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The More Feminine, the Better!: Gender  
Normativity among Lesbian and Bisexual  
Women in Cuba

Evelyn Fitzgerald Browne

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
International Development

University of Sussex

December 2021

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:.....Evie Browne.....

# The More Feminine, The Better!: Gender Normativity among Lesbian and Bisexual Women in Cuba

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## Abstract

This thesis provides a critical ethnographic exploration of the lives of lesbian and bisexual women in Cuba, through the conceptual framework of gender normativity and homonormativity. It is based on interviews and ethnographic research with 33 self-identified lesbian and bisexual women and 23 policymakers, officials, academics, and other interlocutors, in Havana, Santa Clara, and Matanzas. Drawing on queer theory, it argues that Cuba's strong patriarchal binary gender system provides a framework for normativity that lesbian and bisexual women navigate to gain moral respectability and social acceptance. Lesbian and bisexual Cuban women tend to uphold a narrow vision of normative femininity, which produces respectability and desirable social invisibility. Through traditional signifiers of gendered white moral respectability – femininity, having children, avoiding certain public spaces, (same-sex) marriage – women are able to access some level of normative invisibility and social acceptance. In contrast to a view of Cuba as increasingly tolerant and progressive for LGBTI people, this thesis shows that social and political support for lesbian and bisexual women relies on their correct performance of strict feminine norms. These findings resonate with recent literature arguing that Cuban approaches to LGBTI issues promote normalisation and normative incorporation of LGBTI citizens. This research develops the argument that normalisation of sexual diversity is built on a foundation of *gender* normativity, and excludes those who do not comply with gender norms, bringing a gendered analysis into the story of 'gay rights' in Cuba, which is often missing. Alongside other studies on lesbian and bisexual women across the world, this research shows that gender is key to understanding LGBTIQ experiences, shaping what is possible within lifeworlds, what is impossible, and what is aspirational. This contribution to the literature helps demonstrate how LGBTIQ lives are structured by gender norms, and why it is important to consider gender in our work.

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## A note on terms

The 'LGBTIQA+' umbrella acronym can be difficult to use (Formby, 2017), so when I employ it I do so deliberately and carefully. In the empirical parts of this thesis, I use terms in the way I understand Cubans to use them. 'LGBT' is used as a broad general term to indicate non-heterosexual and non-cisgender ways of life, but also to refer to people who *specifically* identify as one of these categories. 'LGBT' is the most common term in Cuba to refer to this demographic, and the broad experience of being sexually non-normative in some way. On the whole, intersex, asexual, and queer are not part of the discussion in Cuba, and so I use these appellations very deliberately, if and when they are mobilised. I use 'LGBTI' or 'LGBTIQ' when this term is *specifically* given by people or sources I am quoting. In my analytical discussions, I use 'LGBTI' to indicate the global political discourse of human rights and rights activism, as it is used by the UN and international development organisations. I use 'queer' or 'LGBTIQ' when the discourse or analysis *specifically* includes queer, anti-normative sexuality and gender positions, or contests an identity-based paradigm.

'Lesbian and bisexual women' refers to the primary respondents in my thesis. I eventually settled on this term because it is in common use in Cuba (*mujeres lesbianas y bisexuales*) and indicates the two terms that most women understand identifies them as a group. I do not use these terms as strict identity categories, but rather broad terms which reflect a wide range of experiences and subjectivities. A full discussion of identifications is in Chapter 5. My primary delineation of the group of respondents is around their sexual orientation towards women, not their gender. I explicitly include both cisgender and transgender women in this term, and other people who identify at least partly, or sometimes, as a woman.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Cuba holds a unique position, as one of very few low-income countries with an actively socialist political system, where it is also legal to be gay. In recent years, research and media have suggested that there is an increasing tolerance for LGBTIQ people in Cuba. Central to this narrative is the fame of Mariela Castro Espín, the daughter of Vilma Espín Guillois and Raúl Castro Ruz – the ex-president of Cuba and brother of Fidel Castro. Mariela rose to prominence as head of the government-affiliated organisation CENESEX (*Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual*; National Centre for Sex Education), which campaigns for LGBTI rights, inclusion, and wellbeing. In 2019, Cuba considered allowing same-sex marriage as part of its revised constitution, partly as a result of CENESEX's influence. The amendment was ultimately defeated, an outcome often attributed to a campaign by conservative evangelical churches. But the fact that same-sex marriage was proposed at all is a testament to the changes Cuba has made since Fidel Castro declared homosexuals as “incapable” of being revolutionaries in the 1960s (Lumsden, 1996, p. 93). With the rise of CENESEX, as well as the wider global move towards the recognition of LGBTI rights, Cuba's national narrative is one of increasing tolerance, and LGBTIQ people are increasingly publicly visible in Cuba. This visibility, however, sometimes brings unwanted attention and high-stakes media discussion and scrutiny, and LGBTIQ people still face strong public disapproval and state violence. Either way, ‘LGBT issues’ are certainly on the agenda in modern Cuba.

Even within this contested narrative of increasing tolerance for LGBTIQ issues in Cuba, the discussion by most of the press and many researchers misses a key element: lesbian and bisexual women. For the most part, discussions focus on the experience of cisgender gay men, who are the LGBTIQ people most frequently interviewed by researchers and usually taken as representative of the LGBTIQ experience as a whole. To a lesser extent, transgender women (who mostly do not identify as lesbian or bisexual) are present in research and their issues represented in Cuban media and politics, mainly because Mariela Castro Espín takes a personal and professional interest in their wellbeing, having completed a PhD on ‘transsexuality’ in Cuba herself. In light of these changing realities and specifically the continued absence of lesbian and bisexual women's experiences, my thesis seeks to address this lacuna. I aim to elucidate the experiences of a wider array of LGBTIQ realities in Cuba, addressing the question, ‘Where do lesbian and bisexual women fit into the story of “increasing tolerance” for LGBTIQ people in Cuba?’ It is only the second substantial study focusing exclusively on this group, after

Tanya Saunders (Saunders, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). My approach to conveying lesbian and bisexual women's experiences brings a gendered analysis into the story of 'gay rights' in Cuba, which is often missing from studies of LGBTIQ Cuba, and from LGBTIQ studies more widely. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the blind spot of research and advocacy, I find that lesbian and bisexual women I spoke to report continuing to be overlooked, under-represented, and discriminated against, showing ongoing sexism from within the LGBTIQ 'community' and across wider Cuban society.

In 1996, Ian Lumsden wrote about Cuba: "Gays are tolerated so long as they know their place, are discreet about their sexual orientation, and do not contravene gender norms in their public behaviour." (p. 189). Although Lumsden was only writing about men, and much else has changed in 25 years, I find that this sentiment remains obstinately true. Róisín Ryan-Flood asserted in her European study in 2009 (p. 159) that scholars must take into account the significance of gender to lesbian experiences, and, in the other direction, how sexuality influences the construction of gender. Alongside other studies on lesbian and bisexual women across the world, I find that gender is key to understanding LGBTIQ experiences, shaping what is possible within lifeworlds, what is impossible, and what is aspirational. Recent scholars have argued that Cuban approaches to LGBT issues heavily promote normalisation and normative incorporation of LGBT citizens (Allen, 2011; Kirk, 2011, 2017; Sierra Madero, 2015; Stout, 2014). I develop this analysis to explore how LGBT normalisation in Cuba, or the normalisation of sexual diversity, draws on traditional constructions of gender, and can exclude those who do not comply with gender norms. Scholars of gender and women in Cuba are in agreement that gender difference remains a significant social structure, separating masculine and feminine into binary categories, and that women remain tied to domestic roles and social reproduction despite the gains of the Revolution (Allen, 2011; Dore, 2020; Härkönen, 2016; Kirk, 2017; Núñez Sarmiento, 2005; Pertierra, 2008; Saunders, 2010; Stout, 2014; Wig, 2021). The values of hegemonic femininity in Cuba are well examined by anthropologists for heterosexual women, but I want to fill in the gap to explore what they mean for non-heterosexual women. I find that these gender norms strongly structure the lives of the lesbian and bisexual women I spent time with.

My main argument in this thesis is that the Cuban lesbian and bisexual women I spoke to tend to uphold traditional, conservative, gender norms, which I suggest is a way to achieve social tolerance, respectability, and desirable invisibility. Drawing from these individual experiences, queer theory, and the existing literature on gender and LGBTIQ issues in Cuba, I explore how

Cuba's strong binary gender system can pressure lesbian and bisexual women to perform, or over-perform, gender normativity as a way to compensate for sexual non-normativity and to reach social acceptance. Alternatively, those who resist 'correct' female gender performance are sometimes rejected by both heterosexual and LGBT Cubans, a process especially seen in the social rejection of women who look masculine. Thus, I analyse how sexuality is gendered in this case study, and how tolerance for different sexualities can be dependent on the correct performance of gender norms. My theoretical contribution is therefore that constructions of 'normalcy' for lesbian and bisexual women in this research are built on a foundation of *gender* normativity. This research was partly motivated by a desire to examine where lesbian and bisexual women's experience falls in relation to that reported for gay men and heterosexual women in Cuba. In contrast to a view of Cuba as increasingly tolerant and progressive, the way in which respondents in this research navigated gender and sexuality suggests that social and political support for lesbian and bisexual women operates in relation to their performance of correct feminine norms, thus upholding a conservative, patriarchal, binary view of gender. This contribution to the literature helps demonstrate how LGBTIQ lives are structured by gender norms, and why it is important to consider gender in international development work on sexualities.

Across much of Latin America, women and men are defined as opposites to each other in an essentialist view of gender (Chant & Craske, 2003, p. 141), but gender and sexuality are usually regarded as deeply entwined (Craske, 2014, p. 382; Howe, 2013, p. 5), to the extent that they are seen as much the same thing. Gender is often perceived to signify sexual subjectivity and as the basis of sexual identity, making gender performance the critical indicator of sexual orientation (Lumsden, 1996, p. 132). This is different from the discourse that partner choice indicates sexual orientation, which is commonly found in the West (Hirsch et al., 2012). The Latin American gender-sexuality system is often illustrated in the literature by the *activo/pasivo* dichotomy between men who have sex with men. Only the *pasivo*, the penetrated partner, might be referred to as gay, or exclusively attracted to men. The *activo*, the insertive partner, remains a macho man, considered heterosexual even though he has sex with men (Morad, 2014, p. 17). For men, the masculine act of penetration means that he is still considered a man, and therefore not gay; while the penetrated partner is considered to be in a feminine role, and therefore might be described as gay. While this is well documented among men, as yet there is little literature theorising the gendered aspects of sexuality for lesbian and bisexual women in Cuba (or Latin America), which I address in this thesis.

My participants include a number of women who define themselves as *activa* and *pasiva*, following the model for men described above. *Activas* are masculine-presenting women who are dominant in their relationships with *pasivas*, who are often described as ‘normal women’. While this is a commonly known model among Cubans, the academic literature has rarely touched on this Latinx gendered self-presentation as a serious subject for study, and never in Cuba. My research explores a small group of women who enjoyed and found power in their masculine/feminine partnerships. However, *activa/pasiva* pairings are heavily denigrated by other LGBT Cubans, who describe them as backward, old-fashioned, and upholding the patriarchal model. I suggest that this abject othering is because of *activas*’ transgression of gender norms, and other Cubans’ strong rejection of female masculinity as inappropriate. Taking an intersectional approach, I will also show how female masculinity and *activa/pasiva* relationships are conflated with blackness, and how divesting from practices and culture perceived as black is used by some lesbian and bisexual women as a way to claim moral respectability. In this research, I found that it is common to uphold a model of binary gender that valorises femininity in women and rejects masculinity, and that desirable femininity is entangled with whiteness, high class, Revolutionary values, moral decency, and respectability.

Taking *activa/pasiva* women as a starting point, I develop the argument that normatively correct feminine performance is a critical strategy for lesbian and bisexual women to achieve respect and tolerance in society. As well as normatively feminine appearance and sexual behaviour, some lesbian and bisexual women mobilise desires to have children, to be good daughters to their own mothers, to be respectable in the community, and to legalise same-sex marriage, as ways to improve their lives. While these are generally conservative and normative desires, like Elisabeth Engebretsen writing queer anthropology about Chinese lesbians, I do not take the aspiration to normativity as an indication of either a lack of agency or political repression (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 154). Instead, I view the desire for normativity as a valid subject of study which has meaning to women’s lives. Engebretsen (2014, p. 160) warns that normalisation should not be dismissed on purely theoretical grounds as a capitulation to heteronormativity or an inauthentic model of liberty, but considered in its context as a route to making lives more liveable. Rather than assessing whether people’s behaviour is normative or non-normative, I examine how lesbian and bisexual Cuban women understand those discourses, how they use them, navigate them, position themselves in relation to them, and why. My focus on *why* people might aspire to normativity leads to my argument that the performance of femininity and adherence to gender norms becomes a marker through which lesbian and bisexual women can show their correctness, moral virtue, and respectability.

Alyssa Garcia argues that the Cuban state has always regulated (cisgender and transgender) women's bodies under a rubric of morality (Garcia, 2010), an analysis which I expand to specifically include lesbian and bisexual women's experiences. I examine how gender normativity and adherence to Cuban values of being a 'good woman' is a strategy which lesbian and bisexual women can use to achieve social integration, respect, and to compensate for their sexual non-normativity.

Cuba's unique position as a socialist Global South country where it is legal to be gay makes it a case study which challenges theoretical conceptions of normativity and the desire to be normal. The specifics of Cuba show that normativity is not a monolithic concept, but holds particular meanings in different places. I will argue throughout that studies of LGBTQI lives need to include a strong analysis of place (and gender, race, and class) in order to understand norms and normativity. In Cuba, the desire for normalcy is bound up with nationalism and socialist values of being equal and united. Being different, and especially *organising* around being different, has historically been seen as divisive and undermining the Revolution (Garcia, 2008). Fostered by the state, Cuba retains a strong sense of collective national identity, where the community is more important than the individual (Kersh, 2019, p. 7). There is a long literature identifying how non-heterosexual Cubans have consistently stated their desire to be integrated into normal society, not separated out into 'gay ghettos' or even gay bars, and to be considered as much a part of the Revolution as anyone else (Bastian Martinez, 2011; Guillard Limonta, 2009; Lumsden, 1996; Maher, 2007; Saunders, 2009b). Stout describes this desire as wanting not to be 'different' and 'tolerated', but normal and accepted (Stout, 2014, p. 54). I found the same trend in my research. In some cases, I understand the desire for normativity as a genuine affinity with socialist values, and in others as a conscious strategy to gain respectability by adhering to commonly accepted values and national discourses.

Saunders claims that lesbian women are written out of Cuba's Revolutionary discourse because of their failure to have a sexual relationship with men (2010, p. 13). If Saunders is correct, then my research proposes the performance of gendered normalcy as a way to reclaim a place within the Revolutionary national socialist project. Bao (2018), Engebretsen (2014), and Kam (2013) have found something similar in socialist China, where queer belonging is aligned with being a good socialist citizen. Like Engebretsen, I do not take a moral or theoretical position on whether normativity is 'good' or 'bad', but use the concept to explore how lesbian and bisexual women navigate sexuality and gender issues in their lives, and why they do so in particular ways. The socialist rhetoric of equality based on normalcy,

and the Cuban suppression of identity-based movements, mean that normalisation is an important personal tactic for many lesbian and bisexual women to increase acceptance, tolerance, and has concrete material benefits that should not be underestimated. The desires for normalcy and invisibility are not *inherently* disempowering; in Cuba, these are regarded as social goods by many lesbian and bisexual women, and others.

The principal contribution of my research is to bring a gender analysis into the study of LGBTIQ Cuba, and to add to the growing collection of global ethnographies which bring gender into LGBTIQ studies. Through this research, I show the importance of gender in the construction of sexuality. More broadly, I seek to make Cuban gender and sexuality norms visible through the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women. Exposing norms can be a powerful political tool for changing and subverting them (Williams, 2009, p. 51). Finally, a larger analytical point about why it is worthwhile to study lesbian and bisexual women's desires for normativity is that it reveals how (cisgender and transgender) women's bodies and sexualities are political sites where national and international discourses of morality, respectability, and belonging play out.

### Situating myself

I arrived at this topic of research after five years working as an international development specialist on gender relations and social development, following my Master's degree in International Social Development at the University of East Anglia. From a long-term engagement with feminism and gender equality, I developed an interest in queer approaches and queer theory applied to international development (a still-difficult relationship). Within this academic field, I saw that cisgender and transgender lesbian and bisexual women remained under-served. The 'LGBTIQ rights' work in international development still privileges cisgender gay men. I also had political interests in Cuba as a socialist nation, where there were possible alternatives to the LGBTI identity-based paradigm, which is firmly attached to liberal democratic political frameworks. Putting these together, I wanted to explore whether Cuba's socialist system could align with queer approaches to sexuality, and whether the Revolution's good record on women's rights extended to lesbian and bisexual women. As with much doctoral work, this is not exactly how my thesis turned out. The fieldwork I conducted led me to refocus on gender norms as a deep structuring factor for lesbian and bisexual women, revealing Cuba's surprisingly conservative approach to gender and normativity. My research

thus corroborates just how deeply hegemonic gender norms run through all kinds of political systems.

In 2017, I conducted eight months of fieldwork in the cities of Havana, Santa Clara, and Matanzas. It is hard to obtain research permission in Cuba (Härkönen, 2014, p. 46) and although I found individuals exceptionally welcoming and friendly, there were many bureaucratic obstacles placed in my way, so I was pleased with the amount of information I gained in this short time. I carried out semi-structured interviews with 33 self-identified lesbian and bisexual women and 23 policymakers, officials, cultural contributors, and activists. I also engaged in participant-observation at performances, events, church services, gay clubs, and conducted mapping exercises. I employed a research assistant to help me translate between English and Spanish in interviews.

My own gender identity as ostensibly female was a benefit to this research, especially since I do not identify as lesbian or bisexual. My positionality is discussed in full in the Methodology chapter. I do not exclusively identify as a woman, but I found myself emphasising this aspect of my identity, and my feminist credentials, in order to connect with women. I worried that the politics of representation would mean that I would not be able to find respondents, or that people would not want me to analyse or represent their lives if I was not lesbian or bisexual myself. In the end, I found that women were apparently comfortable talking to me, and perhaps pleased at the opportunity I offered to listen to their voices and stories. This was a relief, as my position as a white privileged foreigner makes me undeniably part of the uncomfortable colonial history of international development, which I can only mitigate with the strong desires to be heard that women expressed.

### Structure of the thesis

When I interviewed Alberto Roque Guerra, a prominent Cuban LGBTIQ rights activist, he told me he didn't think ordinary people need to study gender or queer theory per se, but that it is important they are educated about identities and society: "the notion that you are a subject, that you are attached to other people, and you are attached to the state, and you are attached to your family members" (interview in English). During my analysis phase, this quote struck me as a good description of several important locations of power over women. Following this, I have organised the empirical part of my thesis into four chapters discussing these locations of power: the self; family; community; and the nation.

The thesis begins with a brief overview of the Cuban context in Chapter 2; describing some key issues in history, economics, and politics; and then focusing on LGBT history in Cuba. Chapter 3 provides a literature review discussing the persistent invisibility of lesbian and bisexual women in the global literature on gender and sexuality. I then outline my conceptual framework, introducing my main themes of invisibility, respectability, and normativity. I then bring together the global literature and concepts with a discussion of gender and sexuality norms in Cuba, leading to my research questions. Chapter 4 presents my methodology.

Chapter 5 begins the ethnographic chapters, starting with the self as a location of power over women. This chapter discusses *activa/pasiva* women, as a route to exploring Cuban lesbian and bisexual women's constructions of gender and sexuality. I present the rejection of masculine *activa* women as a key example of how traditional femininity is valorised among LGBT Cubans. In Chapter 6, I explore two aspects of family: women's relationships with their mothers, and the experience of becoming a mother themselves. I discuss how women's sexuality is always already semi-public, a matter for family discussion, and how this means that lesbian and bisexual women are unable to keep discreet privacy about their sexuality. Having a child, presented as a normative desire by most women, emerges as a route to compensate for sexual non-normativity by giving a gift to the family, especially one's own mother. Chapter 7 moves to community spaces as a location of power over women, discussing how *machismo* means that CENESEX is disinterested in supporting lesbian and bisexual women, and how gay clubs are focused almost entirely around the experience (and money) of cisgender gay men. I found that the *Iglesia de la Comunidad Metropolitana* (ICM; Metropolitan Community Church) is a popular social space for lesbian and bisexual women, because of its active inclusion of women, unlike other LGBT community spaces. Finally, in Chapter 8, I explore the same-sex marriage debate, discussing what lesbian and bisexual women imagine that marriage will bring to their lives, and how marriage is considered normal but not normative. Same-sex marriage is framed through socialism, holding the state accountable to its promises of equality, inclusion, and rights, but is not a homonormative desire. Chapter 9 concludes my thesis by revisiting my research questions.

## Chapter 2: Cuban context: History, economy, and politics

The socialist Cuban Revolution is the dominant discourse shaping discussion of Cuba, deliberately so by the Revolution's long-term leader and figurehead, Fidel Castro Ruz, and other officials, and de facto by academics and commentators. It has been the subject of many impassioned studies and editorials, in particular focusing on the relationship between Cuba and the USA. But my research is not directly concerned with the Revolution as an ongoing political event or with national and international formal politics. Instead, this project looks at contemporary sexuality in Cuba, which is of course influenced and shaped by international, national, and local politics, as are all areas of life (Hamilton, 2012, p. 13). To understand sexuality and gender in Cuba, a brief history follows of the pertinent historical events and social issues since the Triumph of the Revolution in 1959, as Cubans call it.

The Cuban Revolution overthrew the USA-backed military dictator President Fulgencio Batista for a socialist government led by Fidel Castro Ruz (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 16). Fidel styled himself a rugged, masculine, man of the people, often seen by commentators as a charismatic and personalist leader (Kapcia, 2021, p. 179). Fidel held power first as Prime Minister until 1976, then as President until 2006, when the Presidency passed to his brother Raúl in light of Fidel's ongoing health problems (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 10). Cuba was viewed by the USA as an enemy in the Cold War, because of its growing alignment with formal Communism, and continues to be regarded with suspicion. Since 1963, the USA has placed an embargo on US trade with Cuba, the longest sanctions in history, which has had devastating effects on Cuba's economic development, yet shown the remarkable durability of the Revolution, which remains nominally in place in 2021 (Kapcia, 2021, p. 2).

While Fidel's coup in 1959 was initially socialist rather than Communist in character, the Cuban state became aligned with the Soviet Union, and adopted Communism in 1965. Fidel was the First Secretary of the Communist Party from 1961 until 2011, again succeeded by Raúl. The Communist Party remains the only permissible political party on the island, and the most powerful decision-making body (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 53), making Cuba a one-party authoritarian state. However, citizens have a number of routes for political participation under Cuba's model of 'direct democracy'. There are direct elections for local, provincial, and national assemblies, but the candidates are from a pre-approved government list, meaning the elections are not considered democratic by international observers (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 53). Large scale political changes are often preceded by a national consultation, where citizens

discuss and offer their contributions to the text or spirit of policy, through meetings of the local Communist Party branches, mass organisations, trade unions, or simply through neighbourhood discussion (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 93). Cuba has a written Constitution, revised most recently in 2019, which underwent this process of national citizen debate, including a discussion on same-sex marriage (ultimately not permitted).

While liberal scholars do not recognise Cuba's third sector as 'civil society', there are a number of autonomous and semi-autonomous associations based around industries, religions, and cultural and social interests or causes, as well as definitively dissident groups (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 54). The state 'mass organisations' arose in the early 1960s to mobilise specific groups of Cubans, based on gender, residence, age, and so on. One of these, the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución* (CDR; Committees for the Defence of the Revolution) operates as a kind of neighbourhood watch and forum for any and all kinds of political discussion, debate, mobilisation, and distribution mechanism (Kapcia, 2021, p. 54). The *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC; Federation of Cuban Women) was created by Vilma Espín Guillois, Raúl Castro Ruz's wife, and in principle every Cuban woman belongs to it. It has had an influential position through the Revolution, in representing women's interests politically, and mobilising and educating citizens (Kapcia, 2021, p. 54). It has not, however, represented lesbian and bisexual women well, who have turned to CENESEX, the sexual education organisation, instead. Mass organisations are not considered to hold any potential to challenge state policy (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 53), but they do provide an avenue for political participation.

Economically, the sweeping changes at the start of the Revolution included the state expropriation of landholdings; limitations on private property, private schools, and private clubs; and the massive redistribution of wealth to the poor (Brenner et al., 2015). The tangible economic benefits to previously marginalised people continue to give the Revolution legitimacy and popularity, especially among black Cubans (Garth, 2021), although younger Cubans who do not remember pre-Revolutionary times can find the state's current economic choices stifling. The Cuban state has gradually loosened its control of the economy, with important reforms by Raúl in 2011 to allow increased small-scale private businesses, self-employment, cooperatives, and Foreign Direct Investment (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 160). The state still employs most of the workforce, on very low salaries, and produces 80 per cent of GDP (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 161). The economic model remains socialist in character, but has been compared to China and Vietnam's 'market socialism' reforms (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 161).

Some of the original aims of the Revolution were to eradicate inequalities (Lamrani, 2016) including economic, class, gender, and ethnic inequalities, with varying degrees of success. Wages were kept relatively equal, commercial sex was largely eliminated, and officially no Cubans experience racial discrimination (Stout, 2014). Free healthcare and education were established as guaranteed rights provided by the state, including a basic food ration to all citizens, and free access to clean water and electricity (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 23). There were general increases in welfare, health, and education from the 1960s to 1980s. During this time, women's rights improved, including a strong focus on increasing women's participation in the formal labour force. According to the Revolution's Marxist-Leninist class analysis, women's participation in the workforce would naturally lead to gender equality (Garth, 2021; Hamilton, 2012, p. 27; Härkönen, 2014, p. 4; Kersh, 2017). Abortions were also legalised in 1965 (Lamrani, 2016), reproductive healthcare improved, and many women entered higher levels of education and professional jobs. The first decades of the Revolution are usually described as creating overall improvements for poor and marginalised people, including heterosexual women and black Cubans.

The 1970s saw a turn towards the Soviet Union for political inspiration and economic support, with Cuba joining the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, the 10-member organisation of socialist countries created in 1949 that dissolved in 1990 (Núñez Sarmiento, 2010). After the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989, Cuba lost material support from the Soviet Union and entered what they call *El Periodo Especial en Tiempo de Paz* (The Special Period in Times of Peace, or Special Period for short). Cuba had imported large percentages of food, fuel, and power from the Soviet Union, and its collapse caused great shortages in state supplies and rations (Stout, 2014). The Special Period increased inequalities and poverty, particularly along racial lines (Saunders, 2009b). People relied heavily on family remittances, which white Cubans generally have more access to than black Cubans (Saunders, 2009b; Stout, 2014), as white Cubans were more likely to leave the island and to find well-paid work elsewhere. Individual Cubans found sudden space for free market enterprise, including commodification of their bodies through sex tourism (Stout, 2014), and commodification of blackness through cultural outputs (Allen, 2011). Women's domestic duties increased during this time, as intense scarcity meant many more hours searching for products, and men entrenched roles as principal breadwinners (Kersh, 2017).

The state responded to the crisis by opening up some sectors to private enterprise, like restaurants and rooms for rent to tourists; investing heavily in tourism ventures owned by the

state but with up to 49 per cent foreign investment (Kapcia, 2021, p. 128; Wig, 2021); and paying less attention to social matters, including a more relaxed approach to gay visibility (Saunders, 2010). It also decriminalised the use of the US dollar, which encouraged greater family remittances from Cubans living in the USA and increased Cuba's access to hard currency to purchase imports on the world market (Kapcia, 2021, p. 127). In 2011, Raúl Castro Ruz introduced economic reforms which moved slowly towards less state involvement in the economy, encouraging small private enterprises, a wider use of market mechanisms, and a call to decentralise decision-making (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 54; Wig, 2021). For example, it became legal for individuals to buy and sell cars and property for the first time in the Revolution (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 92). However, the increase in tourism created further inequalities and a dual economy – those educated, white, English-speaking, Cubans who could get jobs in tourism had significantly greater salaries and opportunities than those working in the state public sector (Stout, 2014).

The gradual introduction of capital is variously condemned and celebrated, depending on observers' ideological viewpoint. Supporters of socialism have anxiously described the increasing inequalities between Cubans, highly racially inflected as black Cubans have less access to remittances and jobs in the lucrative tourist sector (Allen, 2011), and often gendered as women turn back to running households instead of working (Kersh, 2017). Free-market capitalists have seen the changes as heralding the end of the Communist regime and the triumph of capitalism. However, the Cuban state remains resolutely resistant to neoliberal economics and politics (Kapcia, 2021), for example continuing to uphold free education and healthcare. The 2019 constitutional referendum reasserted the Communist Party as the only legal political party and maintained state control over economic production (Frank, 2019).

Recent political events in the USA have had a strong impact on Cuba. In December 2014, US President Barack Obama announced the intended gradual overturning of the trade embargo between the countries and return to normal diplomatic relations (Kapcia, 2021, p. 167; The White House & Office of the Press Secretary, 2014). His visit to Havana in March 2016 signalled a historic moment of change in the relationship. The news was greeted with joy by some Cubans, who saw opportunities for enterprise and liberal freedoms, and suspicion by others, who were anxious that the (social and political) gains of the Revolution were kept intact (Anderson, 2016; Grant, 2016). Donald Trump's election as President reversed many of these political normalisation procedures, and his policy signalled a return to Cold War-era

antagonism towards Cuba, at the behest of the Cuban diaspora living in the USA, who tend to be right-wing, conservative, and white (Kapcia, 2021, p. 177).

In November 2016, two weeks after Trump was elected, Fidel died, prompting a national and international discussion of 'What next for Cuba?' Because power had already passed to his brother Raúl some ten years earlier (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 10), there was little formal political or economic change in Cuba itself, although the island was rocked by the news. But in April 2018, Raúl stepped down as President as part of a long-planned transition to hand the Revolution to a new generation of socialist leaders (Kapcia, 2021). He was replaced by Miguel Díaz Canel, who was selected by an internal council as a candidate and confirmed through a vote in the National Assembly (Kapcia, 2021). In April 2021, Raúl also stepped down as First Secretary of the Communist Party, again replaced by Díaz Canel. Díaz Canel's ascent is the first time the Cuban Revolution has been led by someone who is not a Castro, widely considered a significant event for Cuba, signalling a newer, younger, more modern approach to socialism (Kapcia, 2021, p. 173). Díaz Canel is well embedded in Revolutionary politics, however, and is unlikely to want or be able to make significant changes, especially while the revolutionary 'historic' generation is still alive. Significantly, I often heard from LGBT Cubans that Díaz Canel was known to be supportive of gay rights, not least because he comes from Santa Clara, the home of Cuba's most significant gay community centre and nightclub, El Mejunje.

I now turn to highlighting a few broad social issues which are important to understand the Cuban gender and sexuality context. Following intersectional analysis, I engage with the discourse of race and racism to inform my analysis of gender and sexuality expressions. Across Latin America, whiteness, respectability, European values, sexual purity, and gendered moral virtue tend to go hand-in-hand, which the Cuban Revolution has complicated but not eradicated (Garth, 2021; Stout, 2014, p. 16). Allen (2011, p. 61) argues that Cuban Revolutionary policy, which prioritises class inequalities and ignores other social inequalities, has been unable to shift intransigent racial (and gender and sexuality) hierarchies, which continue to frame black people and African culture as inferior. The devaluation of Afro-Cuban culture has conflated black Cubans with criminality and sexual and gender deviancy in the popular imagination (Garth, 2021; Saunders, 2010), which many LGBT Cubans struggle against in their personal lives. Being black is still a marginalised and denigrated position, and its entanglement with gender and sexuality creates intersecting inequalities for LGBTIQ Cubans. Cuba has a complicated social categorisation of ethnicity, coded through skin colour, hair, facial features, body type, and 'cultural level', discussed below. Officially, the census and other

documentation only recognise white, black, and *mulato/a* (mixed-race) ethnicities, and Cubans tend to claim whiteness or ‘self-whiten’ as much as possible in order to achieve respect and respectability (Fernandez, 2010, p. 19). As across the Caribbean, light skin is implicitly connected to higher class (Garth, 2021; R. S. King, 2014, p. 60), making it an act of social mobility to divest from markers of blackness.

Cubans often use the phrase ‘*bajo nivel cultural*’ [low cultural level] to refer to people or behaviours seen as low-class (Stout, 2014, p. 12). A form of code for talking about race and class in a state which officially acknowledges neither (Garth, 2021), the phrase refers to a number of behaviours, practices, traits, qualities, and manners which are highly racialised (Fernandez, 2010, p. 134). Fernandez provides a full description from her interviews with young Cubans (my italics):

“factors such as the level of formal education, *decency and restraint especially in public settings, propriety, moderation, etiquette, and the degree of social refinement*. It also referenced a spectrum of styles and tastes in music, clothing, hair, and speech (Berg 2005). The term referred to not only the person in question but also their family, their social background, the environment in which they were raised, their living conditions, and their *barrio*.” (Fernandez, 2010, p. 134).

Critical race scholars have identified these attributes as being read in terms of race, with ‘low cultural level’ associated with blackness and ‘high cultural level’ associated with whiteness. Class and skin colour are tied together in an assessment of someone’s place in society, a social categorisation that upholds pre-Revolutionary racist norms (Garth, 2021). Allen (2011) theorises that black Cubans have to over-perform respectability in order to overcome the prejudices against them, which can be done through gaining a ‘high cultural level’. Black Cubans who reject Afro-Cuban practices and embrace European culture are more likely to be accepted by Cuban society as having ‘high culture’, which represents a route to social respectability (Saunders, 2010).

Cuba has a very strong discourse of national unity and equality, which influences how LGBT citizens position themselves. The 1959 Revolutionary movement in part derived its legitimacy from championing Cuban nationalism and independence, a popular move after decades of being a ‘playground’ of hedonistic exploitation and vassal state of the USA (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 16; Garth, 2021). Revolutionary rhetoric and political discourse has been characterised by moral incentives rather than material incentives, appealing to Cubans’ consciences, selflessness, and nationalism under Che Guevara’s rubric of the ‘New Man’ to build a new,

egalitarian Cuba (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 22; Hynson, 2020, p. 14). Putting collective responsibility and national unity above selfish, greedy, desires has long been a hallmark of Revolutionary morality. At the same time, the state desire for unity also resulted in stringent control of the media and culture, in the name of national security (Brenner et al., 2015), and the stranglehold of the state as the singular source of moral authority in the country. Whether or not Revolutionary morality is lived in reality, the discourse of unity still holds considerable power. Historically, organising around ethnicity, for example, was considered a divisive act by the Cuban state, viewed as undermining national unity and the heavily promoted official equality (Daigle, 2015, p. 176). Contemporary Cuban activists on all issues are likely to prefer an approach of inclusion into the nation rather than take an identity-based approach, which is often viewed as divisive separatism, by the state, and by activists themselves (Saunders, 2009b, p. 183). The discourse of national unity underpins almost all actions and statements about rights, activism, and LGBT issues.

The Catholic church has occupied a complex position in Cuba. It is widely agreed that in colonial and pre-Revolutionary times, the church was less influential in Cuba than other Latin American countries (Kapcia, 2021, p. 166; Kersh, 2017). In the early years of Revolution, the government and Catholic church became hostile to each other, with the church retreating to self-imposed internal exile and the state adopting an officially atheist stance (Kapcia, 2021, p. 50). Hynson (2020, p. 105) argues that the suppression of the church was in part an attempt to make the socialist state the only source of moral guidance. The absence of Catholicism could be regarded as supporting women's rights, because the Cuban state was able to legalise abortion, improve reproductive healthcare, and lower the importance of marriage with little to no opposition on religious Catholic grounds (Smith & Padula, 1996, p. 182). The church's continuing opposition to the Cuban state has also, at times, allowed the church to take the unusual position of supporting LGBTI rights, on the basis of individual civil liberties (Portada III, 2013). Some alliances emerged between religious people and LGBT people in the early years of the Revolution, as both groups were oppressed by the state (Hamilton, 2012, p. 185; Maher, 2007). Recently, the rising popularity of new evangelical churches has been detrimental to LGBTI rights, as evangelicals led a campaign against same-sex marriage that had widespread popular support. Alongside Catholicism, evangelism, and Judaism, Cuba has a strong history of the Afro-Cuban syncretic religion Santería, which is often regarded as inclusive of gay men and straight women (Hamilton, 2012; Hearn, 2008; Lumsden, 1996; Morad, 2014; Vidal-Ortiz, 2005), although women have considerable restrictions on positions they can hold, remaining subordinate to men (Rubiera Castillo, 2020, p. 102). Crahan (2015) argues that, although Cuba

has historically low levels of service attendance and participation in religious groups, that normative religious values and popular religiosity remain widespread and deeply embedded in society. Since the Special Period, when the policies on religion relaxed due to necessity and the ability of churches to provide much-needed social welfare assistance, churches have increased their presence in Cuba. The Catholic church has a good deal of social legitimacy and support from society, while retaining an uneasily cooperative attitude to the government (Brenner et al., 2015, p. 43). I return to the place of religion in lesbian and bisexual women's lives in Chapter 7.

Cuban women have experienced increases in public participation, political representation, independence, economic empowerment, and sexual liberation through the Revolution. They have become more visible in public life, particularly in the labour market (Pearson, 1997; Safa, 2009; Núñez Sarmiento, 2005). Women have excelled in school and university, leading to a high representation in professional jobs including science, technology, academia, and law, sometimes at a greater level than men (Lamrani, 2016; Núñez Sarmiento, 2005). Women are comparatively well represented in formal politics and decision-making bodies. Cuba's high number of women in Parliament (53 per cent as of 2020, the second highest in the world<sup>1</sup>) is often cited proudly as an example of how progressive Cuba is on women's equality. Further national sources of pride include Cuba's excellent maternal mortality statistics (Andaya, 2014), and that Cuba was the first country to sign the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW; Lamrani, 2016). Literature from politically orthodox Cuban scholars often follows this official narrative of women's increasing participation in the socialist project and the Revolution's success at women's empowerment, often focusing on successes from the 1960s and 70s and ignoring contemporary issues (see e.g. Díaz, 2019, for an orthodox perspective).

While these achievements are considerable, orthodox and critical scholars are in agreement that traditional gender norms remain entrenched in Cuba, with women's continuing responsibility for the household and childcare, and divisions between hegemonic masculinity and femininity, under the framework of *machismo* (Almeida Junco, 2020; Díaz, 2019; Dore, 2020; Kersh, 2019; Saavedra Montes de Oca, 2017; Torres Santana, 2020). A young Cuban gender analyst, Ailynn Torres Santana, somewhat controversially writes that the differences

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<sup>1</sup> Rwanda is first, at 61 per cent. World Bank; <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS>

between men's and women's experiences of the Revolution are structural, or in-built, which I read as a suggestion that the Revolution is built on the backs of traditional gender roles (Torres Santana, 2020). Indeed, Rachel Hynson (2020) makes a convincing argument that the early years of the Revolution operated through increasing patriarchal control of women, especially their reproductive and labour roles; an argument which runs counter to the official state narrative of women's emancipation. Saunders argues that the Revolution's approach to women simply ties together old traditional gender roles with new Revolutionary participation:

“the result of these efforts have been the institutionalization of pre-revolutionary cultural discourse surrounding reproduction and women's role as mothers as well as combined revolutionary discourses concerning women “as workers” (Smith and Padula 1996).” (Saunders, 2010, p. 12)

This requires women to manage the triple burden of paid work, domestic work, and civic participation. Apart from Saunders, the literature discussed here mostly considers heterosexual women, and there is little knowledge about how lesbian and bisexual women responded to the developments in women's rights through the Revolution. My thesis is partly driven by the question of where lesbian and bisexual women fit within this overall narrative.

### LGBT Cuba: from Mariel to Mariela

Since around 2010, there has been increased visibility and tolerance of 'LGBT issues' and LGBT people in Cuba, largely due to the high-profile campaigning of CENESEX, a government-affiliated organisation headed by Mariela Castro Espín, daughter of Raúl Castro Ruz, ex-President of Cuba, and Vilma Espín Guillois, founder of the FMC. A number of academic studies on LGBTI and queer Cuba report both an increasing political tolerance and a conservative attitude among the Cuban population. Recent in-depth studies include the history of CENESEX (Kirk, 2017); history of Cuban sexuality (Hamilton, 2012); sex work, morality, and the economy (Daigle, 2015; Stout, 2014); the nexus of queerness and ethnicity (Allen, 2011; Saunders, 2010); male homosexuality in relation to nationhood (Sierra Madero, 2006); and queer bodies on stage (White, 2020). These works paint a picture of Cuban gender and sexuality heavily moderated by moral codes of conduct, often steeped in markers of whiteness; a strong public/private dichotomy revolving around the visibility of 'ostentatious' homosexuality; and a struggle for LGBTIQ people to find a place within the Cuban Revolution. Saunders is the only author to focus exclusively on lesbian women, leaving a gap in the literature which I address. The experience of women adds depth and specificity to analysis, and highlights the importance of not taking one demographic experience as indicative of all.

In Cuba, the 'male homosexual' was a vilified category through most of the first thirty years of the Revolution, framed as anti-revolutionary. Fidel Castro Ruz is on record in 1965 telling an interviewer that homosexual men were incapable of being revolutionaries: "We would never come to believe that a homosexual could embody the conditions and requirements of conduct that would enable us to consider him a true Revolutionary, a true Communist militant." (Lumsden, 1996, p. 93). 'Homosexual' men were positioned by the state as lazy, unproductive, and not capable of being true revolutionaries or upholding socialist values (Hamilton, 2012), in opposition to the 'New Man', who upheld honour, morality, strength, and citizenship. Homosexuality was closely linked with drugs, prostitution, and criminality in the popular imagination, and crackdowns on crime and 'anti-revolutionary' activity frequently targeted gay men (Hamilton, 2012, p. 39). During the 1960s, homosexual men were persecuted and violently repressed, including boys sent to special schools, men expelled from mass organisations, or fired. Some were sent to the notorious re-education camps (UMAP camps; Military Units to Aid Production) in the countryside to be remade from 'social deviants' into 'real men', alongside Jehovah's Witnesses, religious people, and other men deemed 'counter-revolutionary' (Bastian Martinez, 2011). UMAP camps were run by the army, and undertook forced labour from 1965-67 (Hamilton, 2012). Alongside jail terms, harassment, exclusion from jobs, and lack of healthcare, LGBT people – mostly effeminate men – were directly accused of being counter-revolutionaries through the 1960s and 70s (Quiroga, 2000, p. 129). These well-studied early years of the Revolution until the mid-1970s are discussed by historians as a time of repression and persecution of people with non-normative sexualities, but almost exclusively focusing on men, especially effeminate men, whose publicly 'ostentatious' or flamboyant appearance was considered an affront to the norm (Arguelles & Ruby Rich, 1984; Bejel, 2001; Hamilton, 2012; Lumsden, 1996; Peña, 2013; Ruby Rich & Arguelles, 1985; White, 2020). Lesbian women are noticeably absent from early Revolutionary discourse and therefore from historical studies (Allen, 2011, p. 68; Saavedra Montes de Oca, 2017), remaining largely "unnamed and invisible" in law and policy of this time (Peña, 2007, p. 487). However, there are some stories about women who had same-sex relationships being purged from universities, schools, and Party organisations; refused employment; mistreated in prisons (Hamilton, 2012); and expelled from the FMC (Smith & Padula, 1996, p. 173).

This period of Cuban LGBTIQ history is often analysed in terms of nation-building and gay men's place within the Revolution (notably by Cuban authors Bejel, 2001; Quiroga, 2000; and Sierra Madero, 2006). I am less interested in constructions of nation than I am in the everyday contemporary experience, but this history is important because it informs how LGBTIQ Cubans

currently construct ideas of belonging and community, and why some people choose to use traditional socialist values to elevate themselves as morally respectable. The Cuban scholar Abel Sierra Madero presents the main argument in his 2006 book that the production of the (male) homosexual other is the foundation of the Cuban nation, through constructing a set of traits that inhere in the New Man and which, by extrapolation, must have an abject other against which to be measured. Allen claims that male homosexuality in the early Revolution was seen partly as bourgeois decadence, partly as weakness, and that these were strongly associated with cowardice and not sacrificing for the nation (Allen, 2011, p. 68). Allen sees that these early discourses produced an idea of homosexuals as incompatible with the good communist militant citizen, incapable of being citizens of the new Cuba. Quiroga frames it thus: "In Cuba in particular, the postrevolutionary homosexual was always outside the national body, rejected by the nationalist construct. He was the essence of discharge itself, what is not wanted, what is not accepted." (Quiroga, 2000, p. 11). Kirk (2017, p. 8) describes the repression as an inability to fit effeminate men into the model of rugged Cuban *machismo* which prevailed through this period of nation-building. The othering of gay men made them into a problem for the Revolution (Kirk, 2017, p. 8; White, 2020, p. 8), while the Revolution itself was predicated on the heterosexuality of its citizens (Garcia, 2008, p. 101; Hynson, 2020, p. 25). Bejel (2001) is one of the only authors to include a gendered perspective in his analysis, by identifying that the homophobia against gay men was principally against effeminacy in men and their perceived transgression of gender roles, rather than a problem with their sexual acts per se. I propose that these studies of homosexual men's position in Cuba lack a deep gender analysis, focusing only on men, masculinities, and effeminacy in men, while implicitly assuming that their analyses hold true for women and other LGBTIQ people. I develop a gendered analysis to explore for the first time how some lesbian and bisexual women navigate gendered discourses of national belonging, beyond the now-established story of gay men being rejected from the 'macho' Revolution.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, attitudes began to shift and homosexuality began to be framed as just another variant of human sexuality, although not without setbacks, and still not accepted as revolutionary by the government (Kirk, 2017, p. 28). In 1979 homosexuality was decriminalised (Kirk, 2017, p. 24), although homosexuals were still accusable of 'public ostentation' (Lumsden, 1996, p. 82) and 'improper conduct' (Hamilton, 2012, p. 16), vague categories allowing continued persecution. In 1980, Cuban political dissidents sought asylum in the Peruvian embassy, causing a confrontation with the state that ended with the Cuban government issuing permits to thousands of citizens to emigrate from the port of Mariel (the

‘Mariel boatlift’) (White, 2020, p. 9). Many same-sex practicing men and women left voluntarily in this moment, while the Cuban government saw the exodus as an opportunity to get rid of ‘social undesirables’, and rounded up and forced some homosexual people (mostly men) to leave (Hamilton, 2012, p. 128).

The 1990s offered a slow change in attitudes towards LGBTIQ people. In 1990, Vilma Espín Guillois, director of the FMC, publicly denounced homophobia (Hamilton, 2012). 1993 saw the release of Cuba’s first homosexual-tolerant film, *Fresa y Chocolate* [Strawberry and Chocolate] where an openly gay male character explores what it means to be a Revolutionary citizen and gay. Citizens and scholars often cite this film as a turning point in the homosexuality narrative (Kirk, 2017, p. 128). CENESEX (*Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual*; National Centre for Sex Education), established in 1989, became a high-profile institute promoting LGBTI rights through the 1990s, run by Mariela Castro Espín, a charismatic and well-known leader. CENESEX hosts support groups for LGBTI people, campaigns about HIV/AIDS, provides counselling services, and lobbies the government (Kirk, 2015; see below for details). In 2010, Fidel issued an apology for what he described as his “sole responsibility for state homophobia” in earlier times (Allen, 2012, p. 331). This period is usually characterised by scholars as one of increasing tolerance towards homosexuality, although this largely refers to cisgender gay men, and does not much engage with the experiences of transgender, lesbian, and bisexual women, or transgender men and intersex people.

For transgender Cubans, the narrative has been one of slow change towards tolerance, coupled with an official support for male-to-female transition, in policy if not always in practice. The first gender affirmation surgery (male-to-female) was performed in 1988. It would be twenty years before another surgery was performed, which is attributed to a lack of expertise and equipment (Kirk, 2017, p. 25), although it may equally have been because of controversy about the operation (Roque Guerra, 2011). But transgender Cubans can legally change their gender marker on ID cards, and gender affirmation surgery remains free under the national health system (Bastian Martinez, 2011). In 2011, Ignacio Estrada and Wendy Iriepa, self-identified as a gay man and a transsexual woman, were married in a media-ready wedding which has been highly promoted as a beacon of tolerance in the region (R. S. King, 2014, p. 56). There has been more focus on the experience and support of transgender women than transgender men, a gendered discussion due to the enormous homophobia and transphobia directed at perceived ‘effeminacy in men’, and because of Mariela’s personal support for transgender women.

