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Fascinans or tremendum? Permutations of the state, the body, and the divine in late-twentieth-century Havana

When I began doing fieldwork on Afro-Cuban religion in Miami in 1985, I had no idea that I would ever concern myself with what then was still unthinkable: the demise of the Soviet Union and its effects on the phenomena my research focused on. No less than those of their subjects, however, ethnographers' lives are subject to the vagaries of history. As a result, I find myself writing this essay not just as a Caribbeanist, but as a student of post-Soviet transitions. This is ironic in more than one sense, for not only has my work in Cuba since 1993 forced me to confront issues and ask questions that I had previously thought largely irrelevant to the ethnography and cultural history of Afro-Cuban religions. Rather, the impossibility of extricating my subject matter—Afro-Cuban religious knowledge and practice—from its observational context in the massive crisis Cuba is currently experiencing, has turned me into a denizen of a disciplinary niche I never thought I would inhabit.

Postsocialist ethnography is rapidly becoming a distinct genre of its own, and it has given a tremendous boost to the anthropology of Eastern

1. This essay is based on fieldwork intermittently conducted in Havana between 1993 and 2000. As it was going into print, the Cuban state announced wide-reaching monetary reforms effectively ending the circulation of U.S. currency as legal tender on the island as of November 8, 2004, and mandating its replacement with the peso convertible as a hard currency equivalent (Banco Central de Cuba, Resolución No. 80/2004, proclaimed October 27, 2004). Ironically, parts of my ethnography must now be read as documenting a mere phase in the history of Cuban cash practices—a reminder, perhaps, of the tenuousness of any "ethnographic present" and the generalizations one might draw from data cast in this representational mode.

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Europe. To be sure, whatever one may be observing in Cuba these days, calling it “postsocialist” may be to jump to a politically immature and perhaps irresponsible, but certainly analytically shallow, conclusion. Nevertheless, I cannot refrain from drawing an analogy with the forms of institutional cathexis Eastern European ethnography is experiencing these days. This is well expressed (in all its ambiguities) by Katherine Verdery (1997:716) who notes that ethnographers of Eastern Europe nowadays take on “a job other anthropologists have done for decades: describing the penetration of capital into non-capitalist ways of organizing the world.” Harking back to another time-hallowed item on the anthropological agenda (see also Marcus & Fisher 1986), she tells us, somewhat self-consciously, that

Making of necessity a virtue, I would say that Eastern Europe is a particularly advantageous place from which to launch [a] culturally based critique of liberal capitalist democracy. This is so because Eastern Europe is especially close to capitalist democracy’s heartland and because politicians (not to mention everyday thinking) in Western Europe, the United States, and the East itself have so long presented the East as a group of civilized captive nations with European traditions who, unlike the Third World, would be European if only they could throw off the Soviet yoke.2

Here, the implication seems to be, might lie a new frontier for anthropology, fortuitously created by the so-called end of the cold war. As capitalist market relations begin to permeate the former second world, might we not get, as it were, a second chance to study processes akin to those out of which the ethnographically known non-Western world emerged?

Whether one shares Verdery’s enthusiasm or not, the entrance into the New World Order (or disorder, for that matter) that is likely to structure whatever social realities anthropologists might come to study in former second world locations does hold empirical and theoretical challenges. Yet the language in which we phrase such processes, it seems to me, remains oddly cluttered with concepts, such as “dollarization,” “demonstration effects,” or simply “economic liberalization” and “the market,” that fail to capture what exactly is going on. “The market,” indeed, is a case in point, for in much social science discourse it tends to assume, nowadays, a semantic function quite akin to Rudolph Otto’s (1979) old definition of the “holy”: an irresistible, but ultimately uncanny force which we can only circumscribe, but never fully know. The analogy is not as fortuitous as it might seem, and it holds troubling methodological implications. As Clifford Geertz (1968:109) once

2. Cuba, of course, is no less close to the “heartland” – only some ninety miles away, after all, and from the perspective of Cuban Miami, it indeed appears a nation captive of a totalitarian regime, and/or its perverse ideologies. Yet what would Cuba become if it threw off its “anachronistic” yoke? On this question see Fernández Retamar 1996.
put it, even the most intimate personal accounts of religious experience present themselves to those who have not shared such experiences at a remove similar to that which separates a dream experience from the kind of "secondary revision" that eventually becomes available to a psychoanalyst in the dreamer's conscious account. Much of the same, I would argue, might be said about everyday economic experience and its theoretization in terms of more or less politically disciplined systems of lay or expert knowledge. Substitute "economic" for "religious," "market" for "ritual" in the following passage, and think of the vagaries of, for example, the international market in commodity futures, and you will get the idea: "Religious belief in the midst of ritual," Geertz (1968:111) wrote back then,

where it engulfs the total person, connecting him, as far as he is concerned, to the deepest foundations of existence, and religious belief as the amalgam of ideas, precepts, judgments, and emotions that the experience of that engulfment insinuates into the temper of everyday life are simply not the same thing. The former is the source of the latter; but it is the latter which shapes social action.

Given the analogy I have set up here, and harking back to the issue of postsocialist market transitions, the analytical question at hand may well be this: are we dealing with processes that can be adequately described, let alone analyzed in the way Verderley presents them, that is, as the penetration of capital into noncapitalist ways of organizing the world? Or might we not set ourselves up for yet another round of reifications by confusing economic doctrine with economic experience? The point here is certainly not that anthropology has

3. It has, of course, a considerable genealogy, reaching back to at least Marx for whom it represented a favorite trope for exposing the irrationalism of both bourgeois religious and economic beliefs. In a rather different sense, however, the rhetorical equation between defection from socialist regimes to capitalist ones (or vice versa) and religious conversion was common in both first and second world's political parlance during the heyday of the cold war. For a more contemporary example see Wuthnow (1996:152), who has no qualms about analogizing the cultural form cash practices take in the United States to the phenomenological problem Geertz pointed to: "To the outside viewer, it may be assumed that a person 'has money' (knows God), but the evidence comes from externalized activities, such as buying things (going to church)."

4. Put even more simply: in a late capitalist economy the experience of global economic forces that may engulf your life by putting you out of work simply because your job in a first world primary production sector can be profitably relocated to a cheaper third world labor market may not be expressible in terms of your cognized model of the fundamental justness of capitalism. Yet the economic models that shaped the social actions productive of this particular outcome may be entirely consistent with your own cognized model of what economic life should be all about. The conditions of domination and exploitation are reproduced in the consciousness of the dominated. Gramsci called it "hegemony."
no business concerning itself with the predicament of people living through situations comparable to what the Cuban state declared to be a “special period in times of peace” in 1991 so as to drive home the need to institute wartime austerity measures in the absence of any formally declared war. Rather, it is that we perhaps ought to approach the conditions under which our interlocutors are forced to live through what, in this case, represents the unusual scenario of a nonexistent war causing real infrastructural and human damage with a sense of humility that extends to the abstractions we cull from our mediate, and often happily limited, involvement in their plight. Like my Cuban friends, beholden as they are to the rituals and rigors of the economic realities they cannot escape, I think we, too, are groping in the dark, caught up in an analytical equivalent to the shifting middle ground between belief, skepticism, and sheer incomprehension they inhabit. For might not the trope of radical discontinuity between “market” and “plan” we have so readily come to deploy in the aftermath of Eric Hobsbawm’s “short” twentieth century (1914-89) occlude and disable, rather than open up, the analytical possibility of engaging both “first” and “second” worlds as “fantasy spaces”: moral universes that took shape less as functions of competing political-economic and moral truth claims, than as the result of everyday practices tenuously shoring up “objectively necessary appearances,” while often enough patently calling them into question at the same time.5

TWO STORIES ABOUT MONEY IN CUBA

Let me illustrate this somewhat abstract formulation with two ethnographic vignettes. Ostensibly speaking to what might be conceptualized as predictable side-effects of Cuba’s recent monetary policies, these anecdotes illustrate a more fundamental dilemma, which Parker Shipton (1990) and Caroline Humphreys (1995) in very different contexts refer to as a “scrambling of exchange spheres” or “crisis of value.” The first story concerns a meeting in the city of Matanzas with a retired school teacher whom my

5. As Immanuel Wallerstein argued again and again, the socialist bloc had always been part of the “modern capitalist world system.” No matter to what extent member-states of the COMECON actually managed to repress market mechanism in their formal economic sectors, socialist societies invariably contained noncriminalized “grey” zones that were tolerated to alleviate shortages alongside burgeoning bona fide black markets; in an even more fundamental sense, the fact that the world had simply not — or not yet — become fully enveloped by socialist internationalism forced such states to assume the ideologically odious responsibility of acting as the surrogate capitalist in respect to transactions with the class-enemy conducted on the level of external trade. The World Revolution, of course, would have changed all that, and so everybody kept waiting for Godot.
wife and I wound up talking to during my first trip to Cuba in the spring of 1993. I asked him where I could get something to drink, and he very kindly escorted my wife and me to his house where he gave us some water. Within a few minutes of conversation he suddenly paused and told us to wait for a minute, while he disappeared into what seemed to be his bedroom. At the time, Matanzas had a very limited tourist infrastructure, and the U.S. dollar had not yet been legalized as a second currency circulating against the Revolutionary peso, though this was to happen in the summer of that year when the Cuban state launched a well-coordinated coup on its citizens’ illicit foreign currency savings by opening the doors of state-owned diplo-tiendas, that is, stores previously catering to foreigners and foreigners alone, to general effective (i.e. dollar-backed) demand. When the man came back, he presented us with a pre-Revolutionary twenty-peso bill issued in 1958, and printed, as I realized only days later, by the U.S.-based American Bank Note Company (see also Ferguson 1997). As if to compound the ironies already implicit in a piece of legal tender circulating within a nation that did not even print its own money, the bill depicted Antonio Maceo, the black hero of the Cuban wars of independence, the second of which found its conclusion—or abortion if you will—in the so-called Spanish-American war of 1898, and the de facto colonization of Cuba by North American capital.

“Ah,” our host sighed, “this still was money! Not like today. Can you believe,” he asked us, “that the Cuban peso was worth more than the U.S. dollar at that time?”

“Keep it,” he urged me, “I used to teach history, you know, and I want you to understand this lesson.”

“This,” he said, pulling a current five-peso bill out of his shirt pocket, “is garbage, una basura. A piece of paper,” he added, excusing himself for using such language in front of my wife, “good enough for wiping your ass [para limpiarse el culo]. Así es la Cuba de ahora: una mierda” (this is what today’s Cuba is like: a piece of shit).

