

“A Una Cuba Alternativa”?¹

Digital Millennials, Social Influencing, and *Cuentapropismo* in Havana

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“*Vengan a conocer nuestra plataforma, formen parte, ¡tomen acción en esta batalla por documentar y mostrar al mundo una Cuba ALTERNATIVA!*”² read the invitation, which pinged up through yet another WhatsApp group to which I’d been added by Frank, my digital entrepreneur friend in Havana. He was one of several friends I had who, having completed university degrees that were unlikely to lead to satisfying or well-remunerated work for the State, had taken it upon themselves to set up their own businesses, using emerging digital technologies and networks to celebrate the various unsung countercultural trends that saturate Havana’s exclusive events line-up for those who can score a spot on the guest list. Frank and others like him are riding the crest of a growing wave in Cuba, the result of a potent combination of increasing access to the internet (at least in Central Havana) and social media, and further concessions to Cuba’s euphemistically dubbed *cuentapropistas* (i.e. “those who count on themselves” or self-employed people who do not work for the State). Implicit within this euphemism, however, is an inherent binary at the heart of Cuban society: an all-pervasive sense of “them” (the State) versus “us” (those active in the so-called “non-state sector”). Moreover, for some *cuentapropistas* who operate in the even more liminal digital space of Cuba’s emerging hybrid economy, this can bring with it a heightened vulnerability in a country where Fidel

¹ “Towards an Alternative Cuba”?

² “Come and find out about our platform, take part, take action in this battle to document and show the world an ALTERNATIVE Cuba!”

Castro's famous declaration, "Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing," still strongly resonates as the country's official "cultural policy."³

This chapter will consider how an emerging generation of Cuban "millennials" are becoming digital entrepreneurs, launching businesses that operate within a relatively "new" world of social media and internet access in Havana. I follow Jean and John Comaroff in considering three essential aspects of this so-called "millennial" moment: "the shifting provenance of the nation-state and its fetishes, the rise of new forms of enchantment, and the explosion of neoliberal discourses of civil society" (2001: 3). The digital age has only increased the fetishization of Cuba in the visual imaginary of a world tourism industry seeking out the "authentic" at every turn. This project has coincided with Cubans' own increasing access to digital media, resulting in a growing desire to have a voice in the representation of their homeland in a public digital space, as well as engage in dialogues about what Cuban society can and will be in a digital, globalized age.

The chapter draws upon ethnographic research conducted in Havana between March 2017 and September 2018 to consider how a relatively small but culturally influential set of young Cubans has been negotiating these rather seismic shifts in an altogether complex sociopolitical and technological context. Their businesses often operate in a liminal space within Cuban ideological norms.⁴ Although technically legal and within the remits of *cuentalpropista* licenses, many of these young Cubans are coming under increased scrutiny and pressure from

³ "Palabras a los intelectuales" (Words to the Intellectuals), April 1961, original: "*Dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución, nada.*" Author's translation.

⁴ I understand "liminality" here in the sense of the term as used by anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner in their studies of religion and ritual, whereby they describe an ambiguity that occurs in the middle stage of rites of passage, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the rite is complete (Gennep 1977; Turner 1969). In this case, I allude to the ambiguity experienced by those entrepreneurs poised between what might (very crudely) be characterized as "socialist" and "postsocialist" Cuba.

both the State and regular members of society for their celebration of a cultural “alterity,” parallel perhaps to “hipster” youth movements seen around the world, but which in Cuba might be interpreted as counter-cultural, counter-Cuban, or indeed counter-Revolutionary.⁵ Ironically however, for some this stems not so much from a particular stance against the Revolution or from resistance to the Cuban State, but rather from a social or cultural positioning against hegemonic and stereotyping visions from the outside of a fetishized or “exotic” Cuba they reject. Ironically, this is something which, arguably, puts them back in line with Cuba’s Revolutionary ideals of resistance to colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and global capitalism.

This chapter follows several such entrepreneurs as they navigate the emerging systems of regulation and normativity that surround both digital media and *cuentapropismo* in Cuba, as well as when interfacing with other liminal digital spaces such as *el paquete* and the SNETs (intranets) of Havana.⁶ It examines some of the pitfalls of this world, as several of the entrepreneurs encounter tensions with the police, family, or neighbors due to their activity, before considering to what extent young digital entrepreneurs are redefining what it means to be Cuban, as digital media facilitate increased interaction with modes of expression from outside of Cuba. For several of these digital entrepreneurs, their celebration of cultural “alterity,” even if through tangential association with the aesthetics of fashion and music movements from abroad, can be inherently, if unwittingly, political statements, which can in turn create tensions for them both at home and at work. And yet our own notions of what constitute “revolution” and

⁵ The word “revolution” has long been ideologically co-opted in the Cuban context. In this chapter, I use “revolution” with a small “r” to refer to the concept more broadly, and “Revolution” with a capital “R” to refer to the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the ideologies attached to it. The same is true for the adjectives “revolutionary” and “Revolutionary.”

⁶ These terms are discussed fully later in the chapter, but in brief, “*el paquete*” refers to a network for the distribution of digital content spanning the island of Cuba, while “SNETs” or “Street Networks” (Spanish: “*la red*”) are akin to intranets and operate as digital networks for sharing content within neighborhoods in Havana, as well as in some other towns across Cuba.

“resistance” are also called into question when considered within the Cuban context, as lived practices belie a subtler interplay between various coexisting notions of “resistance,” “rebellion,” and “revolution” within an evolving Cuban identity politics.