As can be seen from these various events and changes, over the last twenty years the country has moved away from 'repression of homosexuals' (Báez & Soto-Lafontaine, 2015), towards engaging seriously with the international LGBTI rights agenda, while framing this within socialist values. Since 2008, Cuba has voted at the United Nations in favour of LGBTI rights, or statements against violations of rights on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (Kirk, 2011). On one occasion, Cuba voted in the other direction, diluting LGBTI protections, which was met with strong public resistance from Cuban activists (Báez & Soto-Lafontaine, 2015; Stout, 2011). Over time, the Cuban state has inserted clauses on non-discrimination of gender and sexuality into important framing policies such as the Labour Code (Kirk, 2017). The new President Díaz Canel, who comes from Santa Clara, Cuba's most important gay centre, is considered to be more supportive of LGBTI rights than any previous leader. Up until the rejection of same-sex marriage in 2019, observers tended to see the 2000s as progressively improving LGBTI rights in Cuba, according to a Western liberal democratic understanding of LGBTI needs, issues, and quality of life.

Nonetheless, Cuba remains socially conservative in many ways, as pointed out by many ethnographic studies. Allen (2011), Fernandez (2010), Saunders (2010), and Stout (2014) analyse the persistent hierarchy of race, which in important social ways remains unchanged despite the Revolution. Andaya (2014), Härkönen (2014), and Lundgren (2011) add a gendered analysis which shows the intractable association of women with reproduction and domestic life. During my research period, an important issue for LGBT Cubans became the possibility of same-sex marriage, which CENESEX has pressed for since at least 2007 (Kirk, 2017, p. 188), currently without success. Following ten years of activism, the 2019 constitutional revisions included a change in the wording of the marriage clause from 'the union between a man and a woman' to 'the union between two people' (Marsh, 2018). The Constitution was then put to the public for discussion and comments, following Cuba's model of direct democracy. The marriage clause caused a considerable outcry and a strong rejection from sectors of the Cuban population – particularly the evangelical churches – and the clause was not approved (Kapcia, 2021, p. 174). Activists continue to fight for same-sex marriage to be legalised, with the next opportunity coming in the revision of the Family Code through 2021. The current situation is thus one of some increased tolerance and acceptance for certain forms of sexual and gender transgression, and some severe social sanctioning of other forms.

I will argue throughout that female same-sex sexuality has not experienced the same move towards cultural and social acceptability as male same-sex sexuality in Cuba (Saunders, 2009;

Stout, 2014) and is under-served in the literature. It has become more visible and accepted since the 1990s, but is still marginalised, and largely muted in the public sphere (Hamilton, 2012). Lesbians face an immense degree of social and cultural isolation (Saunders, 2009b, 2010) and invisibility in social life, culture, policy, and academia. This observation provides the main rationale for my exclusive focus on lesbian and bisexual women. More broadly, I highlight the need for a disaggregated approach to 'LGBTI issues' that includes intersectional gender, class, and race analysis in order to capture the nuances of people's experiences, which I outline in the next chapter.

## CENESEX

Cuba's organisation of civil society through the mass organisations and cultural associations means that there are no NGOs of the form recognised in liberal democracies. There are, however, a number of civic organisations and social, cultural, and artistic groups, alongside trade unions for particular industries (Crahan, 2015). Within LGBT life, the most important of these is CENESEX, which dominates the landscape. CENESEX (*Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual*; National Centre for Sex Education) was founded in 1989, but came into its current prominence when Mariela Castro Espín was appointed as its head in the early 2000s. Mariela, often referred to by her first name only, is the daughter of Raúl Castro Ruz (Fidel's brother) and Vilma Espín Guillois (founder of the mass organisation for women, the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas*). Mariela also holds a PhD (2015) on transsexuality in Cuba and has been an elected member of the National Assembly (Parliament) since 2013 (Kirk, 2017). Her immense personal power and political profile give her an extraordinary ability to push an agenda that other people would not find possible. In 2014, she voted in the National Assembly against passing the new Labour Code, because it did not sufficiently protect non-discrimination of gender identity. Bills at that stage are usually passed unanimously and waved through. Because of her personal power, Mariela became the first and only person to vote against a bill in the history of the Revolution (Associated Press in Havana, 2014). This story was often told to me as an example of how she uses the platform she has as a public figure and through her family name, for a social good, to stand up for an oppressed group. Many of the people I spoke to in Cuba credit her with single-handedly changing the lives, opportunities, and attitudes towards LGBT issues and people. It is hard to overstate CENESEX and Mariela's importance, and they are quite often seen by LGBT Cubans as allies against the rest of the state, and sometimes against the rest of society.

At the community level, CENESEX provides workshops, education, health promotion, and LGBT identity-based networks, which run their own activities and provide some social gathering space. The Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Network has a paid national coordinator, Ana, and 11 volunteer regional coordinators who run the provincial branches. The first lesbian and bisexual women's network was formed in Cuba's second largest city, Santiago, in the late 1990s, followed by Havana in 2004 and the others (Kirk, 2017, p. 68). Importantly, this first group was formed autonomously by women, who then requested support from CENESEX, showing the state's responsiveness to citizen demand. However, I and other researchers suggest this also highlights the invisibility of lesbian and bisexual women, as CENESEX had not independently recognised them as a category in need of support (Allen, 2011, p. 149), while it had already started providing support to gay men and transgender women. I will continue this gendered analysis throughout, describing how lesbian and bisexual women are frustrated that CENESEX appears to provide them less support, which they feel is institutional sexism and 'lesbophobia'.

Few scholars have researched the attitude to gender or potential sexism in CENESEX, not least because of the highly risky nature of this exercise for Cubans, with its implicit criticism of the state. A foreign scholar such as myself has some advantages to researching this issue (Sierra Madero, 2015), as I am not subject to CENESEX's ministrations and I was never officially affiliated with them. Another foreign scholar, Emily Kirk, has provided the most comprehensive analysis of CENESEX to date (Kirk, 2017), but her historical method charting the Centre's evolution does not evaluate its approach to gender and gender norms in any depth. Megan Daigle mentions CENESEX's heteronormative approach in passing (Daigle, 2015, p. 157):

“CENESEX's liberal approach to gay and lesbian couples, then, is based on the idea that the heteronormative model of stable, monogamous, nonpromiscuous relationships can be transposed onto same-sex couples, who can then be considered as revolutionary as any other workers and citizens. Homosexuality becomes acceptable when it is legible through the lens of 'normal' relationships. By this heteronormative logic, women are meant to be passive, the pursued rather than the pursuer, and to embody values of monogamy, commitment, and faithfulness; promiscuity and lust, in this sense, are the preserve of men.”

A small number of Cubans have been able to note that CENESEX takes a conservative approach to gender roles. Sierra Madero (Negrón Muntaner, 2011, p. 13) uses the example of the support for transgender women to claim that CENESEX reinforces stereotyped binary gender, showing that its approach relies on teaching them how to do gender 'properly': “in order to teach transvestites, transgenders and transsexuals how to walk, dress, talk, or use cutlery

according to established social norms and in view of their future as women.” As others have shown that Cuban society follows strict gender divisions (e.g. Härkönen, 2016; Lundgren, 2011) it is no surprise that CENESEX seems to support the same, an issue that I explore in depth.

Recent scholars have argued that CENESEX’s current approach to sexuality is based on normalisation and normative incorporation of LGBTIQ citizens (Allen, 2011; Kirk, 2011, 2017; Stout, 2014). Normalisation is a common approach across Latin America, particularly in its socialist or left-leaning countries (Fiol-Matta, 2016; Howe, 2013). Most Latin American countries approach LGBTI issues as support for ‘sexual diversity’ rights and integration into normal life (Fiol-Matta, 2016), rather than a support for difference, sexual dissidence, or separatist identity-based politics. In Nicaragua, Howe (2013, p. 98) shows that activists took an approach which tried to reframe all forms of sexuality as normal, rather than stressing pride in anti-normative queerness or difference. The normalisation approach has particular salience in Cuba, as it corresponds to Revolutionary values of equality through sameness, as opposed to an identity-based paradigm of equality despite difference (‘out and proud’), which sits uncomfortably with the Revolution and is usually seen as political dissent. Sierra Madero condemns CENESEX’s normalisation approach as a “‘politically correct’ sexual diversity” which creates an acceptable version of homosexuality that requires people to assimilate correctly into the national imaginary (Sierra Madero, 2015, p. 13). In post-socialist China, which has many similar discourses to Cuba, Engebretsen (2014, p. 126) describes lesbian activist practices as appealing to a commonly shared humanity, emphasising sameness rather than difference, often through claiming normativity. Scholars across global contexts show how the normalisation approach cannot be considered ‘queer’ in any significant way (Fiol-Matta, 2016; Liu, 2010), and in fact reinforces the logic of homophobic othering (Kam, 2013, p. 96). Normalisation works to exclude some people: the ‘abject others’ of homonormativity theory, discussed in the next chapter on concepts used in this thesis. My research explores how these discourses of normalisation work within the Cuban context, returning to abject othering in Chapter 5, and CENESEX’s approach in Chapter 7.

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief introduction to some of the key events, moments, organisations, and people who have exerted an influence on constructions of gender and sexuality in Cuba. The combination of socialism, with its strong promotion of women’s labour, and the lack of the Catholic church, mean that heterosexual Cuban women experienced

significant gains in rights and equality through the sixty years of the Revolution. Gay men also experienced a welcome move towards cultural and social tolerance, away from cruel and oppressive treatment in the twentieth century. Yet, as I have described, lesbian and bisexual women do not clearly figure in this narrative. Scholars are in agreement that Mariela's CENESEX, while a juggernaut pushing for greater tolerance and acceptance for LGBTI people, has not successfully engaged with lesbian and bisexual women in the ways that they have wanted, and these women remain marginalised in society. I now turn to exploring the concepts I use in this thesis to analyse the lives of the lesbian and bisexual Cuban women that I talked to, and the wider literature on gender and sexuality in Cuba.

## Chapter 3: Literature review and conceptual framework

In this chapter, I review the literature on gender and sexuality that informs my analysis. Firstly, I analyse the absence of lesbian and bisexual women from the global literature on gender and sexuality, which is a key factor in my choice to study this group. I then outline the concepts of normativity, respectability, and invisibility that guide my analysis of lesbian and bisexual Cuban women's constructions of gender and sexuality. My choice to use these concepts emerged from the data collection and analysis, as these three narratives are consistently given by women as motivating factors in their lives. Thirdly, I review the relevant gender and sexuality norms in Cuba, drawing together the previous literature with my analytical concepts, which lead to my specific research questions.

### Invisibility of lesbian and bisexual women in the literature

Although scholars have continually called for increased representation of women in sexuality studies, lesbian and bisexual women remain under-studied<sup>2</sup>. It is common across the global literature on sexuality, same-sex desire, and gender, to find a lack of visibility of lesbian and bisexual women in public policy, academia, and societal thought. Instead, sexuality literature often privileges cisgender gay male experience, taking this as representative of wider LGBTIQ issues. Defining LGBTIQ issues by the experiences of the most powerful individuals in that group is sometimes called an act of oppression against other members (Walsh, 2016).

International development policies and programmes do not often discuss sexuality (Cornwall & Jolly, 2009; Hawkins et al., 2014; Jolly, 2000; Williams, 2009), despite consistent engagement and pressure from academics (Mason, 2018). Where LGBTIQ people are included in development studies, it is often in analytically narrow terms, very often through rights-based claims, HIV/AIDS prevention, or women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. In Latin America, much of the route to LGBTIQ knowledge and resources has been through international development aid focused work on HIV/AIDS, the majority of which has centred on the experiences of men who have sex with men (Lind & Share, 2003), which has therefore given men much higher visibility than lesbian and bisexual women (Williams, 2009, p. 63). Often LGBTIQ people are grouped together with women, ethnic minorities, people with

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<sup>2</sup> As do transgender women and men, intersex people, non-binary, asexual, agender, and aromantic people, and most other non-heteronormative people.

disabilities, and other minority groups, each appearing as a token representative in a list of 'vulnerable categories' that projects aim to include. This obscures the specificities of each group or individual and creates a monolithic approach to each category. They are rarely given analytical space to explore their broader life-worlds. In particular, a gender analysis is often missing from studies of LGBTIQ sexuality.

The treatment of women in development literature often assumes heterosexuality. While it may be that most people are in opposite-sex partnerships, treating this as normative overlooks a significant minority and creates heterosexist assumptions which bias and discriminate in favour of opposite-sex relationships. Heterosexuality is institutionalised and naturalised in many societies (Lind & Share, 2003). Assumptions of family structure, gender, and sexuality create fairly rigid structures around how women in low-income contexts are seen in discourse and practice (Lind & Share, 2003). Women who do not live by these structures or who do not conform to heteronormativity often find themselves excluded from development processes and development benefits (Cornwall & Jolly, 2009). Gender in development studies and practice is usually conceptualised as a binary distinction between 'women' and 'men', often distinguishing between them on the basis of their social roles (Cornwall & Jolly, 2009). Women are almost always conceptualised as "mothers, wives and heterosexuals" (Lind & Share, 2003), constructing women only in relation to others and leaving out women who do not perform these roles. Women-loving women and female-to-male transgender people (or, transmasculine people) are almost invisible in academic anthropological literature (Boellstorff, 2007a; Cornwall & Jolly, 2009; Eng et al., 2005). A few recent exceptions are making exciting inroads into theorising and exploring lesbian and bisexual women's lives around the world (e.g. (Blackwood, 2010 (Indonesia); Engebretsen, 2014 (China); Howe, 2013 (Nicaragua); Kam, 2013 (China); Stella, 2015 (Russia); Wekker, 2006 (Suriname); Williams, 2009 (Peru)). My research adds to these empirical studies to deepen knowledge of the diversity of lesbian and bisexual women's experiences.

Central to my research is my theoretical approach that gender and sexuality are interrelated. This is helped by situating my study in Latin America, where local understandings perceive sexuality and gender as always already mutually constitutive (Howe, 2013, p. 5). In a study of Mexico, Hirsch, Wardlow, and Phinney (2012, p. 103) show how sexuality is built through multiple intersecting endeavours:

"Not just a product of one's desire for a particular practice with a person of a particular sex, it is also an assertion of social class, a gender performance, a navigation

of strongly patterned social space, and a means of ensuring access to the kinship structures without which adult life is hardly possible.”

More specifically, scholars argue that Caribbean sexuality cannot be considered separately from gender (R. S. King, 2014, p. 10). Ryan-Flood (2009, p. 159) states that gender is important to consider in the study of lesbian women, because otherwise, it is assumed that the category of ‘woman’ only includes heterosexual women. I respond to these previous studies by bringing a deep gender analysis into my study of Cuban lesbian and bisexual women’s lives, and by including a race and class analysis as well, adding to the global discussion of how gender structures options and outcomes for LGBTIQ people, and how gender is a highly significant factor in the differing experiences of different LGBTIQ groups.

Within the literature on queer histories in Latin America and North America, Latina lesbians have been invisibilised, especially in comparison to gay men (Craske, 2014; González-López & Vidal-Ortiz, 2018; Hamilton, 2012; R. S. King, 2014; Quiroga, 2000; Torres & Perpetusa, 2003; Williams, 2009). This is not just an oversight or unintentional mistake, but speaks to the construction of women, ‘women’s issues’, female sexuality, and non-normative women as *unimportant*. Rosamond S. King (2014, p. 122) argues that the active invisibilisation of lesbian women across the Caribbean is a direct result of deeply embedded sexism and patriarchy. José Quiroga (2000) claims that the invisibilisation of lesbians from Latin American queer histories shows the male-centered nature of power which considers male homosexuals to be a ‘problem’, but cannot even conceive of female homosexuals. Recently, González-López and Vidal-Ortiz (2018) and Fiol-Matta (2016) note the absence of scholarly studies using a queer approach that include the experiences of Latina lesbians. Fiol-Matta makes a strong case that:

“the experience of queer female-bodied persons (understood as a queer traversing of cis, butch, and trans femininities, and ‘female masculinities,’ to quote Halberstam’s queer classic) is unquestionably not yet incorporated at the theoretical level on a par with queer studies’ analyses of men, male femininities, and male masculinities.” (p. 222).

Howe argues in her study of Nicaraguan activists that lesbians deserve a special focus in order to recognise and explore a subjectivity that is still relatively new to academia about Latin America (Howe, 2013, p. 6). My research addresses this important gap in the literature, including my conscious choice to take a broad approach to sexual orientation categories to include local subjectivities.

Within the literature on queer and LGBTI Cuba specifically, the marginalisation of lesbian and bisexual women is also apparent. The strong literature on gender in Cuba and Cuban women tends to consider only heterosexual, cisgender women in relation to heterosexual, cisgender men; while the literature on Cuban sexuality and queerness tends to consider heterosexual relations, gay men, and (mostly straight) transgender women. As I will discuss throughout, men's sexuality of all kinds dominates the landscape, while women's and female sexuality is sorely under-studied. It is continuously acknowledged in the sexuality literature on Cuba that women's sexuality is absent (Roque Guerra, 2011, p. 224), yet my research is only the second study exclusively analysing lesbian and bisexual women. At the state level, several authors note that Cuba is strongly androcentric and masculinist (James, 2011), resulting in a social invisibility and perception of lesbian women being hard to access for researchers and social policy (Allen, 2012; Härkönen, 2016, p. 157). While I also found lesbian and bisexual Cuban women initially hard to access, I eventually connected with a concealed but strong-minded and politically astute network.

The invisibility of lesbians in the literature on Cuba is attributed by Stout (2014, p. 19) partly to the Cuban Revolution's ongoing silence on female pleasure and desire, which is not considered of much importance. Daigle (2015, p. 14) agrees with this assessment, suggesting that Cubans rarely discuss women's attraction to women, and tend to dismiss it as 'not real sex' because of the lack of a penis, which is a widespread notion across Latin America (Chant & Craske, 2003, p. 150) and the Caribbean (R. S. King, 2014, p. 99). Lesbians are not seen as a threat to the nation in the way that gay men are (R. S. King, 2014), which results in their erasure from discourse. While gay men were persecuted in the early years of the Cuban Revolution, lesbian women were culturally unintelligible and apparently inconceivable (Peña, 2007). In Guillard Limonta's (2009) study of media representations of lesbians in Cuba, she suggests that the lack of representation is due to a combination of patriarchy, poor critical awareness, and straightforward homophobia. Saunders (2010) suggests that Cuba still has a distaste for lesbians, while gay men are increasingly accepted. They add (2010, p. 13) that the contemporary Revolutionary discourse of femininity is constructed through a feminine subject's sexual relationship to men. Women who do not have sex with men are thus marginalised as gender non-conforming and excluded from Revolutionary discourse.

Allen (2011), Hamilton (2012), Guillard Limonta (2016, 2009), Saunders (2010; 2009), and Stout (2014) are recent and notable exceptions in the literature which give some space to women-loving women in Cuba. Allen (2011) and Stout (2014) include women in their ethnographies of

queer Cuba, looking at, respectively, ethnicity and sex work as their main axes of analysis. Hamilton (2012) includes a chapter on women's same-sex desire in her oral history study of Cuban sexuality, which provides an important and illuminating historical analysis. Tanya Saunders (e.g. 2009, 2010) and Norma Guillard Limonta (e.g. 2009, 2016) are among the only scholars looking at the experience of Cuban lesbian women exclusively. Both have a strong focus on the nexus of ethnicity and sexuality, as they examine the specificity of the black lesbian experience. These five authors all acknowledge the dearth of literature on lesbian and bisexual women in Cuba, making my work an important empirical contribution to this small collection.

The story reported in the literature of Cuba's increasing tolerance towards same-sex sexuality and queer sexual practice is usually about men who have sex with men, gay men, and, to some extent, transgender women. Or, people perceived to have sex with men: 'real sex' where a penis is present. But this obscures the many other LGBTIQ people who have different experiences of social inclusion in Cuba. Lesbian women are outside the national discourse on sexuality (Céspedes, 2003), and bisexual women are very rarely considered at all. My research deepens understanding of the specificities of lesbian and bisexual women's gender and sexuality in Cuba, in particular highlighting how one demographic's experience (gay men) cannot be taken to stand in for a universal LGBTIQ experience.

### Conceptualising normativity

In this thesis, I use the concepts of norms and normativity to analyse how the Cuban lesbian and bisexual women I met think about and practice their gender and sexuality. I draw on queer theory to inform my anthropological study, adding to a small but growing collection of ethnographies sometimes described as 'queer anthropology' (e.g. Allen, 2011; Blackwood, 2010; Boellstorff, 2005; Engebretsen, 2014; Howe, 2013; Manalansan, 2003; Rofel, 2007; Sinnott, 2004; Stout, 2014; Wekker, 2006; Weston, 1997)<sup>3</sup>. Queer anthropology tries to inject abstract queer theory with grounded sensibilities about real lives, including an exploration of how queer lives differ across countries and contexts, challenging a universalist discourse of what constitutes queerness. Relationships, marriage, family structures, and gender performance have local meanings in relation to normativity, which cannot be universalised but

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<sup>3</sup> For discussions of what queer anthropology is, see e.g. Boellstorff, 2007a; Boyce et al., 2017; Weiss, 2016b.

must be studied in context. Sexual geographers have long emphasised the importance of socio-political place for analysing expressions of sexuality (Ryan-Flood, 2009, p. 179). This thesis goes beyond assessing whether people's behaviour is normative or non-normative, to examining how some lesbian and bisexual Cuban women understand these discourses, how they use them, navigate them, position themselves in relation to them, and why.

In this thesis, I mostly understand 'norms' as social norms, rather than, for example, legal norms or moral norms (Brennan et al., 2013). I follow a broad definition of social norms as:

“the implicit, informal rules that most people accept and abide by. Social norms are influenced by belief systems, the economic context, and sometimes by perceived rewards and sanctions for adhering to (or not complying with) prevailing norms. Norms are embedded in formal and informal institutions and produced and reproduced through social interaction.”<sup>4</sup>

Norms are particular rules or principles that a group accepts and follows (Brennan et al., 2013, p. 4), and they operate best when they are invisible, exercised by social institutions, peer pressure, and expectation (Williams, 2009, p. 51). Within the broad category of social norms, I have a particular focus on gender norms, which can be defined as “how people of a particular gender (and often age) are expected to behave, in a given social context.”<sup>5</sup> I follow intersectional analysis, which has shown that gender is always mediated by ethnicity, class, age, ability, and sexuality, among other social markers, and I bring these elements together in my analysis. Social norms, including gender norms and sexuality norms, have a normative element, meaning that they indicate ways in which people are expected to behave, giving a moral imperative about how people *should* conduct themselves (Brennan et al., 2013, p. 7). If there is no normative element, then the social issue in question could be considered more in terms of whether it is 'normal', customary, or happens often. I therefore understand gender norms and gender normativity as the ways in which Cubans expect people to behave according to their gender, with a positive moral value attached to performing these correctly.

I use some elements of queer theory to analyse gender and sexuality norms and normativity. Queer theory takes as its starting point the instability of categories, meanings, and power relations (K. Browne & Nash, 2010). In general, it is a commitment to contesting the frameworks and operations of normativity (Rooke, 2010, p. 29) and it seeks to make

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<sup>4</sup> ALIGN platform, ODI, ALIGN website, [www.alignplatform.org/FAQ](http://www.alignplatform.org/FAQ)

<sup>5</sup> ALIGN platform, ODI, ALIGN website, <https://www.alignplatform.org/about-norms>

normativity visible through challenging analytical categories (Fotopoulou, 2012, p. 19). Normativity is usually posed by queer theorists as something to resist or challenge, and 'queer' as the way to challenge it (Wilson, 2019). An early queer scholar described the approach as resistance "to regimes of the normal" (Warner, 1993, p. xxvi). With regard to sexuality and gender, queer theory broadly seeks to dismantle – or at least deconstruct – identity categories, in favour of an understanding of gender and sexuality as fluid behaviours and practices (Boellstorff, 2005, p. 204). It particularly focuses on examining how heteronormativity shapes all domains of life, seeking to "make strange" the idea that heterosexuality and traditional gender roles are normal (Boellstorff, 2007b, p. 19). Margot Weiss, an influential scholar, writes that queer signifies transgression, resistance, or exclusion from normativity, especially heteronormativity (Weiss, 2016a). I use these insights from queer theory to explore how and why lesbian and bisexual Cuban women in this research position themselves as 'normal', or resist this framing.

Heteronormativity is an important analytic in my research. Heteronormativity is usually understood as the matrix that upholds a binary, male-female, view of gender, and which promotes heterosexuality as the norm. It is exercised through cultural, legal, and institutional practices that maintain the idea that there are only two genders, which reflect biological sex, and that 'opposite-sex' attraction is the only natural expression of sexuality (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, p. 441). Heteronormativity also maintains a gender hierarchy that privileges men over women (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, p. 441). Queer of colour and post-colonial scholars have added the important observation that heteronormativity is often racially defined and coded as white (Cohen, 1997; Ferguson, 2003; King, 2009), and that it derives from a colonial model of sexuality and gender (Gosine, 2015; Weerawardhana, 2018). There is an underlying negative attitude to heteronormativity in most of the queer literature, which is not always acknowledged. Most scholars put across the viewpoint that heteronormativity is *bad* in some way and should be resisted. I am in agreement from a theoretical and activist perspective, but many people I spoke to in Cuba regard normativity as highly desirable and strive to achieve it.

The desire of LGBTI people to achieve normativity, or be considered 'normal', is usually described as homonormativity. Homonormativity theory was originally put forward by Lisa Duggan, most notably in her 2004 book *The Twilight of Equality*. She describes the growing depoliticization of gay culture in the USA, in favour of domesticity and economic consumption. She describes homonormativity as a type of politics in which gay culture upholds and sustains

dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, instead of challenging them (Duggan, 2004, p. 50). She argues that the gay movement was redefined as a fight not for liberation, but equality, through a process of mainstreaming gay people into a vision of centrist, uncontroversial, ordinary life (Duggan, 2002). This is exemplified most clearly in the drive for same-sex marriage, which Duggan sees as a conservative move as it upholds the primacy and desirability of traditional marriage over alternative, queerer, relationship structures (Duggan, 2002). Duggan attaches this vision firmly to neoliberalism, seeing homonormative politics as an outcropping of privatised, economically conservative, consumption-based desires.

Homonormativity theory also analyses the emergence of a central power dynamic among LGBTQI people where some people are empowered by their assimilation to socially approved structures of neoliberal capitalism, while others are further marginalised (Podmore, 2013, p. 264). In the literature on liberal democracies, the characteristics of 'empowered' queer subjects might include monogamous couples, married, middle-class, white, property owners, community contributors, and 'good citizens', as these are the attributes desired under neoliberalism. Those outside the norm are constructed as 'abject others', an oppositional category that can be excluded from the mainstream in order to highlight and enable the inclusion of the privileged few. Queer of colour scholarship has identified that abject others are often non-white, or local minority ethnic groups (Agathangelou et al., 2008; Ferguson & Kyungwon Hong, 2012), a dynamic which stretches across almost all geographical contexts and times. Ferguson (2003) argues that black bodies are always already constructed as deviant and not heteronormative, because they are 'different' from the white norm. I use this analytic to examine how some Cuban lesbian and bisexual women position themselves as respectably normal in comparison to other LGBTIQ people, often around an axis of race and class conflated with femininity.

Although the othering dynamic has a powerful analytical potential, and has been popularly adopted, several scholars caution against reifying a neat inclusion-exclusion framework, a binary which seems to go against the principles of queer theory. As anthropologists Kath Weston and Róisín Ryan-Flood have pointed out, real people are both normative and non-normative, and can pass across boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in different spaces, at different times, sometimes by choice and sometimes because of structural inequalities (Ryan-Flood, 2009; Weston, 1997). Another anthropologist, Elisabeth Engebretsen, highlights the complexities of social life that exceed the boundaries of a normative/anti-normative framework, concluding that this is an essentialising discourse that fails to take into account the

desires and realities of people living outside Euro-American social models (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 9). Podmore suggests (2013, p. 264) that these criticisms must be tackled by deconstructing and challenging the homonormativity framework itself, and re-examining intersectionalities. Gavin Brown cautions against applying homonormativity as a monolithic concept, as it tends to be viewed “as a homogeneous, global external entity that exists outside all of us and exerts its terrifying, normative power on gay lives everywhere.” (Brown, 2012, p. 1066). I draw on these criticisms and ideas by using normativity and homonormativity as concepts to inform my analysis, but not as hypotheses to test, nor do I rely on a rigid inclusion/exclusion binary.

What makes Cuba an interesting case study is how these concepts play out under contemporary socialism. Present-day Cuban society contains strong discourses of the value of being normal, or conforming to moral social expectations, which I explore through the insights offered by some lesbian and bisexual women. The discourse of being Cuban and a good socialist revolutionary has at times eclipsed ethnic, sexual, gender, or other subject positions. Researchers have found that Cubans occasionally refuse to ethnically identify themselves, instead saying they are ‘only Cuban’, in line with official anti-race policy (Saunders, 2010). During the Special Period, nationalism again became more important than sexuality: “It no longer mattered who you had sex with, only that you supported Fidel.” (Stout, 2014, p. 41). Contemporary Cuba retains a strong discourse of the primacy of national unity over individual identities, seeing identity-based movements as divisive, dissenting, and unpatriotic (Bastian Martinez, 2011; Daigle, 2015; Garcia, 2008, p. 109; Saunders, 2009b). China, Russia, and European post-socialist states have similar discourses, adding an important nuance to the discussion of what it means to be normal or desire normativity, in countries with different geopolitical histories.

The socialist or post-socialist ‘national unity’ approach to LGBTI issues draws on the idea of not disrupting the social order, and protecting socialist values. Against what Ferguson claims, it is not necessarily about eradicating difference or homogenising culture (Ferguson, 2003, p. 128). Several authors find that in socialist and post-socialist states, claiming a non-heterosexual identity in public is conflated with being selfish and putting one’s individual needs over and above the needs of the collective. In Russia, sexual behaviour of any kind in the public sphere, especially from women, is considered improper, meaning that asserting a sexual identity is seen as vulgar and defiant (Baer, 2013). In China, lesbian women prioritised taking care of the family and preserving family honour, which is a highly important social marker, rather than asserting their sexualities publicly, which would bring shame on the family (Kam, 2010). Kam

argues that fulfilling family duties is more important to these women than claiming a public sexual identity. These studies reveal a socialist discourse in which public claims to sexual identity are seen (by heterosexual and LGBTI people) as individually selfish, undermining the more important collective issues of the societal whole.

Some authors have also shown how queerness can have a positive relationship with socialist belonging. Liu (2010) and Bao (2018) both argue that queerness and Chineseness are mutually constitutive and must be considered together. They argue that queer belonging is possible in China as part of the socialist project, not in resistance to it. Bao's (2018) central thesis recognises the socialist aspirations and longing within queerness in China, desiring, for example, a more egalitarian society – a straightforward overlap between LGBTI rights goals and socialist goals that is sometimes forgotten. In Nicaragua, which had a socialist revolution in the 1980s, Howe (2013) found that lesbian and bisexual women saw their struggle for sexual rights as part of the revolutionary socialist struggle for greater equality and better conditions for all. The alignment of LGBTI rights equality with socialism in some cases produces a desire for inclusion within the socialist project, not a rejection or independence from it. In this conceptualisation, identity politics may be considered unhelpful and divisive, distracting from the greater fight to improve conditions for all. This concept helps my analysis of Cuban LGBT lives, which are sometimes structured around greater inclusion in society rather than resistance or desire to change society.

International development theory and practice has been slow to take up insights from queer theory, despite sustained engagement from academics and activists for at least twenty years (Mason, 2018). Gender, sexuality, and development discourse continues to focus on cisgender, heterosexual women; sometimes on cisgender, heterosexual men; or LGBTI identities; and tends to uphold the gender binary (Weerawardhana, 2018) without questioning the normative functions and assumptions in this approach (E. Browne, 2019). Susie Jolly and Andrea Cornwall have consistently shown that development work rests on heteronormativity and that it fails to challenge gender and sexuality norms (Cornwall & Jolly, 2009; Jolly, 2011; Jolly & Cornwall, 2016). The development literature and queer literature thus do not speak to each other effectively, with the possible exception of queer anthropological work. Development literature usually takes norms as something to try to change or improve, such as increasing women's economic empowerment by changing norms which disallow them from going to work. Whereas queer theory usually engages with norms and normativity as concepts to resist wholesale, rather than try to change. My work sits at this intersection, examining how lesbian

and bisexual women themselves regard normativity, both as something to aspire to and as something to change.

### Normativity as respectability

Gender normativity can be understood as closely entwined with respectability. Respectability politics in general is a political position where marginalised groups demonstrate acceptable normative values, or ‘model minority’ behaviour, in order to be accepted by dominant groups (Strolovitch & Crowder, 2018, p. 340). For LGBTI people, respectability can act as a protection against social sanctions, social exclusion, and as a way to gain acceptance, tolerance, and rights. Upholding norms is incentivised by the possibility of gaining respect and approval from those around us (Brennan et al., 2013, p. 221). Breaking norms usually carries social sanction, ranging from disapproval, disgust, and contempt, to legal and political repercussions (Brennan et al., 2013, p. 221). The pursuit of normativity might therefore be considered as the pursuit of respectability and respect, amongst other goals.

The ‘black politics of respectability’ discourse is useful to turn to here, as it shows that respectability is often entangled with whiteness across the world. Joshi (2012, p. 419) analyses how respectability is produced by performative acts that align behaviours with social norms that are gendered, white, middle-class, and heterosexual. Queer of colour scholarship has shown that whiteness and being middle-class are often considered the norm against which other ethnicities, sexualities, or poverty are measured, producing blackness as an abject other. Scholars have consistently highlighted the important point that, in the USA, heteronormativity is coded white (Cohen, 1997; King, 2009). Normativity – both hetero and homo – is bound up in an idealised version of a white, middle-class, bourgeois, nuclear family (Cohen, 1997), with the component parts inextricable from each other. The ongoing scholarly discussion of how sexual and gender normativity is coded white is important to understand how LGBTIQ people of all ethnicities express their genders and sexualities, and how they are perceived or constructed by others through this expression and its relation to whiteness.

The hierarchy of ethnicity in Cuba is very similar to the USA, the Caribbean, and other parts of Latin America – whiteness and Europeanness are constructed as racially superior, socially and culturally more ‘advanced’, and respectable (Saunders, 2010). The discourse of whiteness as morally superior runs through much of Cuban history, and remains in existence today, if not always openly acknowledged, due to the Revolution’s official ‘race-blindness’ (Fernandez,

2010; Garth, 2021). The white social norms of sexuality and gender are drawn from a long colonial slave history that repressed and pathologised perceived unruly hypermasculinity for black men and unregulated sexual lasciviousness for black women (Alexander, 1994; Cohen, 1997; Ferguson, 2003).

Ferguson (2003) argues that the indivisible nature of race, class, and gender means that respectability and assimilation for black folk can only come through the regulation of 'black' gender and sexuality. Put another way, he argues that black people in the USA can achieve respectability through performing whiteness in their gender and sexual expression. Across Latin America and the Caribbean, imitating or performing whiteness has historically been a route to claiming decency and respectability, increasing black equality through assimilation rather than resistance to normative whiteness (Chant & Craske, 2003, p. 139). This trend is also visible in Cuba, with Cubans following white norms of 'good appearance' and 'proper behaviour' (Garth, 2021, p. 391), in an attempt to 'self-whiten', or be read as white as possible (Fernandez, 2010, p. 19). Hynson (2020, p. 30) argues that 'proper sexuality' in the early years of the Revolution became coded as white, despite the general upheaval of social norms, Cuban nationalism, and discourse of anti-imperialism. Garth (2021, p. 396) makes an important contribution, claiming that the Revolution continues colonial racist logics, and that its discourse of equality seeks to bring all Cubans to a level of whiteness, rather than accepting the value of all people. The discourse of whiteness as moral superiority does not only explain the denigration of Afro-Cubans, but works as a lens through which to view the moral respectability aspirations of LGBTI people, as achieving cultural whiteness elevates people up the social hierarchy. For Cuban women, whiteness is closely related to femininity, both desirable for respectability. Saunders' work on black lesbians in Cuba shows how white respectability for women is bound up with hegemonic femininity. Before the Revolution, but continuing during it, some black Cubans encouraged adhering to heteronormative "Victorian" femininity to gain respectability, which meant being family-oriented and "the least culturally African possible" (Saunders, 2010, p. 21). I use these concepts from the black politics of respectability literature to explore how performing normativity through cultural and social actions considered to be 'white' can bring respectability for some lesbian and bisexual Cuban women.

Alongside the elevation of whiteness, respectability has an element of moral decency. Joshi (2012) theorises that respectability is a moral discourse: by showing moral decency, LGBTI people can gain respectability. Moral decency is performed according to local codes and

customs, and cannot be universalised. But theoretically, scholars have pointed out a strategy of compensation at work. By performing exceptional decent, moral, normative acts in one social area, LGBTI people are sometimes able to compensate for non-normative sexuality. Discussing lesbians in China, Kam (2013, p. 69) terms this the “politics of public correctness”, which she describes as an attempt to outperform in certain aspects of life in order to gain the familial and social recognition to compensate and trade-off for unacceptable sexuality. Also in China, Bao (2018, p. 55) examines how queer people aspire to good citizenship, middle-classness, and thorough respectability in order to frame themselves as legitimate political subjects, whose only difference from other citizens is their sexual orientation. He registered a call from queers to behave ‘decently’ in public (in this case, meaning not having sex in public places) in order to gain greater acceptance (p. 190). In Myanmar, Chua (2016, p. 655) found that the first lesbian civil society group was set up in collaboration with an eye clinic, in order to show moral conduct and counteract the stereotype of LGBTI people as deviants. Respectability is thus accessed through adhering to local normative codes of conduct that are considered to be moral and decent. The performance of decency through normativity as a way to silence critics is a strategy which has been widely noted in the literature on LGBTI lives (e.g. Ryan-Flood, 2009). Moral decency also has an implicit differentiation from those who are not ‘decent’. The abject other concept from homonormativity theory is useful to illuminate how LGBTI people can elevate themselves into a position of respectability through distance from those who are not respectable.

In Cuba, I use this analytic to explore how some lesbian and bisexual women perform, or over-perform, gender normativity and socialist values in order to position themselves as morally decent and respectable. Binary gender norms are heavily promoted and upheld by CENESEX (Daigle, 2015, p. 157) and the Revolution more broadly, making hegemonic femininity and motherhood into symbols of national morality (Saunders, 2010, p. 31). Kersh (2017) describes how Cuban women considered being a ‘good wife’ as a moral virtue and important part of self-identity and self-respect. Saunders (2010) claims that early Revolutionary policy entwined gender, sexuality, morality, and race in such a way that being a good woman meant desiring men and maintaining a stable heterosexual family unit, as well as being a Revolutionary worker and fighter. Instead of protecting women’s rights as autonomous subjects, women were protected through their status as wives and mothers, upholding social norms of feminine morality which rely on their sexual relationships with men (Saunders, 2010, p. 14). Since lesbian and bisexual women do not necessarily have sexual relationships with men, I explore how they compensate for this failure by seeking gender normativity in other ways. Daigle

argues that (2015, p. 157) if LGBTI people perform gendered socialist morality correctly then they can be accepted as belonging within the Revolution. Stout argues that the literature has historically overlooked “an embrace of socialist ideology among gays” (Stout, 2014, p. 178), which I examine here through the lens of lesbian and bisexual women’s performances of moral respectability.

### Normativity as invisibility

Normativity and invisibility are closely entwined; perhaps it is even possible to theorise normativity as invisibility. Brighenti (2007, p. 326) suggests, “one can appreciate the characteristics of the normal as those of the invisible: the normal is unmarked, unnoticed, unthematized, untheorized.” The pursuit of normalcy and normativity could be considered the pursuit of social invisibility. Here I explore the concepts of in/visibility and how I use them throughout this thesis.

In/visibility can be empowering or disempowering; they are not inherently either liberating or oppressive (Brighenti, 2007). Brighenti (2007) argues that what matters about visibility is who is seen, by whom, and in what way or for what purposes. Foucault’s use of the panopticon concept shows that some visibility equates to surveillance and control, or what he calls the disciplinary gaze (Foucault, 1977). Invisibility can therefore sometimes be an escape from surveillance, and a certain kind of freedom (Acosta, 2011), shown in the following examples. Both Hayfield (2013) and Brighenti (2007) identify that visibility often means being visible to the male gaze, which is not always what lesbian and bisexual women want. Hayfield (2013) explores the visual dress codes for lesbian women in the UK, showing how they can be invisible to heterosexuals but highly visible to each other. Having a child often invisibilises lesbian sexuality and draws lesbian and bisexual women into assumed heterosexuality, which is sometimes experienced as disempowering (Ryan-Flood, 2009) and sometimes as creating queer space (Acosta, 2013, p. 104). Other scholars have found that invisibility does not necessarily equate to normativity. The group of lesbian women in Kirtsoglou’s research in Greece (Kirtsoglou, 2004) chose to be invisible to wider society to protect from homophobia, but continued to live resolutely anti-normative and political private lives. Invisibility can be a way of accessing respectability. Many countries, especially China and the post-socialist countries of Europe, have a discourse of LGBTI people choosing to exist within a normative invisibility in order to avoid direct confrontations with family, uphold family honour, and make a bargain for some level of civic acceptance in exchange for decent behaviour (Chua, 2016, p.

253; Fojtová & Sokolová, 2013). In contemporary Russia, Stella (2015, p. 106) argues that the Anglo-American model of visibility and authenticity premised on 'coming out of the closet' is not important to non-heterosexual women, who instead privilege managing their identities appropriately across different social contexts. These brief examples show the variety of ways in which in/visibility is experienced and used by lesbian and bisexual women, and how different strategies of visibility are leveraged at different times and in different spaces.

In many places, the power of invisibility rests on a division between public and private, and the idea that sexuality should be kept private. Joshi argues that respectability for LGBTI people rests on the correct performance of social norms, which include keeping sexuality necessarily private, as it does not belong in the respectable public sphere (Joshi, 2012, p. 447). In the USA, he claims this forces queer activities into the private sphere, which creates a difficult public/private tension that he sees as a problem. In many studies of LGBTI Latin America, scholars have shown that discreet invisibility of non-normative sexuality in the public sphere is considered respectable and produces respectability for LGBTI people. There is a strong discourse across many Latin American countries that different sexualities and genders can be tolerated (but not necessarily accepted) as long as they are kept discreet, silent, and invisible, firmly within the private sphere, described by Carlos Decena's (2011) concept of 'tacit knowledge'. Ethnographic studies show how Latin American queer people often use a strategy of 'everyone knows, but no one talks about it' (in English, 'don't ask, don't tell') in order to preserve their family relationships and family honour (e.g. Acosta, 2016; Howe, 2013, p. 122; Morad, 2014; Stout, 2014, p. 58; Wekker, 2006, p. 187). However, this practice of discreetness is not the same as being in the closet (Peña, 2013), which is a metaphor not widely applicable to Latin American sexualities (Acosta, 2010; Decena, 2011), or perhaps to any non-Western society (Stella, 2015, p. 107). Quiroga sees the practice of privacy as silence, not secrecy (Quiroga, 2000, p. 105). In some cases, this kind of knowing privacy enables people to continue their queer lives without social sanction, using invisibility and silence as a protection of queer space.

Scholars have identified that Cuban LGBTI people maintain this common Latin American trend of keeping their sexuality discreetly private and invisible, although these studies largely focus on gay men (Allen, 2011; Arguelles & Rich, 1984; Hamilton, 2012; Lumsden, 1996; Morad, 2014; Peña, 2013; Rich & Arguelles, 1985; Stout, 2014). A specifically Cuban iteration of the trend is a division whereby people claim that sexuality does not, or should not, affect how they are seen as public (socialist) citizens (Arguelles & Rich, 1984; Hamilton, 2012, p. 176; Rich &

Arguelles, 1985; Stout, 2014, p. 59). Sexuality is often regarded by Cubans in this literature as just one component part of someone's identity, and not necessarily one which needs to be foregrounded at all times. Keeping sexuality private and invisible from the public sphere allows Cuban people to gain respectability through their performance of other moral duties; as citizens, workers, family members, and community participants, using the compensation strategy described above. I use the concepts presented here to analyse how Cuban lesbian and bisexual women navigate in/visibility to achieve or resist normativity, and how this issue is structured by gender.

In summary, normative invisibility is sometimes a way of accessing respectability, and being respectable sometimes equates to being invisible. Normativity rests on the ability to blend in with others, keep sexuality discreet, and to perform moral duties successfully, especially in the public sphere. In Cuba, as in much of Latin America, the literature shows that normative invisibility is often regarded as protective and as a route to gaining respectability, decency, and a good life.

### Gender and sexuality norms in Cuba

In the above sections, I discussed the major historical and political developments that have contributed to contemporary Cuba's gender and sexuality norms, and the key concepts informing my analysis. I now turn to discussing the specific norms in Cuba, to frame my analysis of how lesbian and bisexual women construct their sense of self and how they navigate their lives, with reference to my main themes of respectability, invisibility, and normativity. This section explores the existing literature that led to my main research question: in intimate, community, and national practices and discourses, how do Cuban lesbian and bisexual women navigate, perform, and subvert gender and sexuality norms?

Traditional gender norms in Cuba can be described as *machismo*. As in other countries in Latin America, Cuban society is structured in a patriarchal way, where hegemonic masculinity gives power to men, and exerts expectations on women about their modest and respectable behaviour, sexual virtue, and prioritisation of their families' needs (Kersh, 2017, p. 72). While the Revolution may have improved the status of individual women, the patriarchal system and individual Cuban men remain largely unchanged (Garcia, 2008, p. 99). Stout (2014, p. 16) suggests that colonial norms of raced, classed, gendered, and sexualised morality have been complicated by the Cuban Revolution but not eradicated. Morad (2014, p. 16) describes the

Cuban *machista* gender system as retaining pre-Revolutionary concepts such as male superiority and the feminised sexual role as simply to please men. The *machista* gender system produces a moral value attached to men being ‘masculine’ and women being ‘feminine’, meaning that a ‘good’ woman is a feminine one. Men and women are regarded as strict opposites, complementary but definitively separate (Lundgren, 2011). Within LGBT Cuba, *machismo* is often discussed as an issue pertaining to men, frequently given as a main source producing homophobia against effeminate gay men, as the *machista* ideology rejects sexual diversity and homosexuality (Kirk, 2017). Kirk writes that a *machista* system ignores female sexuality in general (p. 9), and does not engage with female homosexuality at all (p. 14). *Machismo* is undoubtedly a problem for non-normative men, but I will show that it is also a problem for non-normative women, which is often overlooked.

The other side of *machismo* is ‘hegemonic femininity’ for women, which can be understood as the characteristics of ‘ideal womanhood’. Scholars have analysed Cuban femininity as anchored in visual and bodily gender expression and presentation. Heidi Härkönen’s work (e.g. Härkönen, 2015a, 2015b, 2016) shows that Cuban bodies of all ages are always on display, and that appearance is a highly important marker of correct gender performance. For women, “the adult female appearance favoured by both men and women consists of strong make-up, carefully manicured nails, and showy, skin-tight clothes that reveal the woman’s body shape” (Härkönen, 2014, p. 19). The ideal body type for women is given as ‘*la criolla*’ or ‘*la mulata*’, a highly exoticised, racialised form described as having a narrow waist, big bottom, big breasts, and mixed-race brown skin (Härkönen, 2014, p. 20; Lundgren, 2011, p. 132). Desirable femininity is highly racialised in Cuba, with most authors agreeing that lighter-skinned women with straight hair are considered more attractive (Allen, 2011; Almeida Junco, 2020; Fernandez, 2010; Saunders, 2010; Stout, 2014).

In Cuban society, heterosexual sex is regarded as a normal and healthy part of life, and discussed frankly and openly (Daigle, 2015, p. 26). It is common for heterosexual Cubans to be involved with more than one person at a time (Lundgren, 2011, p. 60), with infidelities acknowledged by both men and women. Although the Caribbean values men’s virility shown through having multiple partners and children, Härkönen’s (2016, p. 144) work shows that Cuban women are also sexual agents and just as likely to maintain more than one romantic interest. Both men and women are recognised as having sexual power in Cuba (Smith & Padula, 1996, p. 171). A woman’s sex appeal is regarded as an asset and source of pride and power, by both men and women. This is somewhat unlike other parts of Latin America, which

are sometimes described as having a *marianista* model which privileges a vision of women as only wives and mothers (La Fountain-Stokes, 2016) and vilifies women who have sex (Craske, 2014, p. 386). In Cuba, the literature shows that women's sex appeal, largely shown through their carefully curated appearance, is considered a natural, positive, attribute of femininity. These gender norms of *machismo* and desirable femininity are discussed thoroughly in the literature on heterosexual Cuban life, but not yet analysed well for non-heterosexual women, leading to my central research question aiming to explore how lesbian and bisexual Cuban women navigate, perform, and subvert gender and sexuality norms.