Today, Maceo still looks at you from the five-peso bills issued by the Revolutionary Cuban Central Bank. If you catch hold of one issued before 1997, it will still guarantee that it represents a state obligation convertible against the gold and other reserves of the Cuban national treasury. But on its back you will not see the 1958 bill’s depiction of the famous meeting between Maceo and the Spanish general, Martínez Campos, at Baraguá in 1878, where despite the hopeless military situation, Maceo refused to surrender unless slavery were abolished and Cuba given independence. What the backside of the pre-1997 bill features instead is an image of the invasión of western Cuba by the victorious rag-tag guerrilla of Dr. Fidel Castro Ruiz during the months of September and October of 1958. By 1997, however, the bill had mutated again. Maceo’s serene face on the front remained, but all references to the bill’s function as a state guaranteed universal commodity-equivalent had dis-


appeared. Different from the so-called peso convertible or peso fuerte, a form of dollar surrogate which initially emerged in the post-1991 period to circulate exclusively between tourists and the state (the earliest bills, in fact, bore the palm-tree logo of the largest state-owned tourist agency, INTUR), and which proclaims its free convertibility into foreign currency, the regular peso notes printed after 1997 no longer give any such guarantees. Interestingly, however, on the reverse of the 1997 five-peso bill, Maceo and his officers at Baraguá have returned, replacing the peasant troops of the Revolutionary invasión for reasons one can only speculate about. Might these mutations indicate the national bank’s tacit acknowledgment that Cuba is returning, to use Susan Eckstein’s (1994) phrase, “back from the future?” And if so, would not the inscription Cuba será un eterno Baraguá (Cuba will be an eternal Baraguá) insinuate a rather ominous prospect of perennially deferred redemption; an eternal refusal to capitulate rather than a promise of victory?

Yet irrespective of these symbolic events behind Maceo’s back, so to speak, the real trouble is that the contemporary bill is as practically compromised as the one in 1958 was in symbolic terms: its pretensions of representing unrestricted exchange value are not only denied by its automatic conversion into a mere piece of paper once one crosses the border into the international departure lounge at José Martí airport. They are even more blatantly falsified in everyday experience, for possession of nothing but national currency today signifies a painful restriction of legal access to the Cuban national product. Though by 1999, new state-run exchange bureaus featured machines whirring out pristinely crisp twenty-peso bills upon hard currency payment, one would have been hard-pressed to find Cubans who seriously bought into the fantasy that such pieces of paper crystallized any but the most tenacious, volatile, and empirically questionable illusions of value. Even the peso convertible (which was becoming rare by 1999) represents an only too well understood practical fiction, standing in for more solidly fetishized instances of the “money form”: although Cubans occasionally find themselves forced to use such bills in everyday transactions, everyone seems aware of their brazenly illusory value – and tries to get rid of them. The reason is as simple as it is illustrative of the process by which the breakdown of one regime of make-believe engenders the installation of the next: the common rationale for disposing of pesos convertibles is that while hoarded U.S. dollars will presumably never lose their value-storing capacity (backed as they notionally are by the economy of the powerful North American class enemy), the Cuban state can always arbi-

6. Although its origins and functions have, to my knowledge, not been studied, this dollar substitute seems to have originated in an attempt by the state to concentrate its hold on “real dollars,” and, one presumes, a concurrent policy to drive out the enormous overhang of unspent pesos without risking further hyperinflation (which was happening anyway) in the national currency sector (Pastor & Zimbalist 1995).
trarily interfere in cash practices underwritten by its self-produced phantom dollar. Once that fantasy crashes, one might again be left with little more than a piece of paper good enough para limpiarse el culo.

The second anecdote is set in Havana in early December of 1994. I had arrived a few weeks earlier, and friends of mine had decided to take me to a tambor (Afro-Cuban religious ceremony) for the vispera of Santa Barbara held by a faint acquaintance of theirs in the barrio of Colón. On the evening before that saint’s day on December 4, practitioners of regla ocha—a religion with pronounced historical relations to the cultures of Yorùbá-speaking groups in southwestern Nigeria—celebrate Changó, a deity ambiguously if pervasively associated with Santa Barbara. I said “sure,” and so we went.

Colón is a part of Centro Habana notorious for its association, long antedating the Revolution, with what the Cuban government nowadays calls elementos desvinculados: people “disconnected” from the socialist state for reasons of individual failure to live up to its collectivist standards, or, to phrase the matter in historically more transcendent terms, because of their presumed moral depravity. It has an interesting history, too. Having grown around one of the major slave markets of Havana, by the 1830s, it came to house the first Benthamite model prison in the Americas. By the early twentieth century it had turned into a predominantly black working-class barrio, adjoining Centro Habana’s commercial center and the cigar factories located just south of its border. By then, at the very latest, it had become an area of ill repute, a zone of shelled nineteenth-century buildings converted into infamously unhealthy solares (tenement buildings) overcrowded by dark-skinned, poverty-stricken,

7. This precisely is what could occur once Resolución 80/2004 goes into effect. Since Cubans will find themselves restricted to using the peso convertible for all transactions previously conducted in dollars, the state will be in a position to strategically increase or restrict the amount of circulating currency without regard to the hitherto uncontrollable interference of “hard” U.S. dollars flowing in through remittances from exile, or obtained from tourists. Although it is hard to judge how realistic the possibility of a drastic devaluation of the chavito is, it could have devastating consequences for the majority of Cuba’s citizens.

8. The barracones of which had emerged from army barracks constructed between Calle Consulado and Calle Alameda in 1779. After a large fire in 1822 they were relocated further west to the space between Calle Virtudes and Calle Laguna. The last barracón in this area was destroyed in 1836 (de la Torre 1857:77).

9. Its tracts were separated by sex, race, and type of offence, and its design appears to have followed the Benthamite conceptions then gaining ground in Spanish penology. No matter how modern its conception, the jail set up by Governor General Miguel Tacón between 1835 and 1839 was an architectural disaster, becoming physically unstable, and literally undrainable of human waste only years after its initial construction (Chateiowin 1989:159-65). That it continued to function as a penal institution until well into the 1930s speaks to the kind of modernity it evidenced.
and politically volatile tenants. Along with Havana’s infamous *barrio chino* along la Zanja, and the *barrio de Belén* near the harbor (see Segre, Coyula & Scarpaci 1997:10; Fernández Robaina 1998)\(^{10}\) it had also come to represent a major center of Havana’s spectacular pre-Revolutionary vice industry immortalized by Graham Greene.

All this, of course, was long gone by the time my three friends and I ascended a pitch-dark broken staircase leading to a surprisingly spacious apartment on the fourth floor of a dilapidated tenement building. Nevertheless, there was something about that evening which Graham Greene could have written about far better than me. Like most ethnographers, I have long been used to the way my presence changes the social situations I happen to step into. Light-skinned, blue-eyed, and afflicted with a foreign accent, it is indeed hard to mistake me for a Cuban. Hence, I was all but surprised that as we entered the ceremonial space, what must previously have been various foci of social interaction began to converge on my person. No sooner had my friends and I pushed past the crowd smoking and chatting in the hallway than I was ushered toward the altar display, where I greeted the *oricha* (deity), kneeling down in front of the *trono* (ritual display), shaking a ceremonial rattle, and deposited my *derecho* (ritual dues) in the form of twenty illegally exchanged pesos. We were then led into a large room, where the ceremony proper was taking place. At that point, two deities had taken possession of their devotees, dancing in the characteristic styles of Yemaya and Eleggúa. We had lined ourselves up against one of the walls of the room, and after a few minutes one of them, a gaunt young black man incorporating the goddess Yemaya came dancing toward my friends and me. Almost immediately,

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10. The origins of Centro Habana’s *solares* are discussed in Arriaga Mesa and Delgado Valdés (1995). The horrendous conditions prevalent in such tenements in the twentieth century are vividly documented in Chailloux Cardona (1954:107-55). The count of 1,400 *casas de tolerancia* in Havana published by *La Lucha* in January 1899 was surely exaggerated, though the massive wartime displacement of rural men and women to Havana certainly rendered prostitution a survival strategy for many (Poumier 1975:136). Nevertheless, at the time, 462 such establishments had legally registered with the governmental Sección de Higiene (Elizalde 1996:35). After 1959, it was in “the *barrio* of Colon, the most famous ‘tolerance zone’ of the Republic” this author continues, that the Revolutionary government initiated “a process of social reinsertion to which almost all persons related to this milieu submitted voluntarily, either for genuine sympathy with the Revolution, or for fear of the open rejection which the popular sectors exhibited toward them” (Elizalde 1996:35). In 1965, prostitution was formally lumped together with other forms of deviance as a “precriminal” condition of “dangerousness” (*peligrosidad*), thus enabling the state to detain and re-educate (e.g., through compulsory agricultural service) persons legally judged to be in such a “condition” without necessary proof of bona fide criminal activity on their part (see Salas 1979:97-103).
he/she focused on me, embracing me and cleansing me with a ceremonial flywhisk. Then the deity stepped back and asked me, "funmi l’owo" (give me money), a conventional ritual demand to paste a bill to the possessed person’s forehead expressed in regla ocha’s ritual language, lucumi. I complied by pulling out a peso bill and fixing it onto the sweating surface of the person’s forehead – a similarly conventionalized gesture signifying the transformation of the commodity value of a secular bill of exchange into a value-form circulating within a human-divine economy of sacred prestations. But to my friends’ and my surprise, no such transvaluation appeared to take place. The deity took a good look at the bill, and returned it to me with the comment that this was not the right kind of owo, or, at least, not the kind appropriate to the situation.

In my recollection things seemed to go awry from that moment onward. The person possessed by Eleggúa bolted down the stairs and out of the house, and people came rushing after him. Since no one knows what an oricha may make his human embodiment do, there was considerable concern about the fact that the ritual scene had begun to spill out onto the street – a source of unimaginable mystical as well as mundane dangers, especially after dark. Stories circulate about possessed people picked up by the police with results leading to endless complications for everyone involved. My friends, at any rate, had had enough after my embarrassing encounter with the young black man incorporating (or pretending to do so) the deity Yemaya. Minutes later we left, and as we walked back to my friends’ home in the neighboring barrio of San Lázaro, I did my best to convince them that I neither took it as a personal affront, nor was of the opinion that Santería in Cuba had degenerated into a racket.