The Rise of Digital Entrepreneurs in Havana

“How could a one-party socialist state that still monitors e-mails, curtails freedom of the press, and limits private enterprise create a digital society, which is premised on the open exchange of information and trade?” (Ashby 2001: 18)

It is all too easy to presume that, because Cuba’s digital and technological panorama does not mirror that of, say, the United States, it would be an odd place to set up a “digital” business. It is well known that the island has limited internet connectivity. High costs, slow speeds, censorship, and a frustrating lack of privacy when online due to the very “public” nature of the most common access points (Wi-Fi hotspots in public parks), all continue to characterize getting online (Freedom on the Net 2018). Yet such obstacles have proved galvanizing to some of Cuba’s millennial generation, with deficiencies in access to infrastructure, capital, and information spurring remarkable creativity when it comes to digital platforms. For example, at the time of my departure from Cuba after my latest round of field research one of my contacts was in the process of constructing a new business, which he hoped to launch internationally within a few years, and which would offer digital storage and archiving services (similar to what we might think of as “the cloud”) without reliance on internet access. As a teenager, without online access, he had learned to take apart and rebuild computers, cell phones, and eventually whole digital systems and networks. This knowledge, patience, and aptitude for “*invento*” (an all-important Cuban popular term for creativity and inventiveness of questionable legality) all stood him in good stead in what is a notoriously challenging marketplace even with dependable

internet access. Despite its frequent fetishization as the “offline island” therefore (Helft 2015), Cuba is arguably a fertile land for digital entrepreneurship, and Cubans’ “make do and mend” attitude has fomented a particularly widespread saturation of digital content.

The most renowned of these means undoubtedly remains *el paquete* (or “the package”), a highly efficient and profitable island-wide data distribution system that has been called Cuba’s “largest private employer” (Press 2015), and summarized as “the internet distilled down to its purest, most consumable, and least interactive form: its content” (García Martínez 2017). This weekly (and eventually, daily) distribution of digital content including music videos, international soap operas (ranging from South Korean to Turkish), antivirus updates and apps, digital magazines, classified advertisements, and more crosses the island by boat, plane, car, bus, bike, and even on foot (thus the term “sneaker net”) to reach a substantial proportion of the population. Layers upon layers of *paqueteros* or distributors participate in this marketplace, which can cost as little as a few Cuban pesos (approximately \$0.20 U.S. cents), and which delivers a curated selection of digital content on USB sticks and hard drives door-to-door.

The content which circulates through *el paquete* also circulates daily, within Havana at least, through the city’s SNETs or Street Networks (García Martínez 2017). These started out as ad hoc local area networks (LANs) or *intra-net* systems wired up by teenage boys in the outskirt suburb of Villa Panamericana in Eastern Havana for the purposes of gaming (Press 2017), but have now expanded to include at least 44,000 people spread all across Havana, according to my contacts who worked across several of the locally deployed and managed networks. Access costs around \$1 a month and depends upon living in the right neighborhood to be able to run a cable from a pre-existing connection. Once on the system, members can browse a veritable treasure-trove of games, videos, music, chatrooms, and more from the comfort of their own home, and

can share data and chat in real time with friends across their neighborhood. Moreover, the entire contents of *el paquete*, including its dozens of pdf-format magazines made by various digital entrepreneurs across Havana, are also liberally shared throughout these networks.

For the majority of young millennials in Havana for whom internet access is a considerable challenge, these “alternative” sources of digital connectivity are a vital means of staying up to date with the latest music, fashion, gossip, and events. For a smaller elite however, internet access itself is also an everyday aspect of normal consumption. “*El internet es de respirar, está en el aire*” (you breathe the internet, it’s in the air) explained Frank, as he fiddled with the “Nano” box he had screwed onto a bracket from the ceiling of his office. For those with access to money (typically those with relatives in Miami, which in turn most likely means the white middle classes), such devices can be bought through the black market for a few hundred U.S. dollars and installed to extend or amplify state internet signals from Wi-Fi hotspots to private dwellings a block or two away. Internet access can then be enjoyed in the privacy of one’s home or office, albeit still typically at the high cost of \$1 per hour charged by the State telecom monopoly, ETECSA. For people like Frank, who runs a social influencing business in El Vedado (a middle-class neighborhood of Havana),⁷ or my various other contacts who work in digital marketing or produce digital magazines, regular internet access is an essential tool of the trade. For them, reliable internet access is a tool which also implicitly belies a degree of social capital, not infrequently bought with money from contacts overseas, and possible in part due to

⁷ The notion of socioeconomic class is a problematic one in relation to Cuba, given the Revolution’s intention to destroy class disparities. Nonetheless, Cuban society remains stratified according to various socioeconomic principles (for example, access to relatives abroad who can provide remittances), and as such, I follow others in maintaining Cuban society is driven by notions of class (Eckstein 2010; Weinreb 2009), and, indeed, this is a crucial element of accessing digital technologies on the island.

the maintenance of close social relations with neighbors on higher floors who can host the antenna for them, or at the very least not snitch (“*chivatear*”) on them to the authorities.

Cultural Alterity and National Identity

One thing most of my contacts within this emerging digital entrepreneur “social set” in Havana had in common was a mutual self-identification as “*alternativo*” (alternative), and a desire to distinguish themselves from “*los cubaneos, los cubiches, and los cubanazos*” while still resolutely declaring inclusion within *la cubanidad*.⁸ These *habaneros* might be considered the local equivalent of “hipsters,” and were not to be found grinding to Cuban *son* tracks wearing tight neon clothing, as one so often sees in Cuban music videos. Nor were they sipping *mojitos* and dancing *salsa*, as a hegemonizing and exoticizing foreign gaze so often projects onto Cuba. No, these young twenty/thirty-somethings were educated, artistic, creative, middle-class, and seeking modes of expression that encapsulated all of this alongside a keen awareness of international trends, combined with a proud sense of their Cuban identity.