My first sub-question, discussed in Chapter 5, investigates how lesbian and bisexual Cuban women experience, at the individual level, the frameworks of acceptable gender and sexuality that are clearly evident in the literature. Femininity among lesbian and bisexual women is analysed as desirable in the handful of studies which discuss the issue in Cuba. Hamilton (2012), Saunders (2010), and Stout (2014) all agree that contemporary women-loving women enforce the same standards of desirable femininity as wider Cuban society, seen most clearly in expressions of their 'ideal woman'. Saunders (2010, p. 28) has established that, especially among white and *mulata* lesbian Cubans, desirability is based on hegemonic femininity including higher class, passivity, lighter skin, and thin bodies. Of Saunders' 15 respondents, all but two said they liked "feminine women with long hair" and "*mujeres finas*" (refined women), usually code for white or light-skinned women (Saunders, 2009b, p. 180) – in short, feminine 'normal' women.

Conversely, masculinity in women is often rejected by Cuban lesbian and bisexual women, and perhaps across Latinx cultures more widely. Short hair, men's clothes, and being too macho were rejected in possible lovers by two of Stout's respondents (2014, p. 124), which she analyses as an expectation and desire for gender conformity in their partners. Sierra Madero (2013) identifies how, in 1920s Cuba, masculine (presumed lesbian) women were considered in the press as repulsive, uncivilised, and failures of womanhood. Howe's analysis of Nicaraguan lesbian *activa/pasiva* (butch/femme) couples shows that masculine *activa* partners were stigmatised as gender transgressors, while their feminine *pasiva* partners were considered to be 'normal' women (Howe, 2013, p. 18). Acosta (2016, p. 524) states that Latina women in the USA chose to dress in a feminine style, and suggests that black/Latina lesbians might reject masculine presentation to resist the hypersexualisation stereotypes applied to black women. She does not develop this concept, but I explore how ethnicity factors into the need to present selves as normatively feminine as possible. Saunders (2010; 2009) and

Hamilton (2012, p. 186) note that, among women-loving women in Cuba, blackness is often read as masculinity, and both are stigmatised as low-class and unattractive. In 1994, a Cuban intellectual commented that the worst possible social position – in everyday life if not in official policy – would be to be an Afro-Cuban lesbian (Smith & Padula, 1996, p. 173).

These excerpts from the literature suggest that white hegemonic femininity in gender presentation continues to be a strong force for lesbian and bisexual women in Latinx cultures (Guillard Limonta, 2016). I developed an open-ended research question to analyse how individuals experience this: how do lesbian and bisexual Cuban women navigate gender norms, and how does their understanding of gender norms help them construct their own subjectivities? In Chapter 5, I explore individual subjectivities in relation to hegemonic femininity through the experiences of *activa/pasiva* couples, who are rarely mentioned in the literature, and who experience strong rejection by other LGBT Cubans because of *activas'* transgression of appropriate femininity.

The literature on Cuban women, gender, and families is in strong agreement that having a child is seen as inherently desirable for women, and specifically as fulfilling the requirements of womanhood (Andaya, 2014, p. 74), but there is almost nothing written on how lesbian and bisexual women navigate this imperative. Härkönen's work suggests that, for women, having a child completes the process of becoming a full adult, which is also noted in many parts of Latin America and North America (Andaya, 2014; Wekker, 1993; Weston, 1997). Motherhood is highly idealised in Cuba, by both women and men (Safa, 2009; Núñez Sarmiento, 2005), and Cuban policy more broadly. The literature on Cuba shows that it appears to be an alien concept that a woman might choose not to become a mother (Hamilton, 2012, 36). In colonial times, Smith and Padula (1996, p. 169) suggest that respectable women were supposed to not enjoy sex, but endure it with their husbands in order to reach their true source of satisfaction: children. The quintessential mother icon is found in Mariana Grajales Cuello, mother of independence hero Antonio Maceo. Jean Stubbs describes her mythologised as, "Her motherhood was not only that of the protective, nurturing mother. Hers was the motherhood of total and selfless dedication to a cause, sacrificing home, husband and children to war and making it good." (Stubbs, 1995, p. 313). The Revolutionary Cuban approach to women embraced a version of feminism that centred on motherhood, reifying it as moral (Garcia, 2008, p. 94) and as a Revolutionary act. Here, being a good, moral, respectable woman hinges on the strong imperative to have a child.

The literature on Cuban parenthood has ignored lesbian and bisexual women, transgender women and men, gay men, and other genders and sexualities. It has almost exclusively focused on heterosexual women, and very rarely even considered heterosexual men as fathers (Härkönen, 2014, p. 37). The very slim literature on non-heterosexual reproduction in Cuba suggests that it is a highly gendered discourse. A brief aside in Härkönen (2016, p. 65) notes that Cuban parents tend to believe that having a gay son means there will be no grandchildren, and in a footnote she notes that she never heard any gay men express a desire to have children. The normative conflation of Cuban women with motherhood appears strong enough that there is an implicit assumption that lesbian and bisexual women will have, or at least *want*, children, while gay men will not. This corresponds with Weston's earlier finding in the USA that lesbian women did not engage in much debate about whether they should or should not have children, but approached it more as a technical issue about *how* to have children (Weston, 1997, p. 167). Ryan-Flood (2009, p. 154) also recognises the discourse that lesbians are "marginally more acceptable" than gay men as parents, because of the construction of womanhood as inherently caring and nurturing. From another perspective, Andaya (2014, p. 74) briefly notes that gender and heterosexuality are so closely intertwined in Cuba that a woman who does not want children may suffer speculation about her sexual orientation. Becoming a mother is a normative expectation for most Cuban women, and is seen as an ultimate expression of femininity and womanhood. This literature on Cuban mothering, with its absence of non-heterosexual parenting, led to my second sub-question: how do lesbian and bisexual Cuban women understand, desire, or subvert norms of family life? How do they perform, resist, or subvert the dominant state and social narrative of women as mothers?

Family is understood by many scholars as the central social unit in Cuba (Hamilton, 2012, p. 26). 'The family' has long been a subject of discussion in the Cuban Revolution, with the state showing an ambivalence and inconsistency in its policies (Smith & Padula, 1996, p. 165), perhaps due to the duality of Cuban norms of both Caribbean matrifocality and European nuclearity. The Cuban family is described in the anthropological literature as matrifocal, lacking paternal presence, extended, with low levels of marriage, and with a high dependence on kin for material and care resources (Andaya, 2014; Härkönen, 2016; Pertierra, 2008; Safa, 2009; Stubbs, 1995). Despite this cultural norm, there also exists a long history of state promotion of legal, formal marriage, which has not been significantly successful, and a normative value of respectability ascribed to the nuclear family (Hynson, 2020).

The matrifocal structure is commonly found in Cuba, as in the rest of the Caribbean. Matrifocality is characterised by women's central position in the kinship system and as powerful within the household; the sense of family bonds being created primarily through mothers and children, with weak marital relations and the marginal position of men as fathers and husbands (Härkönen, 2014, p. 37). Contemporary Cuban households tend to be multi-generational (Härkönen, 2016), often headed by a grandmother (*abuela*). Her daughters are expected to live with her, or at least close by (Härkönen, 2016), while sons may move into their partner's mother's household. Men's role is to provide economic resources, fix things around the house, and do literal heavy lifting (Pertierra, 2008; Wig, 2021), but they may not live with their partner and children. It is common to have children with more than one partner, or for children to move between households (Härkönen, 2014). The literature on Cuba places this family model as normative to African heritage, although matrifocality is applicable to Cuban households of all ethnicities (Pertierra, 2008). Heterosexual couples may live in a 'consensual union' [*union consensual*], which is legally and socially recognised as equivalent to marriage, but without the formal ceremony or documentation. In the most recent census, in 2012, of the heterosexual Cubans who had some kind of conjugal bond, about half were formally married and half were living in a consensual union (Censo de Poblacion y Viviendas, 2012). Consensual union is perceived to be either a cultural artefact from African societies, brought by enslaved peoples, or a direct result of the Spanish prohibition on slaves formally marrying each other (Safa, 2009) – either way, it is normatively associated with blackness, although Cubans of all ethnicities practice consensual union.

Alongside matrifocality, Cuba also has nuclear families, marked by a legally married couple at the centre, with their biological children. In colonial times, marriage was strongly associated with whiteness, high class status, respectability, and the control of women's sexuality (Garcia, 2010, p. 174). At the Triumph of the Revolution, the new state heavily supported legal marriages, but tried to remove bourgeois class and economic meaning from them. The government's efforts to legalise long-standing unions and encourage new couples to wed were presented under socialist Revolutionary rhetoric as opening up the elite symbol of marriage to everyone (Hamilton, 2012); as protecting women and children's rights by legally binding men to the family (Härkönen, 2009); and as a symbol of modernity for Cuba (Härkönen, 2014, p. 5), moving away from the perceived low-class, 'backward', African family model. In economic terms, the government tried to break the family as a source of wealth, by banning family inheritances and expropriating family businesses (Smith & Padula, 1996, p. 145), which was supposed to remove economic motivations to get married, and create inheritance and legal

equality between married and unmarried citizens (Andaya, 2013, p. 737). At this time, the state appropriated legal marriage as a symbol of Revolutionary socialist moral values (Hynson, 2020, p. 132).

Despite the state's consistent efforts to promote legal marriage, the removal of class and economic meaning; the absence of the Catholic Church; and the persistence of matrifocality mean that legal marriage has lessened in importance through the Revolution. All authors agree that heterosexual marriage in contemporary Cuba is widely regarded as having little social importance. "While legal marriage seems to have lost its signification as a class-based ideal, this has not led to its wide popular adoption – as envisioned by the revolution – but rather to the erosion of its importance." (Härkönen, 2014, p. 6). Divorce is common and not stigmatised (Andaya, 2014, p. 76) and non-marital sex is regarded as a healthy and normal activity. For heterosexual Cubans, consensual union has the same rights as marriage, meaning there are few incentives to get married (Hynson, 2020, p. 264). While there is a persistent discourse put forward by the state that the 'model family' is a married, nuclear, heterosexual couple and their children (Hynson, 2020; Smith & Padula, 1996, p. 164), this model seems not to have taken hold in society (Hynson, 2020, p. 258). The Revolution's attempt to remove the class meaning of marriage, and economic incentives, appear to have created a situation where many Cubans feel there is no reason to get married at all. The unusual situation of the low importance of heterosexual marriage in Cuba but the strong emphasis put on same-sex marriage in the homonormativity literature, led me to explore how Cubans conceptualise same-sex marriage: how do lesbian and bisexual Cuban women understand, desire, or subvert norms of marriage?

Alongside same-sex marriage as a high-profile, public, political endeavour, and private family life, I wanted to include some aspects of lesbian and bisexual women's public-facing lives in Cuba, as an analysis of "gendered organisation of social space" (Hirsch et al., 2012) provides insights into how meanings of sexuality are produced. Gender analysis from around the world shows that lesbian women are very often less present and visible in LGBTIQ spaces, as a result of patriarchal systems giving women lower access to money, a higher likelihood than men of having dependent children, fear of violence (Casey, 2009), and persistent gender norms that honourable women should not be seen in public (Andaya, 2014, p. 27), or have a public presence away from their male family members (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 127). The global literature expresses a common tendency that lesbian women 'socialise at home' rather than in public (e.g. Engebretsen, 2014; Saunders, 2009a; Stella, 2015), because of gender norms that

restrict women's public presence, as is also the case in Cuba. Semi-legal or private parties held in someone's house are often mentioned in academic sources as Cuban spaces which cater more for lesbian and bisexual women than public areas like gay clubs or the *Malecón*, the sea wall in Havana, popular for an evening stroll (Allen, 2011; Hamilton, 2012; Saunders, 2009b). While gay men were reappropriating Cuban public space from male compulsory heterosexuality through the 1990s and 2000s (Larson, 2010; Saunders, 2009b), lesbian women kept a lower profile by using private space for their gatherings. King (2014, p. 102) argues that the active invisibilisation of women who desire women in the Caribbean requires that these women stay outside the public sphere, but she identifies that the public/private divide has likely always been more of a discursive ideal than actual practice. Cuba's Revolution denounced the public/private model for women, but discursive ideals hold a strong power, and the literature suggests that Cuban women still navigate respectability through where, and by whom, they are seen in public spaces. Saunders' work is vital here, as they are one of the few analysing lesbian experience of public space in Cuba, showing that women feel excluded and unwelcome in many public spaces, even those designated for LGBTQI people, as a result of *machismo*.

Women's discursive relegation to private spaces is reflected in the academic literature on the increasing tolerance for LGBTI Cubans in public and political spaces, media representations, and city nightlife, which is almost entirely a story about men (Leslie Santana, 2021; Saunders, 2009b). The political shift towards tolerance is undoubtedly important, particularly given the activist work to reframe male homosexuality within citizenship and national belonging, but entire sections of the population are overlooked and inequalities faced by other marginalised sexualities, such as lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women; and transgender men, are glossed over, to create a singular narrative that further marginalises them. Researchers of LGBTIQ Cuba frequently do not acknowledge that they are taking the male homosexual experience as representative of the wider community or justify why they are doing so, displaying a sexist bias (possibly unconscious) within the academy itself. At most, some scholars acknowledge that their work lacks engagement with lesbian women's experiences (Saunders, 2009b). Drawing from the broad observation that lesbian and bisexual women are often left out of academic discussions of 'LGBT Cuba' and seemingly from public life, I wanted to explore where they saw themselves fitting in to the 'LGBT community' in Cuba, in terms of their gendered experiences, leading to my final research sub-question: how do lesbian and bisexual women navigate gender in community spaces?

A final illumination of the gendered and sexual norms of moral respectability for Cuban women is provided by briefly examining disreputability, embodied by female hustlers, or *jinetas*<sup>6</sup>. One of the Revolution's 'greatest successes' was the eradication of women's prostitution (Sierra Madero, 2015), partly through guarantees of basic needs and education to all, and partly through prosecution, crackdowns, and re-education (Daigle, 2015, p. 52). But since the beginning of the Special Period, Cuba has seen an increase in prostitution and *jinetismo*, usually understood by scholars as a result of the economic crisis and lack of alternative sources of income (Garcia, 2010; Stout, 2014). *Jinetismo* is culturally associated with the fetishized *mulata* body in women, and the hypermasculine black body in men.

*Jinetismo* has stimulated much discussion in and about Cuba. For my research, the most pertinent point is the heavily moralising and disciplinary discourse coming from the state, accusing women of moral degradation (Daigle, 2015, p. 62). *Jinetas* are not condemned on grounds of sexual promiscuity in and of itself, as having plenty of sex is considered a healthy norm in Cuba (Stout, 2014, p. 60), but they are framed by ordinary Cubans and the state as lacking Revolutionary consciousness, being motivated only by economic gain, afraid of real work, and having 'low cultural level' (Hamilton, 2012; Hynson, 2020; Stout, 2014). Stout (2014) briefly mentions in her conclusion that through disassociation from *jinetos* conducting same-sex transactional sex among men, other homosexual Cubans were able to construct themselves as 'good gays' who deserve a place in the nation (Stout, 2014, p. 178). I pick up this thread and add a deeper gender analysis, to examine how lesbian and bisexual women position themselves within and against gendered narratives of morality and decency.

The literature on gender and sexuality in Cuba indicates a strong moral framework that determines respectability for women through gender normativity, which is as yet not sufficiently theorised for Cuban lesbian and bisexual self-identified women. Cuban norms produce a matrix of morality markers for women that include ethnicity, marriage, feminine appearance, motherhood, and public invisibility. Firstly, old, bourgeois norms produce a vision

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<sup>6</sup> *Jinetero* literally means 'jockey' and *jinetismo*, 'jockeying'. The term arose during the Special Period to describe Cubans' economic interactions with foreigners, including transactional sex, informal tour guiding, taxi-driving, obtaining black market cigars, taking tourists to the best salsa clubs, and so on. It now has a more sexual meaning, associated with exchanging sex with foreigners for cash, dinner, drinks, trips to hotels, or 'the boy/girlfriend experience'. Scholars (e.g. Daigle, 2015; Stout, 2014) argue that the term contains much more agency than traditional Cuban notions of the victimised prostitute, and imbues *jinetos/as* with considerable shrewdness as economic providers and manipulators of foreigners.

of gendered respectability that is achieved through adherence to white, European ideals, and through distance and divestment from Caribbean, African, or black social markers. These markers of women's worth are similar to those found in other Latin American contexts. Secondly, Cuba's Revolution adds some specific gender norms. In particular, the absence of the Catholic church, the prevalence of Afro-Cuban culture, and the socialist political model, result in a society which values sex and sex appeal, does not view marriage as normative, and encourages women to work outside the house and be politically active. Under these norms, respectability can also be achieved through feminine sex appeal (or, at least, conventionally feminine appearance), and participation in the socialist project through labouring for the atheist nation. I will draw on these two major sets of norms to explore how lesbian and bisexual women position themselves to gain or resist respectability, invisibility, or normativity. Cuba's unique position as a socialist Global South country where it is legal to be gay makes it a provocative case study which challenges scholars on how to think about normativity.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

My purpose in starting this research was to follow anthropologists of sexuality in exploring how lesbian and bisexual women produce and navigate gender and sexuality norms, and how those norms structure their lives and their sexualities. I took inspiration from Elisabeth Engebretsen's work with lesbian *lala* women in China, and aimed to similarly examine the wide range of social factors which make certain representations of self, family, and community desirable, and others less so (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 154). I also oriented myself alongside Evelyn Blackwood, taking a broad view to explore women's subjectivities through discourse, practices, and social relations (Blackwood, 2010, p. 1). Following these kinds of studies meant that I wanted to take an approach that included ethnographic methods, participant-observation, interviews, and conversations, and that was quite open-ended about topics and key issues, letting them be defined by the participants. Ethnographic methods offer a challenge to the universalising tendencies of theoretical sexuality frameworks that assume pan-cultural identities and practices, by emphasising the geopolitical context in which sexualities are constructed (Connors Jackman, 2010). Nonetheless, I take the position that interviews and even in-depth ethnography remain only a snapshot of a chapter in someone's life and how they choose to present themselves at that moment, to that researcher (Stout, 2014, p. 18). As an international development specialist, I was also conscious of my desire to produce research that would have concrete use for policymakers, NGOs, and activists, and which would be oriented towards improving lives as well as recording them.

My vision of long-term, in-depth ethnography in Cuba was, however, hindered by several factors. Anthropology and oral history have little academic authority in Cuba, and are not well regarded by academics and policy officials. This kind of research is therefore difficult to conduct as it has little institutional support. Ethnography, especially by foreigners, was all but absent from the island for thirty years after Oscar Lewis was ejected in 1970 (Andaya, 2014, p. 5). Fernandez (2010, p. 12) suggests that this was in part because of the Cuban state's fear of exposure of less-than-perfect socialism in the country, while individual Cubans may be justifiably afraid of saying something to an anthropologist that might have repercussions for them (Chase, 2020). However, since Mona Rosendahl's significant ethnography in 1997 on everyday perceptions of the Revolution (Rosendahl, 1997), a steady stream of anthropologists has managed to conduct long-term ethnographies in Cuba, although the Cuban academy is still distrustful. Oral history projects have faced particular suspicion and setbacks (Chase, 2020;

Hamilton, 2012), which is unfortunately the type of project where women's voices might be best heard, especially black and poor women. Two young female Cuban authors of a recent oral history book said, "Projects in the field of oral history can be viewed with a kind of suspicion or reluctance, or attributed with a lack of rigor.... [oral history] does not have a lot of presence or reach." (Chase, 2020, p. 214). I was often asked by academics about my scientific methods and whether I was doing a survey, and my answers along the lines that I was doing 'deep hanging out' were met with some scepticism about the value of this kind of work. Respondents, on the other hand, were more supportive of my work once they realised I was interested in listening to whatever they thought was important.

Cuban bureaucracy often threw up impenetrable barriers to my research (cf. Härkönen, 2014, p. 46). I was anxious to get the correct visa for fieldwork, justifiably concerned about having my paperwork in order in this bureaucratic and suspicious context. But I never managed to acquire 'official' permission to conduct research. Like Carrie Hamilton and Elizabeth Dore (Hamilton, 2012, p. viii), I consistently met officials who thought my project sounded worthwhile but refused to give formal support. My original proposal of a year's ethnography was also far beyond the duration of most foreign researchers' visits, where permission is usually granted for two to six months (Tony Kapcia, personal communication). Ethnographers of Cuba have usually conducted their participant-observation through several short visits over a number of years, for example Noelle Stout and Jafari S. Allen, who both spent up to ten years following their interlocutors' lives (Allen, 2011; Stout, 2014), but give no indication of their visa status in their published work; and Heidi Härkönen (2016), who undertook several research trips of a few months each because of visa difficulties. In doctoral research similar to mine, Emily Kirk collected most of her archival data from CENESEX in two months, and Megan Daigle her interviews with *jineteras* in six months (Daigle, 2015; Kirk, 2015). I suspect, like Daigle and me (2015, p. 13), many foreign researchers eventually give up on achieving official permission to conduct fieldwork. I managed to gain the informal blessing of the lesbian and bisexual women's network at CENESEX, which seemed to suffice in terms of 'official support' if I was asked about my affiliations. To make the best of my situation, I reoriented my methods towards development ethnographic research and interviews, which can be done in a shorter space of time than traditional anthropological ethnography (Kees van Donge, 2006). I circumvented bureaucratic obstacles by enrolling for Spanish classes at the University of Havana, giving me a student visa which allowed me to stay in the country for longer than a tourist, but which meant I juggled my research time with classes every day and homework. Despite my continuing education in Spanish, my language skills were never excellent, and I

worked with several different research assistants as translators. This meant that my interactions with respondents tended more towards recorded interviews with simultaneous translation than free-flowing participant-observation (Bujra, 2006).

I conducted a preliminary scoping trip to Havana for one month in July 2016, then two field trips to collect data from April to July 2017, and September 2017 to January 2018. The bulk of my data collection was therefore through 2017. For the final trip, my male partner accompanied me and we rented a room with a small private kitchen in Havana, giving me some much-needed independent space to work, away from the structured rhythms of *casas particulares* catering to tourists. As will resonate with many anthropologists, the timing of my trips was frustrating in relation to what was happening in Cuba. In November 2016, Fidel Castro Ruz died, when I should have been in Cuba but was actually at home waiting for a visa. Just after I finished fieldwork in 2018, the new Constitution proposed legalising same-sex marriage, which prompted fiery debates that I watched as best I could from home. And in April 2019, a year after I finished fieldwork, Raúl Castro Ruz stepped down as President and First Secretary, heralding a ‘new era’ for Cuban politics. Shortly after this, the annual *Jornada contra Homofobia y Transfobia* (International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, May 17<sup>th</sup>) was cancelled by the government for still unclear reasons, causing a considerable activist protest. I was disappointed at being away from Cuba for all these events. But perhaps my poor timing has some benefits for ethnography – my research is not dominated by ‘historic events’ but reflects the much more ordinary everyday activities of participants’ lives.

## People in this research

### My positionality

In accordance with best practice in anthropology, and especially queer anthropology, it is necessary to include a reflexive discussion of my own positionality in this research. Situating the author acknowledges that all knowledge is incomplete and mediated by the author’s interpretation, and provides the reader with some information with which to evaluate the truth claims presented (Weiss, 2011). Ethnographers have long understood the importance of reflexivity and how the researcher’s identity affects research findings. A queer approach advances this understanding by undoing the idea of the ethnographer as a stable self, and requires the researcher to pay attention to their own shifting identity (Rooke, 2010). Encounters and relations in fieldwork complicate easy boundaries between researcher and

researched, as research itself is always already relational (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). The interpretive turn in ethnography recognises that the researcher participates in constructing the cultural happenings they observe, as much as 'truthfully' reporting back, and that respondents' "self-explanations offered to the ethnographer are offered on the basis of the informants' understanding of the *kind of person* the ethnographer is." (Rooke, 2010, p. 152. Italics in original). As such, I make no claims to objective neutrality but instead recognise that the way this research has turned out is because of who *I* am as much as who participants are.

The first and most important consideration here is that I am not an 'insider' in the group of people I am studying. I do not identify as lesbian or bisexual and I am not Cuban. I am also white, educated, and middle-upper class, all of which mark me out as an 'outsider'. This issue consumed me before fieldwork: what if no one would speak to me? What right did I have to speak for them, when I knew nothing personally about the experiences they had been through? What if they thought my work was bad, or worse, exploitative? Was I just extracting data to further my own career? It is not an overstatement to say that I wrestled with my conscience for a long time as well as formal research ethics, especially given the colonial history of anthropology and international development. I remain uneasy with the philosophical implications of academic fieldwork in a foreign site, as many of my contemporaries are. To some extent, all ethnographers grapple with the politics of their presence in research contexts and their speaking for a group of people. No matter which approach I took, or how good my Spanish was, I was always going to be positioned as a privileged foreigner taking information about Cubans back to a foreign university. To mitigate this, I presented early findings at the annual Cuba Research Forum conference in July 2017, a meeting open to all in Havana, and I will send my completed thesis directly to CENESEX. I remain connected online to key informants, and supportive of their changing needs through several natural disasters and the Covid-19 pandemic. My Cuban friends mostly seemed eager to talk about their lives, and I feel that my research produced a number of new insights and made a valuable addition to collective knowledge about lesbian and bisexual lives, which can be evaluated in relation to my positionality and methods of gathering information.

The insider/outsider dilemma rests on the assumption that being an insider and sharing common traits brings a greater ability to access participants, greater trust and understanding, which in turns leads to more insight and 'better' research. Insider status is privileged in research because it assumes that sharing an identity produces 'truer' access to knowledge (Valentine, 2002, cited in Nash, 2010, p. 136). However, queer theory challenges this

assumption. As several chapters in *Queer Methods and Methodologies* (2010) point out, insider status does not necessarily confer access or preternatural insight, nor does it remain a monolithic box that has been ticked in a research proposal. Insights from queer theory show that the insider/outsider binary is rather too tidy and that, more usually, researchers move fluidly and uncomfortably across this boundary, being neither fully inside nor outside at any given time. For example, Engebretsen highlights that she was an outsider (foreign) and insider (lesbian) at the same time, and also moved across boundaries of being a researcher and/or activist during her fieldwork (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 27). Nash shared lived experiences of queer spaces with some of her transgender men interviewees when they were living as women, but had no commonalities with their experiences of spaces when they were living as men, meaning that her understanding shifted between insider/outsider status within a single interview (Nash, 2010, p. 138). She highlights that the relations between researcher and researched are “perpetually unstable” and constantly remade (Nash, 2010, p. 138). Queer theory encourages anthropologists to think of research relationships as a moment in time and space co-constituted by both researcher and researched, rather than indicative of a permanent uncovering of the ‘truth’ (Gorman-Murray et al., 2010, p. 101). It is the interview process itself that determines the research findings, not any fixed subject position of either researcher or researched. Like Gordon Waitt (Gorman-Murray et al., 2010, p. 101), I found myself any or all of friend, stranger, confidant, distrusted, expert, student, listener, complicit, both insider and outsider during my fieldwork.

Queer scholars point out that a shared ‘queer’ subject position does not *necessarily* lead to shared understanding nor more meaningful or insightful research. In Cuba, Stout (2014, p. 21), suggests that a shared sexual subjectivity might in fact elide or gloss over the extremely unequal power relations between a foreign researcher and a Cuban. Gorman-Murray et al. (2010) describe how one author had the least informative interviews with people he shared most traits with, and the more informative with those he had differences with. He found that those respondents tried hard to articulate what they wanted to say, and needing to explain things clearly to the researcher was an effective way to draw out insightful specificities. I also found it useful to ‘play dumb’ or ask ‘naïve questions’ in some of my interviews, to encourage people to clarify or further explain what they meant (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015) and put them in the position of expert. Engebretsen (2014) notes that being ‘the stranger’ does not necessarily mean a lack of access, and sometimes people find it easier to open up to an outsider rather than their peers.

In Cuba, all this is exacerbated for sexual minorities because of the historic witch-hunts and denunciations by other Cubans. Abel Sierra Madero, a Cuban scholar, found that he could not access all Cubans because they thought he might be police or a state representative, while people were often more willing to talk to foreigners as they represent opportunities (Sierra Madero, 2015). He also notes that foreign texts are less subject to censorship. In my research area, it is often someone with foreign protection who is more able to write a critique of LGBTIQ issues in Cuba, as it remains dangerous for Cubans to do so. I found that being a foreigner had some advantages with the sensitive topic of LGBTIQ issues, as I am not subject to Cuban control of narratives nor was I perceived as someone who would gossip or tell stories to the authorities. A recent interview with Cuban academic Ailynn Torres Santana reflects how there is growing acceptance of non-Cubans writing about Cuba (Chase, 2020). At its best, being an outsider can bring a critical freshness to the study, directly acknowledge unequal power relations, and provide an escape valve for issues that are too sensitive to discuss with involved peers. My end-point, then, in this discussion, is that ‘outsiders’ like me have a valid contribution to make to the critical study of Cuban lesbian and bisexual women precisely from the negotiated and unstable position of being outsiders, which can be enriched by researchers of all subject positions carrying this work forward. I remain engaged with policy debate and online discussions about issues important to my friends and research respondents, and of course, keeping up with their lives.

Beyond sexuality, I found two identity issues working in my favour during fieldwork: one, I am not American; two, I am assigned female at birth. In a context where English-speaking foreigners have often been agents of American imperialism, I found that explaining that I was British (or English) often reassured people. Although I do of course bring my own political views with me, not being from the USA seemed to give Cubans some relief, as I was perceived not to be immediately engaged with the ongoing and historical tension between the two countries; or perhaps that I was on their side rather than the Americans’, like many international solidarity visitors to Cuba. Instead, conversations about the Queen, Harry Potter, the Beatles, or Manchester United seemed benign and non-threatening, and provided a common ground that was not fraught with political tension. I also often described myself as a student [*estudiante*] rather than a researcher [*investigadora*] as this seemed to assuage some fears about being scrutinised by a foreigner, even a British one.

Secondly, my gender seemed to provide a sense of alignment or alliance. If I wasn’t directly asked if I was a lesbian, which happened more often than not, I would usually volunteer my

heterosexuality early on, for trust and transparency. There was often an expectation that only LGBT people would be interested in LGBT issues (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015), which I countered by somewhat uncomfortably over-emphasising other aspects of my identity (feminist, woman) in order to foster connections with women based on sameness, and to minimise differences (Gorman-Murray et al., 2010; Muñoz, 2010). I arrived at this topic of research through a long engagement with women's rights and gender equality, eventually focusing on lesbian and bisexual women as among the most marginalised and ignored within international development gender discussions. I found that presenting myself with this alignment seemed to justify why I was interested in lesbian and bisexual women's stories, once generating a round of applause in a group interview after my clumsy delivery in Spanish of my strong support for women's rights. Describing myself as a woman allied with other women was a strong position to take, developing empathy and understanding (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). I have no doubt that a man, even a queer man, would have had more difficulty conducting this research than I did.

However, on the personal level, I do not identify that strongly as a woman, which I came to realise through my engagement with these topics. In my first months of fieldwork, I dressed and presented myself with my ordinary, not very feminine, appearance. After some time in Cuba experiencing the heavy pressure of hegemonic gender expectations, I found myself wanting to appear more feminine in order to fit in better. I bought new, feminine, clothes and started wearing jewellery, and received positive, affirming comments from my Cuban friends. A year after I returned home, I cut off my hair and reoriented myself as un-feminine again. I now consider this episode as indicative of the weight of gender norms in Cuba and the pressure to conform to certain codes of appearance, plus my researcher's desire to fit in as well as possible. Like Rooke (2010), I was deeply self-conscious of my performance of normative gender as an attempt to gain credibility and acceptance. During the final part of my PhD, I took a year off to have my first baby. My personal experience of having a child necessarily coloured my analysis of how women I met talked about motherhood, and helped me retrospectively understand the longing, sadness, and joy expressed by women who had limited support to have children. I also found myself leaning in to my feminine side again, and that this life-changing event significantly impacted how I think about and understand a wide range of gendered issues, from career options to bodily changes. It is not often commented on, but significant personal events like having a baby can shape research as much as intellectual positions or connections (Pertierra, 2007a). My own ambiguous and shifting gender identity highlights how both researcher and research subjects do not have fixed and

stable selves, but flexible and changing subjectivities. The process of interviewing and researching itself may have changed our identities, even while we were reifying them through discussion (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). As such, my data here is just a limited and provisional account (Boellstorff, 2007b, p. 13) of how people chose to present themselves to me in that specific moment, which is not a permanent ‘truth’.

## Respondents

Queer approaches continue to wrangle with the myriad problems with any choice of term or categorisation based on an assumption of stable sexuality and identity (see Weston, 2009), but for want of a better option, I drew a boundary around the people I am interested in based on self-identification. I wanted to analyse the experiences of people who identify as women who consider themselves to have a sexual, erotic, or romantic interest in other women. Sexual orientation was thus my main axis of inclusion in this research, rather than gender. The primary respondents might be called cisgender women, but ‘cisgender’ is not in common usage in Cuba and is not a self-identified label. Some people who were assigned female at birth expressed their gender as masculine, or fluidly, or told me they were ‘a bit of both’. But they all identify themselves as women, however they choose to define that for themselves. I include transgender people in this research, but I only found one transgender woman who identifies herself as a lesbian, and she told me she is the only transgender lesbian in Cuba. Other transgender women I met described themselves as straight, heterosexual, or attracted to men. I interviewed one transgender man to capture his experience of resisting being defined as a lesbian or masculine woman – at the time of my research, he was the only out transgender man willing to be interviewed, but there has since been new CENESEX support for transgender men.

I interviewed 33 primary respondents for this research. The terms people use to describe their sexual orientation vary, but fall within a few main categories: lesbian [*lesbiana*]; bisexual [*bisexual*]; or open [*abierta*], which are discussed in more depth in Chapter 5. Of these women, 19 said they are lesbian, three bisexual, and 11 used other terms or did not use a specific term. In the latter group, some people told me they are ‘open’ to all sexual experiences, and some that they choose not to define their sexuality. I settled on ‘lesbian and bisexual women’ to write this thesis, as these two terms are commonly used and understood by participants, and capture how most people think about sexual orientation. However, I do not use these terms as strictly bounded identity categories, but as expedient shorthand to indicate a broad range of

experiences and subjectivities of self-identified women who have a sexual, erotic, or romantic interest in other women. My use of the term 'lesbian and bisexual women' is explicitly inclusive of both cisgender and transgender women, and people who define their gender in ways that include only sometimes identifying as a woman, not necessarily always.

My primary respondents are aged between 19 and 59, capturing quite a wide range of generational experience, although none who were alive at the triumph of the Revolution in 1959. I felt it important to record some indication of ethnicity and class, but these issues can be hazy given Cuba's official racelessness and classlessness. Like Stout (2014, p. 19), I did not seek out people of specific ethnicities, but as time went on, I pursued interviews with more fervour with people from groups I felt were under-represented, in order to capture a range of experience (Willis, 2006). My research assistant Camila and I sometimes asked people what level of education they have as a proxy indicator of class, and we often discussed between ourselves the conditions people live in, their location, jobs, and other markers of socio-economic position.

A small group of five older women in Havana make up most of the women who fully identified themselves as black or African. They are aged 45 to 50 and represent themselves as poor or working-class, although several have bachelors' level degrees. This group was also slightly more likely to say they are 'lesbian', although one person only uses her name to indicate her sexuality, and one is an *activa*. I read their labelling as 'lesbian' as in line with their high-profile activism with CENESEX and as a politicised stance. 13 women are *mulata* or mixed race, and 15 white. My sampling is therefore in line with the official ethnicity demographics reported in the Cuban census<sup>7</sup>, although I would suggest that white women are somewhat over-represented in both places, and black women under-represented. The *mulata* group includes the *activa/pasiva* women from Havana discussed in Chapter 5, and otherwise women who mostly identify themselves as lesbian. The *mulata* group are mostly in their twenties, and are working- and middle-class, with many holding bachelors' degrees. The 15 white women in my research include the only three women identified as 'high-class', or wealthy, which I identified by their ability to travel abroad or ownership of good quality apartments. Other white women are in the upper end of the 'middle-class' bracket, many hold degrees, and this group has the widest

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<sup>7</sup> 64.1% white; 9.3% black; 26.6% *mestizo*. These are the only categories given as options in the census, and classified only according to skin colour and appearance rather than any family history or genealogy. (Censo de Poblacion y Viviendas, 2012)

age range. The white women are much more likely to describe their sexuality as ‘open’, including the same three who are ‘high-class’. I believe there is great scope to further analyse the relationship between higher class, whiteness, and more ‘open’ or fluid sexualities. I did not probe this deeply enough to draw any strong conclusions, and my assessment of people’s socio-economic position is intended only as a thumbnail sketch to illustrate roughly where my respondents lie in the complex field of racialised and classed gender and sexuality in Cuba.

*Table 1: Respondent demographics*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Class</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Lisett	Havana	45	Black	Middle	Bachelor’s degree	Name	
Yamila	Havana	34	Black	Working		Lesbian	<i>Activa</i>
Caridad	Havana	45	Black	Working		Lesbian	
Dayana	Havana	50	Black	Working		Lesbian	
Marú	Havana	50	Black	Working	Technical Degree	Lesbian	
Misleidy	Havana	26	<i>Mulata</i>	Middle	Technical Degree	Bisexual	
Yudelkis	Havana	21	<i>Mulata</i>	Working		Bisexual	<i>Pasiva</i>
Daimary	Havana	29	<i>Mulata</i>	Working	Technical Degree	Lesbian	<i>Activa</i>
Ofelia	Havana	25	<i>Mulata</i>	Working	Technical Degree	Lesbian	<i>Pasiva</i>
Odalys	Santa Clara	25	<i>Mulata</i>	Working		Lesbian	<i>Activa</i>
Carmen	Havana	22	<i>Mulata</i>	Working		Open	<i>Pasiva</i>
Yamileisis	Havana	27	<i>Mulata</i>	Working			<i>Activa</i>
Belkis	Havana	28	<i>Mulata</i>	Working-Middle	Technical Degree	Lesbian	
Ibis	Santa Clara	20	<i>Mulata</i>			Lesbian	
Yeniset	Santa Clara	29	<i>Mulata</i>			Lesbian	
Isiairis	Havana	42	<i>Mulata/India</i>	Middle	Technical Degree	Lesbian	Transgender
Yanelis	Santa Clara	35	<i>Mulata/India</i>	Middle	Bachelor’s degree	Lesbian	
Dania	Havana	52	<i>Mulata/Jaba</i>	Working	Bachelor’s degree	Lesbian	
Maritsa	Havana	32	White	High		Open	
Daysi	Havana	59	White	High		Open	
Yadira	Havana	30	White	High		Open	
Liana	Matanzas	50	White	Middle	Technical Degree	Lesbian	

Leidy	Santa Clara	29	White	Middle		Lesbian	
Ydairis	Havana		White	Middle		Open	
Norma	Havana		White	Working	Technical Degree	Lesbian	
Lixa	Havana	40	White	Working	Technical Degree		
Heydi	Havana	56	White	Working	Technical Degree		
Suleidy	Havana	24	White			Bisexual	<i>Pasiva</i>
Maria	Havana	27	White			Lesbian	
Mayte	Havana	28	White		Bachelor's degree	Lesbian	
Isabel	Matanzas	51	White			Lesbian	
Arianny	Matanzas	19	White			Open	
Dachelys	Matanzas	38	White		Bachelor's degree	Open	

Many of these women are activists too, but I have made a somewhat artificial separation between this group and my second group, who hold positions in organisations relevant to women's rights and LGBTI rights. The group of secondary respondents contains 23 men and women who cover a range of positions: CENESEX officials, an FMC representative, academics, activists, civil society workers, international NGO representatives, nightclub managers, a church pastor, and an artist. They are people who can speak to my research topics from an informed perspective, but I have mostly used their interviews for context and background, to fill in gaps, or to comment on specific questions, for example, the legal situation.

#### Research assistants

It is common practice in development research to hire a research assistant or interpreter familiar with the cultural context and local language (Bujra, 2006). Due to my caution about my own language skills, and rather than struggle alone through a limited time in Cuba and potentially misunderstand important statements, I opted to employ a research assistant and translator to help with fieldwork. Although I wanted to find a queer female assistant, to enable an insider familiarity and alignment with people talking about sensitive topics (Boyce & Pant, 2001), in the end, I worked with several different people.

My first assistant was a man I will call Osmany, who I met when he was working at CENESEX as a liaison officer and who thus had many useful connections. He was young, straight, black, and based in Havana. He introduced me to his network of activists and people who attended CENESEX meetings, which was extremely useful at the beginning of fieldwork. As a straight

man, his gendered experience was removed from that of participants, which may have created a distance similar to mine of being foreign, white, and straight. However, he was black and lived in a poor barrio of Havana, which meant that his understanding of everyday life resonated with interviewees. His own interest and lived experience of economic struggle coloured how he interpreted and posed my questions in Spanish, which reframed my early interviews through a more local lens, focusing on issues of economic inequality. Because I was more interested in the intimate experience of gender and sexuality, on my second research trip, I chose to find another assistant, a young woman I will call Camila, also straight, black, and from Havana, whom I met through a friend. Camila was trained in translation and highly academic, with her own interests focusing on black representation in literature. As a young, black feminist, Camila was highly attuned to the intersectional issues facing participants, and her academic abilities meant she understood why I asked interviewees questions in particular ways. She was a useful partner to discuss the research with, and her insights on blackness and racism were particularly illuminating and insightful. When we created a women-only environment in our interviews (notwithstanding my own gender fluctuations), I felt that this was a more supportive and freer space, where participants (and myself) seemed to be more comfortable talking about intimate issues. In one of our interviews, Ofelia was in tears after breaking up with Daimary, and both Camila and I felt like we switched off our researcher identities and moved to simply comforting Ofelia as a friend, which was no doubt in part because Ofelia felt safe talking to us. Both Camila's and my positionality as young women helped create empathy with respondents. The gender identity and demographic profile of all involved, therefore, had some impact on how I conducted this research, and moderated the specific subjects that were raised. These two assistants were heavily involved in seeking respondents, arranging meetings, helping me travel to events on the convoluted bus system, translating on the fly, and discussing our observations. I paid both of them for their services. In my other sites of Matanzas and Santa Clara, I asked for ad hoc translation from Eduardo, an older black gay man, and Luis, a straight young *mulato* man who worked in El Mejunje. I did not pay these two men but did pay for some meals in restaurants and small gifts as compensation. To facilitate my analysis later and not rely purely on the translator's interpretation, I audio recorded as much as possible.

I found the assistants invaluable in conducting this research, making the data collection much richer than I could have managed on my own. It was helpful to have someone to debrief with after an interview or event, to discuss our interpretations of what had happened (De Neve, 2016). And sometimes I found it useful to talk with the assistants after an interview where I

had found myself quietly nodding and agreeing with something I personally objected to, which I did to build a space for people to feel comfortable telling me their opinions (Naveed et al., 2017). Debriefing helped me release negative or judgemental feelings in a way that would not directly affect a participant, and helped me rebalance my critical thinking about the research findings (Naveed et al., 2017). My reflective exchanges with assistants and other friends were crucial in increasing my understanding of the context and history of LGBT Cuba although they are not a designated 'fieldwork method' (De Neve, 2016). The use of assistants exposes the narrative fiction of ethnography (Clifford, 1986, cited in De Neve, 2016) – ethnographic research is never a 'true' rendition of life as it actually happens, but is the interpretation of life by the researcher. My social constructivist approach means that a translator is not necessarily seen to 'contaminate' the data, but is part of the process of constructing meanings in the already contrived research encounter. Both Osmany and Camila made efforts to maintain a neutral disposition during interviews and to translate my questions as directly as possible, but their presence certainly affected how and what respondents wanted to talk about. I was always conscious that respondents were not just talking to me, but directly or indirectly talking to the interpreters as well. As my assistants were mostly young, I had the impression that respondents spoke to them as peers, rather than official survey-takers or bureaucratic academics. It may have been helpful that none of the assistants were formally associated with CENESEX, meaning that they were not perceived as government representatives, therefore allowing more freedom of speech.

## Methods

### Meeting people and snowballing

I knew from my reading that lesbian and bisexual women in Havana (and presumably, the rest of Cuba), were perceived to be a shadowy group, hard to access (Allen, 2012; Härkönen, 2016, p. 157). Although gay men and transgender women are relatively visible in public spaces and the media, the 'lesbian community' is not organised; there is only the CENESEX network for official support, and most contact is informal and social (Hamilton, 2012, p. 178). My first points of contact were organisations and events, as these were easiest to identify. Through the CENESEX women's network coordinators in Havana and Santa Clara, I was introduced to local activists and network members, who kindly invited me to events and performances where I met other potential participants. I was, however, very conscious of the need to go beyond the

official, government-sponsored network, for fear of uncritically presenting a government point of view (Hamilton, 2012, p.viii) and I also spent time meeting people in other ways.

I met many people in gay clubs on a Saturday night, and sometimes did interviews there and then, but more usually asked for a phone number and arranged a meeting later. I was keen to be in Havana for the *Jornada contra Homofobia y Transfobia* (International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, May 17<sup>th</sup>), as I knew there would be plenty of opportunity to meet people and participate in activities. I conducted an intensive week of interviews, attendance at speeches, screenings, the lavish Gala performance, the *conga* itself, and – of course – an afterparty in a club. I also met the *Iglesia de la Comunidad Metropolitana* (ICM; Metropolitan Community Church) for the first time at the *Jornada*. I then followed ICM to their core community in Matanzas, and attended ICM services in all three of my field sites, often asking congregants for an interview afterwards. My research assistants were sometimes with me in these social spaces, and sometimes not. One person (Carmen) replied to a Facebook message I posted in a relevant group, and through her, I met all the *activa/pasiva* women in Havana who feature in this research and whose insights make a significant contribution to my analysis. Her desire to be connected online and willingness to meet foreigners was beneficial for me, highlighting the unpredictable factor of serendipity in fieldwork (De Neve, 2016). I always asked people at the end of an interview if they knew anyone else who would like to participate, and found this to be a successful method of meeting new people, and of moving further away from CENESEX networks. Personal contacts and social networks were far more fruitful than my parallel efforts to pursue official help from CENESEX, the FMC, and the University of Havana, as they were densely bureaucratic, hard to get hold of, and slow.

#### Field sites

I initially planned to conduct interviews solely in Havana, while aware that most research on Cuba also falls into the trap of taking the capital as representative of the rest of the country (Härkönen, 2014, p. 46). I was pleased when the reason and opportunity to travel to other cities presented itself. I was repeatedly told that I needed to visit El Mejunje, the big LGBT community centre in Santa Clara, and when I connected with the ICM church, I chose to travel to Matanzas to talk to the community there. These two cities present a different picture of LGBT Cuba than the capital, and are useful to extend academic knowledge of life in less urbanised areas of the country. My travelling across and between three cities allows me to trace connections and relationships across private and public spaces, and how the personal

and political intersect (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 23), as opposed to a more classical 'thick description' ethnography looking in depth at a specific event or case (Kees van Donge, 2006, p. 184).

Santa Clara is Cuba's fifth largest city, located in the middle of the country, and is most famously known as the resting place of Che Guevara, laid here to memorialise the final battle of the Revolution. Tourists regularly come here because of this, which El Mejunje has benefited from. It has a small-town feel, with a typical central plaza where people gather at dusk to chat, drink, and use the wifi. It is still relatively common, although now more of a tourist trap, to travel around the city in horse-drawn carts, and on Sundays I often saw children getting a thrill from riding around the plaza in a goat-drawn carriage. Matanzas is a smaller town, located on the north coast about 90 minutes' drive from Havana (on a good day). It has far less tourism than Havana or Santa Clara, though it is a convenient stopping point on the way to Varadero, the highly popular sun, sea, and sand tourist destination. Matanzas people are proud of their reputation for being the birthplace of Cuban poetry, music, and dance, though many felt the city is now struggling. In many ways it is quite typical of Cuban cities, being less tourist-focused, having only one or two venues for LGBT gatherings, and a small, close-knit, community of LGBT people. I went to both cities on weekend trips from Havana, spending considerable time in Santa Clara, but only a few visits to Matanzas. In this way, I conducted ad hoc multi-sited ethnography, through following some connections and important locations under the direction of Cubans, in accordance with my open-minded approach to the research topic (De Neve, 2016).