The man’s questioning of the nature of my offering as inappropriate to a situation involving a yuma (a popular derogatory term for foreigners) had been a give-away to the simulated nature of his possession by Yemaya. In fact, the strongest confirmation for this was delivered by Erasmo. As we walked back to Marisol’s apartment, he emphatically pointed to the thin gold necklace bearing a crucifix he was wearing. “Of all of you here,” he said, “and despite of the fact that I am a Jehova’s Witness now, I am the only one whose head was ever crowned,” – meaning that he, several years before his recent conversion, had undergone the ceremonies of initiation into regla ocha. “She should have known it.” Adherents of regla ocha believe that incorporated deities will immediately recognize initiated devotees regardless of whether or not their priestly status is known to the individual whose body they inhabit. Gods are supposed to ritually salute initiates even though they may not be known to either the host of, or the other participants in, the ceremony. According to this logic, if the man possessed by Yemaya had greeted any of us at all, it should have been
Erasmo, rather than *un aleyo extranjero*, a “profane” foreigner.\(^{11}\) Even though Erasmo was no longer a part of *la religión*, the goddess — had she been genuine — would have immediately recognized that his head had been “crowned,” i.e. that he had undergone the irreversible rite of initiation into *regla ocha* often described as the “coronation” of the neophyte’s head with the regal presence of an *oricha*.

The term my friends used to describe what had happened was that I had come to be the victim of a *santo jinetero*. *Jinetera* or *jinetero* is a term I had learned to associate with a range of rather specific meanings in Cuban public discourse, but it was the first time that I actually encountered it in a context pertaining to religious matters. Since *jineterismo* is roughly translatable as “hustling for dollars” and tends to evoke notions of prostitution, what it implied in this case was that the man’s fake possession in the presence of a financially potent stranger became readable as compromising both the deity’s and my identity: I had turned into the trick of a divine prostitute, or better, perhaps, of an impostor prostituting the deity, or even only its appearance, for monetary gain.\(^{12}\)

**CRISES OF REPRESENTATION**

It is to experiences like these — which were neither unusual nor surprising to me then — that this essay and the larger questions to which it aims to speak, owe their intellectual origins. Such questions concern interpretations of the morality of increasingly divergent patterns and relations of exchange and consumption on the background of a fundamental restructuring of the Cuban economy observable today. Cut off from its economic moorings in the former socialist bloc, and afflicted with the continuing U.S. embargo, Cuba is undergoing changes more dramatic than anything that occurred since the Revolution in 1959.\(^{13}\) Given the dismal state of the

\(^{11}\) The term *aleyo*, generally used to designate noninitiated persons acting within a religiously defined context, actually means just that: “stranger.”

\(^{12}\) Erasmo’s criteria notwithstanding, one might ask whether the man’s possession behavior might have remained “authentic” had it not been for my presence — for he had already been draped with a blue *pañó* (piece of cloth) substituting for Yemayá’s *ropa de santo* (possession garments). However, as I hope will become clear later in this essay, it would not have made much of a difference: as I will argue, belief, as well as believability, are ultimately intersubjective phenomena.

\(^{13}\) The crisis did not begin with the self-destruction of the USSR, but was anticipated by an increasing souring of relations. As early as 1990, scheduled shipments of petrol, foodstuffs, and technical equipment from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe had already failed to arrive, giving Cubans a first taste of the derailment of the rationing system, the
national economy, which had rested on Soviet-subsidized sugar exports, and the state's financial incapacity to develop adequate import-substitution venues, Cuba has embarked on a socially highly problematic course of frantically developing a tourist industry that was hitherto hardly existent. Growth rates in the tourist sector are staggering, indeed. The number of foreigners visiting Cuba more than doubled between 1990 (340,000) and 1995 (750,000), nearly doubled again in the course of the next three years, and surpassed the two million mark in the year 2000 – a hundredfold increase over 1971, and still ten times the number that visited Cuba in 1983 (Espino 1993, Martin de Holan & Phillips 1997, LeoGrande & Thomas 2002). As a result Spanish, Canadian, Italian, and British investors in Cuban-foreign joint ventures are currently doing what American hotel chains wish the U.S. Treasury Department would allow them to: stake claims on a potential bonanza.

For Cuba, however, tourism is obviously a mixed blessing. This is not just because the Cuban tourist industry leaks a sizeable amount of the revenue it generates through massive hard currency investments in infrastructural development and imports necessary to maintain international tourist standards.\(^{14}\) The existence of a tourist sector in the midst of a state-administered economy of scarcity itself is deeply problematic. At the very least, it would seem to add a sharp experiential accent to a situation which functionalist sociology would be likely to reduce to the terms of “relative deprivation theory.” For the inadequacy of state-guaranteed rations of primary goods, the legalization of the possession of U.S. dollars in 1993, and the increasing scarcity on the non-dollarized market not just of imported products, but of nonrationed breakdown of public transport, and the increasing disruption of industrial production which were to come. By 1991, the island was facing a vertiginous economic downward spiral, as an estimated 85 percent of its (always heavily subsidized) trade with the USSR and COMECON vanished into the thin political air from which it had initially materialized (Segre, Coyula, & Scarpaci 1997:141; Font 1997). Cuba’s GDP declined fully 25 percent in 1991, 14 percent in 1992, and yet 10 percent more in 1993, fuel shortages caused by a cut in half of Cuba’s Soviet petroleum imports within only one year (1989-90) left its major export item, sugar cane, rotting in the fields, and the slight growth rates of 1994 and 1995 (a much celebrated 2.5 percent in the latter year) hardly translated back into an improvement of everyday living conditions (Pastor & Zimbalist 1995, Font 1997, LeoGrande & Thomas 2002).

14. As Font (1997:124) observes, of the US$ 800 million Cuba grossed in tourism in 1994, it retained a mere US $250 million. Hence Martin de Holan & Phillips’s (1997:790) warning: “if the number of tourists increases fast enough, the short term [hard currency] leakage could rise to the point where the net contribution to Cuba is close to zero, leaving social and environmental problems as the only remaining impact of the ever growing number of tourists.”
goods have led to a situation where deep social rifts are opening up between emerging segments of the population with access to foreign currency, and those who remain restricted to the non-dollarized sectors of the economy to meet their daily needs. Not only do all Cubans have to regularly supplement their state-supplied food rations with national currency cash purchases on state-controlled, but also notoriously over-priced *mercados agropecuarios* (private farmers' markets)\(^{15}\) — the range of goods available exclusively within the dollarized sector of the Cuban national economy nowadays has come to include a wide variety of foods (most importantly all forms of cooking fats), all products pertaining to personal hygiene, and increasingly also pharmaceutical products.

No less disastrous in their effects upon daily life are the currency exchange relations that developed in the aftermath of the 1993 decision to legalize possession of the U.S. dollar, and the subsequent opening of a second formal market in U.S. currency. Although official exchange rates initially remained pegged at a one-to-one standard, by 1993, the black-market value of the U.S. dollar had shot up to a staggering 120-125 pesos and only slowly declined to 40-45 pesos in 1994 and about 35-40 pesos in 1995.\(^{16}\) By 1999, the state's CADECA chain of exchange bureaus had achieved the goal of manipulating rather than merely following the black-market fluctuations at a rate then hovering around 20 pesos. Still, what such rates meant in the mid-1990s was that given a salary average of 180 pesos in 1995, and maximum salaries for skilled professionals ranging around 400-450 pesos, a quart of vegetable oil sold in the government-owned *tiendas de recaudación de divisas* (TRD), or more popularly *chopins*,\(^{17}\) for around US$ 2.25-2.75 factually represented

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15. In fact, the rationing system was never designed to provide a full dietary basis. Rather, the expectation had always been that it would grant an egalitarian distribution of a basic range of government-subsidized products, to be supplemented by similarly subsidized meals at the workplace, school, or daycare center, and individual purchases on the state operated, or, at times, semi-privatized, parallel market. Benjamin, Collins & Scott (1985) provide a sensitive and fair assessment of Cuban nutritional policy and practices before the onset of the crisis. Today it is sadly ironic to read that these authors (as well as Cuban nutritionists), in the mid-1980s, saw obesity as a growing health problem in Cuba.

16. In part, at least, this factual (though not official) devaluation of the peso was a product of hyperinflationary financial policy — once the dollar entered into free circulation, it became clear how “bad” (in Gresham’s sense) the national currency really was.

17. The official designation for these venues as “stores for the recollection of foreign currency” is a blatant give-away of their function which, as Segre, Coyula & Scarpaci (1997:175-76) put it is “not to increase the [consumptive] options available to *habaneros*, but rather to capture the greatest amount of hard currency in order to finance the continuation of the present system” — at a “morally justified” profit margin of an average 240 percent profit exacted by the Cuban state from consumers of fully dollarized products such as, for example, cooking oil, detergent, or tampons.
the equivalent value of a full monthly wage for most industrial workers, and only slightly less for skilled professionals.  

Through the creation of two virtually separate spheres of commodity circulation visibly demarcated by the formal properties of two distinct monetary media of exchange (pesos vs. dollars), the state radically redefined the meanings of “scarcity” from a failure of effective supply into a failure of effective – i.e. dollar-backed – demand. The unintended but logical consequence was a fundamental unsettling of definitions of the legitimacy of wants. As dollarization unfolded and ramified into the fabric of Cuban social life, former economic crimes transformed into positive consumer virtues. Unregulated association with foreigners (previously constituting a “precriminal” state of “ideological diversionism”) was encouraged, and consuming import goods or nationally produced commodities of export quality changed from a tightly hemmed-in privilege into a question of everyday needs, once the state began to enlist its population in the incessant process of recaudación (recollection) of the single good that ensures its existence and perdurance in the post-cold war era: the U.S. dollar.

In this sense, it is ironic testimony to the disintegration of the Cuban public sphere to see what even a casual visitor to Havana in the mid-1990s could not help but note: the mutation of forms of social practice criminalized as late as the end of the 1980s into de facto elements of an increasingly bipolar, and highly ambivalent culture of struggle (lucha) – the socialist lucha for a better society, and the day-to-day lucha to get by. An obvious example is the still reigning Law No. 1231 (Ley contra la vagancia) passed by the Council of Ministries in 1971. Subsuming loafing, unsteady work habits, and outright theft under the category of social parasitism, its definition (quoted in Pérez-López 1995:72-74) nowadays fits the economic strategies a vast number of people deploy to merely get by.  

