's office buildings consistently have extremely long wait times, the state employs individuals who work out of their homes selling similar services and/or products. For instance, when individuals receive their monthly telecommunication bill, rather than wait *la cola* they can bring the bill and payment to Susana. Making bi-weekly trips to the ETECSA office, she waits and pays these bills for her 'clients' receiving a percentage of the total amount paid as her wage. These clients must, of course, trust Susana to make the payment on time as they remain responsible if the bills are not paid by the due date. Susana also sells prepaid phone cards for both corded phones and cellular phones. (Interestingly, prices on the former are marked in Cuban pesos and the latter in convertible pesos). As a state employee who pays a work tax which permits her to engage in this form of labor, she purchases these prepaid cards for 10% cheaper so that she might sell them at the official price to the population and realize a profit. Essentially, her work entails waiting queues, and this often involves standing outside in the heat for hours. However, Susana makes good use of the *el último* practice described in the last chapter so that she might sit at a nearby bench in the shade provided by a tree or building rather than stand by the door. But she also socializes her work in other ways.

A friend of Susana's would often pass by as we were conducting our Spanish lessons for the day. Employed in the same form of work, this younger neighbor was also a single mother. As such, she often encountered difficulty making regular trips to the ETECSA office. Moreover, while the street that her neighbor lives on is only several few blocks away, Susana described how it was much less busy in terms of the traffic in pedestrians who might stop by to make purchases. Thus, while Susana often easily sold all the prepaid cards she bought, her friend usually does not. To help mitigate these difficulties, Susana absorbs some of these unsold commodities and then

sells them herself—returning the complete amount paid to her friend. This gift of labor, while not illegal, nevertheless conflicts with the competitive ethos that ought to be characteristic of capitalist relations and that might otherwise be assumed to naturally accompany the proliferation of capital mechanisms of incentivization.

But if sustaining social connections is a determining factor in the movements and actions one can make in relation to the currencies they carry in their wallets—i.e. if friendships are indeed ‘the most important thing’, and if people understand the quality of things produced being decided by the manner in which labor is coordinated, how does a currency then become seen as embodying these capacities/values?

### **5.6 *Trabajar* and the value of laboring**

As of 2018, the Cuban peso and the convertible peso continue to circulate alongside one another despite the Cuban government continuing to discuss a need to unify the two national currencies. Intended—at least initially—only for international affairs, the convertible peso appears as a sort of “liminal” currency, its status being somewhat ambiguous and caught between two seemingly “stable states” or social orderings (Skjoldager-Nielsen & Edelman, 2014, p.33). Caught, in this sense, between the sphere of *divisa* associated with the free market and independent labor, and the sphere of *moneda nacional* associated with centralized planning and a wage-labor relation with the state. However, I have also argued that a pragmatic unity exists in everyday life between both pesos, this dynamic being perhaps best captured symbolically by José’s configuration as well as use of his wallet. Here, José’s fluent use of the Cuban peso in collaboration with the convertible peso would make it seem as if the former were simply a smaller denomination of the latter, easily capable of upwards convertibility without moral

discrepancy as if the relationship between the two rested solely upon a mathematical discrepancy.

The convertible peso might therefore be said to resemble the *entre dos* components ‘invented’ by José to make two seemingly irreconcilable parts interlock and work together. And, not unlike the *entre dos* which must be fabricated to make fit mechanical incongruencies arising due to socioeconomic and political tensions, the national currencies are also underscored by a moral valuation which reflects and refracts the lived experiences of Cubans. This is an “uncomfortable” pragmatic unity, as José expressed, with a hierarchal distinction being drawn between both pesos as they are perceived to embody distinct innate capacities to inspire actions and draw out commodities which appear qualitatively different. In this respect, many Cubans judged commodities (including labor) purchased within the sphere of *divisa* as inherently superior, whereas those purchased in the sphere of *moneda nacional* were deemed inferior. A distinction which does indeed seem historically informed, intimately connected to the Special Period and the revolutionary government’s revised commitments being compelled to draw increasingly upon capitalist mechanisms and the global market—hegemonically dominated by the US dollar—to rescue its own anti-imperial, anti-capitalist project.