As a small but culturally influential elite group, these millennials occupy a hazy space within Havana’s cultural and political landscape however. On the one hand, they explicitly seek “the alternative”; a statement which is inherently problematic in a one-party State which often interprets any expression of “alterity” as a threat to a hard-won “Revolutionary” status quo. Moreover, such “alt” movements clearly map onto issues of social class, which in Cuba is irrevocably bound up with transnationalism and access to Cuba’s large, relatively wealthy, and

⁸ Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969), Cuba’s premier anthropologist, defined ‘*la cubanidad*’ as “*la condición genérica de cubano*” (the generic condition of [being] Cuban) (Ortiz 1940: 166). The adjective is key—this kind of “Cubanness” is generic rather than individual, and in its narrowest sense designates the junction of nationality and citizenship. However, *cubanía, cubiche, and cubaneo* (etc.) typically refer to what is considered a dominant Cuban temperament (Pérez-Firmat 1997: 4), which in contemporary Havana typically suggests an overt liking of *reggaetón* music, tight clothing, and lots of “bling”, and overall brings to mind an aesthetic associated with the lower classes.

multifaceted diaspora, or “the other.” To acknowledge these counter-cultural movements would be to acknowledge the existence of a middle class or an emerging *bourgeoisie*, which is fundamentally at odds with Cuba’s Revolutionary project.⁹

On the other hand, these millennials make strong claims to a Cuban identity. Moreover, they proudly incorporate strands of their *cubanidad* into their adoption and adaptation of trends started overseas. For example, one emerging music producer in Havana’s counter-cultural scene has spearheaded a new genre – “*afrofuturismo tropical*”–, which he envisions as connecting Cuban sounds with those of the larger African diaspora and other Caribbean aesthetics (Du Graf and Cromwell n.d.). The name of his recording label –*guampara*– is a colloquial word for machete, a symbol for the Cuban fight for liberty, and importantly a symbol which can be mobilized as both nationalistic in its representation of the insurgent struggle of Cuba’s *Mambises* (independence rebel fighters) against colonial oppression, as a statement of the (ongoing) Afro-Cuban struggle for equality more generally, and as a call for freedom of expression in an authoritarian state.

The issue of whether or not Havana’s counter-cultural advocates see themselves as political actors is a fraught one, however, for Havana is a place where all action is potentially political, yet such politics can be mobilized in several concurrent directions at once. Indeed, Havana is a place where seeming paradoxes take some unpacking; it is not uncommon for people to criticize the State and wholeheartedly defend the Revolution in practically the same breath. The fluidity of lived experience requires a certain flexibility in approach, a skill acquired and honed from birth, and rarely set aside. It is therefore not paradoxical, but in fact entirely logical, that young

⁹ Moreover, as part of the ongoing economic updating of socialism in Cuba, concentrations of wealth and property in private hands has been explicitly banned, essentially outlawing the existence of an emerging middle class of bourgeoisie.

counter-cultural *habaneros* might at once recognize themselves within potentially counter-cultural/“alternative” aesthetics while at the same time fiercely self-identifying as proudly Cuban, and staunchly defend their choice to stay put rather than leave for Miami.

Indeed, in so doing they arguably follow the Revolutionary ideals they have been taught since infancy. One can be a product of the Revolution, live within it, abide by it, perpetuate and promulgate it, resist it and actively condemn it all at once. Indeed, Revolutionary Cuba itself has long defined itself as constituting a powerful “alternative” to capitalist global hegemony, and the Revolution has overseen the continuation of “a long Cuban history of elaborating an alternative version of modernity” (Miller 2008: 694). One might even argue that the championing of cultural alterity has not been peripheral to Cuba’s self-image, but central to it, and has perhaps been its lasting achievement.

Getting Online at the CDR

I first met William at the famed *Fábrica de Arte Cubano*¹⁰ while he was shooting images of a local rap artist for his upcoming music video. He was in his early thirties, mixed race, and would have looked at home in any hip-hop video, fusing dreads and a Caribbean beanie hat with a baggy American football T-shirt and sneakers. At his hip he had some expensive Zeiss lenses for the DSLR camera around his neck. Like many of his age and cultural cache in Havana, he had got into the *Fábrica* that night for free through his wide array of social contacts (in this case he’d grown up around the corner from one of the bouncers working the door), and saw the venue as an important place both for networking and for getting footage of people dressed “the right

¹⁰ The “Cuban Art Factory” or F.A.C. is an old peanut oil factory in the far western section of Havana’s once upscale Vedado neighborhood, which has recently been converted into a one-of-a-kind venue that celebrates cultural alterity among Havana’s hipster elite and foreign tourists alike, but which is also managed indirectly by the State. It includes multiple bars, music and performance spaces, an art gallery, and a private “*paladar*” restaurant.

way.” The *Fábrica* becomes something of a fashion parade on Friday nights, as young millennial *habaneros* take their newest outfit (usually attained courtesy of a Miami relative) for a night out. William’s job was to capture the action and recycle it in music videos to harness an image of Havana as young, hip, and alternative, or in his spot-on words, “*un Brooklyn a lo cubano*” (a Brooklyn, Cuban-style).

William was from *El Cerro*, a working-class neighborhood which has also ironically become the heart of Havana’s digital boom. Of all of Havana’s SNET intranets, *El Cerro*’s is one of the largest and most influential,¹¹ and it’s safe to say that most millennials in the neighborhood are connected, if not in their own home then through a friend down the street. As a freelance photographer, William’s work in the music video business invariably came through contacts, and the SNET proved an invaluable way for him to stay in the loop. When he noticed an upcoming pool party was being advertised on the *Súmame* network (the SNET’s version of Facebook, literally meaning “add yourself” or “join up,” which explicitly mirrors the aesthetic of the international social network), he dashed off a quick message in the chat box to find out if they wanted any of it to be filmed for further promotion; within five minutes it was all confirmed and he’d sorted out a weekend of paid work for himself.

¹¹ In local argot, this local area network is proudly referred to as “*El Cerro Cerrao*,” or “*El Cerro* closed off.”



Figure 1: Upcoming pool party advertised on one of the SNET's social media networks, “*Súmate*.”