## Interviews

My primary method of data collection was audio recorded semi-structured interviews. Interviews are useful for examining processes and motivations, to understand why people make particular choices, and their beliefs (Willis, 2006, p. 146). I regard interviews not as revealing external realities, but as accessing the stories and narratives people use to construct and make meaning of their world (Silverman, 2005). Most interviews were one-to-one (with the research assistant), but a few were with couples or group interviews. Interviews typically lasted between one and two hours. I used an interview schedule with broad topics and themes to help guide the discussion, but the purpose of the interviews was to elicit and understand responses rather than extract definitive answers to particular questions (Kees van Donge, 2006, p. 184). The interview schedule was adapted and adjusted over time, as new themes

emerged. I translated it into Spanish beforehand, so as much as possible I spoke and presented my questions in Spanish. If it wasn't clear, the research assistant would help explain what I was asking. Most interviews were conducted in Spanish, with simultaneous translation by the research assistant, but a few were in English, as decided by the interviewee. If I knew an interview would be in English, I conducted these without a translator, which also gave me the chance to observe how the social dynamics and topics differed from when I was with my Cuban assistants. Quotes originally given in English are marked as such. I found it surprising how few studies of Cuba written in English specify which language researchers used and their level of fluency, but this is a common lacuna in ethnographic studies (Gibb & Danero Iglesias, 2017).

My interviews always started by introducing myself, my research purpose and usage, explaining confidentiality, asking about audio recording, and establishing how much time the interviewee had available. I usually presented my information sheet and consent form at the beginning of the interview (see below on confidentiality). Like Hamilton's oral history project (Hamilton, 2012, p.ix), I started with personal life history questions, as I felt these to be non-threatening and to leave space for interviewees to put forward what they thought was most important (Willis, 2006). We talked about family life; relationships past and present; and desires for motherhood and marriage. I often asked people to tell me about their first relationship with a woman as a way to explore how they discovered their sexuality and how they described it. I also often asked them to tell me about what kind of women they liked, or their ideal woman, as a way to discuss appearance norms. We usually talked about *machismo* in the form of *piropos* [catcalling; see Chapter 5], leading into discussions of public space and levels of comfort in different spaces.

The second half of my question themes were around society and public discourse, which were also the questions I used for my second group of respondents: the policymakers and officials. I usually asked whether the interviewee thought there was a 'gay community' [*comunidad gay*] in Cuba, how visible it was, and whether it included lesbian and bisexual women. I asked people about representation in the media and in policy and politics, and how they were treated in the workplace, school, and the health system. Some people I asked about the *Jornada*, gay pride, and the rainbow flag. I always ended interviews by asking if they had any questions for me (Willis, 2006), and whether they would like to strike anything from the record now they knew what they had said. Many people asked me at this point about what it is like for lesbians in Europe, and wanted to know how people from outside perceive Cuba. These

comparative discussions were just as interesting and informative as the questions I asked of them, and perhaps helped mediate the divide between researcher and researched (Daigle, 2015, p. 18). Finally, I asked whether they had any friends who would be interested in participating. As I was aiming for in-depth fieldwork, I tried to interview people more than once. Follow up interviews were often more informal, and might just be a catch-up on what was happening in their lives, or a return to a specific issue they raised, or to discuss something which had arisen in someone else's responses. I have more in-depth information about some people than others, who I may have met only once.

We usually met in a public space, such as a café or El Mejunje, sometimes just walking or in a park, if the interviewee did not want to be overheard. I often bought coffees and cakes for interviewees and the assistant, as an indication of gratitude for their time (Lloyd-Evans, 2006). I sometimes met people in their homes, if they invited me. Interviewing in homes was especially insightful for me (Willis, 2006), as I saw the living conditions of ordinary Cubans, not just the upmarket rooms for rent to tourists. Officials were usually interviewed in their workplaces, which also gave me an opportunity to see inside organisational spaces. I tried not to ask people to come to me, as I was aware of the time and difficulty travelling around can be. Interviews were frequently cancelled and rescheduled due to sudden changes in circumstances or because of the rain, which made it impossible to travel.

### Other methods

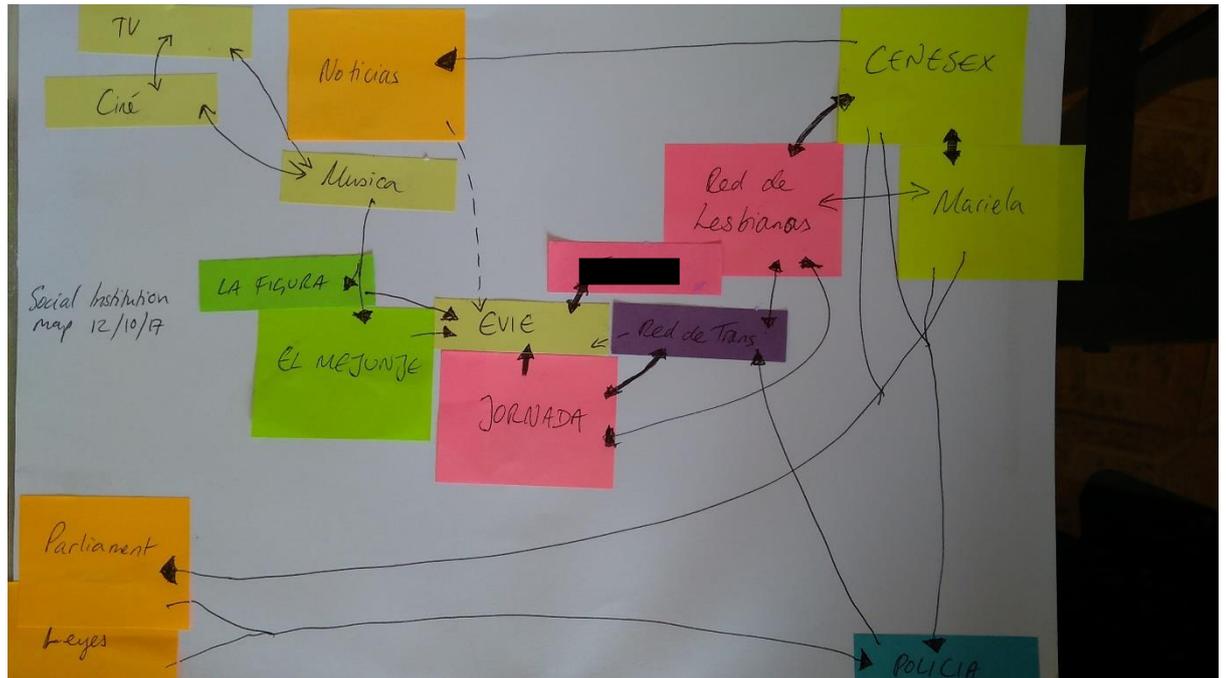
In addition to interviews, I used participant-observation to understand the dynamics of particular spaces and social interactions, which was usually on my own, without research assistants. I found it useful to undertake activities by myself, partly because it allowed me to observe any obvious differences between how people responded to me alone and with assistants, which was usually that being alone felt less formal and more sociable. As mentioned, I spent time in gay clubs approaching potential participants. Not only was this a method of meeting people, but it provides insight into the cadences of social life and leisure, not least the absence of lesbian and bisexual women in public spaces, discussed in Chapter 7. When I started working with ICM, I attended services and observed its inclusive teaching and how this is received by congregants, and the atmosphere created by the pastors. My presence in services also allowed me to position myself a bit more as a participant, someone who had seen inside the church first-hand. I attended several performances by the *transformistas masculinos*, or drag kings, discussed in Chapter 7. An ethnographic approach allows me to note

down and use audience responses to performances as part of my data, alongside what the *transformistas* told me directly. I attended the *Jornada* as a participant in many public events and the *conga* march, and I also walked alongside CENESEX in the May 1<sup>st</sup> International Workers' Day 2017 march in Havana. In my everyday life, I went to a friend's thesis defence and celebration, a local election meeting, the *Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano de La Habana*, New Year's Eve in El Mejunje, visited someone in hospital, and navigated the regular challenges of queuing, shopping, cooking, and riding the bus. These experiences may not be discussed in detail in this thesis, but they inform my analysis and helped me absorb and understand what it feels like to exist in Cuba, especially some of the day-to-day challenges that residents face.

I partly mitigated my Spanish language limitations by introducing a few non-verbal methods (Gibb & Danero Iglesias, 2017). International development sexualities research often uses visual methods as a means of exploring meanings, feelings, and embodied experience. Visual methods produce a different type of data, which perhaps escape the conventional narratives that people tell about themselves, and embrace diversity and individual truths more than consensus-seeking verbal discussions (Barker et al., 2012). Visual methods open up a wider range of responses, including emotional, sensory, metaphorical, complexity and contradiction, which are less often captured in verbal methods (Prosser, 2011). In the end, these were secondary to my interview data, but they help inform my analysis and guided my follow up questions.

I asked a convenient sample of eight participants to draw institutional maps for me showing the people, places, objects, and issues most important to them, with a loose emphasis on gender and sexuality. I first drew my own as a guiding example (Figure 1).

Figure 1: My institutional map of important gender and sexuality institutions in Cuba



I asked people to put themselves in the middle and place institutions nearer or further away depending on how easy they were to access, and larger or smaller depending on how important they were. The arrows represent the direction of influence. Participants didn't always follow these instructions to the letter, but the personal expression is more important than a set of systematic, comparative diagrams. Artists talked me through what their maps represent, and the personal ways in which they express their concerns and describe their lives is insightful.

Three people in Havana participated in a household chores mapping exercise with me, where I tried to understand the gendered division of household labour. I asked people who live with a female partner to list out in written form with me who does which chores – shopping, cooking, cleaning, making the bed, taking out the rubbish – and why. This was not a popular exercise, because it might have been perceived as an attempt to reveal inequalities and create friction in the relationship. On the whole, women insisted that they split the work evenly, which is in line with other research worldwide on female couples (Rothblum, 2010). Women also took the opportunity to tell me that men are lazy and do none of the domestic labour, and how much better it is to live with a woman.

I asked some people to participate in a photo diary project. I had hoped to collect photos I could use with permission, that documented everyday life and how gender is perceived. I did

not commit enough energy to completing photo diaries, as interviews were proving highly informative and easy to conduct. I did, however, spend some time looking at participants' photos on their phones, which gave some insights into how they live their lives in spaces that I cannot access with them.

Amongst these methods, recorded semi-structured interviews were the most useful for drawing out an analysis of gender norms. I also found that, much as I might have liked to use innovative methods, people expected an interview, often asking me 'what do you want to know?', with the expectation that a verbal exchange would be the most appropriate way of passing on their knowledge (Willis, 2006). However, the other methods I used layer complexity and diversity into my analysis, and help triangulate, confirm, or challenge what people were willing to say on tape.

#### Data recording and note taking

I followed ethnographic practice in taking notes and writing up fieldwork. I always wrote up a summary of each interview as soon as possible afterwards, containing as much detail as I could manage of the main themes, topics I wanted to revisit, the location, non-verbal communication, and my intuition about what was said, as I knew these would quickly be forgotten (Willis, 2006). I tried to capture the environment, what people did, and how they talked about what was going on (Silverman, 2005). I occasionally audio recorded myself talking about an interview if I had no immediate access to my laptop, making me feel like a spy, talking furtively into my handheld recorder on street corners at night. I also kept a field journal with daily activities, general observations, impressions of how the research was progressing, and some early analysis. It contained discussions on what I saw, heard, felt, and how I behaved and reacted to events (Silverman, 2005). Following guidance from queer anthropology, I tried to observe and record ordinary power relations related to sexuality across all my encounters in Cuba (Wells et al., 2012). Capturing normalised sexuality and heteronormativity provides a benchmark against which to study my participants' responses and experiences (Connors Jackman, 2010). My field journal was probably the second most useful source of data after the interviews, as I set out to record everything I possibly could, and this account of my activities and observations proved to be quite insightful.

## Ethical considerations and confidentiality

My research was approved by the University of Sussex Ethical Review Board. I wrote a project summary and consent form in English and Spanish detailing confidentiality and anonymity, which I presented to people before conducting interviews. Participants kept the summary and consent form, and I kept a copy of the consent form that they had signed. I was initially concerned that Cubans would be cautious about signing documentation detailing their involvement, as I regarded my topic as sensitive. Daigle (2015, p. 17) found herself unable to use consent forms with *jinetera* respondents, and I assumed LGBTIQ people would be similarly reluctant. However, nearly all participants signed without apparent concern. A few chose not to give their names, or kept a copy of the information without putting their names down. We usually discussed the parameters of my research at the beginning of interviews and throughout, and I always confirmed at the end of interviews whether they were happy for everything they had said to be included, giving them the chance to remove anything they thought would be sensitive. Very rarely, people would say something off record that they asked me not to include, which I have honoured.

I found participants to be ostensibly open and willing to discuss deeply personal issues, more than I had expected. Carmen told me after our first interview that it had been like having a therapy session. I was concerned about exposing vulnerable people to the gaze of the homophobic state, the police, or potentially unsympathetic academic audiences (Ryan-Flood & Rooke, 2009). However, interviewees would sometimes lean in to my recorder and give their whole name and address when I asked them to tell me about themselves. One person, Daimary, was exultant that she was “going to be famous in England” because of my book, a kind notion about the readership of a PhD thesis which I didn’t have the heart to disabuse her of. As I was working with a group of people extremely under-represented, my research was often perceived as an exciting and rare opportunity to talk openly about issues that are important to them, and a possible chance to be seen and heard by people with power, which has been noted in other research with lesbian and bisexual women (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). Engebretsen also found that her lesbian Chinese participants sometimes valued the opportunity to speak about their lives with someone who was listening with full attention (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 25) and in Cuba, Hamilton and Dore found a surprising willingness to speak openly, including criticism of the Revolution (Hamilton, 2012, p.ix). For many respondents, then, the prerogative for confidentiality and anonymity comes from me rather than them, according to what I consider to be ethical practice.

On the other hand, most people elided questions that they perceived to be about formal politics, the state, and Communism. Before fieldwork, I hoped to produce research which had insights into broad political themes, nationalism, and the merits and demerits of Cuban socialism for lesbian and bisexual women. I quickly realised that this is where the sensitivity and danger lie. I chose not to press people on these kinds of questions, assuming they were guiding me into topics they feel important and are comfortable talking about. Resultantly, the research direction is largely dictated by the issues that participants want to raise, alongside or replacing my own research interests (cf. Daigle, 2015, p. 17 for a lack of researcher control over the research). There is scope for further research on the more inflammatory formal political aspects of LGBTIQ Cuba.

I was warned by researchers and Cuban citizens about the possibility of having my activities checked by the police or being followed by them. I certainly heard of this happening to other researchers, and assumed that I was under observation, but I was directly bothered by the police only once. Osmany, my young, male, black research assistant was pulled over for an identity check in Parque Central in Havana, while I hovered out of earshot as instructed by him. Neither of us experienced any repercussions that I am aware of, but the incident did shake me. The rest of the time, I was not aware of any police presence nor did any of my Cuban interlocutors tell me of any issues they had related to me or my research. My whiteness is certainly a factor in this, as foreign black researchers in Cuba are liable to be pulled over by the police assuming they are Cuban hustlers (Stout, 2014, p. 22). I also felt protected because I largely spent my time with cisgender women, and the relationship between foreign women and Cuban women is not immediately read as sexual by the Cuban authorities (or other Cubans, or other foreigners). As I discuss in Chapter 5, most of my participants aim for gender normativity in their appearance, as did I, so perhaps we were not read as lesbians. Daigle (2015, p. 139) writes that Cuban women are assumed to perform only one role with foreigners – sex – so perhaps respondents and I together were invisible, or unthreatening, because of presumed heterosexuality. This also suggests that it is only a sexual relationship between foreigners and Cubans that bothers the Cuban authorities, and that friendship or internationalism can be construed as innocently ‘helping’ Cubans.

My notes were largely digital, kept on my laptop behind a password. However, most of my administration was done on paper, as internet access was limited. I switched to a paper diary and address book early on, as this was much easier to manage than carrying a conspicuous laptop with me. I was concerned about the confidentiality of having names and addresses on

paper, but I kept these items with me almost all the time, and in a locked cupboard in my accommodation if not.

I have given everyone a pseudonym in this research, with a few exceptions for individuals who are immediately recognisable from the position they hold. I have tried to use appropriate pseudonyms which indicate something about the person's background, following Andaya (2014, p. 21). For example, I have used several 'Y' names for women born in the late 1970s and 1980s, who were given trendy Russian-inflected names, known as the 'Y' generation. My research assistant Camila chose her own pseudonym.

### Data analysis

At the time of finishing fieldwork, I was confident that I had reached saturation point across my main themes. As best I could, I asked interviewees the same set of questions to ensure consistency across interviews. I identified commonly raised issues and asked people to comment on them, and found that these responses either confirmed or challenged my line of analysis, which I then followed up on in the next round of interviews. In this way, I iteratively tested emerging analysis and increased my confidence in the validity of my conclusions. I went to Matanzas late in my fieldwork, and when I found there that I was hearing similar stories to those I had heard in Havana and Santa Clara – albeit with regional differences – I had reasonable confidence that I was nearing saturation point. With some of my policy-maker respondents, for example Ana at CENESEX, I informally discussed my early analysis and asked for her opinion; when she indicated that she agreed with my findings, I felt secure that I had captured the most important points that respondents wanted to convey.

After returning from the field, I paid several different people, mostly Cuban, to transcribe and translate Spanish interviews, while I transcribed interviews in English. Translators and research assistants signed a confidentiality agreement, which was also noted to respondents at the beginning of interviews. I reviewed the transcriptions against the translations and original recordings and made some adjustments. In particular, I looked to understand how research assistants had translated questions and answers at the time, and how transcribers had interpreted responses in the written version. I cross-referenced this with my field notes and observations, and included any discrepancies or inconsistencies in my analysis. Studying people's responses at this slower pace was a good opportunity to assess how research assistants' positionality affected interviews, and I always kept in mind who the participant was talking to, and indeed, who else was in the room. Where I had done several interviews with

the same respondents but different research assistants, or with different people in the background, it was useful to compare answers and see how responses differed. I was grateful that I had recorded as much as possible, as sometimes the in-the-moment translations of respondents' long answers in Spanish had had to be summarised into a shorter form in English, with the research assistant choosing what they thought were the most pertinent points to tell me, and I spent some time going over the original recordings to capture the full meanings. I have left some quotes in Spanish to capture the more exact rendering of an issue.

I uploaded all transcripts, field notes, and images I had taken of the maps and diagrams into NVivo software. I began my analysis by coding sections of text into broad themes, which became my four ethnographic chapter headings. As I re-read interview transcripts and notes, themes emerged or became clear in a way I had not seen at the time of recording. Although this was sometimes frustrating (asking myself why I did not follow up on something, or why I had not asked that particular question to that particular person), it is in line with Marilyn Strathern's description of how "the anthropologist embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytical protocols are often devised after the fact." (Strathern, 2004:5-6, quoted in Boellstorff, 2007b, p. 12).

I spotted patterns in the data through a close reading of the text of interviews. I then created more precise codes for themes, and analysed how different people's responses corroborated or contradicted each other. For example, grouping all references to *activa/pasiva* women and reading them together showed a remarkable consistency in the way they were referred to by other LGBT Cubans, suggesting a strong local understanding and attitude to this group of women. I compared and contrasted what different people said on specific topics, and reviewed this against my field notes detailing the context of the interview, who was present, and any other notes I had on the topic. I also triangulated my analysis against the visual data I had collected. Based on topics in the existing literature, I also searched the data for 'missing information' to see what people had *not* said, such as searching for human rights and LGBTI rights-related terms to see if this was how respondents framed certain issues, or not. I found some negative cases which challenged my emerging analysis, most notably many of Isiairis' experiences. As the only trans lesbian in this research (and potentially in Cuba, as she described herself), and as someone who was evangelical, and vegetarian, much of her life stood in opposition to common practices in Cuba. As I have taken a loosely grounded theory approach, rather than testing a pre-existing hypothesis, I dealt with negative cases by iteratively adapting my analysis and conclusions to incorporate perceived anomalies. At the

same time, my approach to the research means that I am not trying to produce a comprehensive analysis that explains all eventualities, but a nuanced examination of a moment in people's lives, which includes complexity and is open to interpretation. I am confident that my conclusions follow from the data and are reliable and valid because I reached saturation point, incorporated negative or outlying cases, and because I corroborated my findings with LGBT Cubans and against the Cuban and global literature.

## Chapter 5: Individual experiences of sexual orientation and gender

### Introduction

Scholars suggest that sexuality and gender in Cuba, and Latin America more widely, are perceived as so closely related that they are more or less the same thing, and are primarily read through bodily presentation. In Cuba, gender presentation is a primary indicator of sexual orientation, and the connection has been so strong in the past that sexual orientation was assumed from how people look (Lumsden, 1996, p. 132). The literature reports that it continues to be the case in Cuba that gender is understood through the outward appearance and how the body looks, leading to a binary view of gender as only male or female, based on genitalia and bodily appearance. In this chapter, I explore how lesbian and bisexual women describe and experience their gender and sexualities, often read through their outward presentation. I begin the chapter with a discussion of catcalling [*piropos*] on the street, which shows the strength of public policing of correct gender for women. I then turn to the example of *activa/pasiva* women, similar to butch/femme gender constructions in other parts of the world, who experience their gender and sexuality as empowering, but are highly stigmatised and rejected by other Cubans, which I will analyse as a moralising discourse supporting gender normativity. I then return to *piropos*, exploring how they act to undermine *activa* identity.

Stout (2014, p. 176) identified a trend of Cuban lesbian women moving away from female masculinity (or butch gender presentation) towards an identity they described as 'normal', a trend which my research shows in full bloom. She also noted that, while supporting sexual freedom and challenging heteronormative behaviour, 'normal' lesbian women continued to uphold gendered ideals of behaviour and dress. I explore how the feminine lesbian presentation that I encountered is attached to ideas of modernity, education, and progressiveness, while masculine presentation is denigrated as old-fashioned, patriarchal, and replicating heterosexist norms. I analyse this discourse, showing it to be embedded in racist and traditional ideas of hegemonic femininity which themselves uphold the gender binary. In particular, I will argue that the valorisation of a 'modern', feminine, lesbian identity in Cuba is part of a longstanding desire for cultural whitening, upholding a Euro-American version of homosexuality which stigmatises local expressions of sexuality, often read as African or black.

Overall, the experiences of my respondents suggest that normalisation and respectability require gender conformity from them, and that gender normativity is key to inclusion in Cuba.

Below, I focus mainly on 'the street' as a widely-accessed public space with its own particular dynamics of gender, and which also functions as a conceptual and symbolic space. The common Central American practice of making *piropos* is most easily translated as catcalling. Although the word itself means 'compliment', the practice is beginning to be analysed as a violent act of harassment (Gaytan Sánchez, 2009). It is overwhelmingly directed from men to women.

*Piropos* were such an integral part of my experience of living in Cuba that I am surprised to find little anthropological commentary on the practice, and so far, nothing from the perspective of lesbian and bisexual women. Partly this is because male researchers will not have experienced *piropos*, showing how important it is to facilitate research by people from different demographics. My field notes contain furious outbursts of frustration at being constantly hailed as a woman and a tourist, and my distaste for the devaluation of women into objects for men's viewing pleasure, as I saw it. Being perceived as a white female tourist on holiday meant that the kind of comments I received were uninventive variations on "*linda*" [pretty], "beautiful girl", "where you from", and the occasional "marry me" or "I love you". I tried a variety of responses, from listening or pretending to listen to music through headphones, ignoring them, engaging in conversation, talking back in English and Spanish, and on a couple of occasions, being extremely angry. But my responses were usually received as an insulting rejection of what was supposed to be either a compliment or a conversation-opener (Smith & Padula, 1996, p. 172). On one of my fieldwork trips, I was accompanied by my white British male partner, and when we were out together, I received few or no *piropos* at all. When walking with my black Cuban male research assistant, we were left alone, except for one occasion when someone told him to 'share the wallet', meaning to share out the resources he was getting from me (or possibly, to let other Cubans have sex with me). My relief at being released from the constant verbal appraisal only further highlighted the perception that my body was not my own – released only because I was deemed to be already under the possession of a man.

*Piropos* serve as an example of the dominance of public space by men in Cuba (Lundgren, 2013), and the constant performative construction of gender roles and gender hierarchy (Ahlsén, 2017). They are also an example of Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory

heterosexuality, where men are expected to be so inescapably aroused, or incited, by a woman's appearance that they cannot help but comment on it (Lundgren, 2013). *Piropos* position women in their correct role as beautiful objects for male sexual and erotic pleasure, a central pillar of what it means to be a 'good woman' in Cuba, where men's desire affirms women as women (Härkönen, 2014, p. 159). I wondered how all this played out for lesbian and bisexual women, or, more precisely, women with little or no sexual interest in men. Would they reject or ignore the attention, or does the male gaze still assert standards of femininity and gender roles irrespective of anyone's sexual orientation?

### How are gender and sexuality understood?

The prominent scholar of Cuban gender and sexuality, Alberto Roque Guerra, explained to me in English that Cubans "still are very focused on a constructionist approach to sexuality that is based on essentialisms. ... It's very linked to genitalia and the appearance of genitalia and how you build your identities based on biology." He said that, "gender is not perceived as something fluid or plural or dynamic. It's perceived as something stable that you are going to experience your whole life and," finishing with a laugh, "you're gonna die, doing this [having the same, stable gender that you were born with]." Roque's opinion, formed from years of working with CENESEX and internationally, is that the ordinary Cuban conception of gender is firmly fixed to how bodies look, and that people believe gender is innate and impossible to change. This view was borne out by numerous interviews I conducted where Cuban lesbian and bisexual women discussed their gender in terms of genitals, appearance, presentation, and to some extent, skin colour. Further, most Cubans I interviewed understand gender as only binary, male and female. Transgender people are usually considered sympathetically, almost always as people born in the wrong body, who need surgery to align the outward appearance of their body with their inner self.

Other studies of Cuba have established that male-female distinctions of gender are strongly significant, structuring social life, and heavily policed by families and society (Härkönen, 2016). Ideal hegemonic femininity is perceived as brown- or light-skinned women who are attractively curvy, with long hair, manicured nails, ostentatious clothes which show off the body; who cook, clean, keep house; and look after their men, parents, and children (Härkönen, 2016; Lundgren, 2011; Saunders, 2010). Femininity is regarded as a symbol of morality for women, and is heavily monitored in society and the family (Saunders, 2010). Importantly, however, virginity and marriage are not markers of morality for Cuban women, as I will discuss in

Chapters 6 and 8. Sexual mores for women are quite permissive and open, as in other parts of the Caribbean, and women's sex appeal to men is valued as a powerful asset (Smith & Padula, 1996). Men are supposed to be *macho* womanisers, who exercise and carefully groom their appearance; drink; smoke; and bring home economic resources. As one interviewee drily summarised Cuban manhood in *el campo*, the 'backward' countryside, "being a man means drinking rum, having 20 women, and riding a horse." Within this conception of gender, hegemonic masculinity is privileged and hegemonic femininity perceived as inferior (Fiol-Matta, 2016; Morad, 2014, p. 16).

Conceptions of binary gender rely on heterosexuality as an expression of masculinity or femininity. In the Caribbean and Latin America, gender identity is often understood to indicate sexual orientation. Studies on men who have sex with men in Latin America have shown that gender performance and role-taking (*activo/pasivo*) is the main indicator of sexual orientation, rather than internal desire for other men. Lumsden succinctly writes, "In Cuba, sexual orientation is inferred from gender identity rather than vice versa" (Lumsden, 1996, p. 132). In this understanding, the performance of masculinity or femininity is what constructs and indicates sexual orientation to other people. As a result, men's homosexuality is conflated with effeminacy, and conceptualised as a problem because of its public gender transgression more than the private sexual acts (R. S. King, 2014, p. 69). Lundgren (2011) has shown how Cuban gender constructs are underpinned by heterosexuality, where men and women are conceived of as complementary, eternally opposite forces, locked in a dance of yin and yang, as Isaiaris confirmed to me, "People don't understand how it is possible for someone not to like women if they were born as a male." Normative gender for women in Cuba, therefore, relies on the interaction with men's sexual desire.

Now I describe briefly the women I spoke to and some of the ways in which they identified themselves. Many women referred to themselves cheerfully as "100 per cent lesbian" [*lesbiana*], when I asked, "what is your sexual orientation?". For most people, this was a label that was earned, or acquired, in accordance with one's behaviour. Almost everyone's first sexual experiences were with men, usually in their teenage years. Many people felt that they became a 'lesbian' at the time that they stopped having sex with men and exclusively had sex with women. Dayana, a 50 year old black lesbian feminist activist, told me that when she was in her twenties, she wasn't a lesbian, because she had not yet had sex with a woman [*no lo había practicado*]. Liana, a 50 year old white woman, said that she was 100 per cent lesbian but that others were not if they hadn't had the physical experience yet. Liana felt that people

couldn't be called a lesbian if they only have the internal feeling of attraction to women but had not acted on it. In some ways, this articulates the theory of performativity (Butler, 2006), where identity is produced through actions, patterns of speech and behaviour, and being recognised by others as a 'lesbian' – as opposed to a definition of identity that relies on an internal sense of being. A behaviour-based identity paradigm is commonly seen across Latin America (Howe, 2013, p. 18), particularly well-illustrated by the *activo/pasivo* dichotomy for men who have sex with men. *Activos*, who penetrate, remain masculine men, while *pasivos*, who receive, are feminised and socially stigmatised (Russo Garrido, 2020, p. 90). Here, performing masculine gender correctly (penetrating) is what determines identity. Although there are few studies on Latina female same-sex practice (some are Acosta, 2010; Howe, 2013; Wekker, 2006), my research indicates that a similar discourse exists among some Cuban lesbian and bisexual women, of sexual orientation being formed through actions and behaviour – by *becoming* a lesbian – rather than resting solely on internal desires or sense of innate identity, as is more common in the West.

People also used the term 'bisexual', but this was not common, and it was used in different ways than in the West, supporting Howe's claim that while LGBTI terms circulate internationally, they are not always understood in a universal sense (Howe, 2013, p. 17). Responses from non-bisexual women revealed quite differing conceptions of how they understand bisexual women. Yudelkis thought that bisexual meant a woman who both penetrates and is penetrated with fingers during sex with another woman. Isaiaris thought it meant a woman who likes transgender women with a penis (like her), because they are attracted to both masculinity and femininity, but also suggested that bisexuals are unable to make up their minds which they prefer. Only three women used the term in the European sense, to identify themselves as women who like both men and women. Other women who liked both men and women instead defined their sexuality as 'open' [*abierta*].

Finally, I met a small number of women who refused categorisation under any terms, instead defining themselves to me as, "I like people", "no categories or limits", "I don't care", "my gender is human", or just by their name. They did so for a variety of reasons based in both socio-political and sexual frameworks of identity. In some cases, they could be considered aligned with the Western discussion on queer refusal of categorisation (Jolly, 2000), making a deliberate, politically informed choice to resist the solidification of identity (Kirtsoglou, 2004, p. 136). It is also important, however, to read this refusal in its local and historical context. Quiroga (2000) highlights that many Latin Americans have resisted the idea of a homosexual

identity, seeing it as a largely Western construct, in line with a strong post-colonial critique of the Western imposition of LGBTI rights onto developing countries (e.g. E. Browne, 2019; Lind & Keating, 2013; Murray, 2012; Weerawardhana, 2018). Further, it is commonly recognised in sexuality research that same-sex practice does not necessarily lead to a homosexual identity (Stout, 2014, p. 24; Williams, 2009, p. 67), suggesting that some Cubans do not experience their sexuality as an identity, nor see the salience of any particular label. Additionally, Cuba's specific history of socialist revolution means that the country has usually worked towards avoiding identitarian movements (Allen, 2011, p. 191; Bastian Martinez, 2011), seeing these as divisive and exclusionary. Several people who refused a sexuality label also identified themselves as strong revolutionaries and connected the two, by making it a revolutionary political assertion to refuse an identity which separated them out from other people, which Bastian Martinez (2011) also found in her life history study of a self-identified Revolutionary lesbian in Cuba. In Hamilton's work on Cuban same-sex desiring women (2012, p. 176), women questioned the applicability of the term lesbian as a public label where, they said, one's personal sexual practices do not make a difference to one's other roles as a revolutionary, writer, worker, community member, and so on. My findings support hers in that my respondents did not always privilege their sexual subjectivity over and above any of their other identities or subjectivities. In sum, people who did not define themselves with a sexuality label sometimes did it from a queer perspective; sometimes because Western labels did not adequately describe their sense of self and did not fit their Cuban experience; and sometimes as a political statement aligning themselves with Cuba's socialist values.

For the rest of this thesis, I use the term 'lesbian and bisexual women' to refer to the women that I spoke to. However, I am not using this as a description of identity or a definitive identity category – as above, some women felt they had not been 'lesbian' all their lives, but acquired the label according to their behaviour at the time. 'Bisexual' is a slippery term in Cuba, but I use it here as a shorthand to denote women who sometimes had sex with, or were attracted to, men as well as women, or who did not rule out either eventuality in their future. The primary delineation of respondents in this research is that they identified themselves as women who had a sexual, erotic, or romantic interest in other women. As such, there is no clear differentiation between 'lesbian' or 'bisexual' experiences, since respondents might use any or none of these constructions at any time. Instead, I use the term 'lesbian and bisexual women' to indicate a broad range of subjectivities that have only one point in common – women's attraction to women.

Now I return to the discussion of how gender and sexual orientation are expressed in the body in Cuba. I discussed appearance with many people, who told me consistently that Cuban women of all genders and sexualities like to ‘look good’ and take care of their appearance, mostly presenting as highly feminine in accordance with social expectation and approval. When I first started meeting Cuban women who identified as lesbian or bisexual, I was struck by how feminine most of them appeared, which seemed to be a form of invisibility which led to respectability. I was often told by lesbian and bisexual women that women who dress ‘normally’ are more respected and accepted in Cuban society, also briefly noted in Hamilton (2012, p. 188). Other scholars of race in Cuba have identified how ‘normal’ or ‘good’ appearance is closely tied to white beauty standards of light skin, straight hair, and nice clothes (Garth, 2021).

At one of my first interviews, I noticed that Mayte was wearing head-to-toe pink and purple, and asked her about feminine dress sense. She told me, “As a lesbian if you are feminine and you have a steady relationship they look at you differently, they respect you more. But when you are the opposite of that, if you are the strong gay stereotype<sup>8</sup>, people talk more, they discriminate more.” She went on to tell me about the importance of appearance to Cubans: “Here they don’t really care to see what you have inside; but what you have outside, absolutely.” Personally, she feels that the values she holds should be more important than how she looks, but found that Cubans tend to judge people based on their appearance. Yadira said that she and her partner both dressed femininely, “and that is not shocking for people, but I have friends whose partners are very strong, and that is more shocking for society.” She feels that she is accepted and treated well in Cuban society because of how she dresses, while women who look masculine are not as accepted. Mayte expounded to me that, “here we like women to be feminine, as a matter of fact we are lesbians because we like feminine women.” Stout (2014), Saunders (2009a), and Hamilton (2012) have made the same observation about Cuba, often phrased by lesbian Cubans as “the more feminine, the better!” Sexual orientation and gender (presentation) are here conceptualised together, with an understanding that women who desire women are desiring *femininity*.

Härkönen’s ongoing work on gender and the body in Cuba suggests that the politics of appearance is not superficial, but represents a normative code that other Cubans read as

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<sup>8</sup> *Mujer fuerte* [strong woman] is a synonym for masculine-appearing women, usually assumed to be lesbian.

showing moral worth, and through which people can access respectability. She argues that the Cuban body is a public property, through which people show their relationships and care, for example, through a mother's attention to making her young daughter look pretty (Härkönen, 2016, p. 239). By contrast, a sloppy, untidy, or messy appearance, especially for women, signals a lack of respect for yourself and perhaps a lack of a partner or family to help take care of you. Härkönen specifically argues (2016, p. 19) that women who do not present themselves well risk their respectability. Hanna Garth (2021), a foreign black researcher, found herself wrongly identified as a Cuban *jinetera* when she failed to dress appropriately to have a drink in a nice hotel. Among lesbian Cuban women, Saunders (2009b) describes the beauty standards of looking good as the eroticisation of hegemonic white femininity. My findings agree with theirs, in that instead of claiming a visibly 'lesbian' appearance, as some Western studies have found (Hayfield et al., 2013), the Cuban lesbian and bisexual women I spoke to often find value in dressing according to normative codes for desirable (white) femininity. A main argument of my thesis is that this highly visible and public display of gender normativity is a means to accessing respectability, via blending in with 'normal' women and invisibilising lesbian identity. Gender conformity in appearance is also one way of upholding the tacit discreetness discussed in the next chapter, while looking masculine is a breach of this pact as it confirms an already-known homosexuality (R. S. King, 2014, p. 73). Personally, I also felt the intense social pressure to look appropriately feminine, and bought several more 'pretty' clothes in Cuba and at home, in order to gain approval and fit in as best I could.

On the other hand, masculinity in women is a denigrated characteristic, rejected by many heterosexual and LGBT Cubans. Isaiiris said bluntly, "I found a girlfriend in Matanzas, but I didn't like her too much, because she looked too masculine, and it looked like I was with a man." Two of Stout's participants, while in general quite supportive of sexual freedom, rejected women with short hair and men's clothing as unattractive, expecting a degree of gender conformity (Stout, 2014, p. 124). I will discuss *activa* women's masculine appearance in more depth below, but here Belkis' comments on her ex, Daimary, are useful. Daimary and Belkis had been together for five years, raising Belkis' two children, but Daimary's increasingly masculine appearance was a factor in their breakup. A particular bone of contention had been when Daimary cut all her hair off, which Belkis hated and the children found embarrassing. She said,

"One day, after she cut off her hair and got dressed as a man, she went to a meeting [at the children's school] and when we came back, the boy said to me: 'mamá, I don't

want my aunt going to the school anymore' and when I asked why, he said, 'it's because my friends said she looked like a man and that was embarrassing.'"

I clarified with Belkis that both the children and the school had no problem with their being a lesbian couple raising children together, but Daimary's crossing a gendered appearance boundary seriously challenged propriety. Belkis continued on masculine appearance by saying, "I don't support that, because to me it doesn't make any sense. If you decide to have your sexual orientation towards women, how come you like one who looks like a man?" She concluded that society in general discriminates against masculine women,

"It's not accepted by society, or by children or family. It's your decision and I respect that, but it doesn't look good [*no se ve bien*]. You're not invited to activities because other people don't like it, and it just doesn't look good. People don't accept it and I understand that."

Like the group of lesbians in Stout's work (2014, p. 67), the women I met often police each other's gender presentation, and tend to regard women who are too masculine as improper, falling between the cracks of the binary gender system.

The discussion above of Cuban lesbian and bisexual women's views of gender and sexuality, from my respondents and from the literature, reveals an understanding rooted in bodily expression, appearance, and behaviour: all public or outward-facing attributes. This contrasts with the discourse of gender and sexuality as rooted in an internal sense of being, often found in the West. Women I spoke to place a high value on their outward expression of gender and sexuality. This includes a strong emphasis on appearance and how their bodies are read by other Cubans; and increases the value they place on public social approval derived from their behaviour as respectable, good, women. There is a long history during the Revolution of appearance being literally policed, especially for men who appeared effeminate or were wearing clothes perceived to be 'anti-revolutionary' (Allen, 2011, p. 70). Gay men in Cuba have often been criticised for being 'ostentatious' (Lumsden, 1996, p. 152), a visible public quality which is perceived to be attention-seeking, demanding special treatment, and occasionally conflated with political dissent. In the wider Caribbean, a strong public/private dichotomy exists, where men's homosexual behaviour in private can be tolerated by the state, while men's publicly visible transgressions of gender norms are considered highly inappropriate (R. S. King, 2014, p. 67). Being visibly 'other' in Cuba has also been a mark of inability to perform citizenship (White, 2020, p. 8).

For the specific group I spoke to, adhering to gendered dress conventions allows them to blend in and to garner respect from being a ‘normal’ looking woman. In some Western studies, femme invisibility, ‘passing’, and not claiming a clear ‘lesbian’ appearance is regarded as a negative trait, leading to accusations of femmephobia (Blair & Hoskin, 2015), femme erasure, claiming heterosexual privilege, staying closeted (Sinnott, 2004), and inauthenticity (Rothblum, 2010). But in Cuba, this quality of invisibility was presented to me by respondents as a positive trait, conferring respectability. Beyond the simple formulation that being invisible protects from discrimination (Kirtsoglou, 2004), which it certainly does, I want to suggest that Cuba is a particularly conformist society, especially around gender norms. Drawing from Cuban Revolutionary history, looking ‘normal’ and blending in with a white appearance norm is often seen as a good quality, met with social approval. Bringing my respondents’ reports together with the literature, my analysis suggests a wider conclusion might be that, for lesbian and bisexual Cuban women, dressing normatively as a woman can provide a level of protective invisibility and social approval, which leads to respectability, similar to the black ‘politics of respectability’ discourse (Cohen, 1997; Ferguson, 2003). This line of analysis suggests that tolerance of sexual diversity is a *gendered* discourse in Cuba, and that respectability relies on gender conformity and the correct performance of gender norms.

In the rest of the chapter, I turn to *activa/pasiva* women, a butch/femme relationship structure that tests and underscores the gender normativity prescribed for lesbian and bisexual Cuban women.

### *Activas and Pasivas*

A small group of young women in the poor Cerro area of Havana introduced me to the idea of *activa*, *pasiva*, and *completa* relationships between women. The terminology is clearly drawn from the well-known male/male relationship in Latin America, *activo/pasivo*, where the *activo* is the penetrating partner and the *pasivo* the receiving. The construction of *activa* and *pasiva* is very similar to other masculine/feminine female relationships around the world, often referred to in English as ‘butch’ and ‘femme’. An *activa* woman dresses in more masculine clothes – trousers, shorts, t-shirts, baseball caps – does not wear makeup, might have shorter hair, and behaves in typically masculine ways such as drinking beer, smoking, and staying out late. In her relationship, she takes the role of ‘the man’, or ‘relationship leader’. In contrast, the *pasiva* is a ‘normal woman’, that is, she dresses in feminine clothes and wears makeup, and takes the back seat in the relationship. She is often perceived to be bisexual, heterosexual, or ‘not really

lesbian' in some way (because she is 'normal'). It was often assumed by other LGBT Cubans that I spoke to, deriving from the male/male model, that *activas* are the penetrative partner in the bedroom, and *pasivas* the penetrated. *Activas* and *pasivas* enter into relationships together. In contrast, *completa* relationships are made up of two women who do not follow these roles but who may or may not dress typically masculine or feminine, and who take equal responsibility for family, money, and the household, and are seen as a balance of 'two of the same'.

As far as I can establish, this part of my study represents one of extremely few in-depth explorations of Latina *activa/pasiva* constructions in English – certainly the first on Cuba. Russo Garrido in Mexico (2020), Howe in Nicaragua (2013), and Williams in Peru (2009) all contain single chapters which discuss *activa/pasiva* within wider work on female sexuality, while masculine and feminine roles appear throughout Wekker's monograph on Suriname (2006). The narrative of female *activa/pasiva* relationships is just visible in the literature on queer Latin America, discussed in short sections or glancing references as far back as at least the 1980s (Sierra Madero, 2013; Whitam et al., 1998). Again, this shows the invisibility of women's history in research, and the particular invisibility of lesbian, gender queer, and non-normative women – they are there as figures in the background, but never made central. In my thesis, I position *activa* and *pasiva* women as central figures explaining how gender and sexuality are constructed in Cuba. This case study explores how some Cuban women understand sexual orientation *as* gender, and how it is expressed through the body, appearance, and behaviour. The imbrication of gender and sexuality is illustrated well by Yamileisis: when I asked what her sexual orientation was, she did not understand the question. After some explanation of what I was interested in, she replied simply, "*activa*". For her, *activa* is both a sexual orientation and a gender.

Daimary and Ofelia, a couple in their twenties living in a tiny rented room in a *solar*<sup>9</sup> in Cerro, a poor district of Havana, became central informants for me. I met Daimary through her friend Carmen, who responded to my Facebook post looking for interviewees, and through them both, met six or seven other women who defined themselves as *activas* and *pasivas*. Daimary used to date Belkis, above, and they broke up because of Daimary's increasingly masculine

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<sup>9</sup> A *solar* is a tenement building designed to be lived in by one family but now divided into many tiny apartments due to the lack of housing space. They are often extremely run-down, crumbling, over-populated, and associated with poverty.

appearance. Daimary also broke up with Ofelia during my fieldwork, and the identities, drama, and social life they described to me over the course of a year reveal many patterns in Cuban life. Ofelia is a beautiful, curvy, and seductive 25 year old, whose charm and erotic energy immediately mark her as fulfilling the Cuban ideals of womanhood. Her status as a beautiful young *mulata* woman garnered her much attention on the street, and also marked her as a *jinetera* in the eyes of many Cubans (Daigle, 2015), including both Osmany and Camila, my research assistants, which may have negatively affected how they interacted with her. As it happens, Ofelia engaged in a transactional sexual relationship with an Italian man during my research time, which funded her life with Daimary. As such, Ofelia's seductive qualities and erotic power are felt to be a source of benefit to them both, both emotionally and financially. It is immediately apparent that Ofelia is the *pasiva* in the relationship, as Daimary mainly wears shorts and tank tops, no makeup, and furiously smokes cigarettes and drinks beer no matter the time of day of our meetings. Aged 29, she has a hyperactive, rough energy, so much so that Osmany commented that she "walked like a soldier", reflecting Cuban modes of assessing women's gender.

I separately asked both women to explain to me what the *activa/pasiva* classification meant. Daimary said, "Let's see, girly girls, I'm the masculine one. Girls, feminine, quite girly, those are the ones I like most. Girly girls. I'm the dude." [*A ver, las hembras, el masculino yo. Hembras, femeninas, bien hembras, esas son las que me gustan a mi. Las hembras. El varón yo.*] I asked, "How can you tell who's a girly girl?" She replied,

"By the clothing. ... We're the active ones. And the girls, like her [Ofelia], where you can't tell anything, are *pasivas*. No, because those where you can't tell anything, are those that have nothing masculine about them, you know? Like my girlfriend, she's feminine, and looking at her, very, very girly, she's feminine. She's got nothing dude about her." [*Y las hembras, así como ella, que no se le nota nada, son pasivas. No, porque los que no se le nota nada son los que no tienen nada masculino, entiendes? Como mi novia, es femenina, al fijarle, hembra, hembra, hembra, es femenina. Ella no reproduce nada varón.*]

Ofelia, said, in a different interview, "*Activa* is the woman who presents as male, masculine, who dresses like a man, T-shirts, pants, tattoos, male jewellery, things like that. The girl, the feminine, the *pasiva*, is the one who likes dresses, heels, to present as pretty." Both women initially identify the characteristics of *activa/pasiva* as resting on outward gender presentation through clothes and appearance, according to the model discussed above. Ofelia and Daimary both suggest that *activas* are easily identified by appearance, but that *pasivas* are more like 'normal women', where you 'can't tell' that they have sex with women simply by looking at

them. The repeated framing of *pasivas* as ‘normal’ women suggests that *activas* are perceived to be ‘not normal’ in some way, which I read as positioning *activas* as gender transgressors.

The *activas* and *pasivas* I spoke to usually expressed their relationships in terms of the ‘role’ they were playing. They felt that the relationship should have two halves, with clearly delineated characteristics on each side. As discussed above, this follows the general Cuban interpretation of male/female relationships as being a push-and-pull of opposites (Lundgren, 2011), and as such, appears to replicate a heterosexual model. I asked Daimary about how she danced salsa, wondering if there would be any difference among same-sex couples (cf. Morad, 2014), and she corrected me, saying:

“No, no, one dances like a man and another like a woman. Salsa is in fact between a man and a woman. Somebody always has to lead, you see? There are women who will dance with another, two friends, but somebody always has to lead, you feel? In a relationship, I’m telling you, I don’t know, on a motorcycle, I don’t know if you understand. On a motorcycle, if it’s me and her, I’ll drive it and she sits behind. Always in a couple there’s one that cedes, gives way to the other, in whatever, for example in a *casino* dance circle there’s always somebody who leads. On a bus, always somebody who gives their hand to the other, now you understand? It’ll always be like that. Of the two there’s always somebody who cedes.”

This was a commonly repeated idea among the circle of *activas* and *pasivas*, and sometimes among other women, that relationships needed a leader. Being the leader is usually seen as a masculine characteristic and thus attributed to *activas*. However, when I asked Daimary’s ex, Belkis, about this idea, she immediately undermined it by saying that what a relationship looks like on the outside, or aspires to be, may bear no resemblance to how it works on the inside. She told me that although Daimary took the masculine role, in reality Belkis had been the one in charge. Wekker (2006) and Russo Garrido (2020) also found that butch/femme relationships in the Caribbean basin may look inflexible from the outside, but on the inside, tend to be much more fluid, resisting easy categorisation. In Thailand, Sinnott (2004) found that *toms* and *dees* do not blindly reproduce gender norms, but are quite flexible within their relationships. Recalling Morad’s (2014, p. 17) note that actual sexual behaviour is private, and myriads of sexuality researchers who acknowledge we can never ‘truly’ know what happens in the bedroom, only how people choose to report it, I suggest that the *activas*’ presentation of themselves as in charge of the relationship and in bed is perhaps more of a discursive ideal than a reality. Like Kirtsoglou found in Greece (2004, p. 110), the category of ‘*activa*’ might symbolise certain roles and behaviours for Daimary, but it does not confine her nor define her

restrictively. Daimary was certainly interested in presenting herself as a particular kind of person to me, and upholding a mythology of herself as a dynamic leader is part of that.