But I also discussed earlier how there is a mutual contingency and compartmentalized relationship between the ‘two islands’ at the state level. Describing, more specifically, how the island’s socialist benefit system has been sustained through the hard currency earned in capitalist industries such as tourism, but also how these market mechanisms exploit/capitalize upon a socialist formation of human talent. For instance, by sending medical and sports personnel to work in countries such as Venezuela in exchange for oil. The same might be said about the state capitalizing upon an ecological relationship, where more pristine beach locations have been

designated as tourist getaways, or about resorts where professionals such as doctors might find employment as bartenders—accumulating more.

The drive along the highway would provide an alternative perspective, revealing how a constellation of in-formal socioeconomic relations also labor along the road between socialist city and capitalist resort. Relations which interact within and between these two spheres, blurring formal demarcations as actors help one another avoid taxation by coordinating their own informal networks, as well as evade fines by communicating through a peculiar sequence of gestures the nearby presence of law enforcement. Laboring and exchanging while moving between the ‘real Cuba’ and this ‘Other Cuba’, as those who are employed within this realm of tourism make unexpected detours to store their artisanal commodities at a family’s home, or perhaps to purchase illegally fabricated alcohol from a friend. In this sense, the blurred identity the convertible peso has assumed—as peso or *divisa*—refracts the reality of Cubans’ everyday socioeconomic interactions more closely, disclosing how *la gente tiene que arreglar sus cosas* by working within this porous space where competing spheres are intermeshed.

But then, how do we theoretically account for what would appear to be a simple difference in earning power between the two currencies earned within their ‘respective’ yet overlapping spheres, which then coincides so neatly with this moral differentiation that causes a rift between them? In other words, how do we theoretically account for this quantitative interchangeability and qualitative incommensurability between the two currencies?

Here, Dumont’s (1980) theory of hierarchy and encompassment is useful as an analytical point of departure to understand how one currency is imagined as being more valuable in the qualitative-quantitative way I have been describing. At a higher “encompassing” level, it might be said that ‘people just want money’, as Teresa expressed, and any differentiation between the

two currencies would appear to be sublimated through the ‘innate power’ they ought to possess in common as ‘universal equivalents’. And yet, despite realizing a pragmatic unity through the common performative quality both currencies embody in supposedly being “directly convertible into any other commodity” and “independent of all limits” (Marx, 1992, p.231), there is a hierarchal opposition “between encompassing and encompassed or between ensemble and element” (Dumont, 1980, p.243). The Cuban peso is evaluated as inferior, ‘contrary’ to the whole and this more ‘encompassing’ sphere of *divisa* where money ought to roam politically free as the universal equivalent dictating the relations between things.

Following Dumont’s theory, however, we confront this structuralist issue of reification as he proposes that “every time a notion gains importance, it acquires the capacity to encompass its contrary (Dumont, 1980, p.245). This idea would steer us back towards an understanding that the value-relation between these currencies is to be encountered in their objective substance and the relationships they maintain within their own world of commodities located outside of human interaction. Instead, I would follow the perspective that it is human ‘labor’, “as another name for a human activity” constantly in formation and which cannot be “detached from the rest of life, be stored or mobilized” (Polanyi, 2001, p.75), that expresses and cements the “specific social character” (Marx, 1992, p.160) of these spheres. Significant to my analysis, therefore, is to highlight value and value spheres as ‘things’ performed over “the length of time [labour-power] *is in action*” (ibid, p.679 [my emphasis]). As things not only pursued but brought into being through human activity as it travels (or labors) along the road, as opposed to being found in some objectified and purchasable form at opposed—socialist or capitalist—destinations.

Throughout this chapter, and my thesis as a whole, I have attempted to show how as livelihoods travel the things they interact with such as cars and currencies—as well as other

people—are also socialized through a mutual self-interest concerned with “the production and reproduction of labour power” (Elson, 1988, p.4). And, in this respect, I would like to contemplate an additional factor prior to finalizing this discussion. From my perspective, it seems necessary to consider the movement of persons and enterprises from ‘over there’ that participate in these value creation chains since, in Cuba, we encounter a situation where averages of productivity and intensity vary significantly between the ‘real Cuba’ and this ‘Other Cuba’ in a way which resembles the relations between individual nations as the “integral parts” composing the world market (Marx, 1992, p.702). As recognized by Teresa when she explained the variable purchasing power of the same currency across the boundaries of different nation-states (having used the example of the US dollar and how it can purchase more in Bolivia than in Russia), as capitalist relations develop within a nation and progress beyond the global average of capitalist development, so “do the national intensity and productivity of labour there rise above the international level” (ibid).