For young freelancers like William, uninhibited social connection such as that offered by digital networks is a primary and powerful currency in a media landscape where for the majority, even phone calls and text messages remain prohibitively expensive. As the SNET connection is a set payment per month, rather than per use or per minute as regular internet access is in Cuba, William can browse as long as he likes, from the privacy of his front room, and make himself available more consistently for upcoming work. Moreover, he can also source the tools of his trade online; his Zeiss lenses were ordered through the network from a man a few streets away who put up a classified ad stating his cousin in Miami could (for a small additional charge) order things on Amazon and have them shipped to Cuba.

A few weeks later, to his dismay, William was cut off from *El Cerro Cerrao*. The guy who had administered the network in the immediate streets of William’s house had packed up and gone abroad, bequeathing his “patch” to a friend, who in turn had decided to up the prices considerably. William couldn’t front the money the man was demanding, but, he told me

worriedly, also needed the connection more than ever as he needed to earn money fast. His wife and children had gone on holiday to Italy to visit an aunt, and had not returned. William sat, dejected, on a wooden chair in the middle of his room, looking at a framed portrait on the opposite wall in which he and his wife wore matching blue outfits and smiled stiffly at the camera. He doubted they were coming back, and wanted to hire a lawyer to represent him, as he had not given permission for his children to be taken from him indefinitely. “Obviously, I want what’s best for them, but there’s a way of going about it, and it’s not like this,” he complained as he surveyed a huge pile of dirty plates building up across the kitchen, which I had tactfully decided not to point out. Adamant he needed to get “online” (i.e. onto the local network) to source both funds and a lawyer, we started walking down the street to find a friend who was still connected.

A few blocks away, we found ourselves knocking on a door bearing a plaque saying “*Presidente del CDR*” (President of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution), only to be invited by Jessica, the local CDR president,¹² into a small apartment with pictures of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro smiling down from the walls onto a central table with a computer and various gaming consoles. Jessica sat on a rocking chair in the corner, re-stitching a dress, while her twenty-eight-year-old son Guillermo and my friend William sat at the computer surveying who else was then connected to the network. Slightly surprised that someone so outwardly in favor of the Revolution would partake of the delights of *El Cerro Cerrao*, I asked Jessica if she took issue with her son being online all day long. “Oh, not really!” she smiled back at me, “only when he hogs the computer all the time. He has to get off when my girlfriends and I want to

¹² Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (Spanish: *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución*), or the CDR, are a network of neighborhood committees across Cuba. The organizations, described as the “eyes and ears of the Revolution”, exist to promote social welfare and report on counter-revolutionary activity. As of 2010, 8.4 million Cubans of the national population of 11.2 million were registered as CDR members (Sánchez 2010).

watch our soap opera! Anyway, where do you think I got the frames for all those pictures from? Besides, the network is real life [*la red es la realidad*], it's where you'll find the real Cubans, making ends meet [*la red es donde hay los cubanos de verdad, inventando*].”

Jessica and her family were further evidence of a truth born out constantly in the chaotic refrain of daily life in Havana; seeming juxtapositions can be in one instance reified and upheld, only to collapse the following instant in the maelstrom of day-to-day survival. Jessica and her family engaged in ostensibly “counter-Revolutionary” activity on a daily, indeed, hourly basis, yet they also personified much of what the Revolution arguably represented. Moreover, their entire lives were framed by it; the family’s apartment (on the top floor) was in a central location so that they could administer the Revolution as CDR head from their front door to their neighbors; they were in fact its very physical manifestation in the community. For Jessica, real life simply wasn’t as black and white as “within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing.” The hard realities of life demanded a more nuanced negotiation of parallel worlds. Their status as local representatives of the Revolution undoubtedly afforded them certain opportunities, but their comfort was driven almost entirely by their digital entrepreneurship, which provided additional income as and when needed. William and his friends, like most Cubans in their early thirties I knew who had grown up under a more rigid notion of “Revolution,” had learned to balance the older social rules of life under socialism with some of the opportunities offered with increasing entrepreneurial opportunity and digital connectivity.

CubanTube

At just nineteen years old, Yuniel had hazy memories of “how it was before,” and already enjoyed the easy familiarity with the workings of digital technologies of one who has adapted,

young, to a changing landscape. He is a member of the first generation in Cuba of those who, in other contexts, have been called “digital natives,” whereas the majority of Cubans are still either “digital immigrants” or “digital castaways,” still cut off from the *Red de Redes* (World Wide Web). Yuniel acquired his first mobile phone at fifteen, and just nine months later (in 2017) he set himself up as a YouTuber. Unlike William however, who used digital technologies as a way of connecting with friends he already knew, or with people in his local neighborhood, Yuniel saw his digital connectivity as a way of connecting with a world beyond his own. Within months, he had 21,000 followers, of which only about 0.5% were in Cuba. While he started out paying promoters of *el paquete* to circulate his material, he quickly realized there was a bigger audience and market to be found outside of Cuba, and so nowadays he sends a video every four or five days to a friend in Miami, who uploads it to Youtube for him. It generates a sufficient income for him to live from, primarily through contracts from various businesses on and off the island paying him for product placement within his videos; including the owners of some of Havana’s internationally based hotels and restaurants.

His main focus in his recordings is showing a version of Cuba that he doesn’t otherwise find online. “Everyone always focuses on the old cars and the cigars, you know, but no one shows real Cuba.” So Yuniel is taking advantage of what he sees as a vacuum in the market; given the relative void of domestically-produced online content, he assures me there is considerable interest in a “real” Cuban putting up videos about everyday life. The last video he did, on living on a dollar a day in Havana, by November 2018 had almost half a million views and shows him walking around Havana buying cheap street food and reviewing it. “I always make sure I put the name Cuba in the title, because realistically that’s what I have to offer,” he told me, but he was also keen to stress that while this is a business for him, and a means for a

better life (through his product placements he gets invitations to sample Havana's finest venues), it is also a means for him to represent a Cuba he loves.