Digging deep into *activa/pasiva* constructions shows that a simple masculine/feminine binary is insufficient to understand how gender and sexuality operates in these relationships. Global research on butch/femme female couples has revealed a variety of answers to whether participants feel more like men than women, feel gender fluid, or reject a heterosexual political paradigm. Sinnott (2004) found that *tom* (butch) in Thailand was a clear gender identity, while *dee* (femme) was a slippery category that resisted easy recognition, even among people perceived to be *dees*. Engebretsen (2014), working on China, found that *T/Po* constructions were all-encompassing identities, far deeper than just playing a role, similar to Rothblum's study (2010) in the USA. However, Russo Garrido's 2020 study in Mexico suggests that women using the term *activa* intended it mainly as a descriptor of role play, rather than a deeply felt identity. Ofelia often refers to Daimary using masculine pronouns and word endings, not an uncommon practice among the other *activas* and *pasivas* I spoke to. But she also acknowledges Daimary's flexibility, saying, "You know, in our relationship, she's the active man, but you know she doesn't feel like it at all. [She feels like a] man, sure, but she's a woman and has her monthly period and so yeah, however much she calls herself a man..." I once asked Daimary outright whether she felt more like a woman or a man, and she said, "*Mas como una mujer.*" [More like a woman]. However, she embraces her gender fluidity and flexibility, describing how her voice changes when people address her as a man, and how she feels different depending on how she feels that day. Although Daimary is often perceived by both straight and LGBT Cubans as someone who wants to be a man, in accordance with a strict binary gender framework, in herself and with her partners she is not confused about her gender identity moving comfortably between masculinity and femininity. She expresses no concerns about claiming a female gender identity while embracing masculine pronouns and some aspects of typically male behaviour.

*Pasiva* women, on the other hand, were almost always described to me as highly feminine 'normal' women, that is, women who look and behave like women. As I discussed above, 'normal' lesbian or bisexual women are often described as more accepted in society, because 'no one can tell' that they are attracted to women from their gender presentation. People using this framing equate invisibility to acceptance. Belkis said of her partners, "the more feminine they are, the better. It makes me feel good because I know that no one is going to be affected, not my children, nor me, or anybody." She believes that femininity in her partners

results in acceptance by society, with no negative consequences for her or her family, like there were with masculine Daimary. In other studies across the world, femme invisibility has been shown to produce a level of social acceptance, for being “‘good lesbians’ in terms of appropriate appearance and gender roles.” (Rothblum, 2010, p. 49). I will build the argument throughout that Cuban *pasiva* women (and other feminine-presenting lesbian and bisexual women) experience their femme invisibility as empowering, leading towards respectability and social approval.

Finally, I return to the point that that *activa* and *pasiva* women understand their sexuality *as* gender. The women I spoke to present their subjectivities as primarily constructed through gender and performed through appearance. But when I asked other lesbian and bisexual (and gay) Cubans about *activa/pasiva*, I often had a response about sex. Yanelis said, “The theory of *activa/pasiva* is in the sexual aspect, it’s not in the way that you project yourself in society, it’s not like that. Because honestly, I project myself as a man, I have done so my entire life, even when I had boyfriends.” Yanelis thinks of herself as quite masculine and projects herself in a masculine way in her life – but yet, she isn’t an *activa*, because she is both active and passive in the bedroom, playing both roles, or neither. In another interview, Lixa expanded on the theme of ‘doing everything’ in the bedroom, by saying, “I am *completa*. If I give pleasure to you, why wouldn’t you give pleasure to me? I have no insecurities. In the end, there are two women in a bedroom, we’re two women, we like the same things.”

These suggestions, commonly repeated across many interviews, reveal that other lesbian and bisexual women’s view of *activa/pasiva* is that it is a sexual division entailing certain rules about what one can and can’t do in bed. This is very similar to constructions of ‘stone butch’ in the West (Halberstam, 2018), also found in East and South East Asia (Chao, 2000; Engebretsen, 2014; Sinnott, 2004): a subjectivity that does not allow the person to be touched by a partner on the genitals or breasts. I found a consistent discourse, repeated in my three locations and across age, class, and ethnicity divides, that *activas* are somehow hung up, or ‘have insecurities’ about how they can be touched, a pathologisation of *activa/butch/stone butch* widely reported on in the global literature (Engebretsen, 2014; Halberstam, 2018). While I verified with the group of women in Cerro that rules about touching are sometimes true, they did not judge this negatively in the way that other Cubans did, but see it as a source of pleasure. In Mexico, *activa/pasiva* constructions were also understood as activities during sex, but Russo Garrido (2020) does not suggest that these are framed pejoratively. I found a persistent negative opinion about *activa/pasiva* women among other LGBT Cubans that I

spoke to, very much like the attitudes that Sinnott (2004) found in Thailand, where *toms* and *dees* were derided for restrictively conforming to a heterosexist model. I suggest that *activa/pasiva* relationships are more complicated than simply upholding heterosexual gender norms, but are unstable and defy easy categorisation, which can only be seen by giving *activas* and *pasivas* themselves space to talk about their subjectivities.

“It’s nonsense”: Other Cubans’ responses to *activas* and *pasivas*

I have above given space to *activas* and *pasivas* to tell us about their understanding of gender and sexuality; I now turn to examining how other Cubans in this research see them.

*Activa/pasiva* relationships, on their own terms, are regarded positively by the *activa/pasiva* women I spoke to as a natural extension of the opposites-attract model of gender and relationships. But other LGBT and heterosexual Cubans denigrate these relationships with a vehemence I rarely saw about other subjectivities. *Activa/pasiva* women, but especially *activas*, were described to me in derogatory terms as backward, uneducated, low-class, heteronormative, and as a relic of a patriarchal past that other LGBT people are trying to leave behind.

At 8pm on a roof in Matanzas, where we had just finished a meeting of the ICM church, I told Arianny that I’d met a group of women in Havana who called themselves *activa* and *pasiva*. Our interpreter, Eduardo, a 76 year old gay man, interrupted to say, “No, but people don’t use that anymore, it’s obsolete.” I asked Arianny, who was only 19, if the terms meant anything to her. She said, “No, I didn’t know it before, but a lesbian friend told me about it and we had a good laugh because it’s funny. I understand it with men but not women.” Eduardo replied, “Me neither, but not even with men, that’s a lie.” Arianny agreed, saying, “Think about it. It’s nonsense.” This exchange is fairly typical of how most LGBT Cubans responded to the idea of *activa/pasiva* roles between women when I asked, regarding it as something ridiculous, to be laughed at, and dismissed as nonsense rather than understood. In another conversation, Maritsa, who had lived in Germany for eight years and returned to Cuba when her marriage to a man broke down, mused that people nowadays use *activa/pasiva* terms as a joke. In English, she said,

“It’s become a way to make fun of other people. Really. Really. Even the gay men, all the time they say *pasivo* to each other, because this is funny. It’s like when you have sex and your partner is not really doing anything and you are doing everything, then you can say like, ‘you’re passive today’. But just today! So it became a way to make fun of other people. But just a joke. ... I think it’s just a way to make fun.”

Making a joke of someone's gender identity and sexual preference can be a way to create a dividing line which places the joker on the side of moral superiority. A long history of queer scholarship has identified a central dynamic of othering and marginalising certain subjectivities in order to empower others (Podmore, 2013). Joshi (2012, p. 418) argues that distancing oneself from others who are 'not normal' is an act of claiming respectability in comparison to and through the abjection of others. In this section, I analyse how both heterosexual and LGBT Cubans create *activa/pasiva* women as abject others, and how this is sometimes used to valorise their own feminine, modern, gender and sexual subjectivities as respectable and morally superior, and, by extrapolation, more deserving of inclusion in society. I analyse how gender normativity is central to the project of claiming morality and respectability.

The respectable identity I was presented with in comparison to *activa/pasiva* reads similarly to those found in development ethnographies that include butch/femme subjectivities, which emphasise normalcy and sameness. Most Cuban lesbian and bisexual women, including *pasivas*, firmly described themselves to me and my research assistants as 'normal', a discourse which claims ordinariness and sameness as the basis of rights and social inclusion (Richardson, 2005). Liana said, "My opinion is that I do not like it [*activa/pasiva*], I am neither *activa* nor *pasiva*, I am a normal person and when I love, I do everything [sexually]. I respect the opinions but I do not like it." Maritsa said, in English, "The people I know don't describe themselves like *activa* or *pasiva*. Everyone is everything. But this is like the new generation, they say 'everything' [*completa*], it's normal." As previously noted, the description as 'normal' by other lesbian and bisexual women relies on a sexual meaning connoting that both people are allowed to touch and pleasure their partners. Ironically, *activas* and *pasivas* in this research regard themselves as 'normal' as well, since they reproduce the ordinary masculine/feminine dichotomy so well accepted in Cuban relationships. In Howe (2013), Sinnott (2004), and Rothblum (2010), lesbian women describe gender opposites as the normal basis for a female/female relationship. Here, 'normal' has no inherent meaning but is simply used to create a moralising dividing line between groups, in order to place oneself higher up in the hierarchy, where 'normal' equates to 'good'.

Further to a description of themselves as 'normal', I also found a discourse among other lesbian and bisexual women that the *activa/pasiva* model is a remnant of the patriarchal past, which should be left behind. Most women who made this connection would then position themselves as contemporary Cuban feminists, whose liberal egalitarianism elevates them to a higher status. Lumsden (1996, p. 150) already noticed this trend in the 1990s among men who

have sex with men in Cuba, that *activo/pasivo* roles were regarded as changing and being left behind in favour of a more egalitarian, modern, model. In her work on queer Cuba, Stout (2014, p. 121) spent time with a lesbian couple who refused sexuality and gender categories to describe their relationship, choosing instead to call themselves *modernas* [modern women].

I was presented to Yanelis, an activist in Santa Clara, who aligns herself with CENESEX and is extremely well-educated on current approaches to international LGBTI discussions and rights issues. Her analysis of *activo/pasivo* roles is that they are old-fashioned, and should be firmly relegated to the past. “There was a time when it was really common, you were either *activo* or *pasivo*, in fact, it was frowned upon when two *pasiva* girls were together.” In a follow up interview, Yanelis clearly expressed a distaste for *activo/pasivo* roles, despite being extremely supportive of other kinds of gender and sexual expression in her activism, “I don’t do that patriarchal *machismo* where a lesbian relationship must be the same as a heterosexual one.” She expresses a commonly held opinion that *activo/pasivo* roles replicate a *machista* heterosexual model that oppresses women, and through her rejection of this model, positions herself as having moved beyond patriarchy, in line with her modern, international brand of lesbian feminism. Lisett, a black middle-aged feminist activist in Havana, closely aligned with CENESEX, said of *activo/pasivo* women, “they repeat the same model that we want to eliminate.” In Peru (Williams, 2009) and Nicaragua (Howe, 2013), women similarly describe female masculinity as old-fashioned, and lesbian femininity as modern. Importantly, the third ethnography discussing *activo/pasivo* constructions, Russo Garrido in Mexico (2020), does not explicitly show this discourse. I believe it is possible that her respondents adhered to the modernity/backwardness narrative, as those who claimed more egalitarian relationships and sex lives appeared to be those who engaged with liberal international activist organisations and discourses, and aspects of the ‘backwards past’ corresponding to gender roles echo throughout her text. But this is not a conclusion she reaches, suggesting that we need more empirical studies to fill out our understanding of these sexualities in Latin America. However, the conflation of feminine gender normativity with modernity is very evident in other development ethnographies examining butch/femme relationships, making this a worldwide trend.

In parallel, although more unspoken, I found an association of *activo/pasivo* with people of low-class status, potentially uneducated or ignorant; a status reading that in Cuba is almost always conflated with blackness, or Afro-Cuban culture and heritage. In Cuba, blackness is often carefully alluded to by saying that people have ‘low culture’, or ‘low cultural level’, which

is positioned in opposition to decency, moral worth, refinement, and class – implicitly equated with whiteness and Europeaness (Fernandez, 2010, p. 134). In the literature, both the pre-Revolutionary ‘backward past’ and female masculinity are associated with Cuban ideas of low-class behaviour, which are shot through with racist undertones. Saunders has shown in their work on black lesbians in Cuba that blackness is often equated with masculinity, and vice versa (Saunders, 2009b, 2010), meaning that *activa* women are likely to be seen as culturally and socially black (having ‘low cultural level’), if not in actual skin colour. Hamilton (2012, p. 189) also found that *mujeres fuertes* were likely to be considered lower culture, poorer, and blacker. In actuality, my *activa/pasiva* participants were no more likely to be black than any other Cuban, but were instead demarcated by their low socio-economic status. The issue of blackness was usually taken up by other lesbian and bisexual women in veiled terms of ‘education’ and ignorance.

Ana, the national coordinator of the lesbian and bisexual women’s network at CENESEX, an important policy-influencing position, said, “they reproduce patriarchal models, or produce ridiculous divisions, like one is the female and the other one is the male, that is ridiculous. They have all of these unsolved problems and they are not even able to see it.” Ana takes a commonly held stance, which I heard across several interviews with activists and high-class respondents, that *activa/pasiva* women are victims of false consciousness, that they do not know any better and should be educated further. Daisy, a middle-aged white activist in Havana, one of the only people I met familiar with the ideas in queer theory, said that she thought *activa/pasiva* was a problem of low education. “The disinformation on these issues is so great, it makes people repeat and imitate these stereotypes of man and woman. But I am not a judge, I think it is a problem of misinformation, education, ignorance.” The distaste from activists is very similar to that found by Howe (2013, p. 85) in Nicaragua, where lesbian activists took a clear pedagogical direction that women should be educated out of *activa/pasiva* roles and into a modern, liberal, egalitarian paradigm, even describing their activism as helping women to become *bien educada* [well-educated]. In Mexico, one *activa* woman described her involvement with an activist organisation as opening new erotic possibilities, a positive interaction with the ‘educational’ discourse (Russo Garrido, 2020, p. 99). Lisett told me, not unkindly, that the kind of people I was meeting in gay clubs were more likely to be *activa/pasiva*, because only ‘those kind of people’ go to clubs (the class distinctions of clubs are discussed in Chapter 7). She said that professionals – meaning people of a higher class – do not go to clubs, and are more likely to be *completa* couples. Here, she conflates high class, professionalism, and *completa* identity, and by association, high culture and whiteness.

This line of discussion is also seen in Howe (2013, p. 82), where *activa/pasiva* women were considered more likely to be found in *el campo* [the countryside], with all its associations of tradition, backwardness, and poor education. Even Camila, when we discussed the *activa/pasiva* women we had met and interviewed together, felt that they were suffering from low education and poor awareness of feminism. In Taiwan, Chao (2000) found that people dismissed butch/femme constructions as low-class, even *uncivilised*, and differentiated themselves along bourgeois lines claiming enlightenment and civility in contrast. In Mexico, Russo Garrido (2020, p. 133) puts it rather more simply: gender conformity is a respectable form of queerness, while sexual and gender diversity are working-class, and therefore disparaged. I suggest that the production in Cuba of *activa/pasiva* identities as ‘uneducated’ is a moralising discourse which can be used by other lesbian and bisexual women to position themselves as ‘more advanced’, underpinned by longstanding cultural associations with class, whiteness, and respectability.

The descriptions of *activa* women in derogatory terms bear startling similarity to the way butch/femme relationships between women are described around the world. Among others, in China (Chao, 2000; Engebretsen, 2014); Thailand (Sinnott, 2004); Indonesia (Blackwood, 2010); Israel (Luzzatto & Gvion, 2004); the USA (Halberstam, 2018); Peru and Brazil (Whitam et al., 1998); and Nicaragua (Howe, 2013); butch/femme relationships are consistently described by other LGBT people and heterosexuals as old-fashioned roleplay that replicates the patriarchy. In development ethnographies, a particular narrative emerges that associates gender-neutral, egalitarian, femme/femme, and/or feminist lesbian relationships with modernity, development, and international LGBTI rights. Several scholars have shown that, in low-income contexts, butch/femme is often described as traditional, local, or ‘backward’, and that contemporary lesbian women valorise what they describe as a modern identity that allows femininity and masculinity in equal measure, and strives for equality within the relationship (Blackwood, 2010; Engebretsen, 2014; Howe, 2013; Wekker, 2006; Williams, 2009). This discourse is particularly imbued with a sense of catching up to the ‘more liberated and modern’ West. Notably, the analysis of modernity or backwardness is not applied to men who have sex with men, or *activo/pasivo* practices, which tend to be respected as authentic local forms of sexual expression, showing the stricter scrutiny and regulation applied to women’s practices and gender expression.

It may be the case that *activa/pasiva* relationships are an authentic construction of black or working-class sexuality in the Americas. In a study in the USA, Rothblum (2010) found that

butch/femme categories were of more significance to African-Americans and Latinas, suggesting that butch/femme is a meaningful model of non-white sexuality, and that the androgynous, gender egalitarian model is more associated with whiteness. In the USA, Halberstam (2018, p. 121) shows that 1970s lesbian feminists rejecting butch/femme sexual identities wiped out an authentic expression of non-white sexuality in order to promote a perniciously liberal, white model in its place. Hamilton (2012), Williams (2009), and Howe (2013), studying Latin American societies, have placed the disconnect at the feet of international human rights lesbian feminist activism. They argue that lesbian feminist activists – local and international – promote a model of female same-sex relationships that values sameness and femininity over gendered role play. Butch/femme relationships are not respected as authentic local models of sexuality, but activists and educators openly try to ‘correct’ women’s sexual expression. As Chao (2000) argues in Taiwan, creating a sexual subaltern and validating other forms of lesbianism upholds a colonial hierarchy that privileges an American model over others. The model of gender egalitarian relationships appears to be a liberal, white, Global North model, that does not necessarily resonate for all women worldwide. The homogenisation of queer lives into a single acceptable model is something which queer scholars warn against (E. Browne, 2019).

Drawing on Ferguson (2003), Allen (2011) and Saunders (2010) have suggested that black Cubans have to over-perform white respectability in order to overcome the prejudices against them. Similarly, I analyse throughout how some lesbian and bisexual Cuban women sometimes over-emphasise their adherence to white, respectable, feminine gender normativity, in order to present themselves as more deserving of inclusion in society. One important way to achieve this is the construction of an abject other against which they appear more respectable. Putting together the specific responses from participants in this research with the extremely consistent literature on the global disparagement of butch/femme identities, I propose the existence of a discursive dividing line in LGBT life in Cuba, whereby *activa/pasiva* identities are disavowed because of their association with blackness, low class, poor education, and backwardness. The specific case study of *activa/pasiva* women points to a wider trend in Cuba, supported in the literature, that gender normativity is bound up with Euro-American white respectability, and that transgressing racialised gender norms results in heavy social rejection, or abject othering. The valorisation of a modern, feminine, lesbian identity is aligned with Cuba’s longstanding association of moral respectability with Euro-American, culturally white, values, as shown in the literature on Cuban gender norms and constructions of race. Performing feminine gender normativity thus emerges as a key strategy available to lesbian

and bisexual women for claiming moral superiority, via its association with lesbian modernity and whiteness; and rejection of *activa/pasiva* gender transgressors because of their association with the patriarchal past and cultural blackness. This discourse was evident in interviews across all three of my study locations and from participants across social demographics, indicating that it is a commonly held view that has strong significance. Notably, *activa/pasiva* women themselves do not make too much of their rejection from respectable LGBTI life; it never arose in our conversations, from which I conclude that the specific women I spoke to have little aspiration to respectability, nor do they feel too stigmatised by other LGBT Cubans.

#### *Piropos* as a way to assert gender normativity

Adhering to gender norms may bring some lesbian and bisexual women respectability in relation to other lesbian and bisexual women, but all Cuban women exist within a world of *machismo*. Returning to the *piropos* discussed at the beginning of the chapter, I found that no matter how women dress or appear, being on the street brings both pleasurable and frustrating interactions with men. While above, I discussed how some women consciously adhere to gender normativity, below I discuss how gender normativity is thrust upon them and is experienced as a constraint, showing how normativity is not monolithically positive or negative.

The first time I met Daimary, we talked about *piropos*. She has a complex relationship with them, sometimes enjoying the compliment but mostly finding that they erase her masculine identity. Talking about times when she is out and about by herself, she said:

“But why do they do it if I’m masculine [*varón*]? Because for example I don’t walk like a girl. I don’t always look like a guy. When I go out in short shorts and you can see my boxers, I’m doing exercise and they say ‘*Mulatona*<sup>10</sup>!’ and I respond ‘Bro, what *mulatona* you talking about!’ and so I stay at home, and that’s bad.”

Sometimes Daimary looks feminine and sometimes masculine, but when receiving *piropos*, aimed at women, she rejects them because she does not recognise herself, and does not want to be recognised by others, as a ‘normal’ woman. If it gets too much, she stays at home and doesn’t want to go out. She went on, “I mean what do I have to do, cut my hair like a dude? Or

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<sup>10</sup> A variation on ‘*mulata*’, a skin colour comment, not especially offensive. Daimary resists the classification because it is a feminised term of address.

I don't know, it's a bit weird. Of course they realise! They do, they get confused. Because I'll look at them and say something bad, they almost always realise, you know." She finds it frustrating that men issue *piropos* at her even though they realise she is an *activa*, and so should know that she does not want their sexual attention. Since her gender presentation clearly signals that she is not a straight woman, she thinks she should not be the target of *piropos*. The erasure of her self-identity as a masculine *activa* couldn't be explained more clearly than when she said: "*Me lo dicen como si fuera una mujer.*" [They talk to me as if I were a woman].

When Daimary says 'woman', she uses it as a category, meaning *pasivas* and 'normal' women: the kind of women who should receive *piropos*. Although she also identifies as 'more like a woman' on her own terms, her version of woman is *activa*, not a 'normal' woman, like Ofelia, for example. Her *activa* identity as a masculine woman-loving woman makes perfect sense in her world, but is unreadable to Cuban men on the street. It is her *activa* identity that is erased when she is referred to as if she were a woman. Daimary demonstrates the difference between how she feels her gender identity (*activa*) and how other parts of Cuban society see her (always and only female), an act of misgendering. *Piropos* undermine her masculinity and reinscribe her 'correct' position as a woman. Being hailed as a woman is frustrating for Daimary, being reminded that her gender presentation, while powerful and pleasurable in her own world, is stigmatised in the wider world of Cuban society. Allen writes (2011, p. 36) that people who break gender norms, such as *activas*, transgender men and women, and effeminate men, are seen as not respectable in Cuban society, and are likely to be subject to a higher level of scrutiny on the street. Those who do not fit gendered appearance norms are immediately reprimanded as soon as they show their incorrect gender in public. As Sierra Madero has claimed, it is the performance *in public* of incorrect gender that is an affront to the social order, while bending the rules in private is usually acceptable (Sierra Madero, 2013, p. 72). Men's practice of calling *piropos* is a way of reasserting the social order and heterosexual matrix, violently insisting on Daimary's 'correct place' in society.

When Daimary and Ofelia are on the street together, Ofelia often receives elaborate *piropos* due to her beauty and conformity to Cuban ideals. At these times, Daimary experiences jealousy, frustration, and powerlessness at her inability to be recognised as Ofelia's partner. A *piropo* should not be aimed at a woman who is in the company of a man, as that is considered a challenge to the man (Lundgren, 2013). However, Daimary is not understood by Cuban men as a man, and two women walking together are not usually assumed to be a couple. In this

impossible bind, Daimary cannot be recognised as Ofelia's partner as either a woman or a man. She expressed her frustration:

“it's bad, you know, it's bad, there's no reason to do it. None. No man has any reason to do it. If I'm alone I don't care, actually I like it, but if she's with me, why do it, you know? Why do those men think I can't have a woman, why? They say, look at that, all rotten. They say what a waste because she's with me.”

Daimary displays a possessiveness over Ofelia that speaks to her thwarted desire to be recognised correctly as an *activa* on the street. Her emotional outburst shows the pain and upset caused by men who do not respect her as Ofelia's partner. The homophobic comment 'what a waste of a woman' speaks to the wide attitude in Cuba that women belong with men, and that cannot imagine a woman's worth outside of her sex appeal to men. Daimary's insights show that the practice of calling *piropos* is deeply gendered beyond a simple male appreciation of women's beauty. It exemplifies deeply embedded ideas about entitlement, ownership of bodies and space, the strength of gender norms, and the erasure of certain identities.

The gendered oppressiveness of *piropos* is also felt by other lesbian and bisexual women that I asked, though usually framed as resistance to patriarchy, like the discussion of lesbian modernity above. International feminism places *piropos* as degrading sexism, which is how I experienced them. Some lesbian and bisexual women feel the same, usually those women who are highly educated and in touch with international feminist activities. Maritsa said, in English, the experience of walking down the street in Cuba and being regarded by men is that, “you are like a piece of meat, and they are hungry.” A feminist filmmaker rejected the appraisal of women purely on their bodily attributes, by asserting vehemently that, “women are not only tits and ass.” [*tetas y culo*]. Beyond my fairly harmless experiences, Cubans had had much more violent and violating interactions. Leidy and Yanelis, a couple in Santa Clara, told me, “For us, it's a little bit more invasive. I have been asked, ‘how much?’ [price for sex]. Once I smashed a mug on a guy's face.” Leidy added, “And once I stuck a guy's 100 dollars in his mouth.” These examples of harassment which slide from verbal put-downs into physical violence as self-defence show how oppressive gender norms can be in Cuba, and how prevalent sexual harassment is. One gender activist pithily described how *piropos* are a clear example of *machismo* in action, where “Cuban men feel they have the right to say anything they want about women.” *Piropos*, then, are placed by some lesbian and bisexual women as part of the same model of old-fashioned patriarchy as *activa/pasiva* relationships, and above which, liberal, modern women rise. These women were also those who aligned themselves

with international feminism (and socially, tended to be whiter and higher class), suggesting that their experience of *piropos* might be influenced by their political views as well as their sexual orientation.

Although most women told me they do not like *piropos*, there is also an element of pleasure, which might be because women who uphold gender norms find validation in being seen as a desirable woman. Heterosexual Cuban women are reported to enjoy *piropos* (Lundgren, 2013; Smith & Padula, 1996, p. 172), using them as a barometer of their attractiveness that day (Ahlsén, 2017; Allen, 2011, p. 35). Some women I spoke to said that if the comments are nice, or funny (*piropos bonitos*), they do not mind receiving them. Misleidy, who was bisexual, said, “I like being desired. Sometimes I don’t have a very good day and then people sometimes say something that cheers me up.” If it is a nice compliment, it makes her feel good, because she likes feeling pretty and attractive. Another young and bisexual woman, Maritsa, said that if men say nice things to her, sometimes she will smile and accept it as a compliment. Finally, Dania, an older lesbian, whom I expected to resist *piropos* due to her feminist activism, Revolutionary credentials, and masculine appearance, said that if comments are nice, she doesn’t mind receiving them. This attitude towards *piropos* is in accordance with the line of analysis that Cuban women tend to adhere to a strict set of binary gender norms where women are supposed to look beautiful in men’s eyes, and upholding this brings social validation and moral worth.

In my analysis and in global literature, *piropos* or catcalling are a way to assert male control of public space and to reinforce ‘proper’ gender roles and the gender hierarchy which places men as active and women as passive. Lundgren (2013), Achugar (2001), Allen (2011), and others have shown that calling *piropos* is predominantly a homosocial interaction among men to display confidence, bravado, and wit to other men. As such, the function of the woman is entirely passive (Achugar, 2001), even so far that she is expected to ignore the *piropo* and remain silent. The woman’s function is simply *to exist*, as a backdrop or prop for men’s performance (Lundgren, 2013), or, a piece of meat, as Maritsa said. In Mexico, Gaytan Sánchez (2009, p. 238) phrases this as “simply to be a woman is to be exposed to receiving harassment in public places” (my translation), eerily foreshadowed in my very first field note, “It’s amazing how just being female can make the world a threatening place.” The purpose of women in *piropos*, therefore, is simply that they are readable as women, no matter what they look like or dress like, or whether they appear to be women-loving women. As long as they are perceived to be appropriately female, they can provoke a *piropo* from men.

Lesbian and bisexual women's responses to *piropos* are complex, and show the navigation of gender norms, which are felt as both validating and oppressive. While looking like a normal woman can hide lesbian orientation, it cannot make women invisible to the male gaze. As Cowan notes (1990, p. 199), being seen by the male gaze can be a form of domination and possession to control female sexuality. For *activas* like Daimary, *piropos* can be aggressive misgendering, acts of gender violence which undermine her identity. For other women, *piropos* are an example of the endlessly *machista* culture in Cuba, representative of a focus on women's worth only in terms of sex appeal to men. And for still others, there is a good-natured enjoyment of pleasant comments, which reinforce a self-identity as an attractive woman. The differences in the way *piropos* were received were not clearly tied to any social demographic factors, beyond a slight indication that liberal feminist women were more likely to find it a sexist experience. I had thought that women who were also attracted to men might be more likely to enjoy *piropos*, but this was not clearly the case. Even Daimary said she enjoyed them sometimes, suggesting that the male gaze is a powerful force of social approval for many different women. The Cuban emphasis on the body and biological attributes as the foundation of gender means that how others read you is fundamental to the correct performance of gender. *Piropos* may affirm some women's sense of being a proper woman, but for others, they invalidate a gender identity. Gender is thus revealed as highly contingent on social interaction with others. It is only through listening to the experiences of non-normative women, specifically including *activas* and *pasivas*, that we can really understand how gender is performed and reinforced through *piropos*.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored how some Cuban lesbian and bisexual women perceive and perform their gender and sexual orientation at the individual level. The literature suggests that the Cuban understanding of gender is firmly attached to the body and its appearance, which is borne out in the way that lesbian and bisexual women described their understandings to me. I argued that they understand gender and sexuality as aspects of the same attribute, which is continuously expressed through bodily appearance and interactions with others. In this understanding, the politics of appearance is not superficial, but how you look is really *who you are*. Gender is therefore continually asserted by how other people read you, which can be an invalidating experience for people whose gender does not 'match' their bodily appearance, do not experience their gender as binary male or female, or who are not recognised correctly by others. However, I was told by respondents that Cuban lesbian and bisexual women tend to

identify strongly as women, and to present their outward appearance as quite feminine. I read this as a desire to adhere to the strongly upheld gender norms of Cuba in order to achieve a normative invisibility, through which lesbian and bisexual women might be able to acquire respectability and respect from other Cubans. As Allen (2011, p. 11) wrote about men who have sex with men in Cuba, the 'problem' is not sexual acts themselves, which are commonly accepted, but any failure to perform the strict script of masculinity correctly. Saunders calls the policing of women's gender in Cuba, "the narrow framework for performing acceptable femininity and the high social cost of inadequately performing femininity" (Saunders, 2010, p. 17). Drawing from this literature and the experiences of my respondents, I suggest that performing female gender correctly (or, as correctly as possible) allows Cuban lesbian and bisexual women to better blend in with the rest of society, which, for the most part, is what they told me they want. In a society which values conformity and unity, especially around gender, normative invisibility can be perceived to be a respectable value.

The space I have given to *activa* and *pasiva* women shows how different expressions of gender and sexuality can be mobilised to create dividing lines of respectability. *Activa* and *pasiva* respondents see themselves as perfectly normal, and while they may experience social discrimination, usually regard their own sexuality and gender as powerful, appropriate, and fun. The *activa* and *pasiva* women that I met seem not to aspire to moral respectability, which I suggest releases them from some aspects of oppressive normative codes of behaviour. But *activas* and *pasivas* are regarded by almost all other LGBT and heterosexual Cubans that I spoke to as low-class abject others, because of associations drawn with patriarchy, *machismo*, backwardness, and blackness. Other lesbian and bisexual women are able, if they choose to, elevate themselves through distance from this abjected category in order to gain respectability through their difference. My analysis suggests the existence of a line drawn by LGBT Cuban activists, who by creating *activa/pasiva* as an abject other, can elevate themselves through association with modern, liberal, international LGBTI rights values. This finding represents a culmination and confirmation of previous research on Cuba by Allen (2011); Hamilton (2012); Saunders (2010); and Stout (2014), who have all hinted at this modernist drive and gradual shift in attitudes in Cuba, shown here in more depth than any previous study.

This analysis is very similar to findings in other parts of the world (Williams, 2009, p. 48), suggesting that butch/femme gender roleplay by women, though not by men, is seen consistently as somehow egregious. This appears to be a worldwide trend, sometimes clearly linked to human rights feminist activism, which should give development practitioners pause

for thought about how pervasive discourses about appropriate gender and sexuality can eradicate and subsume locally meaningful practices. I argued that *activa/pasiva* women are seen negatively in Cuba because of entrenched gender norms which support hegemonic femininity for women. Further, alongside Tanya Saunders, I suggested that the preference for lesbian and bisexual femininity in Cuba leverages deeply engrained desires for whiteness, high class or high culture, and European sophistication, revealing an embedded racism which conflates female masculinity with cultural and social blackness. In this line of analysis, the modern, progressive, feminine lesbian identity, in its newest iteration, is in fact produced through reference to traditional notions of what women should be – upholding patriarchal gender norms, rather than resisting them.

In this chapter, I have suggested that gender and sexuality are inseparable, and must be considered together in order to make sense of LGBTIQ life. My analysis suggests that respectability and homonormativity for lesbian and bisexual Cuban women require and rely on gender normativity, and that gender normativity is key to the normalisation of sexual diversity. In the next chapter, I explore how gender normativity is demonstrated through family ideals and especially for lesbian and bisexual women, through having a child.

## Chapter 6: “Cover the sun with one finger”: Lesbian and bisexual women’s navigation of family in Cuba

### Navigating respectability by bearing a child

The previous chapter explored how looking feminine and expressing a feminine identity can be used by Cuban lesbian and bisexual women to claim respectability via normative invisibility. In this chapter, I explore what is perhaps the single greatest demonstration of gender normativity for Cuban women: having a child. I will argue that having a child acts as an ultimate expression of correct female gender performance, and that this conformity to gender norms can bring a positive social tolerance, social status, and desirable invisibility. For women in this research, having a child was usually a happy occasion which brought improved relations with women’s own mothers, and which sometimes operated as a compensation for the perceived failure of sexual non-normativity. Like the rest of this thesis, I discuss here how Cuban lesbian and bisexual women that I spoke to try to conform to gender normativity in Cuban family life as much as they can, in order to gain respectability, invisibility, and social and familial acceptance.

Like many other Latin American families, Cuban lesbian and bisexual women told me that their families of origin usually prefer to adopt a strategy of silence or tacit understanding about their sexuality. However, it turned out that all women in this research had in fact had a direct discussion about their sexuality with their mothers, which was just as often initiated by mothers as by a coming-out declaration by daughters. I discuss here how daughters’ sexual and gendered behaviour is always already a semi-public issue in Cuba, seen as a reflection on their family’s honour. As guardians of family respectability and morality, Cuban mothers are identified in the literature as responsible for producing good, well-behaved, daughters with the correct values. When the tactic of silence fails, as it always already will for lesbian and bisexual daughters, some of my respondents were able to partially compensate or appease their mothers by having a child. Having a baby drew some respondents back into mainstream gender normativity and normative family life, producing respectability and social status. In my metaphor for the title of this chapter, a common Cuban idiom which informants used, the sun of obvious sexual non-normativity is partially, though never completely, blocked out by the finger of gender-normative childbearing. Although gender normativity cannot completely compensate for sexual non-normativity, the effort might allow family members to turn a blind eye, preserving respectability. Importantly, gender normativity through childbearing is a

gendered strategy which is only available to Cuban cisgender women and not other LGBTIQ people, due to the way in which being a 'real' woman is conflated with being a mother, and the importance accorded to the status of mother. My research implies that the ways in which Cuban LGBTIQ people navigate family issues and social acceptance is highly gendered. There is a huge amount that could be analysed regarding Cuban lesbian and bisexual women's approaches to family life; here I focus only on some of the gender normativity aspects that emerged from our discussions.

I refer to main respondents in this chapter as lesbian and bisexual women, women, or daughters; their mothers as mothers or grandmothers; and their children as children or grandchildren. Of my 33 primary respondents, nine have children and four are actively planning to do so, but nearly all expressed a desire and longing to have a baby, or regret that they never had. Six women had children before living a fully open lesbian life, while three had made their orientation known before having children. Five women had been teen mothers, consistent with Cuba's low age of first child. All mothers' mothers are heavily involved in raising their grandchildren, with three women leaving their children to be raised primarily by the grandmother while they go to work. Only two women have an active involvement from their child's father. Largely, these demographics are consistent with patterns of parenting in Cuba (Díaz-Briquets, 2014), indicating that there are ways for lesbian and bisexual women to manage parenting that are reasonably well socially accepted. Although I study children here as a 'strategy' for increased social acceptance, all the children in this research are loved, cared for, and bring great happiness to their families. They were not brought into the world to improve opinions of LGBTIQ parents, but their presence is felt to bring additional positive benefits to their parents beyond the ordinary joy of children. In the first half of this chapter, I look at women's relationships with their own mothers, and in the second half, at how lesbian and bisexual women negotiated normativity around becoming mothers themselves. I start with an ethnographic example from Santa Clara, which encapsulates many of the issues explored in the rest of the chapter. I then explain how the 'normal' tactic of silence about sexuality works in the family, and why it does not work for women with their mothers. Then, I move to the discussion of having children, exploring people's stories of becoming a mother and how children operate as a proof of 'normalcy'.

#### *From activa to mamá: Odalys' story*

In Santa Clara, Odalys was introduced to me because she had recently had a baby, and I had

expressed interest in learning about lesbian and bisexual women's options for having children. We meet in the daytime at El Mejunje and conduct a somewhat difficult interview, where it seems as though she doesn't especially want to talk to me, although she happily chats to Luis, my research assistant and her friend. People keep stopping by to coo over the baby, who is dressed all in pink, because she is a girl. I found it interesting that Odalys would dress her child in a hyperfeminine fashion, since Odalys describes herself as an *activa*, and loves performing as a *transformista masculino* (drag king), suggesting that she enjoys playing with gender and understands the performative power of clothes and appearance. However, I wouldn't have guessed her *activa* identity from her own appearance that day, since she is wearing a floaty yellow dress, with her light brown hair in soft curls topped with a matching ribbon. When I ask about *activas* and *pasivas* in a general sense, she laughs and shows me her ID card, her picture showing short hair in a mohawk, looking very butch. Up until recently, she had presented as an *activa*, been performing as a *transformista*, and was generally known around El Mejunje by her *transformista* male name. It seems that having the baby has changed her sense of gender identity. She said, "I changed because of the baby. I was going to be a mother, besides, the baby is a girl, so I changed." When I met her, she was telling people to use her female name, clearly identifying her new position as a mother with a sense of femaleness. She told me that when she got back to work, meaning *transformismo* as well as her regular job, she would cut her hair again and go back to looking more masculine. Oddly, this is not far off what later happened to me through my own journey of pregnancy and birth making me feel more feminine, followed by a reclamation of a more androgynous or masculine presentation.

Since I met few lesbian and bisexual Cubans who had recently had children, I was curious to know about Odalys' decision-making process. She spent most of our interview telling me how much she loves women and is a lesbian through and through, and when I started to ask about how she got pregnant, she claimed "independent production"<sup>11</sup> and didn't want to reveal more. In a roundabout way, she eventually said that she had got pregnant accidentally by having sex with a man, and that, should she want another baby, she would do it "the same way, that's the fastest way. It's not that I like men but I have to do it." She had always wanted to be a mother, so is happy to have a baby, and is willing to make the sacrifice of having sex with someone she does not like. Absent fathers or pregnancy through casual encounters are

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<sup>11</sup> *Producción independiente* means having and raising a child without input from the father, possibly even without his knowing that there was a pregnancy. cf. Härkönen (2014, p. 65).

not uncommon in Cuba, and it can be more important to women that their mother is available to help raise her grandchild, rather than the child's father.

Since having the baby, at age 25, Odalys said her relationship with her mother has vastly improved. She said, "My mother is unconditional, I don't have the words to explain it, she loves her [the baby] very much." But when she was younger, her mother had been furious when she found out that Odalys was going to friends' houses to dress in masculine clothes before going out. She was caught by her mother, she said, kissing goodbye to a partner in the bus terminal. She was sent home, her mother slapped her, and spent a week without talking to her. Her father, on the other hand, tolerated her sexuality on the condition that she would not bring girls home: he said, "you can be a lesbian but I don't want obscenities [*bayú*] in my house." Odalys left home, as a declaration of independence and assertion of uncompromising lesbian orientation, but her mother found her and brought her back, saying that she was still her daughter even if she was a lesbian. These days, even though her father has passed away, Odalys does not bring any of her lesbian friends or girlfriends back to her mother's house, and having the baby has restored good relations in the family. Odalys also started attending Catholic church on behalf of her daughter, in order to get her baptised and introduced to the Church, in case she wants to continue with religion as an adult.

Taken together, Odalys' delivering a baby, looking more feminine, and starting to go to church, are all performances of a type of normativity which brings respectability to her and her mother from their neighbours and social networks. Odalys' current, and apparently temporary, performance of normative femininity through appearance and motherhood is perhaps a way to appease her mother about her non-normative sexuality, and to give her a gift that she wants. Becoming a grandmother (*abuela*) carries a high social status in Cuba, and most other lesbian and bisexual women I spoke to report that their mothers are supportive of them having children, even if they are raised by a lesbian couple. Odalys' embrace of feminine social norms and having a baby could be considered as a route back into her relationship with her own mother. In the Cuban idiom quoted as the title for this chapter, the baby, symbolising gender normativity, provides the finger which can't quite cover the sun of sexual non-normativity, but conceals just enough to allow everyone to pretend that things are 'normal' in their family.

## Silence does not work for women

Many studies of queer Latin America identify a strategy within the home of ‘tacit knowledge’ about non-normative sexuality (Decena, 2011), where same-sex practice can be tolerated by the family as long as it is discreet and private. Queer sexuality is kept silent but known, or, as in my central metaphor for this chapter, the sun which is not quite covered. Non-heterosexual sexuality is “something present yet not remarked upon, something understood yet not stated, something intuited yet uncertain, something known yet not broached by either person in a given exchange.” (Decena, 2011, p. 18). Unlike being closeted, the strategy of silence can allow a degree of freedom to conduct relationships – as long as activities are private and unobtrusive, they might be allowed, if not quite accepted. Many ethnographies, including ones on Cuba, describe a situation where ‘everyone knows, but no one talks about it’, often referred to as ‘*se hace todo, no dice nada*’ (do everything, but say nothing, or, in English, ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’) (e.g. Acosta, 2016; Allen, 2011; Decena, 2011; Hamilton, 2012; Howe, 2013, p. 122; Peña, 2013; Stout, 2014, p. 58; Wekker, 2006, p. 187; Williams, 2009). But somewhat unexpectedly, although they told me *no dice nada* was the ‘normal’ way of doing things, all the women in my research had had a direct discussion of their sexuality with their mothers, and sometimes fathers. My analysis of their specific experiences leads me to suggest that tacit understanding is a gendered strategy that is less available to women than to men.

While many women I met would have preferred to maintain *no dice nada*, it proved impossible, whether through choosing to discuss their sexuality, or being forced to, usually by their mothers. I did not find a clear pattern among respondents about why, and who, chose to discuss their sexuality with their mothers, and who preferred to keep silence, which would be worth further research to explore what factors might prompt such a discussion. Odalys, above, explained that her sexuality was found out by her mother when she was caught with a partner. Up until that point, she had been maintaining *no dice nada* quite effectively. But when she was found out, her sexuality became a matter for family discussion, and she was forced to take a stand. Her mother’s anger made it impossible to go back to complicit silence. Some other women I spoke to were similarly found out by their mothers, sometimes because of direct suspicion and snooping, and sometimes by accident.

Carmen had replied to my call for participants on Facebook, the only person in this research I reached via an open call rather than personal networks. She is 22 years old, *mulata*, and presents herself in a way that Cubans find extremely sexy. She describes her sexual orientation

as 'open, rich' [*abierta, rica*], and *pasiva*. The first time we met, she told me about her early sexual experiences and relationship with her mother. Around the age of 20, she fell in with the *activa/pasiva* girls in her neighbourhood, and started going to gay parties with them. She said that she hadn't yet come out of the closet, using the English term [*todavía no había salido del closet*]. When she started going out with this group of girls, her mother tried to stop her, because she knew they were lesbians, and because of the gender norms they broke. Her mother expressed a socially conservative fear that 'people will talk', and that Carmen would become a lesbian herself, indicating the understanding of sexual orientation as something acquired as well as innate. Carmen herself was still in denial that she was interested in women, and said she was just curious.

Eventually, a day came when her mother waited for her to come home, then locked the door and said, "today, we're going to talk." She said that if Carmen felt good going out with "those people", it must be because she was one of them. Carmen still denied it, and they fought. "From that day on in the house there was chaos. She'd argue every day with me, didn't want to sleep in the same bed as me because I was a pig. Didn't want me to drink from the glasses, and started to treat me very badly, you know, chaos. I wanted to leave home but I didn't have anywhere to go." Every day, her mother would shout at her, force her to do chores, and keep her in the house. Over time, this dissipated, helped by Carmen's doctor brother talking to her mother, and neighbours intervening. Now, things are calmer, but her mother still does not accept Carmen's sexuality. Instead, "she knows, but she would rather not know." [*ella lo sabe, pero no quiere saber nada*]. She flew into another rage when Carmen started her first relationship with a woman, and tried to keep her at home, away from the 'bad influences'. Carmen managed to move into her girlfriend's house, and now they do not really speak to her mother. Carmen said of her mother, "in the end she accepted it, but still hasn't really internalised it." [*ella lo aceptó, pero todavía actualmente no lo asimila*]. Carmen still visits her mother every day, but they don't talk about her girlfriend or her sexuality. Her mother doesn't come to see her at her girlfriend's house, and they don't spend much time together. Her mother prefers to let things lie, in order to maintain a relationship with her daughter. "She knows, but deep down doesn't accept it." [*Ella lo sabe, pero en el fondo no lo acepta.*]

Carmen's story contains more physical violence than most I heard, but is not unusual in its intensity. While Carmen said that her mother would prefer not to know about her sexuality, in fact it was her mother who instigated the discussion (and fight), suggesting that controlling and 'correcting' her daughter's sexual behaviour is more important than upholding silence.

Among my respondents, mothers were just as likely as daughters to initiate a discussion or confrontation about their daughter's sexual orientation, suggesting that those mothers felt a great degree of responsibility and influence (or interference) over their daughters' gender and sexuality. Although Carmen's mother tried to reinstate *no dice nada*, ultimately this is impossible once a confrontation has taken place. The *no dice nada* model, while described as 'normal' by respondents, fails for Odalys and Carmen, which I suggest is because of the heavily moralising discourse surrounding women's sexuality, and a function of the gendered specifics of the mother-daughter relationship. These two stories feature *activa* and *pasiva* women, which I have discussed as much more socially sanctioned in Cuba than other forms of lesbian sexuality, so it is possible that the stigma of gender transgression attached to these relationships made mothers more likely to start a direct discussion with their daughters, although this is not conclusive from the research I conducted. Decena (2011, p. 28) makes a brief but useful intervention to note that Dominican men's ability to maintain tacit knowledge rests on their position as economic providers in the family, which grants them a 'respect' and privacy from family scrutiny. He observes that lesbian Latina women will negotiate privacy differently, based on their socialisation as women. My research furthers this observation and suggests that the management of *no dice nada* might have an important gendered dimension; it may work for men in Cuba, but women's sexuality seems to be much more closely monitored and discussed by the family, principally mothers, making it harder to maintain discreet privacy.

My respondents' experiences suggest that the failure of *no dice nada* rests on the public scrutiny of women's sexuality, and the role of mothers as moral guardians of daughters' sexuality. It is commonly observed in the literature that Latina mothers are considered responsible for their daughters' conduct. Acosta (2010, p. 65) describes Latina mothers in the USA as "enforcers of sexual morality and heterosexuality", having responsibility for educating their children, especially daughters, about correct sexual practices. When talking about policy and education on homosexuality, many women in my research put the family as the most suitable source of information and education, suggesting that mothers are supposed to educate their children on correct gender and sexual practices. In Cuban policy, family is conceptualised as the 'base cell' of society, which is supposed to be the location of teaching and morality, with rather more responsibility than the state (Stavropoulou et al., 2020). Daigle (2015, p. 171) argues that the Revolution placed more responsibility on individuals, rather than less:

“In the absence of structural excuses for immoral conduct, ostensibly removed by the Revolution and its reforms, the responsibility for upright conduct is put on the shoulders of individuals. Women, who are expected to be the moral centers of their families and who are judged for their sexual behaviors in ways that men are not, bear the brunt of this situation.”