18. These data are necessarily impressionistic. In contrast to the 1989 data given by Pérez-López (1995:57), it would appear that the average salary range seems to have become broader. Still, Segre, Coyula & Scarpaci’s (1997:229-30) comparison of the purchasing power of the legal wages of manual laborers, physicians, university professors, and taxi drivers on Havana’s black market in the summer of 1994 amply demonstrates that the Guevarist theory of moral incentives and individual sacrifice for the common good is fast losing relevance in a world where the purchase of a unit of lard costs the manual laborer a full monthly salary, consumes 16 percent of that of a physician, perhaps 20 percent of a professor’s, but only 1 percent of the driver of a state-owned or legalized taxi. See LeoGrande & Thomas (2002:352) for similar comparisons

19. This and the following remarks are not meant to assert a radical qualitative break. On the contrary, as in the rest of the second world, Cuba’s Revolutionary economy had long, perhaps always, contained a burgeoning informal sector (see Pérez-López 1995). The major difference is quantitative and would seem to lie in a) the degree of experiential “routinization” of officially criminalized practices in everyday life, and b) the government’s seeming acknowledgement that a systematic crackdown would only exacerbate the critical nature of urban food supply, and thus prove politically costly.
Due to the erratic nature of the distribution of rationed goods and off-ration products (productos en venta por la libre) in state-run bodegas, unsteady work habits have become a strategy for obtaining (conseguir), “resolving” (resolver) or, as the most characteristic popular expression has it, “inventing” (inventar) basic commodities. Since the amount of basic foods allocated to households on the rationing system does not meet monthly nutritional requirements, most people have to begin purchasing even such basic staples as rice and legumes on the parallel market at least midway into the allocation period. Given the virtual normalization of food-related anxieties in daily life, it is toward the end of the rationing period that the daily struggle of consiguiendo and resolviendo – investigating potential food sources, beating others to a good place in the lines in front of outlets, strategically stocking up on what is available in order to later be able to trocar (barter), reaches a frantic pitch. At such times, Cubans say, the adage el que no trabaja no come (he who doesn’t work doesn’t eat) turns into its opposite: el que trabaja no come, he who works doesn’t eat. Phrased differently, since acquiring even the most basic foodstuffs has become a pursuit demanding extreme expenditures not just of effort, but of time, work, as Segre, Coyula and Scarpaci (1997:242) put it, nowadays “carries an opportunity cost previously irrelevant in the socialist workplace,” but unaffordable to many people in present-day Havana.20

The emerging division between dollarized and non-dollarized spheres of social life comes to the fore most blatantly in localities where there is a regular presence of tourists. This is so not just because routine tourist consumption patterns and expenditures would trigger the kind of Pavlovian reactions known as “demonstration effects” (so beloved by Western economics and political science as an explanans for the Eastern European “revolutions”). More realistically, in the Cuban case such localities (often designated as el área dollar) create a perceptual warp that merely distorts

20. The term inventar expresses this most clearly, for it designates acts of obtaining goods and commodities otherwise out of reach by means most likely to be judged devious. The phrase is often used jokingly, but also in situations of despair. Inventar is a special form of the semantically broader terms resolver (resolve) or solucionar (find a solution for), terms which have come to frame a broad spectrum of everyday activities in Cuba’s “special period.” Food, transportation, clothing, toothpaste, razorblades, soap: everything the state does not provide, or provides erratically or in insufficient quantity within the national currency sector has to be “resolved.” “Inventing” things has slightly different connotations. “I have to invent a few dollars to buy my daughter new sneakers” someone might say (tengo que inventar unos dolares para comprarle un par de ténis para mi hija), meaning that the act of accessing such funds might demand special, perhaps illegal, forms of effort. When someone admits to having “invented” a scarce commodity, one does not ask how, unless one is on close terms.
local social alignments by suggesting the existence of alternatives generated from within a tourism-based state that remains nominally socialist while increasingly combining the worst of two worlds in an oddly Caribbean pattern of hybridization. Tourist zones not only generate state-controlled employment, promising access to dollars (even if only in the form of tips), but a vast informal sector of no-less-tourist-oriented activities epitomized by the virtual explosion of cash-mediated forms of sociality epitomized by the neologism jineterismo. Some of the most obvious manifestations of jineterismo entail the exchange of sexual services for money, and from a structural perspective, jineterismo, indeed, strongly resembles forms of dollar prostitution observable in situations where a supply of sexual services is triggered by a demand backed by a value form far superior in its capacity to generate “exchange entitlements” (Sen 1981) to those money forms against which other types of services can be exchanged. Nevertheless, in popular speech, jineterismo is almost universally distinguished from its ostensible cognate prostitución. Moreover, it is consistently represented as (and, one presumes, felt to be) new – new, that is, not only in quantitative relation to the probably extremely limited forms of individual prostitution existing before the onset of dollarization,\(^{21}\) but also qualitatively different from prerevolutionary patterns of organized sex work. Prostitución, people will say, habia antes. Ahora tenemos jineteras (prostitution existed before [the Revolution]. Today we have jineteras).

Comprising not only the informal, “disorganized” (O’Connell Davidson 1996:45) sale of sexual services, but shading into other, far more diffuse and ambiguous transactional patterns and relationships,\(^{22}\) jineterismo is predominantly construed, both in scarce official statements and in a burgeoning popular discourse on the matter, not in relation to poverty or deprivation of essential goods. The term jineterismo rather speaks to morally highly ambiguous notions about commoditized exchange, luxury consumption, and the creation of social identities through processes of objectification. Already the very term jinetera (and its male equivalent jinetero) invites such interpretations. Deriving from the word for a jockey (jinete) the concept circumscribes a vision of the jinetera rather far removed from Western

\(^{21}\) On this issue see Fernández Robaina (1998) and Fusco (1998).

\(^{22}\) In addition, the spectrum of activities associated with jineterismo in the imagination of Habaneros is clearly gendered. While male prostitution (both hetero- and homosexual) of a more or less casual character undoubtedly forms part of it, women to whom the term jinetera is applied are much more likely to be thought of offering sexual services than men who are hustling tourists in a variety of, oftentimes far less stigmatized, ways. Particularly because the subject of male hustling has been consistently silenced in Cuban public discourse (though not in private conversations), in the following, I will restrict myself to the more obviously sexualized notions about female jineterismo.
common-sense notions of the political economy of sex work. In contemporary popular Cuban understanding, the *jinetera* is not just a depersonalized object of tourist desire, and her sexuality is not a mere object of commodified exchange. Rather, popular discourse inverts this imagery by casting the person engaging in *jineterismo* as an agent who literally “rides,” “spurs,” and “whips the money” out of his or, more often, her “victim,” whose desire he or she has aroused for purely instrumental motives. The underlying assumption is that the *jinetera se monta al extranjero* (literally mounts, but also possesses, the stranger), *le apasiona* (impassions him) or even *le castiga* (literally punishes, but also roughs him up)\(^\text{23}\) to an extent where he becomes dependent upon her, turns into a patient of his own desire, and abandons control over his financial means.

Rather than being cast as a victim of unequal economic exchange, or stigmatized along the lines of traditional views of prostitution as the ultimate form of female dishonor, the *jinetera* is envisioned as engaged in a process of value extraction over which she is thought to exert considerable control. Contrariwise, and irrespective of the exploitation many women experience at the hands of renters of illegal rooms, bribed “protectors” in the official sector, or the clients themselves, in the popular imagination it is the tourist’s personhood which becomes reduced to an objectified source of hard cash, imported clothing, household goods, electronic appliances, high-quality foods, and last, but by no means least, entertainment in bars, restaurants, or cabarets inaccessible to Cubans without adequate supply of foreign currency and, increasingly so, without visibly foreign company.

The official position on the matter tends to support such interpretations. Since there is, by definition, no need to engage in prostitution in a socialist state, these women and men engage in forms of entrepreneurialism centered on their body as a marketable commodity. Such behavior, government statements imply, is motivated by greed and the socially reprehensible desire for superfluous foreign luxury goods. As Elizalde (1996:25) puts it, articulating a variant of the official position of the matter,

> the prostitution of today is, by and large, not a desperate survival strategy, but rather a reflex of the rupture of spiritual values on the social level – a logical consequence of the economic crisis we are passing through – which nowadays renders tolerable what was inadmissible in the past, fortifies the western model of consumption, and bears results consistent with the diverse levels of social consciousness and subjectivity which make people react to the *same problem* in different ways.

\(^{23}\) Much of Cuban sexual vocabulary has fairly violent connotations, though most of such terms pertain to male activities in sexual conquest and intercourse. See Moreno Fraginals (1978, II:40) for an intriguing, but rather simplistic theory of the origins of parts of such terminology in the context of plantation slavery.
Worse yet, such ruptures do not remain restricted to those directly involved in the practice of *jineterismo*. If, in popular speech, the term *jineterismo* largely fails to convey the sense of stigma and spoiled identity commonly associated with the concept of prostitution, this, Elizalde (1996:70) argues, appears not just a result of the “refusal of those involved to accept it as a stigma,” but rather the outcome of what she calls a much broader “process of semantic accommodation [of the term’s connotations] to a certain culture of resolving [resolver], of the struggle [de la lucha].”

Nevertheless, up to 1996, police toleration was blatant, and even after the major crackdowns of late 1990s,24 to many Cubans it seems clear that *jineterismo* functions to funnel much-needed foreign currency into the national economy. In this respect, *jineterismo* partly falls in line with a whole spectrum of forms of social intercourse mediated by dollarized cash-practices such as new state-licensed forms of private enterprise offering both goods and services for U.S. dollars (or its black-market-rate equivalent in national currency), and bona fide illegal activities (sale of “diverted” state property or stolen goods). These, as well as *jineterismo* and its various nonsexualized permutations, have begun to circumscribe new and blatantly postsocialist identities, such as that of the *bisnero* (from business), or that of the *vasilón* (from *vasilar*, to party, with the connotation of reckless hedonism).

**The Production of Strangers**

Such new identities and the forms of sociality to which they refer are, to a certain extent and in certain contexts, represented as morally reprehensible. This has to do with widespread, and by no means unfounded, perceptions of the forms of exchange and patterns of consumption underwriting and objectifying such emergent identities as implying not just the systematic failure of redistributive mechanisms (this tends to be blamed on the increasingly chaotic nature of the Cuban public sphere itself), but a willful failure to reciprocate as well. Partly, such conceptions recur to representations of the common good, social justice, and responsibility which may be traceable to revolutionary ideologies of the relation between the individual and the state. But they also index an array of older genres of nationalist representations of Cuban solidarity (Martí’s *con todos y para el bién de todos*, with everyone and for the good of everyone), and a variety of notions of personal intimacy,

24. Which, by and large, merely drove the women off the street, and into the arms of the waiters at hotel lounges and tourist discos, who often seem only too happy to protect them from the police and state security for a substantial cut. The result was little more than what one might call the “return of the *chulo* (pimp)”.

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honor, and that complex conceptual device for measuring social worth and individual integrity Cubans call respeto.