Social Influencing in Havana

When Frank left college, he got himself a *cuentapropista* license and set up a small shop in *El Vedado* fixing phones. After a few years, and having saved up some money, in 2018 he decided to open up a second business in “social influencing,” an emerging commercial space within Havana's expanding digital market. Tall, pale-skinned, and almost impossibly cool, Frank has long been a known face in Havana's hipster events scene, and is well connected with music producers, models, photographers, bloggers, and the like. Indeed, it was upon realizing that he himself represented and embodied much of what in Havana is deemed “alternative” or “counter-cultural” that Frank saw a business opportunity: to use digital networks combined with his own social networks and presence to promote alternative events across Havana, and charge in the process. In his own words, his business is:

“An audio-visual platform with the purpose of giving visibility, socializing, and connecting the Cuban alternative world. Our vocation is to create a multidisciplinary space supported by artists, projects, and influencers that exist beyond the conventional framework. We support and defend the essence of the artist, spaces with good taste, good ideas, and the attitude of the dreamer.”¹³

Havana has long had an influential “alternative” scene, and indeed, the role of what loosely might be termed “the arts” has always been important in Havana's cultural sphere. For political scientist Sujatha Fernandes, the arts in Cuba are of pivotal importance as a means of “evaluating competing political alternatives” (2006: 3) in an historical moment of growing

¹³ “Una plataforma audiovisual con el propósito de dar visibilidad, socializar y conectar el mundo alternativo cubano. Nuestra vocación es crear un espacio multidisciplinar sustentado por artistas, proyectos y influencers que salen del marco de lo convencional. Apoyamos y defendemos la esencia del artista, los espacios con buen gusto, las buenas ideas y la actitud del soñador.”

contradictions, greater repression of formal political activities by the state, and the emergence of new social (and economic) bases for action. Yet crucially, those artists “who work in transnational spaces of production and exhibition address global concerns and issues rather than confront the socialist state directly” (ibid, p. 184). The new element in this mix however is the immediacy of digital technology, even in a landscape like Havana where internet access can be so challenging. One still has to move in the right circles to be invited to these events, and in that regard social networking has barely changed in Havana, the only difference being that this activity is now modulating onto networks like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, *el paquete*, and the SNETs, which bring with them further (profitable) opportunities for promotion.

Through his sizable networks, Frank is now able to promote several events per night to targeted audiences across Havana. One Friday evening we went to the launch of a new “clandestine” nightclub in the heart of Chinatown: on the rooftop of what otherwise appeared to be an entirely residential street was perched a new bar designed to resemble an opium den, with portraits of old Chinese-Cuban neighborhood denizens, and various craft beers on the menu. Havana’s most exclusive DJ duo –a lesbian couple who mix electronica with Caribbean influences– was at the deck while Havana’s young and cool swayed and preened. There was no sign or name on the door; to get in one must show the bouncer a WhatsApp invitation, which is distributed through a closed group. The next night we attended a similar event, this time on a rooftop of an apartment looking down onto the American Embassy. Strobe lighting flecked the pool as models, artists, and musicians garbed in floral t-shirts swigged beer and exchanged Instagram details.

Such events happen every night in London, Paris, New York, and many other cities across the world. Havana is no exception. But what is exceptional is the cultural capital on

parade at these nights out in the Cuban capital; every aspect of the proceedings, from the clothing, to the haircuts, to the music, to the slang, demonstrates a close acquaintance with aesthetics and fashion trends outside of Cuba. That is not to say they are wholeheartedly adopted –to be sure, trends are blended with notably “Cuban” styles– but such trends belie both a degree of access to the “outside world” and a degree of interest in alternative symbols of trendiness and cool. This particular party, which involves a fashion parade of the work of Cuba’s top designer and a famous local band, put the organizers back about \$10,000, I later learned, which is a significant sum of money anywhere in the world. This is as much a celebration of social capital and economic affluence, which in contemporary Havana usually involves some degree of foreign contact, as much as cultural alterity.

For some, increased contact with international cultural counterparts both on and off the island through digital media provides some support and a new facility at finding like-minded people. Sujatha Fernandes has demonstrated how for Cuban rappers their styles are also a way of exhibiting their cross-national identifications, of “asserting a collective sense of black identity in contrast to the racially integrative program of the Cuban state” (2006: 128). Yet at the same time, they continue to promote (some of) the ideals of the Revolution, for they are critical of the emergence of consumerist values and practices among the more commercial rappers, and they identify with the official characterization of Cuba as a “rebel nation.” Similarly, Havana’s LGBTQ community, which for a long time has lived in the shadows of the State, is also using these emerging digital networks to consolidate their position on Havana’s cultural events scene, bolstered of course by Mariela Castro’s ongoing advocacy for their cause (BBC News 2018). One such conversation took place on a WhatsApp group Frank had set up to promote the Chinatown nightclub opening; a girl asked if there were any lesbian-friendly events going on that

night. A whole new thread started up as suggestions were added to the forum from ordinarily silent observers: in fact there was a event happening that night, an invitation-only event that would combine Havana’s LGBTQ scene with local fusion genres such as “tropical afro-futurism,” that blend international influences with local “flavor.”