The literature identifies that Cuban mothers are expected to both teach and model ‘good’ sexual conduct to their daughters. This is not always felt as oppressive; young women are likely to look to their mothers for guidance. Young heterosexual Cuban women in Samuels et al. (2020) reported that they thought good family relations were the key to preventing sexual relationship challenges, relying on their mothers as role models and sources of advice. The model they are supposed to be teaching, while Cuba has permissive Caribbean norms for women of sex outside marriage, is one of heterosexual, non-promiscuous, decent, reproductive relationships. On the other hand, sons are expected to have plenty of girlfriends as a display of masculinity, and are allowed considerably more license to, for example, stay out late, go to bars, and sleep around.

Alongside Carmen’s mother’s fear of neighbourhood gossip, several women told me they didn’t want to let their parents down or disappoint them in some way, suggesting that daughters saw themselves as a moral reflection on their parents, especially mothers; and that homosexuality is a disappointment. Carmen has not told her father that she is ‘open’: “I don’t want to take away his vision of his ideal daughter, you know, let him down in any way.” Carmen and Odalys both mention their fathers, but on the whole, respondents told me that their fathers often did not react strongly or negatively to their daughters’ sexual orientation. I do not have conclusive findings on whether fathers were more accepting or simply did not feel responsible, but their absence from respondents’ narratives suggest that mothers’ opinions are much more important to respondents. It is hard for me to establish exactly what parents would find disappointing, as I only interviewed lesbian and bisexual daughters, not parents. But like Stella’s findings in post-Soviet Russia, I suggest that negative family reactions to daughters’ sexuality are as much about perceived transgressions of femininity, normative womanhood, and the potential lack of grandchildren as about the expectation of heterosexuality (Stella, 2015, p. 71). I interpret the discussion as that mothers experience a combination of feeling like they have raised their daughter badly; a loss of family respectability; and confronting the possibility of not having grandchildren, although further research might produce other interpretations. Lixa, a 32 year old *mulata* woman from Havana, said,

“It was hard for me, I felt embarrassed with my mum, who never set that example for me. I mean, in my family men are all womanisers [*mujeriegos*] and women are very flirty [*muy satas*], so I never had an example of that [homosexuality]. And it was hard for me because I thought I had failed my mum [*pensé que le estaba fallando a mi mamá*], the education she gave me and the values she taught me. But that was my destiny, period. That’s what I liked, who knows why.”

Lixa worries that her desire for women could be regarded as a failure of her mother’s values and respectability, and that her mother might be regarded as a bad mother for not having taught her daughter properly. Fortunately, while Lixa’s mother was initially upset and asked not to talk about it (showing a preference for *no dice nada*), she quickly accepted Lixa. Lixa and Carmen both show a concern for how their parents see them as ‘ideal daughters’, and that homosexuality would be a disappointment in some way.

A daughter’s non-heterosexuality as a disappointment suggests that daughters’ sexual activities reflect how ‘well’ her mother raised her. Other studies have shown that Latina mothers are socially measured through the behaviour and successes of their children, and that children are seen as a reflection on their mother’s ability to parent well and raise children with good values (Acosta, 2010). In Chile, Figueroa Guinez (2018) describes how a lesbian woman’s mother was telephoned by some men criticising her daughter, which was presented as a morality problem for the mother to solve, not the daughter. Similarly, in Garcia’s ethnography, a young Cuban woman seen with some young American men caused a family friend some consternation about whether to report her perceived *jineterismo* to her parents, for disciplining (Garcia, 2008, p. 204). In Suriname, Wekker (2006, p. 114) describes how children must be presented well in order to reflect well on their mother’s personhood. There is a parallel with Fernandez’s (2010) work on Cuban interracial couples, which shows that children’s dating choices are seen as a reflection on their parents, and can be the subject of social scrutiny in the neighbourhood, risking the reputation of the whole family. Fernandez also shows how Cuban mothers exercise a discourse of family obligation, duty, and the ‘good of the family’ to undermine undesirable mixed-race relationships of their children (especially white daughters), a discourse which similarly underlies the reactions of lesbian and bisexual women’s mothers. Härkönen (2014, p. 155) argues that a Cuban father with a gay son suffered a loss of respectability and *machismo* because he was perceived to have failed to teach his son how to properly be a man. Around the world, an LGBTIQ child may be considered a reflection of bad parenting and may produce a loss of reputation for the family (Stella, 2015, p. 77). My respondents’ experiences imply that something similar happens for some Cuban mothers with lesbian and bisexual daughters, who may feel they have failed to teach their daughters

properly how to be a good woman. While this observation is broadly true across my respondents, some women's mothers (and fathers) were not disappointed or upset about their daughters' sexuality. As I did not spend time with mothers specifically, I cannot draw conclusions about why this might be so, only that some people do not see homosexuality negatively.

Aside from an image of mothers listening to neighbourhood gossip to closely police their daughters' sexual behaviour, some women in this research chose to tell their mothers about their sexuality, actively rejecting the *no dice nada* model. The mother-daughter bond is of high importance in Cuba as the central structuring bond of kinship, and many women in this research value their mothers' approval of their relationships, and work hard to bring all aspects of their life together. Belkis, Daimary's ex, told me that her mother pressured her to get a boyfriend in her teens, "So my mother started to ask questions like, do you have a boyfriend? And telling me that I had to have a boyfriend." As a result, she maintained a six year relationship with a man, having two children with him, while dating women secretly. She had always been open with her boyfriend, and he knew she preferred women and was in relationships with women while dating him. Apparently, "he understood things" and was comfortable with the *no dice nada* arrangement, as long as Belkis would still have sex with him. This arrangement allowed her to maintain an outwardly respectable relationship to cover her less accepted relationships, and, she said, "for me, it was perfect".

Eventually, her mother began to suspect that she might be sleeping with a woman she was spending a lot of time with, and simultaneously, her boyfriend reached the end of his patience. Belkis decided to have an open discussion with her mother, where she told her that she would not date men any longer. She provides an interesting perspective as both a daughter and a mother, on when she told her mother:

"I told her things she didn't know or didn't want to know because parents sometimes prefer being blind to some things, I'm a mother and I understand it. She cried and said that maybe I was just going through a rough patch, she tried to find a way out, she didn't want to accept what it really was in that moment. She eventually accepted it but with some obstacles."

Belkis suggests that her mother would prefer to keep tacit silence about her daughter's sexuality, and that she struggled to accept it when it was made unavoidably public. In this case, Belkis was pushed into initiating a discussion by the breakdown of her covering arrangement, while she too may have preferred to continue living under the *no dice nada* model.

Fortunately, like many stories in this research, Belkis and her mother managed to reorient their relationship and are currently on good terms. Other women in this research also made the choice to openly discuss their sexuality with their mothers, usually similarly to the 'coming out' model.

The stories discussed above show the complicated negotiations that women in this research undertake with their families in order to reach a level of acceptance and balance that works for everyone. No women in my research, across locations, age, class, and ethnicity, maintain the 'normal' paradigm of *no dice nada*, whether through being found out or choosing to discuss their sexuality openly. This somewhat surprising finding suggests that, although I was often told that *no dice nada* is the preferred, and normal, way of managing non-normative sexuality in Cuban families, that it is hard for women to uphold. Instead, daughters' sexuality appears to be always already in the semi-public, family, domain and thus cannot be kept discreetly private, like sons'. Stella (2015, p. 108) argues that a strict public/private division is insufficient to explain women's complex social performances; the family home is in fact difficult for non-heterosexual women precisely because of its lack of privacy. The lack of privacy in Cuban homes is well known (Pertierra, 2007b), and they can be spaces of surveillance for lesbian women (Saunders, 2009b), making sexual activities semi-public from the outset. Engebretsen (2014, p. 78) argues that compartmentalisation is at the heart of tacit strategies, where sexual activities and relationships may not be an issue per se if they are kept separate from family life, but become a problem when they interfere with daughters' ability to perform their appropriate role in the family. The lesbian and bisexual daughters that I spoke to in Cuba did not compartmentalise their sexual lives to keep sexual activities private and out of sight of the family, although they may have wanted to. The literature suggests that Cuban daughters' sexual activity, both heterosexual and not, is regarded not solely as an autonomous activity, but a public reflection on the mother's parenting. Globally, a daughter's sexual activity is often a barometer of family respectability, reflecting virtue, shame, and honour on the family as a whole. The public nature of daughters' sexuality means that women in this research found it impossible for their desire for women to remain private and discreetly silent within the family, even if that's what all would prefer. My deep gender analysis brings a new dimension into the study of queer Latin American sexuality, showing again that norms for men do not necessarily work for women.

Carlos Decena (2011, p. 21) identifies that when the 'tacit knowledge' model is violated, it is social relations that suffer most, pulling apart the relationships that queer people need for

survival. In my research, it is the bond between mothers and daughters that is most important and which is put under strain by daughters' non-heterosexuality. In the next section, I analyse how lesbian and bisexual women could try to make up for the perceived 'disappointment' of their sexuality, by fulfilling other good daughterly duties like having a child. This expression of gender normativity often helped women restore good relations in their family and with society. As Marú explained, "I had boyfriends. I even got married, I had a son, I did all those things to...How do you say it? Cover the sun with one finger."

## Children

In the second half of this chapter, I will discuss lesbian and bisexual women's status as parents themselves. Given the failure of *no dice nada* for all the lesbian and bisexual women I spoke to, upholding gender normativity through having a child emerges as a possible compensatory strategy. Recalling Odalys' story and the strong literature on Cuban motherhood, I discuss how having children can give lesbian and bisexual women a level of respectability and moral worth in society, and is sometimes a compensation to the family for non-normative sexuality through the gift of a grandchild. Having a child could be considered the ultimate act of normative womanhood in Cuba, and the most effective possible finger with which to try to cover the sun.

Of course, this outcome of having a child stands alongside the usual motivations of love, care, fulfilment, and social reproduction. Nonetheless, having a child often operates as an expression of gender normativity, with lesbian and bisexual women in this research invested in showing how normal they are and how normal their children are, as a strategy for social acceptance within their families of origin, and wider society.

### Where do babies come from?

The short answer to this question is that I was told that most lesbian and bisexual women in Cuba have a child through intercourse with a man; sometimes through a long-term relationship, like Belkis, and sometimes through a casual encounter, like Odalys. The lack of assistive technologies and other support produces a situation, common to most parts of the world, where it is simply the most straightforward option to try to get pregnant through intercourse, which was widely reported by my respondents as the principal way which they

and other lesbian and bisexual women used<sup>12</sup>. Of course, the major consideration in this method is how willing women are to engage in sex with a man, and how willing their partners are to support that decision. Among my respondents, the older mothers aged over 40 were more likely to have had children in a conjugal relationship and before living an openly lesbian life. Younger respondents had more diversity in their methods of conception, from casual encounters to planned sperm donations, and were more likely to be openly lesbian or bisexual before conception, including planning for a baby while in a same-sex relationship. Acosta (2013) notes that most lesbian and bisexual mothers in the world have children from heterosexual relationships, making much of the Global North discussion around donor choice, technologies, social mothering, and co-parenting almost irrelevant to Global South contexts, but most research on lesbian mothering comes from the Global North, focusing on white, middle-class women. A comprehensive (but not systematic) review of LGBTIQ parenting in non-Western contexts (Costa & Shenkman, 2020) concludes that research in some countries has exclusively focused on cisgender gay men's parenting, and calls for further research on other gender and sexual subjectivities as parents. My study of some lesbian and bisexual women's lives in Cuba reveals a different set of preoccupations and concerns than those derived from Global North contexts or from studies of men, perhaps more relevant to international development policy and practice.

Drawing together the literature on Cuban motherhood, and the experiences of my respondents, it seems that Cuban matrifocal norms and the perceived temporary nature of male partners can indirectly benefit lesbian and bisexual women with children. The combination of Caribbean matrifocality, Revolutionary women's rights, and the absence of the Catholic church has left some queer space that allows the women I met to create non-nuclear, lesbian-headed families with low levels of social judgement. The Cuban norm where men may get women pregnant but not necessarily act as a father figure (Andaya, 2014; Härkönen, 2014) putatively allows lesbian and bisexual women to engage in casual sex resulting in pregnancies, and choose to have the baby alone, with these choices remaining entirely within cultural normativity and supported by family, friends, and the healthcare system. This is unlike other parts of the world, which sometimes express strong conservative concerns about known paternity and father's involvement for lesbian-headed families (Ryan-Flood, 2009, p. 10).

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<sup>12</sup> See E. Browne (2018) for a further discussion of access to assistive reproductive technologies for the women in this research.

Matrifocal families are not considered as respectable as nuclear, legally married families in Cuba, but they are sufficiently well-established to be unremarkable. In this case, lesbian and bisexual women can leverage a cultural gender norm to their advantage.

Importantly, the choices analysed below are open only to cisgender lesbian and bisexual women, not to gay men, transgender women and men, or other LGBTIQ people. The literature shows a strong association of womanhood with motherhood in Cuba, suggesting that it is considered right and natural for women to want to have children, no matter their sexual orientation. Ryan-Flood (2009, p. 154) notes that “lesbians are perhaps marginally more acceptable as parents than gay men”, due to the gender essentialist conflation of womanhood with care work, which is a discourse highly prevalent in Cuba. My research contributes to a more nuanced analysis of the differing expectations and options available to different genders and sexualities, rather than taking one demographic’s experience as universal for all.

### Becoming a mother

It is hard to overstate the importance of mothers in Cuba: in social relations, care work, and as exemplars of womanhood in the national imagination. Garcia describes the Cuban state’s approach to women in the early Revolution as: “Images of motherhood continued to stand for morality and social justice. This rhetoric was embraced; motherhood came to symbolize social welfare, family unity, and national morality.” (Garcia, 2008, p. 94). Saunders suggests that women are still idealised as mothers in contemporary Cuba, with a continued emphasis on being white, pure, honourable, and sexually attractive (Saunders, 2009b). As a society with matrifocal heritage, mothers are also particularly important in the kinship structure (Härkönen, 2014), and a mother and her children are the backbone of Cuban families. Like Andaya found (2014), when I asked lesbian and bisexual women about their families, they nearly always started with a description of their mother and her household, and consistently conceptualised their mother’s house as their home, even if they no longer lived there or had any intention of living there. The mother-child bond is perceived to be the strongest, most stable, and permanent social bond possible in Cuba (Härkönen, 2014, p. 37).

Becoming a mother oneself is sometimes described in the literature on Cuba as a kind of moral duty, or obligation to one’s own mother. Women who do not have children are seen as both pitiable, suffering a tragedy, and sometimes as selfish, pursuing their own self-interest above their obligation to provide a grandchild (Samuels et al., 2020). Anthropologists have described how becoming a mother in Cuba is closely intertwined with achieving full personhood as an

adult, and particularly gendered, with becoming a 'complete woman' (Andaya, 2014, p. 74; Härkönen, 2014). Achieving full adult womanhood, therefore, is closely associated with becoming a mother, and I add the insight that childbearing can be the greatest fulfilment of gender normativity for Cuban women. Below, I explore how lesbian and bisexual women respondents experience the overpowering discourse of the importance of being a mother for creating themselves as 'normal women'. Here, the emphasis is on being a normal *woman* rather than a normal *person*, as motherhood is a gendered expectation. My analysis suggests that becoming a mother might be a way for lesbian and bisexual Cuban women to show themselves as 'real women', and as a route back into good relationships with their own mothers, as it completes a life stage and makes their mothers proud.

One day in Dania's house in a working-class suburb, I am conducting interviews with several of the activist women who run the CENESEX network in Havana. Marú, who is black, and Heydi, who is white, a couple both in their fifties, told me they had both had children with men before they met each other 10 years ago. At this early point in my fieldwork, I had not met any lesbian and bisexual women with children, so I asked them, "What is it like to be a lesbian mother? And the other question is what do your children think?" Marú replied, "I feel normal. I don't see anything wrong with it." "It's normal," said Heydi. Marú added, "I'm no less a mother for being a lesbian." "Exactly," agreed Heydi. "And, even though we are lesbian, he is no less my son. It's normal," finished Marú. Although both women's responses might be read as defensive – that they have to defend their normality – in fact I heard this refrain repeated consistently across so many interlocutors that I did, in the end, believe that lesbian mothering is seen as relatively normal in Cuba. I suggest that this viewpoint draws on the tight association of women with motherhood, as shown in the wider literature, and the consistent framing by respondents of themselves as 'normal women'. Maria, a woman of a totally different social class, ethnicity, and age (professional, white, 27) described herself as a woman first and lesbian second when she said, "My sexual preference, the fact that I like another woman, does not mean that I cannot fully realise my potential as a woman. In my opinion, having a baby, that little person coming out of you, is going to fulfil me." The ideas expressed here, across generations and social distinctions, suggest that the Cuban lesbian and bisexual women I spoke to are keen to emphasise their normalcy *as women*, over and above their sexual orientation. Having a child, which is presented by respondents as the most normal possible thing a woman could do, shows how normalcy is something that is actively constructed and pursued.

The women above are clearly aware of a discourse that sexual attraction to women is somehow incompatible with being a 'real woman'. A study in Chile, one of very few on lesbian mothers in Latin America, shows that women "had difficulty viewing themselves as fully feminine without motherhood" (Herrera, 2009, p. 38), and that women who were not mothers would have to explain themselves. Saunders suggests that lesbians in Cuba are "despised for their rejection of the roles assigned to them (that of wife, mother, and 'dependent of the male')" (Saunders, 2009b, p. 182). The literature suggests a discourse in Latin America conflating womanhood with motherhood, which can be so strong that motherhood then becomes the key social marker of correct female gender performance and being a 'real' woman.

One of the outcomes of being perceived as a 'real' woman for my respondents is the relief of sinking into normative social invisibility. Consistent with literature from around the world, having a child invisibilises lesbian or bisexual orientation for many Cuban women that I spoke to. In Greece (Kirtsoglou, 2004); Ireland and Sweden (Ryan-Flood, 2009); the USA (Acosta, 2009; Tuthill, 2016); and Chile (Figueroa Guinez, 2018), scholars have found that motherhood usurps other identities, and that women with children are not perceived as possible lesbians by wider society. In these studies, invisibilisation is often presented as disempowering or creating internal or social identity conflict. But in Cuba, social invisibility is sometimes presented by respondents in this research as a convenient cover or protection which upholds respectability. In the same way that looking like a 'normal' woman was perceived as a good thing in the previous chapter, sexuality invisibility through mothering is also sometimes regarded as protective and enabling, to some degree. For example, Belkis' outward performance of normativity through her boyfriend and children allowed her a degree of freedom to pursue other relationships that would not be as socially accepted. Isabel, aged 51, told me,

"Most women in my generation have children, but the child was a means to protect themselves from society. They had sex with men, they had children and that protected them because that way they proved to society that they weren't lesbians. Back then."

From her statement, it might be expected to find a generational difference in how lesbian and bisexual Cuban women manage having children. As Isabel says, around the turn of the century and before, male spouses and children may have acted as a cover for non-heterosexuality, providing desirable invisibility through denial of lesbian orientation. Similarly, in Soviet Russia in the 1970s and 1980s, Stella (2015, p. 56) found that non-heterosexual women could use

their status as mothers or wives to deflect suspicion of their sexuality. Tuthill (2016) found that being a mother allowed lesbian and bisexual Latina women in the USA to pass as heterosexual to some people, and, further, that this conveyed that they were good and moral women.

Younger respondents in my research were less likely to mobilise the discourse of covering or passing, and instead tended to talk about their children as proud proof that openly lesbian and bisexual women could be good and ‘normal’ mothers, which suggests a significant historical shift. Like Acosta (2011), I find that invisibility through gender normativity can provide flexibility, empowerment, and agency for some Latina non-heterosexual women, though not always.

Drawing from the earlier discussion that lesbian and bisexual daughters in this research often perceive themselves to have let their mothers down in some way, I suggest here that having a child can be regarded as a gift to the family, one which often repairs damaged relationships. This discourse may be more relevant to my younger respondents, and those others who were living an openly lesbian or bisexual life before or while raising a child. In my research, grandparents, especially grandmothers, were almost always delighted to have a new child in the family. Becoming an *abuela* in Cuba carries a high social status (Härkönen, 2014, p. 102), and I found that most grandparents are keen to be involved in their grandchildren’s lives, even if they do not entirely approve of their daughter’s sexual orientation. None of my participants are estranged from their mothers, even when there have been violent altercations, as in both Carmen’s and Odalys’ cases. I read this to show the intense importance of preserving the mother-daughter bond, and the hard work that respondents put into pleasing their mothers. Odalys’ mother, who was extremely angry when she found out Odalys was an *activa*, now has a loving and affectionate relationship with both her daughter and granddaughter. Although Odalys said that her mother hopes she is going to “stop being a lesbian”, her mother is very proud of the baby and they seem to have reached a truce at home, through Odalys’ thorough performance of gender normativity in appearance and lifestyle. Maritsa, who is one of the only women planning to get pregnant through donor insemination, told me that her partner’s parents are delighted at the prospect, since their two daughters are both unable to have children. They are happy that Maritsa is giving them the chance to be grandparents, even though they will not be related by blood – and after I finished fieldwork, Maritsa did in fact have a baby. Belkis has help from both sets of grandparents, while her boyfriend eventually left her. Her mother lived with her when the children were small, and her father, who is separated from her mother, visited too. The other grandparents, from the children’s father, are also heavily involved in caring for and raising their grandchildren. She said, “his parents are

great, they come and visit us, they take them out and they care about them, there is no problem and I have no complaints. We get along pretty well, the problem is with him.” Even though their son had rejected Belkis and his children, and Belkis is openly lesbian, she told me that the grandparents are happy for her and her different partners to raise the children and they maintain a good relationship.

As with Belkis, having a child is a gendered act which can bring lesbian and bisexual Cuban women back into ‘good daughter’ status. Ryan-Flood (2009, p. 153) found that her lesbian participants in Sweden and Ireland reported improved family relationships on becoming a parent, with children acting as a bridge. In Cuba, the literature shows that having a child completes women’s transition to full adulthood, and raises their mothers up a generation into the exalted position of *abuela*. It allows mothers to feel that their daughters have become ‘proper women’, and this ascent reflects well on the whole family, which gains social respectability for completing an important gendered rite of passage. Scholars argue that many Cuban families express love through actions and behaviour rather than words (Crockett et al., 2009), making it possible to imagine that producing a grandchild is an act of gendered love from daughters to mothers. For my specific respondents, like Engebretsen (2014, p. 71), I found that lesbian and bisexual women working or reworking what it means to be a ‘good daughter’ holds the most promise for social and family acceptance. The discourse above of giving a grandchild to the family as an act of filial love, I suggest, might bring lesbian and bisexual women back into normative family life through their performance of correct social norms for daughters, and compensate for their failure to perform other social norms well. Here, gender conformity is an option which can bring familial peace and in particular, good relationships with mothers, which is highly valued in Cuba. However, not all women in this research had children or were considering it, yet none were estranged from their mothers, showing that having a child is not the only way to restore or maintain good familial relations. In this research, I did not examine women’s care work or domestic work in detail, but passing mentions suggest that respondents also show daughterly love by caring for their older family members, another important expectation of being a ‘good daughter’ (Blackwood, 2010).

Nonetheless, it is not all normative happy families, despite daughters’ best efforts to satisfy gendered expectations. In Santa Clara, Leidy, who had a daughter at 24 years old after making her lesbian orientation known to her family, still has a strained relationship with her mother. The child lives with her grandmother during the week, while Leidy is working, and with Leidy and her girlfriend Yanelis at the weekend. Yanelis said that the child lives at home because it

was too much of a shock for the grandparents to cope with both their daughter and granddaughter moving out at the same time. This is an example of how Cuba's family norms can accommodate queer families and how grandchildren operate as an appeasement – Leidy and Yanelis are able to live together and see Leidy's daughter every day, while Leidy's mother gets to continue being a hands-on grandmother.

However, I didn't understand why the relationship between Leidy and her mother is still so fractious. In discussion, Yanelis said that parents simply expected too much from them. In clarifying, my interpreter Luis, a close friend of theirs, asked of his own accord, "But in what sense do they expect too much? Like they want you to be with a guy?" Yanelis replied, "No, it's more like there is a heterosexist norm. They expect grandchildren." "But," I said, "you have a child." Leidy responded, "Yes, but she still won't accept it, what she wants is for me to return home and have a heterosexual relationship." Despite Leidy's gift of a grandchild to the family, which I have argued above can be a route back into normative family life, Leidy's mother is still uncomfortable with Leidy's living arrangements and sexuality. She wants Leidy to come home and live a 'normal life' with a boyfriend, and maybe another child. Odalys' and Belkis' mothers are also apparently holding out hope that one day their daughters will change their minds and return to relationships with men. Even though these mothers had found ways to accept their lesbian daughters, and are delighted with their grandchildren, there is still a clear desire for them to give up their lesbian lives and return to normative sexuality. The most negative expression came from Mayte, who told me that her mother rejects the idea of her raising a child with her girlfriend:

"My mother says that she hopes I never get pregnant because she doesn't want to see her grandchild living with two women. That is not a family, it is an aberration [*aberración*], for her and for a lot of women here. Her opinion is the same opinion of a lot of people here, most of them think that a child being raised by two mothers and one father is an abomination, not a family."

Of note is that Mayte's mother does not see it as wrong for Mayte to want and have a child, but only that it is wrong for a child to be raised by two women as a family. These negative examples perhaps indicate that having a child as a familial bridge only works under certain circumstances or when people hold certain perspectives, which my research was not able to probe in detail.

If children are partly a display of gender normativity, it is interesting to hear *activa* women also express that they want to be pregnant and be mothers. Daimary, who had had a long-term

relationship with Belkis, caught me unawares by saying that she had wanted to have another baby with her. But Belkis did not want to give birth again. Daimary had enquired of some gay male friends if they would provide sperm for Daimary to get pregnant. In the end, they did not go through with it. Now, she said, she would still like to have a baby but if it doesn't happen, she will be fine. Daimary's *activa* friend Yamileisis told me that she too would like to have a baby, ideally a girl, through assisted reproduction, but is afraid of the medicalised process and the penetration needed. Both women desire children, in line with Cuban norms, but out of line with the image they present of themselves as masculine. Odalys is the only *activa* I met who had given birth. On becoming a mother, she significantly changed her gender presentation to conventionally feminine, and embraced a new role. I read this to imply that *activa* identities do not necessarily exclude traditionally feminine activities, but rather adopt and adapt them, or, in Odalys' case, allows her to embrace femininity for a pivotal moment in her life. *Activas* in this research describe no contradiction between their sense of gender as predominantly masculine, and their desires to carry children, as is consistent with the global literature on butch subjectivities. Again, this shows that the outside judgement of *activa/pasiva* relationships as inflexibly heteronormative is incorrect, and that from the inside, *activas* in this research experience their gender as embracing different elements of masculinity and femininity at different times. It also lends credibility to my argument that the desire to have a child has a strong power across many different lesbian and bisexual subjectivities in Cuba.

In other countries, the desire to preserve family relationships by LGBTIQ people is often analysed as a matter of honour, shame, or 'face', sometimes taken to the extreme by lesbian daughters or gay sons making a heterosexual marriage in order to pacify social concerns (e.g. Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2010; Stella, 2015). In Cuba, marriage is not overly important as a marker of honour and thus is not usually undertaken as a strategy by LGBT children to appease families. Instead, I have suggested here that lesbian or bisexual daughters might look to having a child as a contribution to the family and a re-entry into 'normal' adulthood. My analysis shows that this move by lesbian and bisexual daughters hinges on performing *gender* normativity as well as covering up sexual non-normativity. In the same way that Decena's (2011) male respondents were able to preserve family relationships because of their gendered positions as male breadwinners, my respondents sometimes preserve family relationships through their performance of gendered expectations for women. As I analyse throughout, most women I spoke to aspire to gender normativity, for the protective invisibility and positive social responses that it brings them. Here, having a child can operate as a highly significant act

of gender normativity, which might be seen by grandmothers as an effort to compensate for sexual non-normativity; or, an effort to cover the sun.

### The kids are alright

Finally, I will briefly look at how women in this research often told me their children were proof of the normality of LGBTI people, and their respectability as ordinary members of society, much like other parts of the world. Respondents were deeply invested in telling me, and showing other Cubans, how their family lives are 'normal', and that their children are 'normal'. 'Normal' conveys ordinariness, sameness with other people, and, crucially, that the children are not damaged in any way by having homosexual parents. Showing that children of LGBTIQ parents have 'turned out well' has been an important tool in refuting homophobia and improving the legal environment around the world (Ryan-Flood, 2009). Research has often focused on showing 'no differences in outcomes' for the children, compared with heterosexual parenting, which has arguably helped normalise LGBTIQ-headed families (Costa & Shenkman, 2020). My respondents are deeply sensitive to the potential for homophobic criticism directed at them as parents, and mobilising a discourse of how good their parenting is serves to silence that criticism and gain some social support.

Lidia expressed that she and her partner, and her partner's son, are considered morally respectable in Santa Clara, which is why they have no problems. "You live with your partner and her son. What do others think about this?" I asked. She replied,

"Maybe, before, it used to be very criticised but society has changed and has started to change some opinions. We haven't had any problems with it, not in the school nor with him, teachers always come and talk to us if there's a problem with him and we give him advice. So far, there hasn't been any problem with the boy, no rejection from the people surrounding him. It also depends on your social behaviour, there are people who are not suited to have a child even if they are heterosexual, but they do and no one takes the child away from them even when they are drunkards, or they hit the child or the mother of the child in front of the child. They do bad things and they are hurting the child."

Lidia considers that she and her partner, who are good, respectable people, are much better suited to be parents than some heterosexual people. Lidia closely associates her correct social behaviour with gaining respect in the community, which she sees as a counterweight to the negativity associated with non-normative sexuality. Lidia shows exemplary social values and tries to provide the best possible upbringing for her child, as part of a struggle to demonstrate that LGBT people are morally upstanding citizens, and to fight continuing prejudice. Also in

Santa Clara, Leidy and Yanelis were thinking about having another child, which they would like to do via a sperm donation from a gay friend, administered at home. When they told me, they emphasised their suitability to raise a child because they would be able to give them a happy and loving home. “[The father] is a friend so the child would grow up in a healthy environment. We would be the biological parents, we wouldn’t be married but the child would have a good environment. We all love each other very much.” Yanelis did have a baby after I left Cuba, which has delighted them both.

Lidia, Leidy, and Yanelis all show a concern with providing the best possible environment for their children, as part of a strategy counteracting negative views of lesbian parenting. Raising good children, and raising children well, are moral barometers which might prove their moral worth and normality to their communities. Odalys’ dressing her daughter in pink and taking her into the church is another example of providing the best possible upbringing (for which, read most normative possible) and avoiding criticism through the careful performance of social norms. Marú and Heydi emphasise the thoroughly normal, happy, and well-adjusted lives their children lead. The performance of exemplary parenting is a result of the extra scrutiny that LGBTIQ families face, and pressure to continually justify their existence (Ryan-Flood, 2009, p. 157), which is widely reported around the world. In South Africa, lesbian mothers described the constant social scrutiny of their parenting, and their desires to ‘prove society wrong’ by being the best parents possible (Van Ewyk & Kruger, 2017). In a study in the USA, Rincon and Lam (2011) showed that all 15 heterosexual Latina mothers they interviewed indicated that they thought it was normal for Latina lesbian women to be mothers, and that there was nothing morally wrong with this as long as they were good parents, a discourse which Figueroa Guinez (2018) also found among young psychology students in Chile. Being a good parent can counterbalance being a lesbian, but this is not always enough. In another study in Chile, Herrera (2009) found something different – that lesbian mothers feared that no matter how good they were as parents, that their children would be taken away, and so they tried to hide their sexual orientation.

Not only are lesbian and bisexual Cuban women in this research culturally expected and moderately supported to become mothers, they are highly pressured to be *good* mothers, a quality which they certainly emphasised to me, a foreign researcher. Drawing in intersectional analysis, it might be reasonably expected that black or lower-class lesbian and bisexual women experience these pressures to a greater degree than white or higher-class women, although I am unable to reach this conclusion from the data that I collected. My respondents largely draw

on the discourse that their families are no different to families headed by heterosexual couples (Ryan-Flood, 2009, p. 152) to emphasise their normality and suitability to be parents. They mostly carefully present their parenting as a public display of their moral worth and respectability. This is not to say that they use or manipulate their children; but simply that the love, care, and effort poured into bringing up their children well also serve a wider purpose of ‘proving to society’ that lesbian and bisexual women are good, normal, parents. As I argue throughout, normalcy in Cuba is perceived to be a good quality, highly desired by most women in this research as a route to social belonging and inclusion.

To end on a positive note, Belkis told me that she has never really encountered problems with institutional structures regarding her status as a lesbian mother. She is actively involved in her children’s school, helping out with activities and organising – which again suggests a thorough performance of respectability – and no-one objects to her involvement. She has never had negative interactions with any of the adults involved in her children’s lives – teachers, doctors, other parents – who all accept her and her female partner. The only issue she had was when her son was embarrassed about Daimary’s short, manly haircut, analysed in the previous chapter, suggesting that gender normativity underpins acceptance of sexual orientation. Otherwise, Cuban society seems to receive her family well, or at least, that is what she wants me to believe.

“[My daughter] is already in high school and everything works just fine. Other children just say that they are the kids with two mothers. They don’t have a father, no one knows about him there. We [Belkis and her girlfriend] are the ones who go to the meetings and the activities, we are always there, and we bring whatever they need. I’m the coordinator in my daughter’s class and we do all the activities, we are always present. That is why other kids tell them that they are the children with two mothers.”

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how gender and sexuality work together for some Cuban lesbian and bisexual women to make the performance of correct gender norms go some way to compensate for the failure to perform correct sexuality norms. Having a child helps bring some lesbian and bisexual women in this research a level of respectable invisibility in Cuban society, and draws them back into normative family life by making their mothers proud.

Cuban families might prefer to operate a private, *no dice nada* approach to non-heterosexuality, as noted in the literature on LGBT Cuba, but this does not seem to work for the lesbian and bisexual women that I met. I argued that this is partly because women’s

sexuality in Cuba is more of a public issue than men's. As seen in the literature, a daughter's sexual activities are not independent and individual, but are a reflection on the whole family, and resultantly heavily monitored and policed by mothers. The semi-public nature of daughters' sexuality means that discreet privacy is impossible to maintain for the lesbian and bisexual women in this research. All women in my research had had an open discussion with their mothers about their sexuality, either under duress or by choice. The greater scrutiny applied to women's sexuality of all kinds is commonly found in literature from across the world. My finding provides an insight into a specific iteration of the global discussion about how gay men's experience of sexuality issues cannot be universalised to all LGBTIQ people, and suggests that lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women; and transgender men, might be under much heavier, moralising, scrutiny than cisgender men, because of patriarchal gender norms.

I theorised that the failure of *no dice nada* for respondents might contribute to a desire to perform gender normativity, to make up for the break in the 'normal' way of doing things and the strain this puts on relationships. Within Cuban family life, having a child is a decisive expression of gender normativity for women. Reported in the literature and by most Cubans I asked, straight and gay, having a child is considered a positive, natural, expression of womanhood, and something to which most lesbian and bisexual women would aspire. In Soviet Russia, non-heterosexual women found that childless status was a source of marginalisation, perceived as a failure to conform to normative femininity (Stella, 2015, p. 58). Similarly, rather than garnering further discrimination or disapproval, having a child seems to bring Cuban lesbian and bisexual women in my research a protective invisibility and socially approved normative womanhood. Cuban matrifocal norms can indirectly benefit lesbian and bisexual women, as it is unremarkable to have a child alone or with no known father. Women in my research were sometimes able to leverage the matrifocal norm to have children without being dependent on a man, although they were still reliant on having sex with men as the most practical way to get pregnant. Having a child often provides a route back to positive relationships with their families of origin, especially their mothers. Bringing a grandchild to the family is usually highly valued and could be considered an act of love and contribution to the family, a strong performance of being a 'good daughter' through gender normativity. As in the metaphor, the sun of sexual orientation cannot actually be covered by one child-sized finger, but the attempt to do so is usually gracefully received and provides a route to greater tolerance and acceptance within the family for many of the women I met.

Lesbian and bisexual women with children emphasised to me that their family lives are as normal as normal can be. The description as 'normal' is a claim to validity and legitimacy, on terms of equality with heterosexual families. Women framing themselves this way told me they see children as 'proof' of their status as normal women. The lesbian and bisexual women that I talked to felt that their desires for children, and their actual children, are an expression of their normative womanhood, which I suggest brings them some level of familial and social tolerance and invisibility. I suggest that being a good daughter by having a child, and being a good mother by raising that child well, are gendered strategies which are available to cisgender Cuban lesbian and bisexual women to prove their normalcy and claim respectability and normative invisibility, which is consistent with other studies of lesbian mothering. Like in Chile, the Cuban lesbian and bisexual mothers that I met are not trying to create new, queer, family forms; rather, they try to replicate a local social norm to normalise their own family arrangements (Herrera, 2009, p. 49). The narrative I have told here of mothers' disappointment in their daughter's non-heterosexuality being mitigated by a grandchild is just one story about some Cuban families. There are many others – lesbian and bisexual women who do not have children, those who do not want them, those who have but are still alienated from their mothers. Further, children are important in familial relationships but they are not the only way in which lesbian and bisexual women perform being a good daughter. Finally, I have pointed out that having children is a highly gendered strategy for normalcy only open to cisgender women, which contributes to our nuanced understanding of how gender structures options for LGBTIQ people.

## Chapter 7: Lesbian and bisexual women within LGBT public spaces: “Pieces of a puzzle that don’t quite fit.”

### Introduction

I now turn away from private, family spaces, towards lesbian and bisexual women’s public-facing lives, and how they navigate gender norms in these areas. The absence of lesbian and bisexual women in public spaces in Cuba, including the academic literature itself, is commented on by scholars of queer Cuba, and merits in-depth attention. Of the vast array of areas which might constitute ‘public’ or ‘community’ spaces, including work, media representation, the neighbourhood, the beach, the street, mass organisations, NGOs, and interest-based groups, I analyse here the three that emerged as most important to women I spoke to. Firstly, CENESEX in Havana, which is the home of the official lesbian and bisexual women’s network and supposed to be the first place to seek support. Secondly, gay clubs, which are increasingly accepted and popular, and constitute the main public space for LGBT socialising. I especially focus on El Mejunje in Santa Clara. Thirdly, a supportive branch of religion, the *Iglesia de la Comunidad Metropolitana* (ICM; Metropolitan Community Church), which provides some opportunities for LGBT community gathering, based in Matanzas. I have chosen not to analyse forms of LGBTIQ activism, as I did not study this politically risky endeavour with enough detail to draw meaningful conclusions about gender normativity.

Whereas in the previous chapters, I analysed how some lesbian and bisexual Cuban women can mobilise invisibility through gender normativity for their own purposes, including to strengthen family relationships and to create visions of themselves as respectable ‘proper’ women, in this chapter I analyse how invisibility can be experienced as disempowering. The ‘LGBT community’ in Cuba seems to hold little space for lesbian and bisexual women, and women I spoke to feel excluded, overlooked, and disconnected from a sense of community. In particular, respondents told me that *el ambiente*, or the LGBT scene, is dominated by cisgender, gay, white, middle-class, men, which is a common phenomenon across the world (Formby, 2017), suggesting that Cuba is not exceptional in its dynamics of public space for women. Notwithstanding the important gains made for women by the Cuban Revolution, lesbian and bisexual women consistently reported to me gendered norms which make them structurally invisible. Further, most respondents’ desire to conform to gender normativity to

preserve their respectability and reputation resulted here in their disempowering absence from public life.

### Community space is lacking for women

From my reading, I understood that La Rampa, the broad street in Vedado, Havana, running down to the Hotel Nacional on the *Malecón* (the sea wall), was the place to be on a Saturday night. The literature promised large groups of queer people gathering and socialising, heading out to parties and hook-ups. Fresh off the plane, I took myself alone to promenade up and down the street about 11 pm on my first weekend 'officially' doing research in Havana. All that happened was an endless stream of *piropos* (catcalls) from presumably heterosexual men, and a dearth of any nightlife that I could identify as visibly queer, particularly including women. After a few more weekends, I found I'd misjudged the timeframe and that I needed to be out after midnight, or preferably around 2 am, when the party really got going. Even so, and after many more months investigating queer public social space, I found a considerable lack of cisgender women's presence in *el ambiente*, an experience borne out by the insights of participants and noted by Saunders in 2009.

Once I started going to gay clubs as well as La Rampa, usually on my own rather than with a research assistant, I saw the high proportion of men (usually around 80 per cent of an audience), far outweighing transgender and cisgender women (around 10 per cent each). On the one occasion in Havana that I went to a club exclusively for women-loving women, again alone, I was the only customer and so it shut early. The most important of the official LGBT social spaces is El Mejunje, the big community centre and nightclub in Santa Clara. Every LGBT Cuban I spoke to had heard of it, and I was frequently met with a jealous sigh at how much time I was spending there. During the day, El Mejunje hosts a variety of community events, for all people, and at night, it is a nightclub drawing a diverse crowd, with 'gay night' on Saturday nights (the most lucrative night). Perhaps oddly, I found gay clubs to be almost the only space in which I had to work hard to strike up a conversation with a Cuban, unlike the usual experience of never being alone for a minute without being approached. Gay men mostly ignored me, which I experienced as a relief from the constant attention of Cuban men, and commonly understood as a reason why straight women go to gay bars (Matejskova, 2009). Very few women in clubs approached me, as it seems that foreign women or foreign lesbians are an unfamiliar presence. Towards the end of my fieldwork, when I understood the rules of the game better, I was more comfortable introducing myself and my research to women,

which was usually met with some interest and a delicate dance around whether I was asking for a date or a meeting, given that the word *cita* is used for both in Spanish.

This experience is of course structured by my own gender expression, straight sexual orientation, whiteness, and usually being read as a tourist, potentially a sex tourist, rather than a researcher. I include it as a reflection on how the body and reading of a researcher by potential participants influences how and what research can be done. Unlike in the academic literature on queer Cuba, which is mostly written by men, I found myself to stand out in LGBT spaces as an object of silent curiosity, although I was never unwelcome. Within the first twenty minutes of talking to people in gay clubs, I would be asked, usually directly, whether or not I was a lesbian, suggesting that I am fairly unreadable to Cubans. As discussed in the Methodology chapter, I am not a lesbian, but my gender identity and expression is not exclusively feminine – which only adds to my unreadability in a Cuban context. Finally, my experience of struggling to meet and connect with lesbian and bisexual women turned out to be a common story among respondents too, since they lack public spaces where they can establish friendships and romantic connections.

Despite Cuba's high level of women's rights and representation, the literature suggests that *machista* gender norms continue to exclude women from public life, and my research indicates that lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women are excluded to an even greater degree than heterosexual cisgender women.

“I do think they suffer twice, or even three times, as much discrimination. They are discriminated as women and discriminated within the group they should belong to, the LGBT. Within this community they are like pieces of a puzzle that don't quite fit well.”

Silverio, the manager of El Mejunje, aptly describes the position of lesbian and bisexual women within the LGBT community in Cuba: “pieces of a puzzle that don't quite fit”. I asked Misleidy whether she thought there was a gay community [*comunidad gay*] in Cuba. She gave a straightforward answer: “Yes”. I pressed her by asking, “for men *and* for women?” “For men more than for women,” she replied. “Because men are more visible than women.” Other people I asked agree that a gay community exists, but are quick to point out the differences and internal conflicts between identity categories. Arianny said, “There is a community but not a common struggle because the people within the LGBT community offend each other, for example, homosexuals [gay men] attack trans [women].” In Santa Clara, I asked Yanelis and Leidy, a couple, how the media represents lesbian women, and was met with the forceful

response, “Here, we don’t have that” [*Aquí no, aquí no hay*]. Leidy said, “We are zero.” Agreeing with her, Yanelis continued,

“We are invisible, translucent [*Somos invisibles, somos transparentes*]. A lot of videos represent the gay community but there is even more *machismo* there [than in heterosexual society]. The gay community is represented by men.”

Both women went on to connect the invisibility of lesbian and bisexual women with the oppression of women in Cuba more widely, where public space is dominated by men, and men act as universal representatives of the widely differing identities and experiences. This is an extremely common observation of LGBTIQ communities worldwide (Craske, 2014; González-López & Vidal-Ortiz, 2018; Hamilton, 2012; Quiroga, 2000; Torres & Perpetusa, 2003; Williams, 2009).

Power relations and gendered, raced, and classed hierarchies continue to exist within queer communities and in LGBTIQ spaces (Bao, 2018, p. 41; K. Browne, 2009). LGBTIQ spaces can be spaces of exclusion and normative rigidity as well as supportive spaces of community belonging (K. Browne & Ferreira, 2015; Formby, 2017). Feelings of exclusion from ‘the LGBTIQ community’ can be found in the global literature on trans people, bisexuals, queers of colour, ethnic minorities, queer people with disabilities, and working-class or economic disparity. Queer of colour critique has gone a long way to breaking down the notion of ‘community’ by highlighting the continuing structural inequalities and sometimes deliberate racism that affect non-white LGBTIQ people from within their own supposed community. As well as ethnicity, gender norms affect how people of all genders navigate public space, and structure how individuals are able to access community (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 128). For women, the global literature identifies that access often pivots on the public/private axis, where women are expected to stay primarily in private spaces, while gay men are expected to be outward-facing, community representatives, meaning they are more easily able to access public LGBT spaces (Hartal, 2015).

An analysis of the “gendered organisation of social space” gives insights into how reputations and meanings of sexuality are produced (Hirsch et al., 2012) and performed (Cowan, 1990). My respondents’ experiences suggest that their invisibility in Cuban public spaces is not through their ‘preference’ for socialising at home or lack of desire to participate, but rather a product of structural gender norms which do not value lesbian and bisexual women’s needs; sideline them from public space; and active *machismo* directed against them by both heterosexual and LGBT people. My research focuses on gendered issues, but access to

community space is also mediated by intersecting exclusions based on ethnicity, class, and wealth, among others, meaning that poorer women of colour may feel even further excluded from community space than white women (Acosta, 2009; Saunders, 2009b). Following this line of analysis, I now turn to the three public spaces that are regarded as important by lesbian and bisexual women to develop a sense of community, to examine how they navigate or resist the gender norms which create exclusion.

### Lesbophobia in CENESEX

The CENESEX network for lesbian and bisexual women was the obvious first point of contact for me. I met with Ana, the head of the network, in Havana, and Lidia, the coordinator in Santa Clara, several times; spent time with many women who participate in the network; and went to several social events and gatherings. Matanzas has a branch of the network, but it is not well organised and I never came across anyone who participates in it. Demographically, the OREMI group in Havana are mostly over the age of forty and many women are black. In the Labrys group in Santa Clara, the attendees are somewhat younger, with several people in their thirties forming a central group. When I pressed network representatives on who comes to meetings, trying to find out if there are class, ethnicity, or other social distinctions, I was met with a flat “all women”, and occasionally, “they are young, old, black, poor, there’s everything, we have no social difference, there’s no race, we are all Cubans.” (Lidia). This is the official rhetoric of ‘post-racial’ Cuba: that no social distinctions exist, and that everybody is welcome everywhere (Garth, 2021). But, reflecting the hierarchy of gender, I found that some women within the network are frustrated with CENESEX’s lack of attention to their specific issues, and the perceived privileging of the gay men’s and transgender networks. CENESEX is felt by some women to be institutionally discriminatory against lesbian and bisexual women, but it continues to fill a gap in *el ambiente* by providing resources and spaces for women to meet under the state’s protection.

At CENESEX, personal interactions and connections with other women are reported positively by the women I spoke to. The meetings provide emotional support, friendship, a sense of belonging, and a temporary respite from the judgement of wider Cuban society, key aspects of ‘community’ (Formby, 2017, p. 61). Marú, a 50 year old black woman who has been involved with OREMI for a long time, told me:

“You are in your world, talk about things related to your world, which you can’t do in other places. We have a lot of friends. A lot of them are not lesbian so, there are

conversations and stuff that we don't talk about with heterosexuals. It's a matter of respect. And, we can do it in that group."