Due to the historical trajectory the island has followed, through communism and towards a market socialism, I believe it is reasonable to stake the claim that the average intensity and productivity of *capital* forms of accumulation on the island are below those reached by the nations who invest in the joint enterprises that now proliferate across the Cuban landscape. In this respect, the closer one gets to these more developed forms of capitalist practice in their livelihood strategies, the greater financial remuneration and purchasing power they appear to carry back to the ‘real Cuba’ in their wallets. Self-employed workers who interact with tourists on a routine basis (José and the artisans) accumulate more than those who predominately work with other island inhabitants (e.g. Teresa’s family owned restaurant, Nicolas’s homemade alcohol factory, and Susana’s mercantile activity for ETECSA). Concomitantly, workers who are

employed in a wage-labor relation with the state and who maintain access to these more centralized forms of labor (discounting the additional illicit activities they might perform to supplement their earnings) appear to receive the least. And, as the Cuban government itself has increasingly shifted towards a market form of organization, selling at *mercados liberados* and *tiendas* what was once distributed at *bodegas*, there seems to be a logical coherency between the evaluations made by Cubans who now associate *divisa* with a more determinate and desirable reality. Although the socialist benefit systems (i.e. health, education, and basic rationed provisions) continues to provide a sense of security, it also has come to rely upon a more productive capitalist sphere of *divisa*.

Currencies also travel within and across spheres, being transformed into one another through performances of currency exchange. As friends and family visit or send remittances from abroad, their respective currencies realize an increase in purchasing power as they interact within a less—from a capitalist perspective—developed nation. Subsequently, although increased capitalist productivity does not necessarily equate to improved “real wages”, or “the means of subsistence placed at the disposal of the worker” within their own national boundaries (Marx, 1992, p.702), there is something to be said about embodied movements of capital productivity refracted through currencies and their function in being a unit of measurement.

While wages are indeed lower for state-employed workers, these have also “been exaggerated both inside and outside Cuba” (Anderson, 2014, p.104). If one consumes locally produced goods and attends domestically organized events, a state salary allows for a great deal more than what 20 or 25 US dollars allows one to purchase in the US or Canada—or even at one of the resorts they have established in a joint partnership with the Cuban government. With high levels of free university education and “a wide view of the world”, however, Cubans are also

intimately aware of what these salaries do not allow them to consume (ibid). And, in this respect it is a capitalist mode of organization and the forms of wage-labor which appear ready to be purchased, as labor detached from “the personality of the worker”<sup>43</sup> (Marx, 1992, p.678) and encountered within these ‘isolated’ spheres of reproduction that seem to grant these better more determinate living conditions. As such, I would argue that it is in gaining closer access to these more economically ‘productive’ nations by way of interacting with the persons and enterprises which reside ‘over there’, that greater remunerative possibilities are encountered. Value/s are, in this sense, immediately social performances which makes judgements about livelihood performances ‘over there’ and comparing them with those ‘over here’ always a possibility. Overwhelmingly, however, it seems that production is evaluated based on an objectified outcome and the capacity to produce more. Development measured in capitalist terms which disguises the necessity of socialist formations that underpin market relations.

In Bayamón, a friend would once explain to me how “*en Cuba si tus problemas pueden ser arreglados con pesos Cubanos, todo esta bien. Si tus problemas necesitan pesos convertibles tienes problemas serios* [in Cuba if your problems can be fixed with Cuban pesos everything is good. If your problems need convertible pesos that’s when you know you have serious problems]. A symbolic potency has become associated with a particular mode of organizing labor which the convertible peso is perceived to approximate more closely than the Cuban peso, as it occupies this role as ambassador between the local and the global on the island. A role it is granted and maintains in being designated as the currency to be used within the ‘Other Cuba’. The currency’s usages then become reified and “seen in terms of its essential capacities or key

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<sup>43</sup> I understand ‘personality’ as meaning the life force, working capacity, and need for subsistence every worker has, but also, their ability to be social and form networks with others.

possible outcomes” (Munn, 1976, p.8) to bring into being a reality which is deemed more desirable, abbreviating the interactions that transpire in-between systems. It allows one to *arreglar* more serious problems a person might encounter, as my friend explained, becoming more valuable—in an economic as well as moral sense—in its capacity to do so. But this possibility only emerges alongside the peculiar social existence it maintains within a sphere of commodity production and the commodification of labor, as well as shifting relations of distribution and exchange. Where things are increasingly purchased using ‘hard cash’ at *la tienda* rather than obtained at *la bodega*, and where the quantity marked on the bill one carries does open possibilities to *arreglar* one’s necessities. If money obscures the relations between working individuals by making these appear as the “social relation between objects” (Marx, 1992, p.165), purchasing power is an expression of this phenomena.