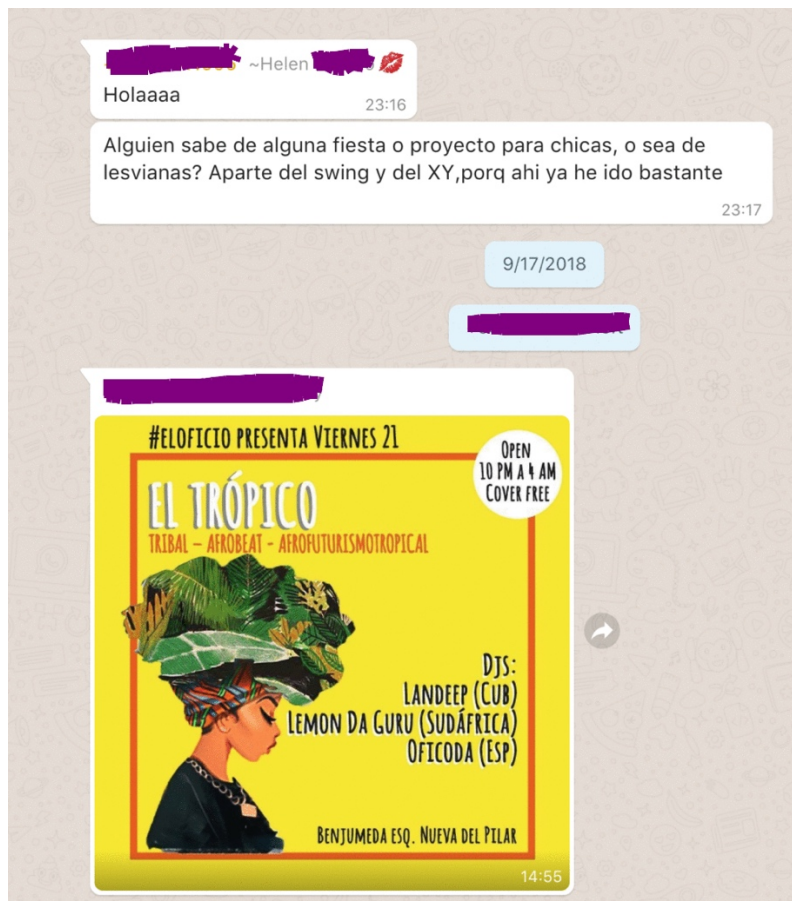


Figure 2: WhatsApp thread seeking “alternative” lesbian cultural events.

This is a shifting world for millennials¹⁴ in Havana; a world which recognizes taboo class structures, economic prosperity, the profitability of new digital enterprises, and “bling” (broadly defined), but which at times must still pay lip service to rules from the old monolithic and

¹⁴ Broadly understood as the generation born from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s, who thus lived through the “Special Period” of economic hardship in Cuba (following the demise of the Soviet Union) as children, and have set up their own businesses as Cuba has “transitioned” into a new economic period.

egalitarian order. The word “alternative” is a problematic one, and to be successful, digital entrepreneurs like Frank have to codeswitch between social worlds as they navigate a new path. Frank has learned this the hard way, and as he sits idly in his office connected to his Nano station Wi-Fi booster, he inspects each customer as they walk in the door to evaluate how they should be dealt with. Several of the older customers who frequent his original business (the one that fixes cell phones) bristle as they notice that the term *compañero* (comrade) is slowly and quietly being displaced by *señor* (the more bourgeois “sir” or “Mr.”). One evening after office hours, as we sat browsing YouTube videos, one such older gentleman passed by. He was high up in the neighborhood’s CDR, and wanted help upgrading his phone’s software. The news that the shop had closed, but that he was welcome to return in the morning, was not met with the same politeness with which it was supplied. “Profiteering lowlifes [*delincuentes aprovechadores*] like you aren’t going to tell me what I can and can’t do!” Frank shrugged at me, “some people don’t like change I guess!”

As Frank’s new business has boomed, he has also come under increasing scrutiny from the State. In the week running up to the expensive rooftop party he was organizing, he was pulled over on his electric scooter by the police as many as three times a day and asked for his “papers.” To Frank’s mind, the increase of such generalized “harassment” was directly linked with his quick success in growing his business. A false denunciation by a neighbor the following week led him to be thrown in an overcrowded jail cell for three days while his business partner came up with the money to pay a fine. Frank emerged with a black eye and a determination to make his business even more successful. But this pressure has not gone unheeded either, he is now making inquiries into obtaining a passport, with the hope of expanding his business to Mexico or Panama and so be able to continue to grow unimpeded. In Havana’s digital

entrepreneurial landscape, an invisible “line” patrolled by the State still limits the degree to which one can expand or prosper unchecked.¹⁵ Indeed, as noted earlier, in its effort to “update socialism” and pump some market-driven efficiency and productivity into the moribund Cuban economy, the government has explicitly outlawed the private concentration of wealth or property.

Liminal Public Spheres, “Revolution,” and “Resistance”

For William and Jessica, Yuniel, and Frank, the emerging digital public spaces of social media in Havana are providing new forums for locating and connecting with like-minded people, albeit people who, conceivably, they might well have met anyway in a city like Havana where social connectedness is not only a pleasantry but a strategic necessity for everyday existence. Yet emerging digital technologies have the power to divert those encounters into a somehow altogether more ephemeral “space,” and therein lies their latent potency. Social media have long been associated with locating new publics and what Juris refers to as “emerging logics of aggregation,” that is, their supposedly inherent ability to harness otherwise disparate energies and unite “underground” resistances into movements (Juris 2012).

Some individuals in Havana do utilize digital technologies for political (counter-Revolutionary) purposes. *El paquetico* is an excellent example. Much like *el paquete*, *el paquetico* or “the little package” circulates hand-to-hand through flash drives, typically once a week, and mostly in Havana. It contains items downloaded from the internet that are typically censored by the Cuban state and studiously avoided or filtered out by the compliers of the more

¹⁵ See also Henken’s discussion of “*la linea roja*” (etc.) (Henken 2014).

tame and commercial –if still independent and widely sought after– *paquete*.¹⁶ *El paquetico* normally includes news reels from Miami Spanish-language television broadcasts, humor (often at the expense of the Castro brothers), and articles that express critical opinions of the Cuban State in one form or another. The founder of *el paquetico* consciously imitated the methods of distribution that have been so successful in *el paquete* to provide what he terms as an “alternative voice,” albeit one which he only dares circulate to a small circle of trusted friends, who in turn circulate it further. Even here then, amidst a conscious network of resistance within Havana, digital social media are not typically implemented as widespread “calls to arms”; instead, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Havana’s indigenous digital networks of distribution are utilized to share content with known and trusted friends.