Being in the lesbian and bisexual women's group allows Marú to talk about things she would not talk about with her heterosexual friends (as a matter of 'respect'), but the women's group is a space to share those ideas and problems and to ask for support. Norma, who describes herself as a heterosexual person who turned lesbian later in life, said about discovering the CENESEX group through her girlfriend Dania,

"I feel good in the group, I hear things that I did not know. I can explain them to other people, I explain what I learnt. You learn about how to express yourself, how to maintain an attitude towards other people. It's a very good place, it's refreshing. It's another world which I did not know, they are sociable, *decent people*, people with experience." [my italics]

While CENESEX is a respectable place to go and people enjoy its social aspect, some women's experience was that it is institutionally neglectful of lesbian and bisexual women's issues, resulting in feeling excluded and overlooked. They told me that CENESEX is 'lesbophobic', meaning that they are discriminated against within CENESEX, with a lack of resources and attention, and nominal rather than meaningful representation. Marú said, "lesbians here in Havana, we do not have a place for ourselves. You go anywhere in Havana and gays [men] are the ones who have the opportunities, we lesbians do not have a place for ourselves. It is difficult for us to get that space." Marú expanded on this theme over the course of several interviews, developed from her long involvement with the state institution, and reflecting a common position held by her group of lesbian friends and colleagues. This group includes some of the founding members of OREMI, and shows their 15 year struggle to claim space and support from the institution which is supposed to respond to their needs. In Saunders' work from the mid-2000s (Saunders, 2009a, 2009b, 2010), they interviewed members of OREMI and reported very similar responses to those I heard, showing that the situation has not significantly improved over time. Marú continued,

"Also, if you take a close look at CENESEX, gays [men] are the ones that predominate; you climb up the stairs and all [you see] is pictures of gays, you never see pictures of a lesbian. It's all about the gays and transgenders. And the transgenders are slightly better off because they're independent. They're part of CENESEX but everything they can or are allowed to do is paid for by themselves. So, they can progress a bit more even though they're part of CENESEX. But there's lesbophobia there, that's for sure..."

After a long and revealing discussion about politics and Cuba's place in the world, we circled back to CENESEX. Marú, apparently trusting me after our discussion of sensitive topics, said,

“Look, let me tell you something: OREMI exists within CENESEX because it’s unthinkable for an institution like CENESEX, that defends the LGBTI community, not to have a group for lesbians. OREMI exists because it has to, but not because people at CENESEX are interested in having it there. And there’s also a lot of foreign organisations, especially from the United States, that when they get in touch with CENESEX they ask about the lesbian women’s network. You know what I mean? So, it’s a network that... has to be there because it has to; not because [CENESEX] is interested in it. They don’t care about having it there; they care about gays and nothing else. Period. [*tiene que estar ahí porque tiene que estar ahí; pero no porque les interese que esté ahí. No les interesa que esté ahí; a ellos les interesan los gays y punto. Ya.*]”

Marú’s frustration and disappointment with CENESEX is clear. She feels that CENESEX hosts the lesbian and bisexual women’s network because it would be unthinkable not to, but that the institution does not care about the network, nor attaches any significance to lesbian and bisexual women’s specific issues.

Marú’s separation of lesbian and bisexual women’s situation from transgender women’s situation is pertinent to explain how gender and sexuality work together to create hierarchies. I believe that she and her friends use the term ‘lesbophobic’ to be clear that there is a difference between how lesbian and bisexual women are treated and how transgender women (presumed straight) are treated. Instead of saying that CENESEX discriminates against women (inclusive of cisgender and transgender women), she is clear that CENESEX discriminates against *lesbians* (inclusive of cisgender and transgender women). As discussed in Chapter 2, transgender women in Cuba occupy a more visible and acknowledged space within LGBT life than lesbian and bisexual women, which is a different situation than in Euro-American LGBT histories (Saunders, 2009b). While no lesbian and bisexual women that I spoke to suggested that transgender women are privileged because they are ‘really men’, across the Caribbean there is insidious androcentrism that continues to focus on people assigned male at birth as more important, to the detriment of cisgender women and transgender men, and others (R. S. King, 2014, p. 23). In Cuba, respondents reported that transgender women are more aligned with gay men, notwithstanding Arianny’s comment that the two groups also fought, than they are with lesbian and bisexual women, and there is not usually a sense of women’s solidarity between lesbian and bisexual women, and transgender women.

Lesbian women in the region have struggled to find a political location that bridges gender and sexuality and gives them a platform to demand inclusion. In Mexico, Mogrovejo (1999, p. 331) identified that the LGBT movement had “subtle and veiled forms of misogyny” and the feminist movement “lesbophobia”, meaning that neither movement was willing to take on the

fight for lesbian women's rights, which Williams also found in Peru (Williams, 2009). In Cuba, lesbian and bisexual women demand space in CENESEX (the LGBT organisation) rather than the FMC (the women's organisation). The first lesbian and bisexual women's network was formed autonomously, in Cuba's second city, Santiago, in the late 1990s (Kirk, 2017, p. 68), and then later developed and supported by CENESEX. While I and other researchers take this as a positive sign of the state's responsiveness to citizen demands, it also signifies CENESEX's failure to recognise lesbian and bisexual women as a category in need or to make space for them itself (Allen, 2011, p. 149). At this point, other LGBT networks had already been created by CENESEX, recognising the need for specific support for different sexual and gender subjectivities, but not cisgender lesbian and bisexual women.

Allen (2011, p. 149) describes how the first few meetings of OREMI in Havana were highly attended, and Saunders (2009b) describes how CENESEX was unprepared for the high demand, and scaled back its activities for lesbian and bisexual women to an 'appropriate' level for a public institution. Partly, this was prompted by complaints from the public about women being openly sexual with each other at CENESEX events, social behaviour which unsettled Cuban propriety as it was in public places 'where children could see' (Saunders, 2009b). Although affection between men, and the mere presence of transgender people, are also considered unacceptable in public in Cuba, CENESEX's lack of support and the public upset seem particularly gendered, as women's 'improper' sexual conduct in public is far more offensive to Cuba's hierarchical gender system than other breaches of sexual propriety. Across the Caribbean, public display of sexual desire is considered beyond respectability for women, both heterosexual and not (R. S. King, 2014, p. 9). CENESEX's headquarters in Havana is rather reserved and requires proper conduct, described by Lixa as, "You feel like a student. Raising your voice is not allowed, you have to wear appropriate clothing." My analysis is that CENESEX is a respectable space for lesbian and bisexual women to attend, but its apparent disinclination to actively engage them demonstrates the patriarchal, hierarchical gender norms that exist (in Cuba and elsewhere), which position women and 'women's issues' as less important than men and which consider women's sexuality inappropriate for the public sphere.

Gendered exclusion issues are compounded by ethnicity. Similar to the difficulty of finding a space between the feminist and LGBT movements, in the USA in the 1970s Latina lesbians felt excluded from both Latino (male) gay organisations, and from white lesbian organisations, showing how women of colour might find it harder to access 'the community' (Acosta, 2009). In Havana, OREMI's largely black composition suggests that blacker lesbians have far fewer

social space options than white women, and that a designated safe space for lesbian and bisexual women is needed to fill a racialised gap (Saunders, 2009a). But it also raises the possibility that CENESEX is not interested in OREMI because it appears to be a largely black group. Certainly, network participants have, at times, expressed race bias of the kind described in Chapter 5 on *activas/pasivas*: white lesbians began to join OREMI, followed by an influx of butch black lesbians, which caused the white women to want to leave the network again (Hamilton, 2014). That OREMI continues to exist suggests that it is one of the only respectable places where black lesbian and bisexual women can meet with a relative degree of safety. Further, OREMI members are also likely to be older, and working-class. It may be that their experience of indifference from CENESEX is due to entrenched ethnicity and class hierarchies rather than, or as well as, a broader state apathy towards lesbian and bisexual women.

These opinions of CENESEX as institutionally lesbophobic are a window onto gender inequality in Cuba and elsewhere where women are deeply under-represented and actively invisibilised within community spaces, which is widely reported in global literature on LGBTIQ communities. Respondents' experiences suggest that cisgender Cuban lesbian and bisexual women might be positioned as the abject others of the LGBT 'community' (or 'queer unwanted' as Casey (2009) calls them), only reluctantly acknowledged by the state. The CENESEX network exists "because it has to", but women I spoke to in Havana do not find a strong sense of community or support at the institutional level. Rather, they felt like the way the network works indicates a lack of interest for their specific subjectivities, which they experience as disempowering invisibility from the eyes of the state. This discourse mostly came from OREMI in Havana, who tended to be older, poorer, and black, thus experiencing intersecting inequalities which may have affected how they interacted with CENESEX and how CENESEX treated them. In Labrys, in Santa Clara, respondents reported the same general frustration with the lack of community space for lesbian and bisexual women, but did not attach it so specifically to CENESEX. Partly this might be because Labrys operated out of El Mejunje, which was seen as a fun and engaging space, but partly it may be because Labrys was more ethnically and socially diverse.

### Gay clubs as exclusionary spaces

When I conducted this fieldwork in 2017, gay clubs, or LGBT night at a regular bar, were becoming well established and quite popular, shifting *el ambiente* from more private to more public, or commercial. This change was usually attributed by respondents to CENESEX's

campaigning for the inclusion of LGBT people into ordinary life, and was often seen as a positive, giving LGBT people accepted public spaces of their own. Respondents painted a picture of gay clubs as safe spaces where they could relax, be themselves, and kiss and cuddle their same-sex partners without repercussions, which could be seen as a private space in a way in which the home and CENESEX are not (Matejskova, 2009; Morad, 2014, p. 47). However, the LGBTIQ literature shows that commercialised LGBT public spaces are mediated by money, gender, ethnicity, and class, which create new inclusion/exclusion dynamics and exacerbate old ones. For example, a safe space for men may not be a safe space for women (Atwell, 2020, p. 9). Like many parts of the world, gay clubs and bars in Cuba skew towards the interests of wealthy, middle-class, white, cisgender men, which excludes and further marginalises other subjectivities (Leslie Santana, 2021). A space built around affirming the experience of a single demographic does not dismantle oppressions nor create community (Fox & Ore, 2010). In this section, I will explore how the changing structure of LGBT social life towards gay clubs has recentred white gay men with money as the core of the LGBT 'community' and the acceptable face of homosexuality, to the exclusion of other subjectivities.

Below, I give two examples to illustrate women's exclusion, although there are plenty of further stories and issues. Firstly, some lesbian women's efforts to participate as drag performers are met with a lacklustre response from gay male gatekeepers, which I analyse as demonstrating structural exclusion on the basis of female masculinity and challenging gender norms. Secondly, as in Chapter 5, many respondents mobilise a discourse of respectability, equating clubs with 'low-class' behaviour (implicitly black, poor, and *activa/pasiva*), and elevating themselves into moral respectability through avoiding such spaces. Structural exclusion from LGBT spaces, coupled with self-exclusion, means many lesbian and bisexual respondents feel they have very few options for public places to gather and socialise, demonstrating how hierarchical gender norms structure the possibilities for sexuality expression.

Alberto Roque Guerra, a doctor, prominent educator, and queer activist for LGBTIQ rights, himself gay, made it very clear to me that he regards gay men as dominating LGBT space in Cuba, to the detriment of lesbian and bisexual transgender and cisgender women:

“[public spaces are] invaded, and I mean it when I say it, by men. Men that are white and have money to go to certain places where they can pay more than 4CUC<sup>13</sup> for a disco, or what you drink there. The lesbians are *not* in public spaces the same as men are obviously doing now. I say obviously because they are supported by the patriarchal power.” (interview in English).

In Nicaragua (Howe, 2013, p. 107), Mexico (Russo Garrido, 2020), Slovakia (Matejskova, 2009), Thailand (Sinnott, 2004, p. 179), South Korea (Jones, 2020), and the UK (Formby, 2017), to pick just a few examples, social, commercial LGBTIQ spaces are consistently described as dominated by gay men, frequently with the modifiers of also being white, middle-class, and wealthy, and sometimes aggressively sexist towards lesbian women. Cuba’s new expansion (or contraction) of LGBT space into public, semi-commercial establishments seems to follow this worldwide trend, where the visible, accessible part of the scene becomes structured around the interests and desires of gay men. The cost of entry excludes many Cubans (White, 2020, p. 10), disproportionately affecting women and black Cubans, who are acknowledged in the literature to have less access to currency, and more caring responsibilities than men. Saunders (2009a) analyses that the intersection of gay men’s dominance of LGBT space with Cuban *machismo* creates an especially miserable and isolating experience for black lesbian women. The literature points to a worldwide discourse that deep gender, class, racialised, patriarchal, and economic lines structure the gay scene, just the same as heterosexual society.

A clear example of how Cuban lesbian and bisexual women are not always welcome in gay clubs, and how men can act as gatekeepers, comes from Marú and her friends in OREMI. She is part of a group of lesbian women performing as *transformistas masculinos*, or drag kings, called the Cuarteto Havana. Drag, or *transformismo*, has been quite popular in Cuba since the 1990s (Morad, 2014, p. 127), both in gay clubs for an LGBT crowd and occasionally on television for a mainstream audience. However, it is almost exclusively *transformismo femenino*, or drag queens (Leslie Santana, 2021). Marú, Dayana, Caridad, and Dania, all long-time members of OREMI, around 50 years old, and all black except Dania, who is *jaba*<sup>14</sup>, represent perhaps the very first Cuban women foraying into drag as *transformistas masculinos*. Odalys, discussed in Chapter 6, also performs as a *transformista* in Santa Clara. Leslie Santana (2021) has studied how the Cuarteto Havana performed at friends’ houses and parties with

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<sup>13</sup> Four Cuban Convertible Pesos was equivalent to four US dollars. On an average state salary of 25 USD a month, four CUC just for a cover charge is prohibitively expensive for most Cubans.

<sup>14</sup> *Jabao* refers to people with fair skin but African facial features and/or kinky hair.

more success and support than in the gay clubs, showing that private, woman-focused spaces may facilitate bending gender norms that are strictly upheld in public. Below, I analyse the Cuarteto's experiences trying to book shows and earn money from performing, which demonstrates the exclusion of lesbian and bisexual women from public LGBT space.

The Cuarteto reported that they are paid little, less than *transformistas femininos*, and sometimes not paid at all. They consistently find it difficult to get booked, even though they are usually popular when they perform, and struggle to make any money from performing (Leslie Santana, 2018). Caridad told me,

“We have gone to many places, people like our work, but they don't want to pay us. There have even been situations of fraud, we've been told 'go to this place to work and we'll pay you a percentage' and after the performance we have been paid nothing, even having done more than agreed. We have been cheated, we've had those bad experiences.”

The Cuarteto Havana consistently locate one of the sources of low pay as 'lesbophobia' within LGBT spaces in Cuba, in the same way that they identify lesbophobia in CENESEX. While this may be true, there are also wider economic problems in Cuba affecting why clubs do not pay performers – I did not ask club managers specifically about this so cannot draw conclusions. Additionally, as noted above, the Cuarteto are mostly black, and older, which might further hinder their access to community spaces. But Marú sees lesbophobic discrimination as a constant throughout the LGBT community in Havana. Her partner Heydi said, “Right, there is something there. I think they [gay men] don't accept us like we accept them.” Marú replied,

“Exactly. For example, now with *transformismo*, I just don't know why they are so afraid of lesbian women who want to do *transformismo*. Maybe they are afraid they will be taken from the high place they are in, but that's not the goal. Our goal is to be able to do *transformismo* too, and why shouldn't we? We have even invited drag queens to our shows to interact with us. That's the idea. But there are many who don't accept that.”

Marú suggests that it is gay men (club managers and drag queens) who gatekeep access to the stage and that they are reluctant, or afraid, to include *transformistas masculinos* in LGBT clubs. Gendered power relations within LGBTIQ spaces can structure how some kinds of fun are more desirable and catered for than others (K. Browne, 2009).

Marú's point was borne out in an interview I conducted with Maikel, a club manager in Havana. I had met him at his gay club, when he was the only person to approach me, and made me feel very welcome (my field notes say, “Maikel was the only person who spoke to

me, and I am eternally grateful for the male privilege which enabled this.”). It took several months to sit down for an interview, but when we did, he revealed the pervasive discrimination against lesbian and bisexual women that devalues their contributions and invisibilises them as workers in the LGBT scene. When I asked about *transformismo masculino*, Maikel replied,

“Something interesting happens, lesbians prefer *transformismo femenino* to *transformismo masculino*. Women prefer to see feminine beauty. That’s why they like it more, they can visualise a *transformismo femenino* better. Men also like it but because they know the person is gay and it’s something kind of magical.”

His comment reveals the depth of hegemonic gender norms around femininity in Cuba – he said that lesbian and bisexual women prefer to watch drag queens, as they can imagine themselves in the role of this hyperfeminized, glamorous, overblown character. In the critical analysis I usually engage with in the UK, drag is seen as a performance which questions gender norms through its exaggeration of femininity or masculinity to the point of parody (Bejel, 2001, p. 200). But Maikel’s statement suggests he sees drag as an aspirational ideal for lesbian women, reinforcing my analysis in Chapter 5 of the strength of hegemonic gender norms that idealise hyperfemininity and veer away from female masculinity in all its forms. Like in Nicaragua, Cuban drag queen performance does not seem to be a critique of idealised gender forms (Howe, 2013, p. 115). Here, Maikel suggests that the performance of hyperfemininity through drag represents the kind of woman that Cuban women should be, and, by extrapolation, the kind of woman they should *not* be (K. Browne, 2009), upholding rigid gender norms (Leslie Santana, 2018). In this example, gender norms are enforced by other LGBT Cubans, not heterosexuals, showing that public LGBT spaces can be places of surveillance (Saunders, 2009b) as much as liberation.

Silverio, the manager of El Mejunje in Santa Clara, said something similar which shocked me with its insistence on gender conformity. He told me that it is socially positive for masculine women to dress up as feminine women, creating an illusion that would bring them approval and draw them back into the gay community through their performance of correct femininity for women.

“I think Lidia [the CENESEX coordinator] could dress up as a woman because if she dresses as a man people are always going to know she isn’t really a man. The interesting thing would be, same as if you passed convincingly as a man, if they see her with makeup and high heels, they won’t believe it. But they [*transformistas masculinos/activas*] don’t have the ability to show themselves in that way, they want

to keep showing a man. In the case of women with masculine characteristics, it would be interesting if one day they dressed up like a woman so that people would see them differently. I had that experience with Yoana, I invited her to one of my shows but I told her I wanted her to come as a woman and she did, people didn't recognise her, and that's the game, what you can do to be more visible and be more socially responsive [*receptiva socialmente*]."

As I discussed in Chapter 5 on *activas*, I encountered a discourse that masculinity in women is highly disapproved of in Cuba, including from within the LGBT community. Maikel and Silverio, white gay men with power within LGBT institutions, both said that lesbian and bisexual women should idealise femininity and concentrate on making themselves look as much like proper, respectable, women as possible. In their eyes, this enables them to fit in with the LGBT community. 'Community' is a space which can establish and reinforce norms, and can exert surveillance and conformism as well as belonging (Formby, 2017, p. 53), often through the reinforcement of heteronormativity (Hartal, 2015). In Chapter 5, I argued that most lesbian and bisexual respondents want to uphold femininity precisely in order to achieve belonging. However, *transformistas masculinos* actively challenge gender norms with their performance of female masculinity, and the Cuarteto also advocate for the presence of black lesbian women in *el ambiente* (Leslie Santana, 2021). Pushing these boundaries seems not to be well received by club managers.

The example of drag provides an insight into how gender norms can be enforced much more strictly on Cuban women than on men. Morad (2014, p. 130) claims that drag is an acceptable space for Cuban men to be in-between genders, but my research suggests that Cuban women can be held to a rigid standard of femininity even within LGBT spaces, and rejected as performers and customers if they do not uphold appropriate femininity. As far back as 1996, Lumsden (1996, p. 151) noted this trend, writing that gay Cuban men enforced the same heterosexual code of *machismo* and femininity norms on their lesbian friends, and that if they broke the code, they were not welcome in gay men's lives and spaces. Two of Stout's gay male respondents said they "disliked lesbians because they had little in common with butch women." (Stout, 2014, p. 92). As Duggan has theorised, visibility in gay clubs (emphasis on *gay*) can be limited to specific iterations of desirable and normalised performances of strictly bounded lesbian or gay identities (Casey, 2009). The global trend of commercialisation of LGBTIQ spaces has often gone hand-in-hand with a tendency to mainstream conformity along class, gender, and ethnic lines (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 131). The case study of *transformistas masculinos* is strongly in line with these worldwide analyses, suggesting that some gatekeepers to LGBT spaces in Cuba prefer to uphold racialised, classed, normative gender.

Alongside the structural gender normativity of public LGBT spaces, I also encountered a strong current of elitism regarding ‘the type of women’ who frequent LGBT clubs, resulting in a moral choice of self-exclusion. As in Chapter 5, some respondents draw a boundary around being seen in such spaces, distancing themselves to morally elevate themselves and gain respectability. The object othering of *activa/pasiva* women is highly visible in the way that other lesbian and bisexual Cuban women talked to me about the clientele of gay clubs. Yadira, who is young, white, wealthy, and unusually, has travelled a lot through her work, said she goes wherever she wants in Cuba, including straight bars, because she prefers not to go to gay clubs, regarding them as full of “marginal” people. She said, “Especially when it comes to the cultural level of the people who go to gay parties in Cuba, it’s very low, at least in my opinion.” I replied that I assumed people who go to clubs are likely to be wealthier, since the entrance fee is high, as Roque mentioned. Yadira put me back in my place by reminding me that, in Cuba’s socialist economy, income is untethered from other socio-economic markers,

“Yes, that too, purchasing power [*el nivel adquisitivo*]. But they are not marginal in that sense. I meant vulgar [*chabacanos*]. For example, I’ve gone to [name of club] sometimes and I haven’t felt comfortable because women there are not the type I like. They are stronger [*fuertonas*].”

Her commentary conflates ethnicity, class, and female masculinity, and demonstrates a casual prejudice, which appears to be a common attitude, repeated across many interviews I conducted. Yadira’s delicate framing of ‘low cultural level’ may have been inflected by a wish not to upset Osmany, my black research assistant, but perhaps indicates a concealed racism too. In a passing comment, Lisett, herself black, told me that the kind of people I was meeting in clubs were more likely to be *activa/pasiva* than *completa* couples, which was relayed in a way that makes a clear link between going out to bars and low levels of education and class. Particular spaces are often marked out by class; in China, Bao found certain queer venues considered low-class because of the attendance of people from the countryside or who engaged in transactional sex (Bao, 2018, p. 57). Russo Garrido (2020, p. 132) found comparable attitudes in Mexico City, with ‘respectable’, middle-class, LGBT people who conformed to gender normativity in certain bars, and ‘gender diverse’, working-class, LGBT people in other bars, framed by others as uncultured. She is more easily able to identify this as a classist discourse than class analysis in Cuba; but I suggest that the broad construction of ‘strong’ *activa* women as low-class is the same. While LGBT clubs provide space for denigrated Cubans, some lesbian and bisexual women viewed them as ‘low-class’ spaces, in a moralising discourse.

I found a narrative among respondents regarding 'low-class' lesbian women in LGBT clubs as perpetrators of violence, and a rejection of this kind of behaviour. Silverio, the manager of El Mejunje, said he thought *activa* women are involved in physical fights in the club more than gay men, and that this results in high levels of discrimination against them, due to their poor 'social behaviour'. Stout's Cuban respondents also linked masculine women with brawls at 'low-class' women's parties (Stout, 2014, p. 68). In Mexico City, Russo Garrido (2020) found a narrative linking lesbian bars with violence, and Williams (2009) had a respondent in Peru expressing distaste for women's physical aggression at LGBT parties. These examples point to a discourse in Latin America that associates masculine lesbian women with violence, and that other women feel the need to distance themselves from this stereotype. My research suggests that masculine or *activa* women are perceived by others in Cuba as low-class, violent, and vulgar, and that this is at least in part related to their disruption of gender norms, as I argued in Chapter 5.

The concern I heard with the class of women in clubs suggests that clubs were seen as morally disreputable spaces for women, who may tarnish their reputations by being seen there. Unlike Hirsch et al. (2012), who found that specific cantinas in Mexico offered a safe space for men to engage in sexual activity with other men without damaging their reputations, LGBT clubs in Cuba might not offer a morally safe space for women. In Cuba, it is still sometimes considered inappropriate for women to be out alone at night, and those out dancing might be assumed *jineteras*, the most immoral of Cuban women (Garcia, 2008, 2010). *Jineterismo* is usually seen as a morally dubious practice in which respectable people do not engage (Daigle, 2015; Stout, 2014). Garcia (2010, p. 182) explains that the issue is not who is or isn't actually hustling, but whether they are interpreted by others as *jineteras*. According to Hirsch et al. (2012), being *seen* to behave correctly is as important as *actually* behaving correctly, for the reputational management of sexual identity. Lesbian and bisexual women may have avoided LGBT clubs due to their reputation for being full of 'low-class' people and a fear that they might be tarred with the same brush, speaking to the importance of maintaining a publicly unblemished reputation, whether or not they actually wanted to go out and enjoy nightclubs. Decena's Dominican male respondents expressed a similar concern that being seen with effeminate men would categorise them as effeminate too, as did Carmen's mother in Chapter 6 (Decena, 2011, p. 150). Decena theorises that social legitimacy and respect are partly based on this strategic reputational management. In my research, some lesbian and bisexual women concerned with their reputation reclaimed their exclusion from gay clubs as a form of moral elevation and respectability, drawing a boundary between themselves as morally superior and

others who go to clubs as inferior – implicitly constructed as low-class, *activa/pasiva*, moneyed, sexually promiscuous, possible *jinetteras*.

As ever, Cuban black lesbian and bisexual women may experience even greater scrutiny and anxious reputation management than white women. The implicit association of *activa/pasiva* and low class with black or *mulata* skin colour might create a deeper need for black lesbian and bisexual Cuban women to distance themselves from this stereotype in order to maintain respectability. Since Cuban respondents were unlikely to talk directly about racism with me, I am drawing this tentative conclusion based on the global literature and other specific iterations of racism in Cuba. While other studies (e.g. Lane, 2015 in the USA) have identified direct racist exclusion from the gay scene, in Cuba, black lesbian women also contend with a pressure to distance themselves from any stereotypically disreputable or hypersexualised behaviour, resulting in self-exclusion in order not to risk their reputations. Perceived ‘immoral’ sexual behaviour is a particular marker of respectability for women, as Acosta (2016) notes in similar Latina lesbian experience in the USA, where women distanced themselves from sexual promiscuity in order to uphold moral respectability. For black lesbian and bisexual women in Cuba, it is impossible to navigate this swamp of norms and judgements – if they wish to attend a club, they may be accused of being a *jinettera*, or assumed to have no money or class, or too much money, and to be a vulgar, masculine *activa*. For many, it may be safer for their reputation to simply not go to gay clubs, and further, to reclaim this as a deliberate act of moral elevation, like Lisett did.

I have picked out two examples of how lesbian and bisexual respondents talk about gay clubs, currently the main public social space for LGBT people in Cuba. Firstly, as drag performers, women seem to be excluded and struggle to get bookings. Secondly, some women show an elitism which constructs clubs as low-class spaces of immoral behaviour. Drawing on the global literature, both of these examples indicate conservative gender norms which designate gay clubs as public spaces primarily for men, and which restrict access for women on grounds of moral respectability. I also pointed out the rejection of female masculinity in these spaces; the drag performers’ boundary pushing of gender norms renders them unbookable in the eyes of some gay male club managers, and some women’s rejection of clubs is closely tied to their abjection of *activa* women. The role of gatekeepers is important here; I conjecture that club managers might rather not have *activa* women in high attendance in their spaces, but Cuba’s officially egalitarian policies mean they are not able to deny entry, as much as Silverio might want his female friends to wear high heels. Where club managers *are* able to control who is

and isn't allowed in, through the performances they book, they have strongly rejected female masculinity and blackness. Individual gatekeepers are not directly to blame, as they most likely mirror wider gender norms. These norms are felt strongly by the women I spoke to, who mostly avoided being seen in LGBT clubs, which I suggest was an attempt to display moral decency and high class. In particular, black women may feel more cautious about being seen in places with negative associations due to the chronic racism expressed against them and the need to over-perform respectability to compensate. On the other hand, this explanation about moral decency does not clearly account for lesbian and bisexual women who *do* go to clubs – it was not only *activa/pasiva* women that I met there. My research only hints at a moralising discourse around how Cuban lesbian and bisexual women negotiate their desires to be part of a social LGBT community, suggesting that they are strongly influenced by gender norms of respectability, but that some women are able to resist these. However, the most common story told to me by respondents is that clubs, the public spaces supposed to be for LGBTIQ people, are exclusionary for lesbian and bisexual women. In my analysis, they navigate this exclusion partly by looking for other, more morally respectable and gender-egalitarian spaces in which to socialise, rather than resisting or protesting these oppressive gender norms.

### ICM church as a refuge

If CENESEX is respectable but lesbophobic, and gay clubs lesbophobic *and* morally disreputable, the question left is: where can a decent, respectable lesbian or bisexual Cuban woman socialise in public? To my surprise, religion emerged as an important social aspect of lesbian and bisexual women's lives. Since Cuba is a secular nation, once officially atheist and having banned religion for a long time (Alonso, 2010), combined with the severity of religious persecution of homosexuality around the world, I was not expecting people to locate a sense of LGBT community within religious gatherings. But since CENESEX and gay clubs apparently fail to meet the social and community needs of lesbian and bisexual women, some women turn to the *Iglesia de la Comunidad Metropolitana* (ICM).

ICM is a branch of the worldwide Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), founded in Los Angeles in 1968 as part of the first wave of the American gay rights movement that included the Stonewall riots (Wilcox, 2001). As a Christian, ecumenical, post-denominational church, it preaches an inclusive reading of the Bible in which homosexuality is innate and a gift from a loving God (Howe, 2007). Congregants come from many different faith backgrounds and are encouraged to explore and embrace God in ways that are meaningful to their own life

experiences, rather than preaching a specific dogma (Atwell, 2020, p. 6). Pastors tend towards reading the Bible in historical context and reinterpreting stories in a more inclusive way (McQueeney, 2009). Although MCC is often referred to as ‘the gay church’ as a shorthand, MCC representatives actively resist this framing, emphasising that they are a church for *all* people, stressing their normality as an ordinary, yet inclusive, church (McQueeney, 2009). Howe describes MCC as “the largest spiritual organization of lesbian and gay people in the world.” (Howe, 2007, p. 91), with presence in at least twenty-two countries (Wilcox, 2009, p. 30). In Central America, MCC was in Mexico by at least 1984 (Mogrovejo, 1999) and Nicaragua by 2001 (Howe, 2013, p. 99).

Grisel, ICM’s main pastor, told me the history of ICM’s arrival in Cuba. Her pre-existing group of Christian LGBTIQ activists in Matanzas invited an MCC delegation to come and speak in 2015, who then invited the Cubans to found an MCC branch. Initially she refused, as they were conducting successful activities in the Baptist church on their own terms. But after some time, the Baptist church became hostile to the presence of LGBT Cubans, particularly transgender women, framed by Grisel as “we became too visible as activists”, referencing Cuba’s general preference for the *no dice nada* model of unspoken sexuality. She reconnected with MCC and founded a church in Havana on 10<sup>th</sup> December 2016, not coincidentally the International Day of Human Rights. ICM was quickly taken up by CENESEX, which saw ICM as aligned with its own social goals of inclusivity and equality for LGBT people. My research from 2017 to 2018 was thus in the very early years of ICM in Cuba.

I first encountered ICM at the 2017 *Jornada contra Homofobia y Transfobia* (International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, celebrated on May 17), where they blessed the large crowd gathered in the *Pabellon* exhibition centre on La Rampa. Troy Perry, the founder of MCC, was in attendance that year to receive a recognition from CENESEX for the work he has done to increase LGBTIQ acceptance around the world<sup>15</sup>. I decided to follow the church in my research, since it was presented to me as an important node in LGBT community space at this time. ICM is based in Matanzas, due to the training seminary there. Everyone I interviewed in Matanzas is connected to ICM in some way, and I attended several services and discussion groups. I also found the ICM branches in Santa Clara and Havana and attended services there, making myself an object of some curiosity as neither a lesbian nor a Christian, but always

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<sup>15</sup> <https://amp.blog.shops-net.com/2514591/1/troy-perry.html>

welcome. At the end of my fieldwork in December 2017, I attended ICM's one-year anniversary event in Havana, which attracted about 50 people from all over the country, half of whom I had previously interviewed, prompting my research assistant Camila to describe the event as "like the end of the movie, when all the main characters come together." Coincidentally, I went to Los Angeles for Christmas that year to visit my mother, and took her and my partner to ICM's founding church for the Christmas Eve service. This part of the research is therefore based on my participation in church services and events as well as interviews and conversations with Cubans. My interest in ICM is not faith-based or doctrinal, but in how it operates as a community space and network for LGBT Cubans, especially women (although I did get a few lectures in queer theology from the pastors).

One of the primary reasons people gave me for liking ICM is because it is inclusive of everyone – gay men, lesbian women, bisexuals, transgender people, and heterosexuals. As I said, I was always welcomed into services. While blanket 'inclusivity' does not always include women, or other disparaged subjectivities (E. Browne, 2018), ICM is the only public LGBT space I saw in Cuba that had more cisgender and transgender women combined present than cisgender men, suggesting that women feel comfortable and confident in this space and that it serves a gendered need. Arianny, a young white woman in Matanzas, expressed strongly how ICM works as a community structure. I asked, "what does it mean for you, faith and church?" She replied,

"A shelter, an aid, like having another family. You know you have another group of people and you can pick up the phone and call them and they will be there for you when you are in need because they love and appreciate you, when you need them because you are in trouble. And for having fun, everybody is there, everyone comes."

I witnessed the sense of community first-hand one weekend in Matanzas, when Liana's mother passed away. I had planned to interview a few people from ICM, but my interpreter Eduardo dropped in to let me know what had happened and that the whole church community was down at Liana's house to support her. Unsure if it was appropriate for me to be there, I asked Grisel, and she said yes, reflecting Cuba's general friendliness and ICM's specific inclusivity. We spent the better part of the day sitting in the street, with the whole ICM community and a hundred-odd other people who knew Liana and her mother, chatting, telling stories, providing food and drinks, and supporting each other. Liana herself, who had been painfully rejected from the Methodist church, said that, "I found in the church [ICM], a family like the family that I did not have." I was touched to see how many people came to support her, and experienced

what Arianny meant when she said that everybody is there for each other when they need it. Later in her interview, she said, “More than a church, this is a shelter. Everything I was saying to you earlier, it’s an aid for people who are scared, who are afraid because they go through difficult situations.” ICM was talked about as a relief, a haven, and a refuge, described in the same terms as the sense of ‘community’ reported in the global literature on LGBTIQ spaces. My analysis suggests that lesbian and bisexual women, more than other genders and sexualities, find this space vitally important, because of the exclusion they face from other LGBT community spaces.

My analysis is that ICM’s appeal to the lesbian and bisexual women I met there is partly because of its specific, active inclusion of women and attempts to circumvent gender, ethnic, and class inequalities, making it a more accessible and welcoming space for them. It may also be that it was simply interesting because it was new at the time of my fieldwork. Atwell’s 2020 doctoral thesis argues that MCC started out as disappointingly sexist as many other churches, but with the integration of lesbian leaders and feminist theory, over time it became more inclusive (p. 26), with some considerable effort made to dismantle patriarchal Judeo-Christian traditions. Particularly, MCC emphasises women’s leadership in the church: as figures in the Bible, pastors, and community leaders (Sumerau, 2012). Both women and men give testimonies, lead sessions, conduct community outreach, and provide care work such as cooking and cleaning for church events (Sumerau et al., 2015). It is important in and of itself that ICM’s head pastor, Grisel, is a lesbian woman, while women are not allowed to become priests in Santería or Catholicism, the two main religions in Cuba, and in other religions women leaders remain a disruptive minority (Grogg, 2009). In its teaching, MCC tries to remain gender neutral, or gender equal. The Lord’s Prayer may be spoken using ‘our creator/sustainer’ rather than ‘our father’, in an attempt to move away from patriarchal, family-based discourse (Howe, 2007; Sumerau et al., 2015). Dayana told me one could also say ‘our mother’, and Grisel avoids gendered language in her sermons. These efforts are not trivial, and are appreciated by women I asked as role modelling the equal worth of all people. Daysi, an active feminist, was discontented with both Santería and traditional Christianity, because of their oppressive rules for women. In ICM, she found a space which she describes as respectful to all people and where one’s religion, sexual orientation, and gender does not matter on the approach to God.

Equal worth is also reflected in the way that ICM manages to create spaces for people to talk across identity group divisions. In CENESEX, the LGBTI networks are usually separate, holding meetings and workshops independently of each other. There is little opportunity to come

together on issues of shared importance. Marú, in Havana, whose particular distaste for CENESEX's siloed working and lesbophobia is analysed above, said,

“ICM also gives you the opportunity to interact with people you normally don't interact with, right? Or, for example, CENESEX is divided into networks...so at CENESEX the networks meet only within their network, but here at ICM it's not like that: all of those networks meet at ICM, so that gives you the opportunity to meet new people.”

Meeting different LGBTIQ people gives Marú a sense that they are all connected and united, but importantly for my argument here, she also feels that people are shown equal respect: “Do you see the difference? At ICM everyone is visible. There's no difference between people, no distinctions, right? As if everyone was just one person.” Marú refers to the hierarchy she experiences in other LGBT spaces, where gay men are given priority and their issues made central. In ICM, she perceives each person to have equal space, and not just for discussion of their sexuality, but holistic support for their whole being. Leidy, in Santa Clara, who has no previous experience of religion before ICM, said,

“I like it very much because it's very human, not just the religious part, they speak about a biblical passage but they take experiences from one as a person. They support you and they listen to you, it's not only the religious part but also your opinion, how you grow, how you believe in that faith, they are not imposing anything, you feel it, you feel a lot.”

MCC encourages sharing stories, testimonies, and life experiences (Atwell, 2020, p. 7). These narratives suggest that ICM's approach gives space to women's voices in a way which CENESEX does not, because of its deliberate and careful attempts to listen to different voices with equal attention.

Along with ICM's active inclusion of women, its position as a church might lend it a respectability through distance from other aspects of the 'LGBT community'. As discussed above and throughout, gay clubs and public LGBT spaces in Cuba are often discursively associated with promiscuity, displays of money, and for women, 'low-class', masculine behaviour, and lesbophobia. Religion, on the other hand, even in secular Cuba, has associations of 'proper' behaviour and moral high standing. Maher (2007) noted a trend as early as 1999, when religion was just beginning to become more visible in Cuba, of religious gay men distancing themselves from the gay community found in clubs and bars, on grounds of behaving respectably rather than being 'ostentatious' and 'superficial'. Although MCC may not be as respectable as other churches because of its queerness, it nonetheless has a depoliticised, social, legitimacy (Howe, 2007) and religion continues to be a normative

institution in Cuba (Crahan, 2015). I analysed Odalys' sudden desire to go to church and baptise her baby in Chapter 6 as part of her return to normative womanhood, where church is regarded as something respectable, traditional, and 'the right thing to do'. This accords with Härkönen's (2014, p. 90) analysis that baptism and funeral rites are part of Cuba's social and kinship rituals rather than necessarily expressions of faith, providing lifecycle markers which produce normativity. In the USA, some MCC members mobilised a discourse of themselves as more emotionally mature, good, decent, and moral than non-religious LGBTIQ people, marking themselves as superior through their church attendance and spirituality, closely associated with a reserved and respectable lifestyle (Sumerau, 2017). My respondents' embrace of ICM suggests that this discourse of moral respectability might pertain in Cuba too.

While nobody I spoke to directly mobilised Revolutionary discourse, ICM's opposition to race, class, and gender inequality is strongly aligned with both official Cuban Revolutionary rhetoric, and the everyday understanding of the inherent worth of all people. This position marks ICM as respectably socialist, unlike other churches, which have more often been oppositional to the Revolution (Portada III, 2013). ICM's adoption by CENESEX also suggests it is regarded as convincingly Revolutionary. Further propriety is drawn from ICM's white, Euro-American Christianity, which has historically been seen as more respectable than Afro-Cuban Santería in Cuba (Hearn, 2008). Marking LGBT selves as respectable through difference and distance from a flashy lifestyle, 'low-class' behaviour, and culturally black practices, is a consistent trend throughout my research and other research on queer Cuba. Attending church, which is often unattainable for LGBT people due to most churches' homophobia, might operate as a route back into respectability for ICM attendees through its discursive association with moral decency and normativity.

However, MCC/ICM is not immune to inequalities, nor is it a queer utopia. Atwell (2020) claims that the wider MCC community continues to experience gender inequality between gay men and lesbian women. Sumerau's work in the southeast USA shows that individual pastors and congregants can change the character of LGBTIQ churches to be more patriarchal as well as less (Sumerau et al., 2015). And McQueeney found an American MCC to support masculinity and male hierarchical privilege (McQueeney, 2009). In Cuba, I never saw any *activa/pasiva* women at ICM events, nor did *activa/pasiva* women know of the church when I asked. It may be that they simply had not heard of it in Havana since it was so new, but in Santa Clara and Matanzas, smaller towns where everyone I met knew of ICM, it may be that *activa/pasiva* women were not welcome at ICM, in the same way they were not welcome in other

community spaces. It is possible that ICM will fall foul of deeply embedded hierarchies as it grows and develops. But at the time I was conducting fieldwork in Cuba, many women I spoke to experienced ICM as a refuge from the *machismo* of wider society, making it a welcoming space especially for lesbian and bisexual women.

## Conclusion

I have explored here some options for public social space for lesbian and bisexual women in three cities: the official CENESEX network in Havana; gay clubs, especially El Mejunje in Santa Clara; and the *Iglesia de la Comunidad Metropolitana* (Metropolitan Community Church), based in Matanzas. I argued that these examples indicate that *machista* gender norms penetrate even within some LGBT community spaces in Cuba, actively invisibilising and disempowering cisgender and transgender women. While research on Cuba may present a story of increasing tolerance for LGBT people, the insights of some lesbian and bisexual women point out how gender can structure LGBTIQ experiences and highlight the fractured nature of the 'community', revealing its deeply embedded gender norms, inequality, and *machismo*. Gender inequality can permeate through all strata of society, even within groups that are otherwise engaged in dismantling oppression.

'Community' spaces can exert surveillance and conformity to gender norms as well as support liberation, requiring lesbian women to present themselves in accordance with tacit social rules (Acosta, 2016). In my case study, I suggested that lesbian and bisexual women's need to uphold respectable gender norms results in being unable to challenge CENESEX's structural discrimination against them, and unable to participate in gay clubs without risking their reputations. Drawing on the wider literature from Cuba and elsewhere, this might be partly because of wider Cuban gender norms which disempower women from participating in public social life generally, and specifically the construction of gay men's interests as more important than women's. The examples presented here imply that the 'sexual revolution' in Cuba follows trends seen worldwide, where cisgender, white, middle-class gay men become the acceptable public face of homosexuality, to the exclusion of lesbian women, working-class, and Afro-Cuban people (Leslie Santana, 2018). The absence of Cuban lesbian and bisexual women from public spaces is not necessarily an outcome of their perceived preference for socialising at home, but might rather speak to the global and regional construction of respectable women's sexuality as constrained to private spaces, an active disappearing act enforced by others (R. S.

King, 2014, p. 93). In this case, unlike in Chapters 5 and 6, structural invisibility is mostly felt as frustrating and disempowering by the women I spoke to.

However, most lesbian and bisexual women I met do not actively challenge their invisibilisation, except for the *transformistas masculinos*, who met resistance and indifference from other LGBT people. Instead, most respondents either conform to expectations of behaviour or avoid LGBT spaces where they feel unwelcome, which I argued might be because of their need to perform respectability and preserve reputation, and their lower access to income and higher caring responsibilities than men. In this way, women may uphold traditional gender norms, even though they feel them to be disempowering. Women's dissatisfaction with the gender norms in CENESEX and gay clubs might partly explain why the ICM church became so popular so quickly. I argued that its approach of inclusivity and active acknowledgement of gendered as well as sexuality inequalities, combined with its respectable position as a church, makes it extremely attractive as a Cuban public social space specifically to lesbian and bisexual women. Differences are evident in how different demographics navigated the three LGBT spaces discussed in this chapter. The CENESEX network in Havana attracted older, black women, while *activa/pasiva* women went to clubs but not to ICM. I have posited that the differences for my specific respondents revolve around an axis of gendered moral respectability, but there may be other explanations; historic, economic, or political. These insights point towards how racialised and classed gender norms might structure what kinds of spaces are available to different demographics, despite Cuba's official rhetoric of equal access for all.

Lesbian and bisexual cisgender and transgender women's deep exclusion from public life that they reported to me and their search for respectable public spaces shows the inadequacy of current LGBT space in Cuba, which caters mainly for cisgender gay men. My focus on space gives an indication of how different physical locations can structure what sexual expression is possible, and the focus on a specific demographic highlights the dangers of taking gay men's experience as universal to all LGBTIQ people. I found a significant pattern that the lesbian and bisexual women I spoke to are perceived, by themselves and other LGBT people, as 'pieces of the puzzle that don't quite fit'. I argue throughout this thesis that some are able to fit better when they uphold gender norms, the irony being, of course, that upholding gender norms for moral respectability means not being seen in certain public spaces. This double bind means that many lesbian and bisexual women struggle to find avenues of social support and community in Cuba. In this chapter, the wider *machista* gender norms discriminating against

all women in Cuba, described in the literature, are even more deeply felt by many lesbian and bisexual women respondents. I suggest that they face a discourse of gendered respectability that requires them to be structurally invisible, blocking their ability to connect and create communities. In the next chapter, I explore how women found one issue on which they could come together with other LGBT people: same-sex marriage. I move from the community level to the national level, analysing how same-sex marriage can be thought about as a form of national socialist belonging.

## Chapter 8: “I want my country to love me as I am”: Same-sex marriage as a national concern

### Introduction

In this chapter, I explore how lesbian and bisexual Cuban respondents talk about same-sex marriage, and how they navigate national-level discourses of equality, normalisation, and socialist belonging through this issue. In some ways, the discussion is very similar to many other countries – gay, lesbian, and transgender people are fighting for inclusion in the nation (which happens to be socialist), and to be considered as full citizens, moral, upstanding, and honest contributors to society, with equal relationship and sexual rights as heterosexual people. What makes Cuba an interesting case study is that heterosexual marriage is not normative or idealised in the country, and fighting for same-sex marriage is perhaps an unexpected position for LGBTI activists to take, given the prevalence of other relationship forms and low significance of marriage. Where heterosexual marriage is not normative, what function might same-sex marriage perform and what meanings might it hold? Cuba's debate about same-sex marriage uniquely removes normativity from marriage, providing an opportunity to study what exactly it is that marriage brings to LGBTIQ life. This chapter begins with an ethnographic vignette of a couple's opinion on same-sex marriage, then an overview of the homonormativity discourse. I then present the key attributes that respondents told me marriage holds for them, concluding that they framed it as a powerful opportunity to gain legal recognition, economic protection, and socialist equality.

Unlike most of the rest of the world, in Cuba, the literature identifies that heterosexual marriage is not a strong or clear marker of adulthood, social approval, or social integration; nor is it an idealised domestic living arrangement; nor a reflection of family honour; nor is it formally attached to state welfare and benefits. Over time, these meanings have been hollowed out from marriage by Revolutionary policies, matrifocal norms, and the low importance of the Catholic Church. As discussed in Chapter 6 on family, it is quite normal for people (especially women) to have children outside marriage, and with more than one partner (Safa, 2009), with little to no social disapproval. Many heterosexual Cubans live with a partner in ‘consensual union’ [*union consensual*] which confers the same legal and social recognitions as marriage (Hynson, 2020). Legally, the Cuban Family Code (*Codiga Familia*) stipulates that there is no difference between the two relationship forms, nor between ‘legitimate’ and

'illegitimate' children, for the purposes of parenting and inheritance (CEDAW, 2011). Norms of cohabitation without marriage are common across the Caribbean, and heterosexual women's respectability is not usually threatened by not being married unless they are perceived to be 'promiscuous' (R. S. King, 2014, p. 127). This literature suggests that lesbian and bisexual women in Cuba might be under little to no social pressure to get either same-sex or opposite-sex married, as marriage bears little social significance in Cuba – at least for heterosexual people. I was curious, then, about why lesbian and bisexual women are so strongly in support of same-sex marriage. Their desires to have equal access to marriage offer a node through which to explore wider LGBT Cuban notions of equality, normalisation, and to understand how 'being normal' can shape aspirations and choices for lesbian and bisexual women.