Es una falta de respeto (it is a lack of respect) is probably the worst thing you can say about somebody’s behavior in Cuba without taking recourse to outright abusive invectives. For una falta de respeto, in effect, abrogates the minimal definition of individual worth which a decent person should always grant his or her interactional partners as a fundamental right, regardless of their origins, social standing, economic situation, or personal characteristics (gender, skin-color, etc.). To engage in disrespectful behavior implies that the person so slighted cannot command respect, a grave insult under all circumstances. Nevertheless, forms of impugning the dignity of others proliferate. In part, this is so because individuals and domestic groups forced to rely on national currency face a severe reduction of their “exchange entitlements” not just within the market sphere proper, but in respect to the circulation of goods and services within informal exchange networks between households, and even among their members. Since exchange within such networks is predicated on the ideal of cariño (mutual affection), the capacity to dispense the suspicion of interés (selfish intentionality) by acts of generosity is a paramount requirement for maintaining one’s status as a participant. This, however, is becoming an increasingly difficult chore: hastily tucking away food when the neighbor who smelled it knocks on the door rather than freely offering it; descending upon relatives with open demands for favors they know they cannot refuse rather than politely insinuating a personal need; or, conversely, refusing gifts and hospitality out of fear of having to reciprocate rather than taking on the moral responsibilities accruing from acceptance – such distortions of expected forms of social conduct cumulatively work to erode people’s public standing as buena gente (good people) and increasingly disengage them from the structures within which moral obligations are appropriately contracted and discharged.

But the effects of this process ramify even further. People become shameless (gente sin vergüenza) not just in respect to the maintenance of social relations. Shamelessness threatens to pervade their bodily self: By the mid-1990s, popular jokes had it that you could always tell who was a state employee by looking at his shoes: the cheap Chinese canvas sneakers (tenis) were always just about to fall apart. More damaging versions of such jokes said that you could smell loyal participants in the formal socialist economy because they had no access to soap, a gross insult in a society where people try to take showers at least twice a day, and where the presentation of one’s body as clean (limpio) and aesthetically pleasing (buen cuerpo) forms an important technique for the maintenance of both a respectable social self and a sense of individual dignity. The moral privilege of occupying a position in the Revolutionary vanguard has come to translate into a bodily reality of eating what was formerly regarded as trash and relinquishing con-
trol over crucial physical aspects of one’s own social self. It is, thus, no accident that, in the early 1990s, Fidel demonstratively ate a fish fillet in front of running cameras (fish is a protein source Cubans traditionally do not appreciate), or that the Cuban TV cook Nitza Villapoll reportedly gave out recipes for marinating and frying grapefruit peel as a substitute for meat (or, rather, as a substitute for the “utility” of meat, not as its nutritional equivalent). Like a bad host, the epitome of what Cubans characterize as *gente sin vergüenza*, who impugns the dignity of his guests by serving bad food or leftovers, the state forces its loyal citizens to eat what they consider the food of the indigent (reduced to fish in Havana’s incredibly dirty bay for food), or outright trash (*basura*).

What Lemon (1998) in the Russian context calls a “crisis of representation” occasioned by a dual currency system undermining conceptions of value that were previously taken for granted, thus spills over from the economic sphere into the domains of social status and personal worth. If the peso, for some, has become a piece of paper that one can wipe one’s ass with, the real danger is that others will find themselves degraded through contamination with an infested medium of exchange, and their selfhood reduced to that of a *cubano que vale nada* (a Cuban worth noting) or un *cubano de mierda* (a shitty Cuban). The “special period,” in other words, has turned into a machine which cranks out deformed selves and morally distorted social relations.

As Elias Canetti (1973:186) put it in his reflections on the connection between the economic crisis of the 1930s and the increasingly violent nature of anti-Semitism in Germany, what Cuba faces these day is a “witches’ Sabbath of devaluation where men and the units of their money have the strangest effects upon each other.” The result is what he calls “a dynamic of humiliation.”

“Something,” Canetti says, “must be treated in such a way that it becomes worth less and less, as the unit of money did during the inflation. And this process must be continued until its object is reduced to utter worthlessness. Then one can throw it away like paper, or repulp it.”

In Zygmunt Bauman’s (1997) terms, what we observe in Cuba today is not just the marginalization and disempowerment of those who, because of their structural position, fail to cope with systemic problems increasingly redefined as individual ones. Rather, we are witnessing their transformation into what Bauman calls “strangers,” people increasingly being defined out of the moral community constituted by what Bauman (1997:45) calls an advancing tyranny of the “economically correct.”

Such dynamics seem evident in the rich growth of racializing signifiers surrounding the emerging “moral economies” of dollarized exchange.
and consumption in Havana these days. On the one hand it appears that the
general disarray of the public sphere in Cuban life, and the operation of the
economic factors outlined before, is beginning to seriously erode the hege-
monic force (or whatever there was left of it in 1989) of the state’s taboo on
race as a subject of public discourse. On the other hand, there are far more
concrete factors at work as well. Due to tourist demand, the commodifica-
tion of Cuban sexuality proceeds along an axis defined by racial stereotypes
(which, however, are only partly in congruence with popular Cuban racial
categorizations), and is consequently imagined as linked to social concep-
tions of “blackness.” In the popular imagination, the figure epitomizing jine-
terismo is not the classy mulatta whose body traditionally formed the screen
for projections of Cuban sexual fantasies. It is the very dark-skinned girl
from the countryside or some solidly black barrio of Havana, whose vulgar-
ity and awkward comportment (one stereotype is that she cannot even walk
on high heels) immediately give her away as black trash.

Rather similarly, the rising incidence of tourist-targeting street crime
(another basically new economic venue born out of the conjunction of expe-
rienced scarcity and a recklessly developed tourist industry) in Havana is
being constructed in terms of long-standing and culturally deeply ingrained
representations of blackness as linked to a lack of discipline and civic vir-
tue, greed, hedonism, etc.²⁶ The incipient emergence of class-like relations
between groups with differential access to the dollarized sector of the econ-
omy, thus, strongly appears to correlate with forms of othering based on
racial ascriptions. Increasingly, the question “to what degree will people
individually compromise themselves morally in order to access el fula (dol-
lar) is being rephrased as one about the identity of groups whose imputed
low standards of morality and civic virtue will predispose them to engage
in economies of prostitution and predation. The tragic result of this is that
irrespective of whether a notionally “black” woman comports herself awk-
wardly because she is a palestina (a term used for illegal residents of Havana
whose origins lie in the eastern provinces) trying to find a papi riqui con

²⁶. This is not the place to discuss the cultural particularities of Cuban racism (which,
despite a relative wealth of literature on Cuban “race relations,” have, so far, not received
adequate anthropological attention). For exploratory treatments of the issue of post-
Revolutionary patterns of Cuban racism see Booth (1976) and Fernández (1996). Some
of Lancaster’s (1992) insight into the Nicaraguan situation seem applicable, too. At any
rate, some “hard facts” are involved as well: since the sociology of emigration from
Revolutionary Cuba brought a disproportionally large amount of “white” Cubans to the
United States (Aguirre 1976), the likelihood that a Cuban socially identified as black will
have access to dollar remittances from family members in exile is slim. As a result, black
Cubans not only have to struggle harder to gain access to dollars, the general presumption
tends to be that if they possess foreign currency, it will be ill-gotten.
guaniquiqui (sugar daddy – thus the title of one of Manolin “El Medico de la Salsa’s” hits in 1995), or because she is simply embarrassed by the situation, or whether a male “black” teenager approaches tourists because he really wants to know the time, rather than pick their pocket, they both contribute to what, with Appadurai (1998), we might call an increasing somatic rendering of political-economic identities.

In a situation where the dollar increasingly appears to possess the power to commensurate any and all values, even bodily surfaces have become deceptively overdetermined: just like the wildly fluctuating exchange value of Cuba’s five-peso bill renders Maceo’s countenance a questionable indicator of value, so have physical appearances begun to function as inherently suspect denominators of individual worth. Hence the seeming need to disambiguate the identity of those who participate in this moral universe along essentialized “racial” fault lines that suggest themselves in spite of all past Revolutionary endeavors at doing away with the political-economic realities from which they once issued forth, and to which they now seem to return.27

SACRED AND SECULAR ECONOMIES IN A “SPECIAL PERIOD IN TIMES OF PEACE”

Among practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions another set of interpretations obtains in uneasy coexistence with the popular perceptions recounted up to now. Within their symbolic universe, the process of moralizing emergent patterns of dollarized exchange and consumption, as well as the forms of identity they are seen to enable and objectify, are informed by notions of mystical causality in addition to (and sometimes in conflict with) mundane ones. And they articulate with a discourse on the morality of certain forms of sociality between human and non-human actors. Space does not permit me to adequately flesh out this issue. But as I have argued elsewhere (Palmié 2002:159-200), representations of differences in the conception of possible relationships with non-human actors (i.e. deities and the spirits of the dead) in several socially overlapping component traditions of, what I prefer to call, an overall Afro-Cuban religious formation, are currently being deployed to signify the experienced brittleness of moral consensus in day-to-day life in Havana in a manner analytically far more acute than the sociologistic vocabulary much postsocialist anthropology seems beholden to.

The fault lines here seem to run between ideas about exchanges between devotees and deities (oricha) in the Yoruba-derived traditions (regla ocha),

27. I owe this insight to Brad Weiss’s comments on an earlier version of this essay.
and those between priestly manipulators of power objects known as ngangas or prendas, and conceived of as containing the spirit of a dead human being. The latter cults are usually collectively denominated reglas de congo, but have various names such as palo monte, mayombe, kimbisa, vrillumba, etc. Different from regla ocha, these are commonly thought to present to their believers a kind of slippery slope ranging from the cult of spirits of the dead through the manipulation of their powers for therapeutic ends to the outright coercion of superhuman powers for amoral purposes that converge on classical European notions of necromantic witchcraft. In the ostensibly more benignly oriented (one is tempted to say "expressive" rather than "instrumental") Yoruba-influenced tradition of regla ocha, ritual interaction between the gods and their devotees condenses idealized notions of sociality centering on images of kinship, nurturance, and generalized reciprocity, and foregrounding the volition of the gods. In the reglas de congo, the relation between a tata nganga (priest) and the spirit (nfumbi) contained in the nganga object is surrounded by an imagery of contractual labor and payment, enslavement, domination, and revolt. It provides an idiom, and arguably does so for historical reasons (Palmié 2002), for a discourse on violence and depersonalization through the agency of objects which appears to speak to the current experiences of many Cubans.