Miller and his colleagues have defined the emerging uses of social media as “the colonization of the space between traditional broadcast and private dyadic communication, providing people with a scale of group size and degrees of privacy” that they term “scalable sociality” (Miller et al. 2016: 9). I would add that in the context of contemporary Cuba as both an authoritarian state and one with limited digital access, these emerging public “spaces” are of critical importance in capturing the dynamics of Cuban sociality, which in turn is in a constant state of negotiation between the supposedly hard binaries of state/public, power/freedom, etc.

For Paloma Duong, the public domain in Cuba reveals

“an autonomous subjectivity increasingly invested, and exercised, in this sense of ‘news about ourselves.’ The search for, and dissemination of, a certain kind of individual data links the subject as an individual to a larger political body, offering a challenge both to prevailing accounts of social autonomy and to information blackouts mediated by the State” (2013: 11).

¹⁶ Self-censorship has gradually crept into the *paquete* as its compilers and distributors seek to maintain government tolerance of this unauthorized activity. Thus, the unwritten rule that seems to determine the limits of content on the *paquete* is “no politics and no porn.”

Certainly in terms of *effect*, public domains have this capacity in Cuba. Change, albeit gradual and piecemeal, can occur as digital technologies facilitate greater discussion around political or politicized topics. In this way, traditional patterns of cultural and media hegemony are slowly being reworked (and perhaps undermined). It would be impossible to rule out the potential role of digital technologies and social media in these changes. For example, Cuba's new constitution potentially legalizing same-sex marriage has certainly coincided with (and been precipitated by) accelerated activity on several of the social media threads and forums about LGBTQ events and meet-ups.

While there are clear exceptions, mostly among bloggers and journalists, who often use such technologies for explicitly political ends, the vast majority of my contacts who regularly used these networks for counter-cultural or "alternative" motives were not doing so in a consciously political (and much less a counter-Revolutionary) way, however. For them, these networks are a way of connecting with friends, sharing pictures, and organizing a night out (but not a protest); a chance to dance, not a call to revolt. As I have described above, some take an additional step and utilize digital social networks in entrepreneurial ways. An ethnographically informed analysis of the rising use of digital technologies and social media in Havana must consider the majority, for whom such networks are merely an extension of their everyday lives, which they do not necessarily view in political terms, but in the far more muddy, contingent, nuanced, and negotiated terms of *invento* (inventiveness) and *sobrevivencia* (survival). This is not to dispute the potential for political action simply as a consequence of the increasing use of the internet among millennials, but an important distinction should be drawn here between the majority who seek individual expression, social connectedness, and an amorphous sense of

“alterity” in their use of digital media, and the tiny minority for whom political action is the primary, conscious, and intentional aim.

I agree with Sujatha Fernandes therefore that these “artistic public spheres” are not bounded, but rather overlapping with market forces, state institutions, and the counter-cultural as “sites of interaction and discussion among ordinary citizens generated through the medium of art and popular culture” (Fernandes 2006: 2-3).¹⁷ To recognize the possibilities for transformative politics within digital networks in Cuba is not to say that these networks are themselves associated with resistance or dissent by Cubans. While some political actors undoubtedly do use digital media to facilitate their political agenda, my own research shows that they often use Havana’s digital networks as alternative means of contacting pre-existing acquaintances to discuss mutual topics of interest, not to recruit members to new systematic movements of resistance. Mona Rosendahl (1997) has suggested that the widespread experience of participation in the Revolution has been one of the main reasons for its survival, and indeed, people’s experiences of participation have not been limited to attending military parades or watching State news broadcasts. Participation has been cultural as well as economic, social, and political, and thus the Cuban Revolution cannot easily be separated out from any one aspect of everyday lived experience.

This logic played out in the case of all the contacts whose stories I have shared here. William spent an increasing number of hours connected to the SNET as the hard realities of the departure of his wife and children settled in and he sought the familiar comfort of “online” mass-player gaming with friends a few blocks away. The network also provided him with an “edge” over competitors to gain more work, and ultimately, a way of realizing his social capital into

¹⁷ See also Gray and Kapcia 2008; Fernández 2000.

more tangible assets, a strategy common to most *cuentapropistas*. His interests in working in the “alternative” sphere of rap and hip-hop music video production arose not so much because of any messages of political resistance that those movements might embody, but more because of a sense of solidarity with other Afro-Cubans, many of whom he had grown up with in *El Cerro*. His introduction to the world of hip-hop music videos had in fact come through the cousin of his *Santero* priest, who knew he was looking for work. William did have a strong desire to leave Cuba, and discussed this in the SNET’s chatrooms with friends, but this desire was related more to his desire to be reunited with his children and to work on the production of the more extensive international music videos he consumed through *el paquete*, than it was to a political motive to become an “exile.”

Yuniel consciously sought not to be “alternative”; his objective was to use digital media to allow the world to see “real life” in Cuba as he knew it. This was not conceived of as a politicized project of exposure however, in the way that some Cuban bloggers and journalists have used digital media to demonstrate the hardships of *la lucha* (“the struggle”) for everyday Cubans. If anything, Yuniel envisaged his project more as a response to the neo-colonial appropriation of *cubanidad* by foreign journalists and bloggers, whose fetishizing gaze onto Cuba was a source of frustration to him. He explicitly avoided presenting content that could be interpreted as political, partly because this would cause him “difficulties,” but also because –in his own words– “I’m not really into that to be honest. I’m more into clothes and stuff” – a consumerist pursuit which itself could, ironically, be seen as highly problematic in a supposedly “Revolutionary” socialist society, but which, to his mind, was not a political statement.