## 6. Conclusion

During one of my final days in Cuba, I sat talking with José on his patio. Parts and tools still lay scattered across the front end of his garage as he had only just recently finished re-installing *la dirección* of his car. While we spoke about various topics, José's friend Mateo "*el medico*" [the doctor] approached the gated front entrance, greeting us and asking how we were doing. And, taking a seat on a vacant chair, he withdrew from his pocket a small package and handed it to José, who then called out to his mother letting her know that Mateo had brought the medication for his father who was still suffering from the coughing fits brought about by the petrol fumes released during his restorative project. Within a few moments José's mom would walk out from inside the living room, wallet in hand and in the process of searching for a fifty Cuban peso bill. Noticing her movements, Mateo would raise his hand shaking it side to side as he smiled refusing the money which was about to be offered to him. "Don't worry", he'd let them know, "today I have money. The day I don't have money I'll ask for it". A short debate ensued between both parties, but ultimately Mateo would hold steadfast in his resolve to provide this medication as a gift rather than allowing it to become a monetary transaction, while, at the same time, joking somewhat seriously about the possibility of delayed reciprocation if a moment of necessity were to arise in the future.

Although having appeared to have restored a sense of political and economic stability through its own peculiar form of market socialist activity, since the Special Period the Cuban government also seems to have allowed for, perhaps even cultivated, an unfolding passive revolution taking place between "emergent [networks] of expertise" (Maurer, 2012, p.520)—an expertise in *arreglar*. In a sense, I have maintained that the revolutionary government's actions and discourses leading into as well as following the turn to 21<sup>st</sup> century presented the Cuban

population with a sort of “double bind” (Bateson, 1972), encouraging capitalist activity alongside revolutionary commitments. For instance, on one hand, the state-owned newspaper Granma has continued to publish a commitment to certain historical principles. The humanist ideas proposed by José Martí and Fernando Ortiz (Barnet, 2019, May 6), as well as the idea that the Cuban revolution was saved from the “coherent model” of the banker by Fidel who united the “traditions” of Marxism and José Martí (Gómez, 2019, May 5). At the same time, Granma has also published articles discussing the success of countries such as Singapore, who moved from third to first world status in a short amount of time, its first step being to “*abrir sus puertas a las compañías extranjeras*” [open its doors to foreign companies] (Forte, 2018, May 15). In this way, the Cuban population has been presented with these two positive directives which appear incompatible, i.e. be capitalist and be communist

What I have tried to show through ethnographic insight is how, as the Cuban population has been called upon to accept the propagation of capitalist practices and has been compelled to move towards incorporating forms of self-employment increasingly tangled with monetary incentivization schemes, they have also actively improvised their own networks and livelihood strategies. Unable to resolve the unresolvable dilemma produced by the double bind, they have moved to negotiate and make room for the tensions that have emerged within this ‘market socialist’ system—even encountering generative possibilities within these contradictions as they account for its deficiencies themselves. In this respect, *hay que arreglar* not only reflects a discursive shift in the cultural worldview of Cuban citizens, but also refracts a transformation in the practical relationship they sustain with their material reality. As the Cuban explanation for forms of interaction which move between and bring together seemingly antagonistic forms, *arreglar* has become part and parcel of everyday interactions, underscoring a social value held

throughout Cuban society where expending one's energies towards bringing into being a sense of certainty for oneself and one's network of relations is seen to constitute action which is deemed "good, proper, or desirable in human life" (Graeber, 2013, p.1). A value no longer perceived as being adequately fulfilled by the 'nurturing' body of the socialist state—struggling to sustain its own hegemony articulated through a revolutionary tradition—while it seems to be increasingly encompassed by that of a global free market development.