In this respect, conceptions of ritual labor and sacrificial consumption in the two systems, and the manner in which these are affected by the current economic and social transformations crucially differentiate the perceptions of the two religious regimes, just as they, in another sense are blurring the practical distinctions between them. Afro-Cuban religious practices traditionally entail monetized exchanges. These, however, are linked to elaborate theories about ritual labor and its role in the conversion of commercial forms of value into mystical ones. Briefly, such are the foundations of the human-divine commonwealth defined by regla ocha: in line with what Karin Barber (1981) has noted for the Yoruba, toward whom the origins of this component of the Afro-Cuban religious formation have consistently been traced, the "sociological truism [that] gods are made by men, not men by gods" is very much part of the theology of regla ocha. "Without the collaboration of their devotees," says Barber (1981:724), "the ārisā (gods) would be betrayed, exposed and reduced to nothing." Though possessing awesome powers, the Afro-Cuban oricha are dependent on human attention. Their existence is predicated on forms of knowledge "embodied" (Lambek 1993:307) by their devotees in ritual work

28. As denizens of heaven, Barber’s informants in Ókukù agreed: the ārisā enjoy infinite powers. Still, they say that "the face of a denizen of heaven is 'awo' [charged with secret power] for the very reason that if you removed its costume you might find nothing there" (Barber 1981:740).
(trabajar ocha) and routine everyday experience of interaction with the divine – a few centavos tossed for Eleggúa at a street corner, a sip of rum spilled on the floor for the ancestors, but also a skin rash read as a sign from Babalu Ayé, or a sudden monetary windfall understood as a grace bestowed by Ochún.29

Animal sacrifices and other offerings, thus, circulate toward the gods in an ongoing series of ritual prestation by means of which humans lock the oricha into moral relationships notionally modeled on reciprocity among kin, but closely resembling forms of surplus extraction in relations of patronage. By appropriating and consuming ritual labor in the form of sacrifices and ceremonies, the oricha accumulate the power (aché) which enables them to uphold the order of the world. But they also implicitly contract the obligation to redistribute in a manner which ensures the “goodness” of their devotee’s lives, and so drives the sacrificial economy in which aché circulates through cycles of “upward delivery” and “downward redistribution.” There is, of course, nothing mechanical about such cycles. Nor could there be, for the gods can, and occasionally do refuse offerings. They are willful, sometimes intransigent beings, who have to be coaxed into granting favors, just as they, at times, need to be seduced into accepting an offering. The flow of aché from humans to gods, thus, must be confirmed by divination, lest a puddle of chicken blood in a calabash remain just that: a rejected invitation to enter a moral, not just contractual, relationship. Ritual is always dialogic, and the conjunction between human ritual labor and divine sacrificial consumption is cooperative effort, effected by a fundamental transformation of their shared object which converts its value from mundane forms into mystical ones.

To speak with Appadurai (1986), the very role of ritual, in this respect, is to lift an object from one “regime of value” into another, radically different one. Representing an interface between sacred and secular spheres, oricha shrines and altars similarly function as converters or relays between different domains of value.30 The money deposited in front of a ceremonial display notionally is

29. Gods angered by neglect will visit their subjects with disease, misfortune, poverty, or sheer disorder in their day-to-day lives. It is the one resource they have for keeping the people who preserve them in line. On a larger scale, inattention leads to attrition, or, put differently, to the disarticulation of knowledge and embodiment: there are gods whose names are still known, but who have stopped descending upon people because their songs and drum rhythms have been forgotten; others have ceased to communicate through divination because they are no longer recognized as speaking through certain oracular constellations (odu). In other cases, knowledge of appropriate sacrifices to certain deities has been lost, dooming them to a ghostly existence as remembered objects of former belief with whom no meaningful exchange can take place anymore.

30. Full-fledged (nonesoteric) possession ceremonies, tambores or bembés, always include the assembly, and ritual dismantling, of what adherents of regla ocha call a plaza (literally market) in front of the ceremonial display of the oricha’s objectifications proper.
the derecho (literally, the right) of the deity in whose honor the ceremony is staged. It is to be used by the priest who organized the event only for expenditures within a sacred economy of prestations toward the deity which are eventually returned in the form of good fortune, health, and happiness. To be sure, priestly incomes are rarely discussed in public, unless, that is, to malign an opponent. Nevertheless, to allocate such monies to other purposes is regarded as an extreme manifestation of interés (selfish intentionality) tantamount to a failure to reciprocate for reasons of greed. It is, besides everything else, a fundamental falta de respeto toward a deity which shares in the attributes of human persons to the degree that its integrity can be impugned.

Hence the outrageous nature of the simulation of “upward conversion” effected through fake possession in the case recounted earlier. In the context in which it took place, the ritual demand of money on the part of the deity ought to have divested the bill of much of its function as a multipurpose commodity and to have charged it with mystical forms of value not redeemable (at least theoretically) within a secular exchange sphere. This, of course, is not what happened. Instead of crossing over into a sacred domain of value, the money never left the sphere of commoditized exchanges. The man’s imposturing foiled the fundamental function of the ritual gesture: to convert money into a gift circulating within a sacred economy. However, possessed as he might have been by the spirit of rational self-interest, the santo jinetero effected more than what Appadurai (1986) calls the calculated “diversion” of objects from normative circulatory “paths” of restricted equivalence. On a more fundamental level, and in a far more damaging way, his actions appeared to expose the arbitrariness, and, indeed, conventional nature of the boundaries between the moral universes of derecho and interés, between cosmic reciprocity and selfish gain, sacred hunger and mundane greed.31

As Brown (1989, 1993) has cogently argued, oricha altars themselves emblematically visualize the workings of a redistributory economy. Speaking about the circulatory velocity with which commercially purchased items transform into “gifts to the oricha,” and back again into divinely charged “use values,” Brown (1993:54) notes for the North American case that “Gifts initially made to the oricha cycle back to refresh the givers anew with food that has absorbed the orichas’ ache... By the end of the evening the mat of the throne [on which the oricha’s plaza was originally laid out] is virtually defoliated. Within thirty-six hours its contents have traveled from supermarket bins to the throne – from actual plaza (market) to the throne’s plaza; have been presented to the orichas and then reciprocated, to be eaten immediately or taken home, often in the same shopping plastic or brown paper bag used to purchase the fruit in the first place. The fruit taken home is eaten by the guests’ family and friends in an exponential spreading of the oricha’s blessing.”

31. In ethnographic terms, a different interpretation is, of course, thinkable, for what if Yemayá, for whatever divine reasons of her own, would have refused to accept an offer in national currency from me? To me, my friends’ embarrassment over the event would
Fake possession is neither new nor uncommon in Afro-Cuban religion, and practitioners are generally well aware of its occasional occurrence. Still, what priests perceive as an aggravating, and potentially dangerous tendency of some people to "use" the disguise of a deity for personal projects presents some of the most tricky analytical problems in as far as the concepts of self, personhood, and body in Afro-Cuban religion is concerned. A possessing deity is thought to completely displace the individuality and volition of the possessed person, "mounting" (montar) and "steering" (manejar) the material shell of his or her body, which then recognizably displays the behavioral characteristics of the deity. The possessed body whose head (cabeza) has been filled with the god merely looks human. During possession the human medium is present only in the form of matter (en su materia) agitated by divine will. Descended gods sometimes demonstrate their full control over their human "mount" (caballo) by using its body in potentially harmful ways without actually hurting it. An impostor, however, turns into a simulacrum of a divine presence while retaining his or her mundane volition. If the possessed body looks like a human, but moves and speaks with divine authority, the body of the impostor enacts an image of the divine, but communicates from the profane structures of intentionality of his or her self.

Fake possession, thus, always threatens to effect the breakdown of the category of the sacred by profuse slippage of meanings from one domain into the other. But it does more than just that. As Lydia Cabrera has argued, in
practice, such slippage tends to be contained by a variety of strategies aimed at neutralizing the ideological effects of incidences of what she calls “sacred scam.” Ostensibly paradoxical in their implications for the closure of the ritual moment as a “finite province of meaning,” such strategies, in Cabrera’s (1983:38-39) view, grow out of the “psychological need” to believe

that the gods have come down, to believe [this] for the whole duration of the ceremony: to believe and make believe so that [others] believe until the last false oricha is [ritually] dismissed. When truth is found lacking, one must conform with the lie which is what the saying “without bread, cassava” [a falta de pan, casabe] expresses.

Cabrera’s theory of the “reality” of false possession as a product of collective displacement is cast in unnecessarily psychologistic and patronizing terms (see Kramer 1993:58-60; Lambek 1993:305-37). Nevertheless, it finds astounding resonances in Žižek’s (1997:86-126) analysis of commodity fetishism as resting not so much on a mere ideological (or structural) illusion than on the necessary imputation of “belief” to others – an externalizing move that stabilizes the effects moral artefacts such as money, god, socialism, etc., are experienced to have on everyday social relations. “[T]he subject who directly believes,” Žižek (1997:108) argues, “need not exist for the belief to be operative: it is enough precisely to presuppose its existence” – or, in other words, to project a socially effective semblance. This is not to say that gods and the spirits of dead people do not intervene in people’s lives, nor to deny the reality of possession. Like the invisible hand of the market guiding the enactment of private vice as public virtue, or the dazzling clarity of revolutionary truths which seize the consciousness of the proletariat, oricha and nfumbi obviously exist. They all do, insofar (and as long) as their presence and agency can be experienced and are routinely socially acted upon (even if only as a felt need to take into account the pernicious effects of ideological mystifications which motivate others to do all the wrong things).

Rather, what Žižek’s suggestions imply is that the occasional breakdown of believability adds to, indeed can be made to represent an excess performance of, that which forms the essential object of belief: the fact that all mercantile exchanges are empirically overdetermined by a multitude of extra-economic considerations has never deterred economists from the belief in the market as a phenomenon or force which could be analyzed as if it represented a sphere of agency (and even an agent) fundamentally separated from all those noneconomic aspects of social life which it allegedly structures and shapes. Likewise, even though “actually existing socialism” is perennially flawed – too much centralism, too much voluntarism, excessive bureaucratic growth, lack of revolutionary consciousness, maldistribution of resources, low productivity (some evil is always afoot) – none of this vitiates, indeed, it even confirms, the truths
of Marxist-Leninist dialectics. And, more importantly, it can be experienced as such, if and when one’s world is conceived as “transitional.”