And so too Frank, whose “call to arms” with which I opened this paper (*¡Tomen acción en esta batalla por [...] una Cuba ALTERNATIVA!*) seemed so declaratively revolutionary

(/counter-revolutionary). His focus upon branding himself a “social influencer” has certainly got him noticed, and of late has attracted increasing levels of attention from State actors. On the third occasion he was pulled over by police and had his electric scooter impounded, he furiously muttered, “*¡Esto se llama RE-PRE-SI-ÓN!*” (This is called REPRESSION!), and vowed to expedite his attempts to get a foreign passport. Yet the following day, I heard him criticize “how hard things are” (*la cosa está dura*) and, in practically the same breath, defend socialism from the slander of some Americans in a bar who had wrongly assumed such things were black and white in Cuba.

His primary motivation in curating and promoting “*la alternatividad cubana*” (Cuban alterity) was a deep-seated sense of pride in an *habanero* identity that fused various multicultural elements and which he saw as defying both foreign appropriating attempts to pigeonhole his city as increasing flows of tourism advance hegemonic depictions of *cubanidad* and the popular (or lowlife, “*bajo*”) cultural forms of *cubaneo* that dominate Havana’s more public streets. His objective was more a cultural project of what he would deem “progression” (*progreso*), and he lauded digital social media more for its ability to exclude than to include. Ironically for a kind of media that is often uncritically assumed to democratize the communicational sphere for everyone, the “public” spheres of Havana’s emerging digital spaces were optimal for their relative privacy and exclusivity when compared with word-of-mouth (“*radio bamba*” or the rumor mill) on the street, which included not only “lower” forms of culture but also increased risk of potential condemnation from or conflict with others.

Finally, we have Jessica and her son Guillerme, who perhaps most neatly encapsulate the paradox of interactions in everyday life in Havana. Jessica saw no contradiction in both working for the State –indeed physically representing the State within her community as president of the

local CDR– and systematically disobeying or undermining it. In her mind, the two elements were both fundamentally true and necessary aspects of life. She had been born into the Revolution. Her parents had fought for it and had been respected members of the Party. So as she and her mother polished the CDR plaque on the door, her son perched at the computer table, selling cushions the pair had stitched with various aphorisms using threads bought online via a neighbor’s relative abroad on one screen, and launching various memes at friends through the chat forum open on another. Spotting my own incredulous look as I surveyed the scene from the opposite corner, she chuckled and said, rather appropriately using a sewing metaphor, “*la vida es un labor de retazos fascinante, no?!?*” (Life’s a fascinating patchwork isn’t it?!).

Conclusion

The supposed democratizing potential of digital media has captured the attention of an international neoliberal set and there has clearly been an appetite for willing such movements to impact Cuba.¹⁸ Such debates, when combined with an oftentimes fetishizing view of Cuba as a fading bastion of an “offline” world, have centered on the phrase “digital revolution,” which, when applied to Cuba, is doubly intoxicating. In Havana, which enjoys greater digital connectivity than the rest of Cuba, this has certainly been true for political activists, bloggers, and independent journalists, many of whom have received extensive attention from foreign journalists and researchers alike – not to mention journalism awards and various forms of financial support from abroad. As Cristina Venegas describes,

“[d]igital media seeps into the everyday life of Cubans just as currents of political transition breathe greater dimension to individual expression and visions for the future. The generation of Cubans joining the digital era are grandchildren of the revolution, without first hand memories of its victories and accomplishments. Their lot has been defined by the hardship of

¹⁸ Such as the new U.S. Cuba Internet Task Force (Marsh 2018) and prior U.S. State Department attempts to spur regime change via “liberation technology” (The Guardian 2014).

extreme times. This generation and its aspirations, complaints, and desires is changing and intensifying the nature of opposition to the government through fresh forms of expression” (2010: 184).

Yet I argue here that, while digital media have undoubtedly realized new opportunities for those in Havana who wish to express counter-Revolutionary views, these voices are a distinct minority among the emerging digital millennials of the capital city. The majority of young millennial Cubans in Havana are drawn more to these networks to share selfies and memes than to share political opinions and galvanize modes of collective resistance to the State. This is true even of a smaller subset that identifies with growing counter-cultural or “alternative” movements in Havana, despite the fact that this very “alterity” is a problematic ideology to proclaim or identity to embody in Cuba. Emerging digital millennial entrepreneurs are utilizing Havana’s digital media networks to forge and further their own career paths, but this principally involves realizing social connections with people they already know, not using digital media to reach into “the beyond.” Moreover, in some cases it is the very exclusivity of certain digital networks, as opposed to their potential for inclusion, that is so appetizing to many of my “hipster *habanero*” contacts.

Finally, a close reading of ethnographic data points to how conceptions of “revolution” and “resistance,” or of state and civil society as bounded terms or indeed diametrically opposed entities, is restrictive in its analytical scope when applied to the Cuban case. Not only are these terms ideologically loaded and frequently co-opted in a Cuban context, they also ignore much of the social, economic, and moral complexity navigated by Cubans on a daily basis. A nuanced analysis of how counter-cultural movements are emerging and utilizing digital networks in Havana reveals a seemingly paradoxical truth: these “movements,” if we can even call them that, can both express tension with the Revolutionary project and the State, and at the same time

embody and even celebrate part of its message. Most importantly, many of these counter-cultural or “alternative” actors do not see themselves as political actors, and indeed, frequently and quite explicitly avoid participating in what they consider to be “politics.”

Perhaps then, emerging digital networks in Havana have served to highlight the death of the binary in Cuba, where moves towards a world where self-employed “social influencers” can even exist are perhaps a tacit admission that old realities were unsustainable. Digital technologies merely reveal in a new way the complex reality of Cuban sociality that has in fact long existed: within the Revolution everything; against it, around it, through it, with it, across it, in spite of it... everything.

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