There has been, therefore, what I have argued is a shift in belonging across the Cuban social landscape, from "we, *la Revolución*" to "they, the revolutionaries" and "we, the people". Where the people now see the in-formal connections between friends and *socios* they themselves coordinate as being more productive to *arreglar* the constant tension between "structure and anti-structure" (Gradišnik, 2015, p.29). In the similarities they share, the ethnographic examples I provided were thus less concerned with people's explicit political attitudes and allegiances—as either openly conforming or contesting dominant structural precepts associated with capitalism, socialism, or even communism. Instead, they speak more intently towards how people move along—and even cement within their own homes—these porous spaces between the rigid boundaries delineated by these infrastructural determinations. Escaping rigid and reductive categorizations, as "[no] mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention" (Williams, 1978, p.125), the improvisational qualities of practices unfolding 'beneath the surface of society' have also been shown—at times—to have paved the 'road forward' for hegemonic activity to follow. In this respect, there have been important transformations in the Revolution's history where, as the Cuban government has moved to implement its own 'freshly' theorized market socialist designs, it was actually attempting to

‘keep up’ and incorporate the movements of its citizens. An example for this retrospective catching up is when the state legalized independent forms of labor already unfolding within the black-market which had been evading its taxation regime.

As myself, José and Mateo continued to talk throughout the afternoon, the two began to debate Cuban politics. While the shift in conversational theme was seamless, their attitudes changed as they discussed the coming municipal elections becoming increasingly serious as they did so. And, although both had set aside their ideological differences in favor of sustaining their friendship, they nonetheless argued passionately about the future of the island and its movement away from the communist disposition it had once zealously labored towards. For José, these changes could not arrive soon enough, while Mateo believed a communist revision of contemporary Cuban society ought to be the order of the day. Gradually, the argument would subside although an agreement between the two was never reached. In this respect, one might say that the disagreement which has and continues to persist between these two friends is emblematic of a more profound and broader societal tension.

Despite having described the shift towards a solidarity felt between ‘the people’, not all the social connections and grassroots forms of coordinating action I have recounted were entirely free from conflict<sup>44</sup>. There was indeed “friction” (Tsing, 2005) which saturated many of the interactions I encountered, just as the road from Cuban city to capitalist resort was marked by many fractures. Friction between individuals working for the state who determine and collect taxes from local independent *negocios* [businesses]—such as Teresa’s restaurant, receiving a tip

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<sup>44</sup> The nature of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a relatively short time frame means the majority of people I met were through mutual friends. This factor may have skewed the descriptions projected through the majority of stories I have recounted, as I encountered fewer opportunities to interact with individuals my Cuban friends maintained more of a business-like relation, or with those they did not like but found common cause with.

so that the amount codified to be taxed finds itself reduced. Friction between friends who had divergent views on how money accumulated ought to be spent and whether one ought to hoard their wealth or not. Friction within entire networks of relations where many ‘individuals’ have achieved ‘self-employment’ and yet their livelihoods remain interdependent with others. Where the owner of a *casa particular* might receive payment from a foreign traveller, which s/he later uses to buy eggs from a reseller at a higher than state regulated price, and with part of this money finding its way into the hands of those who also call for their ‘cut’.

These frictions play out in everyday life, where, despite increased deregulation and marketization throughout the years, the meritocratic promises of the market have continued to ‘drive’ further out of sight as new class relations have emerged between those who do and do not have access to work remunerated in *divisa*. The idea that capitalism ought to work as ‘a well-oiled’ and self-regulated machine mediated by the predictable flows of supply and demand thus becomes contestable. As workers are constantly compelled to draw upon these other forms of doing to make up for the “kinks” in the system (Hallam & Ingold, 2007, p.4). For instance, by gifting labor to one’s neighbor who is unable meet their subsistence needs even after having gained access to a mercantile form of self-employment. But while I have discussed how friction makes itself felt as something “required” to keep things in motion (i.e. the uneasy mutual contingency between systems), “showing us... where the rubber meets the road”, I have argued something slightly different throughout my thesis where roads have not simply been described as being these “[structures] of confinement” (Tsing, 2005, p.6). Specifically, that the in-formal social connections that many Cubans elaborate in order to *arreglar sus cosas*, moving between the inflexibility of architectural designs and the fickleness of the world (ibid), do not just follow these deterministic pathways. Instead, as Cubans make ‘magic’ and *arreglar sus cosas*, they

often veer right towards self-employment and decentralization, by way of leaning left as they rely upon a ‘buddy socialism’ and the productive interdependence between livelihood strategies that this entails. The ‘magic’ quality of *arreglar* resides not only in the ‘explanatory power’ it contains to understand events that otherwise appear unexplainable, but also in the inter-actions it describes which work to “adapt to changing performance conditions” (Berliner, 1994, p.449) and mend these unexplainable fractures that present themselves in everyday life.

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