Kramer’s (1993) and Lambek’s (1993) reformulation of Godfrey Lienhardt’s interpretation of Dinka conceptions of the experience of being overwhelmed by forms of selfhood and agency originating outside the individual (what Lienhardt calls passiones) is useful here. For in the case at hand, the reality of spirit possession – states of being where the self becomes a patient of the divinely willed actions its body performs – builds not just on the concept of the autonomous “self-possessed” individual as the locus of secular agency, but upon the chance of the invasion of secular intentionality into the realm of the sacred. For how, other than by the social effects of the semantic work that vessels of the divine and self-possessed individuals perform, can gods and humans be told apart? How else to distinguish “money” from worthless paper, the home from the marketplace, marriage from prostitution, gifts from commodities, truth from ideology, legitimate exercise of force from sheer terror? Precisely because his or her self is displaced by a numinous entity, a person possessed by an oricha or nfumbi is supposed not to remember, nor be in any way involved in scripting, the plot the deity’s or spirit’s actions spin out of the expressive potential of his or her body. In theory, the divine performance is a total fact, completely devoid of human subjectivity and authorship. Yet, at least in the episode

34. Hence the problem of officially declaring the attainment of a “state of socialism” (or, worse yet, communism), to wit the horrors of Stalinist repression which were arguably predicated on such definitional moves whose function is to irreversibly divorce doctrinal logic from experience (see Arendt 1968:167-69).

35. See Wafer (1991:103) who argues that “it is possible for adherents of Candomblé and social scientists to offer explanations of trance that involve essentially the same determinism. The correct way of talking about trance in Candomblé is to refer to people as logical patients whose behavior is controlled by spirits. When social scientists give Durkheimian explanations of trance, as reflecting particular aspects of the social order, they transpose the ‘mystical’ explanation to a ‘material’ plane.” Functionalism, as we know now, was an intellectual machine full of ghosts.

36. Possession, in this sense, shares numerous features with a form of discourse concerned with how the present transcends, yet is beholden to the past: historiography. At the very least, neither of them can accommodate rumors distending their performative claims to plausibility or veracity into semantic domains inappropriate to its structures of signification. Just as the Western historian cannot dream up events (or take dream events seriously) without compromising the foundational notion of an objectively given past (see Trouillot 1995), so “true” possession cannot accommodate forms of subjectivity muddling the instantiation of an object of belief (a deity, a spirit) with historical action in the classical sense of expressions of rational self-interest by a human subject. In both cases, it seems, subjectivity and intentionality must be dispersed (if in different directions) or otherwise brought under social control.
recounted, the potential for semantic ruptures was centered less on Cabrera’s (1983:38) metaphor for fake possession as a “horse without jockey” (caballo sin jinete), than on an unsettling of the metonymic linkage itself, and its dissipation into mere metaphor: not just the possibility that the horse may walk away with the jockey in unprecedented, and morally troubling, ways, but the breakdown of the distinction itself into fearful indeterminacy.

Thus, quite apart from the significance for practitioners of Afro-Cuban religion of the embarrassing moment occasioned by a “fake deity” soliciting “real money” from a “recognizable stranger” (all three concepts representing ad hoc social constructions), the events that evening in the winter of 1994 were diagnostic of a far more pervasive issue. For Cabrera’s phrase “when the truth is lacking one conforms to the lie” (a falta de pan, casabe) has lost much of its referents in contemporary Cuba. In the mid-1990s there was no bread without cassava outside of the dollar stores and tourist restaurants. The mealy, cardboard-like taste of the latter pervaded all baked goods distributed to the national population or sold for national currency through legal channels. Nevertheless, bocadillos (little rolls) with jam, soy cheese, or slices of jamonada (a soy and bone-meal-based substitute for ham) are major incentives for social performance, never failing to appear in the context of mass rallies (concentraciones) along with sickly sweet artificially flavored lemonade. Neither do people fail to turn out for mass rallies, participation in which invariably promises a bocadillo or two, and a few hours of spectacular diversion from the humdrum of day-to-day chaos and frustrations. In contemporary concentraciones, the spectacular always threatens to subsume the political, reversing the order of cause and effect proclaimed by the state through its media, which never fail to celebrate the numerical turnout at mass rallies as evidence of the people’s unwavering loyalty to the socialist cause. Contrary to such proclamations, however, it is not so much that political consciousness produces the event, but rather that the event visualizes an imputed relation between popular consciousness and mass agency. Again, simulation would seem to pose a distinct threat.

Žižek’s analysis of the reificatory functions of imputed subjectivities once more seems to capture the ambiguities of the kinds of ritual of collective passio the Cuban state periodically stages to overwhelm the population with the experience of its existence. As Aguirre (1984:563) notes with obvious disdain, since “the structures of social domination make it profitable for people to conform to the expectations of the state,” the “hope of the revolutionary movement is that these practices of social manipulation will eventually create a new socialist man.”37 In fact, however, what comes off

37. Aguirre’s formulation, of course, betrays a theoretical allegiance to the kind of economistic and fundamentally amoral zero-sum conception of a market in human action known as exchange theory.
in Aguirre’s account as the state’s organizing of its own theater of fantastic self-deception was (and, perhaps, still is) crucial to a time-hallowed problem in Marxist-Leninist thought about the dialectics of praxis and consciousness in the transition to socialism. In line with Che Guevara’s (1968:342) definition of voluntary work as both the “genuine expression of the communist attitude towards work in a society where the fundamental means of production belong to the society” and “a creative school of consciousness” at one and the same time, the Cuban state has long seemed to build its legitimacy on its capacity to excite forms of collective apasionamiento (a state of being impassioned) for the Revolution and the principles it stands for. The supposition of such apasionamiento, in fact, is a premise without which the theory of moral (as opposed to material) incentives, as critics of the Cuban model of socialism have long pointed out, degenerates into a justification for “extracting unpaid labor from workers who feel psychologically coerced to give up their leisure time” (Harris 1992:90). Though rarely used by the state and its media, the transitive Spanish verb apasionar (to excite passion in somebody) is particularly apt to convey the manner in which a Revolutionary pedagogy intends to possess individual consciousness through moving people’s bodies and making them spectators and analysts of their own collective surges at one and the same time.

Indeed, the histrionics of concentraciones are stunning. “Aquí todos nos volvemos fidelistas (here we all turn into supporters of Fidel),” a sceptical acquaintance of mine said to me as we were watching the beginning of a two-mile torch-light evening procession commemorating José Martí’s birthday from the Parque Central to the quarries, in which Martí was once sentenced to labor, near the end of calle San Lazaro. Having spent most of the afternoon and early evening observing the arrival of lorry after lorry conveying Cuban citizens to prearranged positions on the site, watching them line up, unfold transparencies, produce drums, and form strangely stationary conga lines, I was about to call it a day when flashlights suddenly illuminated an area some 200 yards away from my position at the foot of a tribune. Fidel had appeared as if from nowhere. As I had been told before, nobody knows how he performs his surprise appearances in the midst of densely packed crowds.

38. The major texts of the debate about this issue in the 1960s are conveniently assembled in Silverman (1971). For a more recent and unusually careful assessment see Eckstein (1994).

39. At the very least, the Western skeptic wonders about security measures. Was he there all along, chatting with participants until the crucial moment? Did he crawl out of a manhole? Or did he simply materialize in the midst of a laboriously crafted physical representation of the nation whose máximo líder he is? As in the case of spirit possession in Afro-Cuban religions, these questions point toward critical, and, perhaps necessary, ambiguities.
effect was that of a socialist hierophany. Obviously having given the signal vamonos, let’s go, the sudden apparition and matter-of-fact elocution of el comandante literally set several hundreds of thousands of people in motion. Singing, drumming, waving transparencies with appropriate slogans, munching bocadillos, and downing lemonade, the masses rendered their spontaneous support, manifesting, in their collective action precisely the kind of overdetermination, excess, and subsumption of the signified under its sign by which Cuban masses seduce (in Baudrillard’s [1990] sense) their rulers into being “possessed by a moral force” greater than their own, and of which they are not just “only the interpreter” (Durkheim 1995:212), but, quite simply, also the only interpreter.40 Seized, and propelled forward by such forces, el comandante no longer performs as “a mere individual who speaks but as a group incarnated and personified” (Durkheim 1995:212). The circle closes.

I do not wish to speculate here on the extent of popular Cuban commitment to the present government and its political practices. Most of the people I got to know in Cuba evidenced a precarious balance between disaffection with, and support for, the Revolution, and it would be presumptuous to generalize from my impressions in this respect,41 as presumptuous, in fact, as to question the reality of my informants’ belief in the existence of the oricha and the spirits of the dead. In itself, the cultural form action takes gives no

40. Compare Ché Guevara’s (1967:10) remarks about the phenomenon: “Fidel is a master at this, whose particular mode of integration with the people can only be appreciated by seeing him in action. In the large public concentraciones one observes something like the dialogue of two tuning forks whose vibrations provoke new ones in the interlocutor. Fidel and the masses begin to vibrate in a dialogue of growing intensity until it reaches an abrupt finale crowned by our cries of battle and victory.”

41. Most survey research on the matter (including surveys conducted by the government) is ridiculously flawed not just on account of the crudeness of public opinion research in general, or the perennial problem of reliability in the face of politically charged questions. More fundamentally, such studies labor under what one might call the “problem of the happy worker” which Dominguez (1978:473-74) illustrates as follows: “a worker may be observed to be laboring happily. It is possible to conclude that the worker is happy because he has always been so; that the worker is merely pretending to be happy in order to stay out of trouble; that the worker has been “modernized” (this is especially likely in the case of women who have joined the paid labor force); ... that he is happy because he is cooperatively and selflessly working for the common good. Simply by looking at the worker, it is not possible to determine which of these explanations, if any, is correct.”
clue to motivation or the content of consciousness, which is why, on a more general level, conceptions of belief, attitudes, needs, or ideological commitment as lodged in individual minds are methodologically dubious (Needham 1972). My aim here is not to add to a bulky literature puzzling over the relative nonoccurrence of organized civil disobedience or overt political violence in Cuba in naive psychologistic terms (Do they really identify with socialism? Have they irrevocably fallen for Fidel’s charisma? Are surveillance and repression that systematic? Is it a case of mass brainwashing?). I merely want to highlight some of the practical mechanisms by which both Afro-Cuban deities and the Cuban state perform themselves into existence. As Philip Abrams (1988:81-82) argued in a devastating critique of the reifications bandied about by political sociologists, the problem is a far more general one. “The state,” he posited,

is at most a message of domination – an ideological artefact attributing unity, morality and independence to the disunited, amoral and dependent workings of the practice of government. In this context the message is decidedly not the medium – let alone the key to an understanding of the sources of its production, or even of its own real meanings. The message – the claimed reality of the state – is the ideological device in terms of which the political institutionalization of power is legitimated.

Hence the embarrassment, nicely excavated by Taussig (1991), of Durkheim’s sacralization of the social as “not wholly external” to the individual, but as a force, exacting and empowering at one and the same time, which “can exist only in and by means of individual minds” and must therefore “enter into us, and become organized within us” (Durkheim 1995:211) in order to enact “powers and qualities as mysterious and baffling as any assigned to the gods by the religions of this world” (Morris Ginsberg cited in Lukes 1973:34-35).

Another circle closes here: “the state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice,” Abrams (1988:81-82) tells us. “It is itself the mask which prevents us from seeing political practice as it is.” It thrives on systematic misrecognition. Yet just like money or possessing spirits, the state has “reality effects” that are experientially irrepressible – even in the face of subjective disbelief. To use Thoden van Velzen’s (1995) terminology, one need not subscribe to the “collective fantasies” of others to be swept along, harmed, or killed, by their power once it incarnates in social action. Moreover, as Fields (1982) has compellingly argued, socially effective definitions of reality and irreality do not necessarily revolve around shared forms of consciousness. Above all, it is the extent to which “moral artefacts” such as money, witchcraft, the state, or the gods come to structure social praxis that endows them with their capacity to affect people’s lives,
and so, for all practical purposes to become real. “It is the human predicament,” she says

to be “captured” physically by ordinary ways of doing what we ordinarily do, and mentally, by a corresponding idiom of thought. We at once create and are captive of a real world whose order is delimited by the moral artefacts of quotidian activity. (Fields 1982:591)

This, then, may be the predicament at the root of nonexisting prostitution in the face of furious hustling, racism in the absence of race, or dollarizing spirit possession in a socialist country with a supply-side economy, and caught up in a war that does not exist, but causes real casualties: just like Cuban money fails to elicit predictable social effects, Cuban reality fails to “capture” its denizens to a degree where they appear to blindly stumble through a dream-like maze of fantasms always threatening to dissolve into something else.

CONCLUSION

In contemporary Havana, where the vast majority of the population undergoes experiences of deprivation, the capacity of the gods themselves to reciprocate seems increasingly questionable. In many ways, they have turned into a ragged royalty, haggling with their subjects over issues of food and consuming a good deal of their livelihood in the form of ritual dues. In this they uncannily resemble the Cuban state whose erratic economic policies are not just experienced as entirely unpredictable, but as imposing unbearable privations on those of its citizens who still participate in the formally socialist sector of its economy. Depending on the black market exchange rate, formal peso salaries have come to translate into miserable pittances on the “real existing market.” In the process those who do the right thing and continue to fulfill what the state defines as civic duties invariably get wronged.

What lies beyond the realm of the moral economies of exchange and consumption characterizing the remnants of the Cuban socialist state and the relationships between gods and devotees in the Yoruba-derived traditions, however, is the moral no-man’s land in which forms of sociality epitomized by the *jinetera* and the *bisnero* thrive. Here, *interés* and *interés* alone, structures social relations, in all of its manifestations: from stealing food off government trucks parked in an alleyway for too long, to hiding money, food, and booze from family members, to engaging in commercialized sex, and robbing tourists. It is a world where appearances increasingly become deceptive. In the religious sense, this is not just a matter of faking possession in order to exploit the occasional dollar-heavy foreigner who stumbles into a ceremony. Rather, once religious interpretations are extended to the realm of everyday social relations, the most fitting conceptual frame in which to cast
the ever-present potential for moral derailment appears to be that of witchcraft or, to put the matter in terms closer to popular discourse: the mercenary relationships between *tata ngangas*, and their coerced spiritual labor force; relationships which need not, but always can, result in antisocial projects characterized by predatory escalations of *interés*.

To just give one more example, interpretations foregrounding a moment of establishing control over somebody else's volition are not just part of the *jineterismo* complex, but appear in the context of several new forms of commercialized social interchange. Nowhere is this more obvious than in respect to the new forms of state-licensed private vending of food and beverages. Street talk mostly focuses on images of pollution – dirty hands preparing such foods, tainted products or disgusting materials going into its preparation. At times, however, such rationalizations form a mere screen for fantasies of being victimized by the ingestion of magically charged substances, of incurring the danger of loss of control over one's self by engaging in fundamentally alienated exchanges. Coffee sold across the street to utter strangers is, thus, not only widely perceived as laced with potentially unhealthy substitutes. People have been known to lose control over their volition or consciousness on account of "bad" substances mixed into such beverages or food.

Surely, this could be read as a variation on a classic anthropological theme: the ambivalence exhibited by denizens of incompletely commoditized worlds toward incorporating materials originating from within other people's domestic spheres, and consumed on a "contractual basis," as it were, rather than as an act affirming moral ties. But there is more to it in the case at hand, for commensality always holds its dangers. Cuban folklore provides a rich storehouse for notions of magical acts perpetrated by mixing common beverages such as coffee (the offer of a cup of coffee being regarded as a minimal sign of hospitality) with e.g., menstrual fluids, pubic hair, graveyard dust, etc. These are, albeit in different ways, substances, the ingestion of which produces forms of intimacy – in the literal form of the symbolic interpenetration of otherwise morally unrelated bodies – which can have dangerous consequences because they are socially "unregulated." Hence the power of what Cubans tend to call *pólvos*, powderized substances which, once introduced into one's body turn into what Douglas (1969) calls "matter out of place" and pervert the domain they enter into. And in that sense, the secret havoc wrought by *pólvos* is not some kind of folk rationalization of the onslaught of capital developed by "neophyte proletarians" as Taussig (1980) might have it, for it is hard, indeed, to think of any place in the Caribbean after the onset of slave-based plantation agriculture as precapitalist (or even only noncapitalist). Rather, such suspicions crystallize a theory of human violation and abuse which articulates with, rather than being produced in response to, a dollarizing economy, where different currencies begin to speak not just to unequal life-chances, but to stark contrasts
between notions of agency and powerlessness, identity, selfhood, and otherness mediated by ultimately fluid and shifting moral economies tied to different monetary media of exchange.

"Eso no camina aqui" (this does not go/take you anywhere here), said a private taxi driver to a friend of mine still working a state job when he offered him a standard peso fare for a ride he shared with me in 1995. Like the deity in the anecdote recounted earlier, the driver felt it was not the currency appropriate to the situation. Thinking that I did not speak Spanish, he told my friend what a fool he was not to let me pay, and berated him for his lack of solidarity in depriving a fellow Cuban of the spoils of association with a dollar-laden foreigner. To both of their embarrassment, I set the situation straight, and paid up in dollars, sick as I was of the painful complications such situations usually bring forth. As if to purposively make the situation even more painful for us, the man then gratuitously explained that he would have taken us anyway, since he, too, was heading for the privatized market on calle Egido, to buy — and this is what he literally said — US$ 200 worth of pork to put in his freezer. You never know when the government will shut down these markets again. My friend’s monthly peso earnings at the time translated into some US$ 4 at the current black market exchange rate. I don’t think he had seen anything but an occasional piece of one of Cuba’s various, but all highly unappetizing, meat-substitutes on his plate for months.

In Cuba, today, the dollar walks and talks. When I go there, it is as if I take on its greenish hue. I eat cassava-laced bread, bony little frozen fish, rice, and, when possible, beans and a slice of bone-meal-heavy jamonada. But I bring cooking oil to the household I am a guest in, and maybe soap, tampons, candy, razorblades, and ball-point pens I bought in bulk in Europe or North America, or a bottle of rum, which I intend to consume with my friends and can easily afford. And on my person I carry the unfathomable riches which buy me a trip back from the island to lands where everyone earns incomes in convertible currency, a stunning idea for people caught up in a disintegrating version of Soviet-style state capitalism riddled with a dual currency system that brings out the worst in two worlds.

In fact, I am such wealth as lines my pocket. Neighbors of people I regularly visit hang out on their doorsteps watching me pass by, and they are undoubtedly discussing in what hideous ways my friends and acquaintances might be compromising their personal integrity to make the foreigner come back to their house several times a week. They are not entirely off the mark. In hotels and rented apartments in Havana, people like me literally consume Cuban bodies. And the magic wand we all use is as frightening in its social power and moral implications as the practices of tata ngangas who send the captured spirits of dead people on nightly errands of vengeance and destruction. Indeed, I can think of few better analyses of what Marx called the fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof than the ways in which
practitioners of Afro-Cuban religion have come to interpret the increasing perversion of Cuban social reality by the fantasm of *el fula*, the indomitable bill of exchange, liquidizer of social forms and identities, *fascinans* and *tremendum* at one and the same time, which, for better or for worse, irrevocably ties their country to the capitalist world system.

**POSTSCRIPT: NOVEMBER 2004**

On October 27, 2004, the president of Cuba’s National Bank, Francisco Soberón Valdés, proclaimed what likely will be the most far-reaching monetary reforms since the original legalization of the U.S. dollar as a parallel currency in 1993. Cit ing the recent intensification of U.S. embargo policies designed to severely restrict dollar remittances, as well as commercial currency flows, to the island as an unprecedented threat demanding immediate response, the Cuban government decreed that U.S. currency will cease to circulate after November 8, 2004. While possession of U.S. dollars will remain legal, their function as a universal medium of exchange is projected to end on November 14, after which dollars will have to be exchanged for *pesos convertibles*, officially pegged at a one-to-one level, but obtainable only at a 10 percent surcharge. Coming as it does in response to both U.S. economic aggression and a mounting energy crisis caused by the failure of one of the island’s major power plants in the summer of 2004 and the vertiginous increase of the global price of oil, this move to suspend the dollar and replace it with the *peso convertible* likely aims less to restore Cuba’s “monetary sovereignty” (as official sources announced to Western news agencies) by ultimately fictive means, than to force its citizens to relinquish their hold on hoarded hard currency (estimated in the millions of U.S. dollars), and to make them resign themselves to the exclusive use of the *peso convertible*, a phantom currency, the capacity of which to underwrite routine fetishizations of value had always been regarded as dubious by most Cubans I came to know. Whether social practices involving the *peso convertible* will come to circumscribe a stable or even only socially coherent fiction of value is impossible to tell at this point. Yet the fact that Cuban banking institutions registered 700,000 transactions involving last-minute dollar exchanges within a single week might well be taken to indicate that *el fula* will continue to exert its magic – and will do so not only as an external determinant of the economic viability of the Revolutionary Cuban state, but also as a powerfully charged referent within the precarious economy of signs structuring social life in post-cold war Havana.

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