Same-sex marriage became a topic of intense discussion in Cuba just after I had finished my fieldwork. I had collected opinions from lesbian and bisexual women about marriage before it became anything other than a dream for the future. Since at least 2007 (Bastian Martinez, 2011; Kirk, 2017), CENESEX has tried and failed to get a bill to legalise same-sex marriage through the National Assembly, under several different guises. After I left in January 2018, the National Assembly put a number of Constitutional changes to the public for debate in July, following Cuba's model of direct democracy. Article 68 proposed changing the wording of the marriage clause from 'the union between a man and a woman' to 'the union between two people', strongly supported by CENESEX and in line with several regional powerhouses<sup>16</sup>. Article 68 was one of many changes proposed to the Constitution, but arguably the one which caused most public debate, as I saw reports of it being hotly debated on street corners, buses, in cafes, neighbourhood committees and online, as well as through state media channels. After a formal three month consultation and submission of comments from the public, the article was removed, on the basis that the Cuban people did not support it ('Cuba Removes Support for Gay Marriage after Protests', 2018). The news discussion attributed the pushback to a campaign of evangelical churches, an unusual mobilization in secular Cuba (Augustin, 2019), but quite similar to right-wing church movements across Latin America. The definition of marriage was left untouched, to be resolved in the update of the 1975 Family Code (Cuba Headlines, 2019), which will be put to a referendum in 2022.

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<sup>16</sup> Other Latin American countries which have legalized same-sex marriage: Argentina (2010); Brazil, Uruguay (2013); Puerto Rico (2015); Colombia (2016); Ecuador (2019); Costa Rica (2020); Chile (2021); and some parts of Mexico (2010).

CENESEX's influence has been important in supporting public activism on this issue. Despite the level of opposition from the National Assembly, churches, and society, Mariela and CENESEX press on, positioning their fight for LGBTI rights to marry as one of socialist equality, fairness, and normalisation. CENESEX's clear and unwavering support means that LGBTI activists might feel safe to some extent in their activities around same-sex marriage. Since (male) homosexuality used to be thought of as counter-revolutionary (Hamilton, 2012; Quiroga, 2000), it is a sensible precaution to remain closely allied to a powerful state institution for protection and impeccable Revolutionary credentials. I left Cuba before the constitutional debate happened, so my ethnographic data below only provide a snapshot of what some lesbian and bisexual women were hoping for and dreaming that marriage might provide for them. As my main mode of analysis is gender norms and normativity, this chapter does not discuss international LGBTI rights activism in any depth, although this discourse has been influential in Cuba for supporting same-sex marriage (E. Browne, 2018).

My argument below rests on the difference between normative, normal, and normalisation, where 'normative' implies a degree of social expectation or obligation and a moral ideal ('you *should* get married') while 'normal' implies only that something is commonly practiced ('lots of people get married') (Brennan et al., 2013). Heterosexual marriage is normal but not normative in Cuba. 'Normalisation of sexual diversity' is a common approach to LGBTI rights across Latin America, rather than activism around minority identity politics (Fiol-Matta, 2016; Howe, 2013). In the literature on LGBT Cuba, 'normalisation' is understood to mean social acceptance and respect for LGBTI genders and sexualities, with society viewing them as just some of many normal genders and sexualities. This approach is aligned with Cuban values of equality through ordinariness, rather than equality despite difference. As I discuss throughout, LGBT Cubans that I met often attach a positive value to being seen as 'normal', and do not want 'special treatment'. I examine their discussions of how the right to get married would grant them status as 'normal' citizens, on the basis of equality with heterosexual Cubans. In this framing, marriage is regarded not as an end point in itself, but a useful route to normalisation and equality, and an opportunity to hold the state to account on its socialist promises of equality for all citizens. In this particular case, the fight for same-sex marriage might not be about an ascent into normativity, nor assimilation into the state, nor even about marriage itself, but is a crossroads where LGBT Cubans found it possible to gather and hold the state to account for their inclusion and equality in the socialist project.

### An activist couple's opinion on same-sex marriage

On one of my first trips to Santa Clara, I was introduced to Leidy and Yanelis, the couple whose relationship with Leidy's daughter and mother was analysed in Chapter 6. They are heavily involved in activism and the CENESEX network, called Labrys in the province of Villa Clara. Yanelis, aged 35, has been involved with Labrys and previously with OREMI in Havana, for most of her adult life. When she met Leidy, who is 29, she drew them both close to Yanelis' activist circle and the two of them became central to the life of the network and El Mejunje. Recently, both have begun attending ICM to fulfil their spiritual needs and as another LGBT social space. They were keen to show me their lives in Santa Clara and once took me to the church's study group so I could participate in the discussion, but I developed a bout of food poisoning, sadly a rite of passage for many visitors to Cuba, and had to leave early to lie down. Leidy is white, and Yanelis *india*<sup>17</sup>. Although both dismissed my question about whether they practiced *activa/pasiva* gender roles as backward and ridiculous, Leidy presents herself significantly more femininely than Yanelis, who tends to dress in unisex, casual clothes that she finds more comfortable. In our first interview in November 2017, about a year before Cuba's constitutional debate on same-sex marriage, I asked them what they thought about the possibility of getting married.

"I like it. It's a dream", replied Leidy. Yanelis added, "It makes things right." [*Lo que hace es poner las cosas donde van*. Literally, this translates as 'what it does is put things where they go'.] Knowing that many heterosexual Cubans live in consensual unions, a long-term relationship legally recognised as akin to marriage, I asked whether they wanted to be married or if consensual union is the same. "We want to be married," said Yanelis, firmly. "Consensual union doesn't have the guarantees that a marriage has. Marriage has economic guarantees for you, for the children, consensual union doesn't." Later in another interview, Yanelis said,

"I don't want consensual union, I want marriage, I want my rights. Consensual union doesn't give you rights to anything, to something substantive [*no te da derecho a nada, a nada material*]. Consensual union is a ridiculous way to be legal, I don't want the ridiculous way, I want the way I deserve as a human being [*yo quiero la mera que me toca como ser humano*]."

Although heterosexual consensual union has the same legal rights as marriage, Yanelis reflects the everyday understanding that legal marriage has more social legitimacy, and certainty over

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<sup>17</sup> *Indio/a* is a subcategory of *mulata*, that indicates Amerindian facial features.

economic and property rights, especially for children's inheritance. As Leidy has a five year old daughter, they want marriage in order to protect Yanelis' parenting rights if something should happen to Leidy, and to gain some economic rights for each other's property and inheritance – no less than they deserve as human beings and equal to what other Cubans have.

Although we were some way away from any national discussion of legalising same-sex marriage, they both thought that it was coming. Yanelis said,

“there has been some progress – for a heterosexist society such as this – but there are things that can't be changed overnight, for example, for same-sex marriage to happen all the articles of the legislation must be altered, including the Constitution.”

Leidy interjected, “There are too many obstacles. There are still a lot of conservative people.” Curious about the differences between the state attitude and broader Cuban society, I asked if they thought Cuban society would accept same-sex marriage. They said yes, though it might seem scandalous in the beginning, but that things would calm down and society would adapt. This conversation about marriage was typical of many I had with LGBT Cubans through this research. Almost everybody I spoke to support same-sex marriage in principle, on grounds of equality and having the same access to social institutions and economic protections as heterosexual people. Some people do not personally want to get married and said they would be happy with no long-term relationship or with consensual union, provided that same-sex consensual union recognises the same legal and economic rights as marriage, as it does for heterosexual Cubans. The legal recognition, from state and resultantly from society; and economic protections, emerged as the most important desires.

### Homonormativity and normalisation

Same-sex marriage is one of the core LGBTIQ issues of contemporary times in global debates, with the discussion focusing heavily on its normative component: whether LGBTI people *should* aspire to get married. An academic debate has raged about whether same-sex marriage represents a betrayal of queer values, alongside global pressure to legalise same-sex unions as a marker of international modernity and liberal democracy. Central to the debate is Lisa Duggan's concept of 'homonormativity' (Duggan, 2004). Homonormativity is a type of politics in which gay culture upholds and sustains dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions (Duggan, 2004, p. 50). Homonormativity depoliticises gay culture and LGBTIQ movements, in favour of middle-class economic consumption and domesticity. It positions gay equality as having “access to the institutions of domestic privacy, the 'free' market, and

patriotism” rather than liberation from these conservative ideals (Duggan, 2004, p. 51). Queer scholars usually see the desire to be married as homonormative and associated with a conservative political agenda, leveraging respectability politics to claim legitimacy and normalcy within society. Instead, queer activists advocate resisting respectability, neoliberalism, and absorption into the state and society, arguing for queer liberation from heterosexual family and relationship models, and from conservative politics – which, arguably, Cuba has already done. Same-sex marriage in Cuba offers an opportunity to explore how sameness and normalisation for LGBT people operate under a socialist system with different norms from the liberal democracies where they have been previously analysed.

Anthropologists and sexual geographers have critiqued understanding same-sex marriage only as normative assimilation in the pursuit of respectability, by pointing out the important practical functions of marriage and the differences across geographical contexts (Brown, 2012; K. Browne et al., 2009; Kenttamaa Squires, 2019; Oswin, 2006; Ryan-Flood, 2009). While same-sex marriage may indeed represent assimilation into a conservative norm, it also provides real people with material positives. Marriage equality movements have often focused on marriage as a route to acquiring rights and benefits (Bernstein & Taylor, 2013). In some countries, social welfare is dependent on one’s status as a married partner, such as widow’s pension, healthcare, insurance, and inheritance (Bell & Binnie, 2000). People who are living in low-income contexts or who are marginalised along another axis of difference, such as ethnicity, may not be able to afford to ignore the practical benefits that marriage can bring (Berkowitz, 2009). Queer scholars have also recognised the powerful symbolic meaning that inheres in being socially and legally recognised as a partner and next of kin (Butler, 2002; Duggan, 2008; O’Brien, 2007).

Although scholars might criticise desires for normativity, O’Brien (2007) notes that the positive responses of LGBT people to gaining marriage rights should be taken as an indicator of the depth and stability of marriage as an ideal, which should not be easily dismissed. Engebretsen suggests that homonormativity theory fails to explain and take seriously the desires and aspirations of real people, which include normativity and being recognised as ‘normal’ as a strategy for survival and life improvement (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 9). The desires for normativity and recognition as normal must be taken seriously as objects of study (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 13), and not rejected outright as queer failures. Further, the homonormativity debate has centred on North America and Europe without much consideration for the cultural and social context that has produced the specificities of the

debate. An empirical anthropological approach, as I take here, reveals how the meaning of same-sex marriage is understood and constructed differently in different places, and why normalisation matters to some people, as it does to Yanelis and Leidy.

For some academics and critics, normalisation is a negative, seen as depoliticised assimilation, as described above. But for some women I spoke to, normalisation under a socialist paradigm is perceived as a positive that would actively bring equality. Howe (2013) provides a useful analysis of how the normalisation approach aligned with socialist values in Nicaragua, which had a socialist revolution in the 1980s, making it fairly comparable to Cuba. Howe details how the Sandinista movement saw the struggle for sexual rights as part of the revolution, through trying to change broad societal attitudes towards sexual diversity, rather than using a platform of enclave politics or individual rights, as in Euro-American LGBTI rights activism. Activists did not want to stay in an 'LGBT ghetto' (a term sometimes used by Cubans too), but tried to change society to increase respect and tolerance for all forms of sexuality (Thayer, 1997). Like Howe (2013), I found some Cubans framing the normalisation of sexual diversity as part of the ongoing socialist revolutionary fight for inclusion for all people.

Further to normalisation leading to equality, being 'normal' was often presented to me as a valued social characteristic by lesbian and bisexual women in Cuba, which equates to acceptance, respect, and respectability (Stout, 2014, p. 54). This attitude is commonly noted by academics across socialist and post-socialist contexts, showing the value attributed to normalcy by socialist politics. In China, Kam (2013, p. 90) argues that lesbian women hold the belief that showing social conformity, alongside other 'good' behaviour like decency, culture, and morality, will bring about 'positive recognition' by one's family and then acceptance by the public. They didn't want to 'upset the social order' by making themselves appear different or special, much like Cubans I spoke to. Engebretsen (2014, p. 11) agrees that Chinese lesbians did not want to be publicly visible and that they held a belief that having a 'normal' lifestyle, i.e. being able to marry a same-sex partner, would bring social recognition (p. 84). In the Czech Republic, Fojtová and Sokolová (2013) argue that LGBT Czechs have made a bargain with the state for some level of civic acceptance in exchange for their quiet, conformist, and disciplined behaviour. Similarly, lesbian and bisexual Cuban women told me that their strategy of blending in and showing decent, moral behaviour to other members of society is expected to bring social respect, as I have discussed throughout this thesis. Dania, an older *transformista*, expected people to respect her because she is a normal person who respects them:

“I respect you so that you respect me.... all my neighbours know that I am a lesbian, I have never hidden it and I am proud of it... I earned that respect myself, because I have never made a scene, never treated anyone badly in my neighbourhood. People respect me and I am just another person.” [*ese respeto me lo gane yo, porque nunca he hecho un show, nunca he tratado mal a nadie en el marco donde he vivido, y la gente me respeta y soy otra más.*]

On the other hand, LGBT people who are visibly flamboyant and ostentatious – often equated to effeminate men – are considered ‘not normal’, and were often described to me as not respectable, something which Hamilton (2012, p. 162) and many other scholars have also found in Cuba. This discussion points to a discourse in Cuba that being seen as a normal citizen, through state legitimation and through individual good moral behaviour, might bring a social approval and respectability, which is highly valued by my respondents. More than this, where being normal is conflated with being a citizen with equal rights and respect, as Dania does, might mean that normalcy is seen specifically as a route to socialist national belonging. The desire to be normal is common across socialist and post-socialist societies, and cannot be simply equated to a neoliberal homonormative drive to fit in, but one which is informed by specific political histories and legacies of socialism.

### Why do lesbian and bisexual women want same-sex marriage?

If marriage is not normative in Cuba, the strong desire to legalise same-sex marriage runs counter to the homonormativity literature, which suggests that desires for marriage are embedded within desires for normativity. Same-sex marriage, according to this way of thinking, should have been a non-issue in Cuba, as marriage lacks the social significance and access to “dominant structures and privileges” (Ng, 2013, p. 275) that homonormativity theory ascribes to it. During fieldwork, my starting point for the analysis of same-sex marriage had to be finding out what lesbian and bisexual women want from it. This turned out to be relatively straightforward: material benefits like economic security; and rights, legitimacy, and equality. Further, same-sex marriage was imbued by respondents with a sense of normalcy. Again and again, I came across the position that getting married is a normal thing to do, and that same-sex marriage is a right that would grant LGBT Cubans equality with heterosexual Cubans: making them ‘normal’. I also found assumptions that state support for same-sex marriage would bring legitimisation, reduce homophobia in society, and work towards normalising sexual diversity.

## The practical benefits of marriage

The primary reason given by almost all respondents for wanting marriage is that marriage would protect the couple's assets and allow them to inherit from each other, reflecting similar heterosexual attitudes in Cuba about marriage as an economic arrangement. Lidia, the network leader in Santa Clara, said,

“If I have a partner and I die tomorrow, she doesn't have any rights to anything of mine. If we built a home together, my family could just kick her out after I'm gone, for example. She is not allowed to have my pension because she is a housewife but if we were married she would. They are little details but they matter.”

The principal concern for most respondents is about their house. Despite earlier legal prohibitions on inheritance, marriage is currently a key method of acquiring rights to property, whether formally or informally (Hamilton, 2012, p. 229; Safa, 2009). Cuban law is extremely unclear on property rights, and has gone back and forth significantly since the Special Period, but an everyday understanding among Cuban people at the time of my fieldwork was that legal marriage grants more rights than a consensual union to a spouse's property (as Yanelis said), making access to housing a key reason to get married (Härkönen, 2014, p. 16). Conversely, staying in a consensual union means that, socially, one is not expected to merge possessions with a spouse (Härkönen, 2010, p. 65). Although heterosexual consensual union and marriage have the same legal rights, the grey area of actual practices around sharing property and assets means that people feel more secure if they are married – and legal documentation might be more important for same-sex couples than heterosexuals, since family members may refuse to acknowledge spousal rights without this. Similarly, it may be even more important for black Cuban lesbian and bisexual women, as it seems likely they will have fewer economic assets to begin with and may face more legal and social hurdles to same-sex partner inheritance.

The dominant concern expressed by respondents is that their spouses would not have rights to inherit the property they share, and could be thrown out of their home – by the government or by the family – when one partner died. They described legal marriage as a way to protect against this outcome, by ensuring property rights and inheritance for their preferred next of kin, their partner. Lisett, an economist, told me that it doesn't matter whether it is legal same-sex marriage or legal consensual union, so long as it protects economic rights properly for both parties, specifically the partner's rights to joint property over and above other family

members' claims. Similarly, Isabel, who has no desire to get married since "a piece of paper doesn't make a relationship", said that same-sex marriage was good in principle, because,

"when you had a relationship for over twenty years and you had things together and no children or no one [to inherit], you couldn't give everything to that person [your partner]. The government could take away your property and your partner didn't have the right to anything. Now you can, if you are married, you can be together for whatever amount of years and your partner has as much right as you do."

These attitudes, both stated by older women in long-term relationships who may have been more personally conscious of the possibility of dying without being able to guarantee their partner's inheritance, show the ambivalence of some Cubans towards marriage. Neither woman is especially invested in the form that marriage takes or accessing social normativity, but mostly concerned with protecting legal assets and rights, and achieving legal recognition as spouses. Yaraleidis encapsulates this attitude neatly when she said, about LGBT couples where one partner dies, "it's not so much that they believe in marriage, but they need to be protected by the law if something like that happens." Same-sex marriage emerges as a route to protect each other, as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself.

Bringing in a gender analysis, I want to suggest that property rights may be more important for women in relationships with women, than for other LGBTIQ relationships. As mentioned in Chapter 6 on family, the gender division of productive labour in Cuba is such that men are more likely to have economic assets and access to money. Heterosexual marriage and relationships have often been a route for women to acquire housing in Cuba (Andaya, 2014, p. 129; Hamilton, 2012, p. 225). Stavropoulou et al. (2020) report a general anxiety among heterosexual young Cuban women that they might be left with nothing if a relationship with a man ended through divorce or death. For lesbian and bisexual women, the absence of this route to property may result in the increased importance of specific, clearly detailed, legal protections which allow them to inherit from each other; and perhaps black women feel this importance more intensely than white women. Without men as sexual partners, lesbian and bisexual women in Cuba have reduced resources, making legal and kin support even more important for their economic security. These insights from my respondents suggest that same-sex marriage has hugely important material meaning, far beyond normativity or respectability.

Closely related to the economic argument for marriage is respondents' framing marriage as giving legal rights to partners. As above, property rights and inheritance rights are the most important of these, but their understanding of possible rights includes assisted reproduction,

co-parenting rights, spouse visas, widow's pension, and hospital visitation as next of kin. Some people also see marriage as giving a framework for breakups, like Lisett, who said that currently nobody knows what civil status you have after a same-sex breakup: divorced, separated, single. She sees legal rights as giving clarity to the situation and providing precedents and frameworks to follow. Yanelis, Leidy, and others also mentioned a desire to give their child both mothers' surnames, which they thought that marriage would enable. In an article I published based on the first three months of fieldwork, I analysed this desire as partly a desire to turn everyday queer kinship into an official form of kinship recognised by society and the state, providing the rights to LGBT partners which heterosexual partners are automatically accorded (E. Browne, 2018).

These examples suggest that marriage in Cuba for my respondents might be less about an ascent into normativity, but more a pragmatic arrangement conducted for mutual economic benefit, which it also is in other countries, if not quite so explicitly stated. Härkönen (2009) found that her working-class heterosexual Cuban respondents did not imbue legal marriage with much importance or class meaning, and that it was mostly an economic arrangement or a route to resources, which is very similar to what I found among lesbian and bisexual women. Härkönen (2014, p. 138) asserts that this is not a cut-throat, materialistic attitude, but that the mutually beneficial material arrangements of relationships "express and prove the existence of emotional attachment and bonds of love." Like Wekker (2006) in Suriname and Engebretsen (2014) in China, I found that marriage in Cuba is framed by some lesbian and bisexual women as not so much about romantic, long-term monogamy, as access to material, economic resources, financial security, and social recognition. This practical aspect of marriage is a different discourse than 'the right to love', which appears to be a particularly Euro-American formulation of same-sex marriage (Engebretsen, 2014, p. 82; Joshi, 2012) and a position of enormous privilege in comparison to LGBTIQ people living in low-income contexts. My case studies suggest that same-sex marriage is not necessarily about assimilation into normativity, a central argument in the literature, but can also be about accessing material resources, which expands our understanding of theories of marriage.

However, I also found that respondents expect that same-sex marriage will bring a change in social status for LGBT people, unlike the meaning of marriage for Härkönen's heterosexual participants (2009). Lesbian and bisexual women, and other LGBT Cubans I spoke to, strongly expressed a sense that getting married will provide legal and social recognition that they do not currently have, as well as material benefits. The importance given to same-sex marriage by

LGBT Cubans, when heterosexual marriage is not very important, suggests that there is something qualitatively different about it in the way that it provides meaning, recognition, or affirmation to LGBT lives.

#### Fairness: Same-sex marriage as socialist equality

Same-sex marriage had some strongly materialist elements, as described above, but respondents also discussed marriage on a symbolic level, principally imagining it as bringing equality with heterosexual Cubans. 60 years of the Cuban Revolution have produced a strong understanding across Cuba that all people are equal and must be treated fairly – whether or not individuals believe in socialist or government doctrine. Inclusion in the socialist project has been a long-standing approach for LGBTI activism in Cuba, with the literature consistently reporting Cuban LGBTI people’s rejection of identity politics and being sidelined into ‘gay ghettos’, in favour of normalisation and social unity (Guillard Limonta, 2009; Lumsden, 1996; Maher, 2007; Saunders, 2009b). In my research, lesbian and bisexual respondents often present LGBTI rights and equality as well-aligned with the stated goals of the Cuban Revolution, and engage with Revolutionary rhetoric to put forward their demands for same-sex marriage. Importantly, this is the approach endorsed by CENESEX, which gives additional safety and respectability to activists. However, the desire for marriage is not necessarily a conservative, assimilationist desire to conform to the socialist state, but can be a desire for the state to respond to citizen demand to come good on its promises of equality.

People often framed same-sex marriage to me as a matter of equality between LGBT people and heterosexuals. Misleidy, a young *mulata* woman in Havana, said, “If heterosexual people can get married because they want to or because they think that way their relationship is going to last longer, why can’t gay people?” Maritsa echoed this sentiment, saying, “Why not? If a friend married her husband, why can't I marry my girlfriend? ... It makes no sense that gay people don't have what straight people have. It's the same.” (interview in English). Eduardo, a gay man in his seventies, said that he does not want to get married, but that it is important that everybody has the same rights. In English, he said, “Justice, the same justice, the same rights for everybody. That is more important than having a marriage, and having a child, or adoption, I don't care about that.” Silverio, the iconic manager of El Mejunje in Santa Clara, said that consensual union would likely be enough in practice for most LGBT Cubans, but this would still be discriminatory because straight and gay people would not have the same rights.

Within activist circles, people described the fight for same-sex marriage as a matter of fairness [*justo*]. Lidia, the CENESEX coordinator in Santa Clara, said, “It’s a necessity, we want the same rights straight people have, it’s only fair to have the same [*es justo tenerlo igual*], building a family and having the law and the community respecting that marriage.” Arianny, who is involved with the ICM church in Matanzas because she wants to support activism as well as enjoy the meetings, said about same-sex marriage, “It is not that I need it personally, but I have always been a person who like things to be fair [*le gusta que las cosas sean justas*]. If straight couples have a right to marriage, I think gay couples should have it too.” Arianny’s framing same-sex marriage as equality, fairness, and justice between groups is repeated later in the interview, when she said,

“It’s fair [*justo*], and it’s a serious problem in Cuba and we are already working on it, we are fighting for it and doing a lot of activism to have it but there are some things that can’t be changed for now. But we are fighting for it because it’s a necessity of a group to have the same rights as another group.”

The word used commonly here, *justo*, has a profound meaning of just, right, and fair, an evocative word speaking to a deep sense of balance and equality. Respondents use this word to convey their sense of reworking social structures in order to create equal and fair access to all institutions for all people. In my analysis, LGBT Cubans I spoke to tend to present same-sex marriage as a form of normalisation and social acceptance for sexual diversity, and a demonstration of respect for the fundamental equality between people – and they hold the state accountable for achieving this.

Some people I spoke to directly link the desire for fairness to Cuba’s socialist goals. Mayte, described by her sister Maritsa as ‘really Communist’, asked me to look at something she’d written about wanting to marry her girlfriend. She wrote:

“I refuse not to dream, but mostly I refuse not to fight for my dream. Enough of waiting for<sup>18</sup> miracles, waiting for answers, waiting for acceptance and understanding... enough of treating the subject as if it were an aberration or a political issue<sup>19</sup>. I’m talking about rights as people, I’m talking about having the right to live my

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<sup>18</sup> The word she used, *esperar*, can be translated as waiting for, hoping for, or expecting. In Spanish, it holds all these meanings.

<sup>19</sup> Cubans often use the term ‘politics’ to refer to the ongoing inflammatory debate between communism and liberal democracy and it is often an allusion to the highly politicised situation between Cuba and the USA. Here, given Mayte’s political stance as ‘really Communist’, I interpret her statement to mean that she does not see same-sex marriage as a discussion about whether it represents a Western

life as I want, I'm talking about having the right to love. I don't want to be special, I don't want different treatment, on the contrary... I want to be an ordinary person... I want to get married in Cuba because I'm Cuban, I want my country to love me as I am... I want to get married, I want to love [name of girlfriend] in my country." [ellipses in original].

I also asked her what she thought about the rainbow flag, and she responded in the same vein:

"I honestly think it wasn't necessary to have a flag. I think the flag excludes us and makes us different from the group. I believe that the more we blend in the better, the idea is to come together, not to separate us from the group and make us different from the rest. It is not necessary."

Mayte frames the issue of same-sex marriage and LGBTI rights as one of Cuban citizenship, nationalist belonging, normalisation, and inclusion within the socialist project. The ideas of fairness, and that one group should have the same rights as another group, specifically draw on Revolutionary rhetoric that emphasises the sameness and equality between all people (Guillard Limonta, 2009). This is an established activist approach in Cuba for LGBTI Cubans and black Cubans, who often draw on appeals to equality and integration, especially emphasising the desire not to be treated as a special interest minority ("different from the rest"), but rather as a citizen on equal footing (Lumsden, 1996; Maher, 2007; Saunders, 2009b; Stout, 2014).

This kind of frame alignment with national discourses has been critical to achieving same-sex marriage in other countries (Currier & Moreau, 2018; Díez, 2015, p. 245). Recent ethnographic studies of queer post-socialist China are usefully comparable to socialist Cuba, showing how same-sex marriage can be reframed as socialist human rights rather than international (Western) human rights (Hildebrandt, 2011), if and when this seems likely to bring about change. Liu (2015) and Bao (2018) both show how queerness and Chineseness are mutually constitutive, and how contemporary Chinese queers reappropriate socialist discourse to present themselves as citizens of a modern China. In a similar fashion to what I saw in Cuba, it is possible for Chinese queers to long for or leverage belonging to the socialist nation, a type of social belonging that may be more (or less) radical than LGBTIQ belonging in neoliberal and liberal democratic societies. The Chinese and Cuban situations cannot be read simply as instances of the homogenous globalisation of gayness according to Western models, as both draw strongly on their revolutionary socialist histories to construct identities which belong. China and Cuba are useful case studies which expand the boundaries of theory about same-sex

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incursion of liberal, American-style rights and that it should not be treated as such. Instead, she sees same-sex marriage as a basic human right that exists beyond politicking.

marriage to examine how revolutionary societies break from or maintain norms, and how this changes the meaning of marriage.

The discussion above shows how activists can embed Revolutionary discourse into the same-sex marriage debate, framing same-sex marriage as a socialist right to equality, and LGBT people as normal Revolutionary citizens. Further to the stress on normalisation and Revolutionary rhetoric, I found that many lesbian and bisexual Cubans emphasise the particular ability of the state to confer legitimacy and respectability. Even though Cuba has non-nuclear forms of kinship, and marriage is not normative, suggesting that queer relationship forms might be socially acceptable, people emphasised that having their relationships approved by the state would bring a level of validation that they were not currently getting from society. Lisett highlighted the difference between being able to be together without much social disapproval, and being truly recognised as a couple: “[same-sex marriage] is not only a way to protect joint property, but also to legitimise your love.... I can live with my wife regardless of the law, but deep down you know that is not legal, legitimate, socially acknowledged.” Daysi, in Havana, told me very clearly that she is not seeking acceptance or normativity, but primarily respect, and that respect is generated by the state rather than society:

“what I demand is respect. I don’t know if you understand it [LGBT relationships], I don’t know if you accept it. I do not seek acceptance. ... I think that what we have to look for is respect, and legal protection for the moment when I decide about my inheritance with my lawyer. For me, I’m not interested in marriage, but other people are. They have to have the right to marry, and that right must be awarded to every person. Marriage has no name, it is not ‘equal’ marriage, it is not ‘gay’ marriage or whatever, it’s just marriage. That right, I have to have it just like any other person. That right is what I look for. You cannot pretend that people accept or understand it, it takes time, but they have to respect you.”

Daysi suggests that respect from society is not necessarily dependent on acceptance, tolerance, or understanding, but that equality can be brought about through legal protection of rights, according to her approach to same-sex marriage as a matter of Revolutionary principle rather than public support. Daysi also highlights that she expects the state to respect and protect her rights as a human being. Turning to the law as a source of legitimacy is a product of particular historical circumstances which mean that Cuba has a strong constitutional framework, and the state claims a position as the ultimate and only moral arbiter (Hynson, 2020, p. 65). Daigle, in her work on *jineteras*, suggests that the collectivist socialist approach means that Cubans expect CENESEX and the state to set the terms of

acceptable sexuality (Daigle, 2015, p. 179), and Saavedra Montes de Oca (2017) highlights how Mariela's support for transgender Cubans has 'authorised' families to accept them. Putting same-sex marriage into the Constitution or the Family Code would mean that it passes fully into the Revolution, making it incontestable. This approach conforms exactly to Butler's warning not to hand power to the state over how relationships should be organised, as this is a form of regulation and control (Butler, 2002). But I encountered a strong belief that legitimisation by the state would be a force for good.

In particular, I heard statements many times that a change in the law will bring a change in society, as Daysi said above. Due to Cuba's top-down political system, respondents described that legalisation of same-sex marriage will actively create acceptance of LGBT relationships in society, through normalisation and legitimisation. There is little to no evidence that this would be the case, comparable to the resilience of deep currents of racist, sexist, and classist social discrimination in Cuba despite the laws against them. But there is a strong sense among my respondents that legal change would increase social acceptance and respectability of LGBT people. When I asked Lisett if she thought Cuban society was ready for such a change, she firmly dismissed the concern, saying, "Society is never ready for changes." She added, "there are always going to be changes and people get on board or they are left behind... Society will never be fully prepared for all changes." Lisett's opinion is that it is the state's duty to 'do the right thing' and pass progressive laws that respect human rights, irrespective of whether society agrees or is 'ready'. Marú agreed with Lisett's opinion, saying, "what they have to do is change the laws. If the laws change many things will change, we will progress even more." Of course, in the Constitutional debate, the state did not do this, but acquiesced to 'the Cuban people's' ambivalence about same-sex marriage.

These responses show a belief that legalising same-sex marriage will bring about greater social acceptance for LGBT people, by conferring legitimacy from the state. Joshi (2012) also notes this belief in the USA, and analyses it as a desire for the recognition of equality and validity for LGBTIQ citizens, while also noting that legal equality does not usually end discrimination against minorities, but just makes it more covert. Kam (2013, p. 97) similarly shows that the use of state experts to explain the 'correct, scientific' way to view homosexuality in China can have a strong effect on the image of homosexuality, as they hold considerable authority. Whether or not state sanction would bring social change in reality in Cuba, legalising same-sex marriage appears to have a seductive power (perhaps even a fantasy) with its promise of "warm embrace in the blanket of cultural acceptance." (O'Brien, 2007, p. 141). The lesbian and

bisexual Cuban women in this research hold a strong belief that the state blessing on same-sex marriage would provide a great deal of social legitimacy and confer respectability on their relationships, forcing society to accept them. This is an especially Cuban iteration of holding the state to account to actively create equality between its citizens, rather than waiting for the state to rubber stamp something which is already accepted in society.

Interpreting the meaning of LGBTIQ appeals to the state is heavily coloured in Cuba (and everywhere) by commentators' emotionally charged opinions on the broader politics of socialism and Communism, and what it means to comply with the Cuban government. While I also hold personal opinions on Cuba's politics, usually aligning myself with left-wing and queer approaches, my empirical examples here suggest that at least some LGBT appeals to the Cuban state may not be assimilationist, but rather frame alignment for strategic protection in a country which does not allow many forms of activism. CENESEX has consistently framed LGBTI issues as the right to be included within socialist society as ordinary citizens (Allen, 2011; Kirk, 2017; Sierra Madero, 2015; Stout, 2014), making this a safe(r) position for activists to take. Queer scholars tend to see the normalisation approach as squashing individualism and absorbing citizens into the homonormative regime. Cuban scholar Abel Sierra Madero views LGBT assimilation into the Cuban Revolution negatively, as a 'politically correct' form of sexuality (Sierra Madero, 2015). Fiol-Matta (2016, p. 226) sees the Cuban approach as a Faustian bargain between CENESEX and activists, which requires activists to adopt a Revolutionary position in order to gain CENESEX protection:

“The dominant moral code obtains: being *una compañera modelo* [model comrade], supporting the revolution, and assuming the ideals of Cuban revolutionary womanhood are implicit in the social transaction of the campaign against homophobia and the championing of diversity.”

By transposing a heteronormative model of relationships onto same-sex couples, through marriage, those couples are then fully incorporated into the Revolution, just like all other Cuban citizens (Daigle, 2015, p. 157). Scholars often see this kind of normalisation as a queer failure, and many are suspicious about a wholesale acquiescence to a Cuban state that is widely perceived to be authoritarian, oppressive, and anti-human rights. However, I propose a different way of viewing the situation (though not of the Cuban state).

Since heterosexual marriage in Cuba is not normative, I want to suggest that the fight for same-sex marriage in Cuba is not necessarily about believing in marriage, or desiring normativity, or submitting to state authority, but about claiming specifically socialist equality

and rights and holding the state to account. Like Howe in Nicaragua (2013), Bao in China (2018), and women in this research, I find socialist aspirations and rights to be comfortable bedfellows with LGBT equality. Further, the conversations I had suggested strongly that the principles of equality and inclusion are much more important to respondents than what same-sex marriage means in itself or what people would actually do in practice if it was legalised. The meaning of same-sex marriage, for respondents in this research, centred on the principles of fairness, equality, and justice, just like it is for most activists globally, rather than normative assimilation. As marriage itself holds low importance in Cuba, my research points to a significant pattern that LGBT Cubans are seeking visible legal, political, and social equality, rather than marriage in and of itself. Among my respondents, it may be that the desire to be married is not about seeking normativity, but about claiming civil rights as a visible act of recognition and respect from the state of LGBT relationships. Activists appear willing to take a respectable Revolutionary position – either as true believers, or as strategic frame alignment using the state’s own rhetoric against it – in order to achieve these goals. At the same time, there also exists a discourse in Cuba of aligning the nation with liberal modernity through support for LGBTI rights in the same way they are understood in international discourse. I have focused on how some people used socialism as a frame for their activism, but there are alternative frames, which have different levels of social and political risk for citizens.

In my analysis, seeking same-sex marriage is not necessarily a capitulation to a Western discourse of identity-based rights, or a depoliticised normativity, as suggested by many queer scholars, but is reframed by some Cuban activists as a positive and empowering part of the ongoing socialist project. I do not find the paradigm of normative assimilation versus queer resistance useful to analyse the situation, but rather take a more grounded approach according to what Cubans told me. In this way, same-sex marriage as it currently stands in Cuba might indeed be about normalisation of LGBT people, but potentially through socialism, not neoliberalism, which produces a new set of meanings around equality and inclusion, which may be much more radical than the fight for same-sex marriage in neoliberal societies.

#### The gendered respectability of marriage

While same-sex marriage might be usefully reframed as socialist, the literature strongly suggests several conservative norms about the respectability of marriage for *women*, in particular. No-one I spoke to directly referenced bourgeois desires, but it would be remiss to overlook how marriage, even in Cuba, retains elements of old-fashioned conservative

respectability. Although Cuban citizens may not attach much importance to heterosexual marriage, it is still encouraged by the state as a preferred form over consensual union (Hynson, 2020, p. 263). In the wide-ranging scholarship analysing the Revolution's approach to the family and marriage, the state's support for legal marriage distils down to a preference for European, white, conservative norms, drawing on old colonial notions of respectability. It would be reaching too far to claim that LGBT Cubans are directly appealing to colonial norms or the 1960s Revolutionary discourse of the socialist value of legal marriage, but the longstanding history of the gendered respectability of marriage is hard to escape.

As Stout writes (2014, p. 16), marriage, whiteness, European colonial values, and gendered moral virtue go hand-in-hand in Cuba. Before the Cuban Revolution, nuclear, legally married families were a symbol of moral, respectable, whiteness (Safa, 2005), as they were across much of the colonised Caribbean (Alexander, 1994). Whiteness and legal marriage equated to middle-class respectability (Fernandez, 2010). Marriage holds deep connotations of practicing "legitimate and appropriate sex" and the social reproduction of stable conservative values (Marso, 2010, p. 148) in a normative nuclear family unit that draws respect from both state and society. Queer of colour scholars have highlighted that bourgeois respectability rests on a valorisation of a white family model (Cohen, 1997; Ferguson, 2003; R. S. King, 2014, p. 126) which requires non-white people to perform whiteness in their gender and sexuality expression to gain respectability. Although the Revolution disrupted colonial norms in many areas of class, race, and gender, scholars have shown them to remain latent.

Despite Cuba's official racelessness and apparent social disinterest in marriage, the ugly truth is widely acknowledged in academic literature that Cuba continues to hold a clear hierarchy of whiteness and white cultural forms (Garth, 2021), including legal marriage, as superior to black cultural forms, including consensual union. Pertierra (2008, p. 749) argues that Cuban people "retain distinctions about 'respectable' household forms which maintain racialised and class-driven undertones". More explicitly, the early Revolutionary state promoted legal marriage as the preferred family form, which scholars identify as the state's preference for a white, European, bourgeois family structure for the new Cuba over black, matrifocal family forms (Andaya, 2014; Daigle, 2015; Safa, 2005; Stout, 2014). Further to the implicit white respectability contained within marriage, marriage was presented by the Revolution in the early years as a radical or socialist effort to protect women and children's rights by legally binding men to the family (Härkönen, 2009); or a levelling of class inequalities by opening up the elite symbol of marriage to everyone (Hamilton, 2012). Married, nuclear families were

regarded as a symbol of modernity for Cuba at this time (Härkönen, 2014, p. 5). Under the new socialist regime, family inheritance was banned, and family businesses expropriated by the state (Smith & Padula, 1996, p. 145), thus removing economic inheritance motivations to get married. Marriage, therefore, was remade by the state into a status symbol of adherence to new Revolutionary socialist moral values (Hynson, 2020, p. 132). These two important sources make heterosexual marriage doubly respectable: the Cuban state supports it, and older, deeper cultural norms also support it. Same-sex marriage may draw on some of these deeply embedded norms of respectability.

A final note brings us back to the question of how lesbian and bisexual women could achieve moral respectability through marriage. Time and again, women told me they were not 'promiscuous', in a way which inferred high moral standing associated with monogamy. Disavowing cheating and infidelity seemed to have particular meaning among respondents to position selves as 'good women', which King also finds across the wider Caribbean (2014, p. 126), and which may be related to the discourse of hypersexualisation of black women, and the construction of white women as both monogamous (married) and virtuous. The implied monogamy of marriage could be seen as the moral opposite of 'sexually promiscuous' women, including but not limited to *jinetas*. Lixa, one of the *transformistas*, said that her mother taught her to contain her sexuality in order to gain respect from others. "I have a wonderful mother, who accepts me as I am. My entire family accepts me as I am, there's no recrimination. The only thing my mum tells me is not to be promiscuous, 'respect others to be respected by them'." Daimary said:

"I'm not promiscuous. I like to have one relationship and that's it, you feel? But is it common? The majority are [promiscuous], at least us *activas*, you see? How it normally functions is that you can't just be with one girl, you have to be with many. But I don't. It's common, just like men have to be with seven women. But I don't, can't see that side, I have to take care of her [Ofelia]. The majority do though. If my relationship isn't working, I'll leave, I don't know, and look for somebody else. But to be with her and also have two or three others, looking for others and fucking around, no, I don't share her because I'm not promiscuous, I don't like it."

Lixa's and Daimary's condemnation of promiscuity points to a conservative norm which invests monogamy with moral worth and social respect, and which highlights again the conflation of *activa* women with 'low-class' practices, which are often read as black. Hynson (2020, p. 18) argues that in the early Revolution, sexual monogamy was explicitly part of the new family model promoted by the state. Although in practice many people I spoke to maintain multiple relationships (including Daimary, showing the slippery nature of how people choose to

represent themselves to researchers), I found a discourse among respondents of the moral worth of monogamy, especially for women. Marriage, as a critical symbol of committed monogamy, might retain some symbolic value as a marker of sexual moral respectability for women. Like other parts of the world, the literature suggests that marriage in Cuba might confer moral respectability on women, which may act as an underlying motivation behind the fight to legalise same-sex marriage.

## Conclusion

I now return to my original question posed at the beginning of this chapter: when normativity is removed from same-sex marriage, what is left? Lesbian and bisexual Cuban women that I asked do not seem to regard same-sex marriage as having much meaning in and of itself as a relationship form, but consider it an important means to an end, the end goals being legal rights, equality, normalisation, and respectability. Many are ambivalent about getting married, and do not always see it as an aspirational ideal, but sometimes frame same-sex marriage as a matter of socialist equality and a means to provide economic and legal protection. In order to achieve these resources, I found some LGBTI activists are prepared to leverage socialist rhetoric strongly. The discussion shows that it is possible for marriage to be respectable and supported by norms without being normative, an interesting separation which has perhaps only happened in Cuba.

Legalising same-sex marriage is often seen by Cuban lesbian and bisexual women in this research as a route to social acceptance as 'normal' citizens. For the women I spoke to, marriage was framed as bringing acceptance not through social normativity, but from the state recognition of LGBTI people as citizens with the same rights as everyone else, which they regard as normalisation. In this discourse, I suggest same-sex marriage represents a fundamental appeal to the proclaimed values of the Revolution and is about holding the state accountable to its promises of equality and inclusion – promises which are more clearly declared than in most countries. Lesbian and bisexual women in this research sometimes choose to position themselves within socialist narratives of equality – an incontestable political position to take – and frame the issue as one of deepening the socialist revolution for greater equality for all people. It does not matter whether or not activists are sincerely committed to Cuba's Revolution or the government; what matters is the way they use socialist rhetoric to make their claims. International LGBTI rights discourse also has some traction in Cuba, attached to a vision of modernity and liberalism. I have primarily analysed respondents'

positioning in relation to socialism, but other political frames are in use too. As well as active political claims of equal rights, I found a significant discourse that lesbian and bisexual Cuban women can use a performance of gendered moral normalcy and respectability as a way to claim belonging in the Cuban nation, similar to studies of LGBT national belonging in other countries. The normalisation approach in Cuba is substantially similar to that described in the homonormativity literature – leveraging sameness, ordinariness, patriotism, and citizenship – but its clear framing as *socialist* values produces a politically radical meaning beyond neoliberal incorporation. The desire for normalisation is not inherently disempowering; here, it is reframed as a politically engaged platform for claiming rights and holding the state to account.

The state's perceived ability to confer legitimacy and equality is a specific outcome of Cuban socialist Revolutionary history, which gives the state a particular power and authority as a moral arbiter. The case study of this strong state advances our understanding of how same-sex marriage imparts legitimacy and respectability, beyond the boundaries of homonormativity theory applied to liberal democratic contexts, and shows the importance of looking at a variety of country contexts to avoid universalising tendencies in the same-sex marriage debate. Rather than gaining respectability through the social normativity of marriage, I suggest that LGBT Cubans might gain respectability through the state legitimisation of their sexualities. The Cuban case study offers new insights, suggesting that same-sex marriage does not always or necessarily draw on a discourse of identity-based rights, nor is it always depoliticised, nor is it always about an ascent into normativity, as suggested in the homonormativity literature, but it can simultaneously reach for normalisation and revolutionary socialism. If the wider context in which marriage exists is socialism, is normalisation necessarily a defeat for queer politics?

This case study of same-sex marriage in Cuba implies, perhaps for the first time, that it is possible for same-sex marriage to be normal without being homonormative. This discussion moves the debate forward from the neat oppositional binary that homonormativity theory has sustained, showing it as inadequate and universalising. I propose that analysing same-sex marriage only in terms of assimilation or resistance is an unhelpful framework of failure or success. What matters for international development is why LGBTIQ people want same-sex marriage, and what it is imagined to bring in terms of material benefits and social recognition. Cubans continue to fight for this right, suggesting that, for them, the 'right to be normal' has a high significance and social meaning. Finally, Lixa summarised most lesbian and bisexual Cuban women's attitude to marriage quite succinctly:

“Well, some say that for two people to love each other it’s not necessary to have a ring or swear before God; but some people like to get married, because it’s the normal thing to do. If a man and a woman can get married, why can’t I? There are people who want to, and people who don’t.”

## Chapter 9: Conclusion

I started this research wanting to find out where lesbian and bisexual women fit in to the story of ‘increasing tolerance’ for LGBTIQ people in Cuba, and where they fit in to the story of women’s empowerment through the Revolution. I have shown throughout that, unfortunately, *machismo* continues to exist in Cuba, and permeates into LGBT spaces and institutions as well as heterosexual life. I found that traditional gender norms affect and constrain lesbian and bisexual women in this research as much as heterosexual women – even more so in some situations. I therefore focused my study on analysing how gender norms and normativity impact sexuality expression and lifeworlds for self-identified lesbian and bisexual Cuban women. My overall research question was: in intimate, community, and national practices and discourses, how do Cuban lesbian and bisexual women navigate, perform, and subvert gender and sexuality norms? I have presented the main argument that the lesbian and bisexual women in this research tend to uphold a strict version of feminine gender normativity, which functions as a marker of respectability and social inclusion; is used to compensate for sexual non-normativity; and which produces desirable social invisibility. As a reminder, I am not using the terms ‘lesbian and bisexual’ as strict identity categories, but as broad terms covering a range of experiences and subjectivities among self-identified women who have a sexual, erotic, or romantic interest in other women.

My most significant contribution is to start to understand *why* these women want, or need, to perform gender normativity. My theoretical contribution here is to move beyond the assimilation/transgression framework of homonormativity theory. Rather than assessing whether people are or are not assimilating, I focused on *why* and *how* women navigate normativity. Performing gender normativity is an important strategy for most lesbian and bisexual women in this research for several reasons: it brings respectability and respect from community; it compensates the family for sexual non-normativity; it creates some space for privately queer sexual activity; and it allows women to sink into desirable social invisibility. I suggest, drawing on the specific experiences of women I spoke to, that traditional signifiers of gendered white moral respectability – femininity, having children, avoiding certain public spaces, (same-sex) marriage – can provide access to some level of normative invisibility which brings relief from constant scrutiny, and which frames lesbian and bisexual women as decent, upstanding community members. This line of argument also suggests that women who do not perform gender normativity – especially masculine *activa* women – are discursively

constructed by LGBT and heterosexual Cubans alike as backward and uneducated characters who are morally lacking. Gender normativity thus emerges as an absolutely critical route for the women I spoke to for accessing a decent quality of life with support from family, friends, and the state. My case study suggests that sexuality and gender are intimately imbricated: sexuality expression is structured by gender, and they work together to create social identities. My theoretical contribution is thus that constructions of 'normalcy' for lesbian and bisexual women in this research are built on a foundation of *gender* normativity. My understanding is that the binary gender ideal is aspirational, not actually achievable (R. S. King, 2014, p. 43), meaning that gender normativity is constantly performed but never perfected. The need to perform normalcy is commonly noted across the global literature on LGBTI lives, meaning that my findings are in line with a global trend analysing how lesbian and bisexual women work harder than heterosexual women to emphasise their gendered moral respectability, perhaps over-performing their 'normalcy' in an effort to improve their lives.

I have argued that LGBTI desires for normativity should not be dismissed out of hand as queer failure, lack of agency, or political assimilation, but taken seriously as a subject of study, like Engebretsen argues (2014, p. 160). Women I spoke to felt that normativity brings them important material gains and these must not be overlooked as concrete improvements in quality of life for LGBTIQ people. While lesbian and bisexual women's absence of political action and public presence might be frustrating to some activists (Cuban and international, and sometimes to me), it is important to acknowledge that the choices they make are firstly, in order to survive, and secondly, to make the best of their situation. Normalisation and normativity, broadly speaking, are highly desired by most women I spoke to, regarded as a route to social acceptance, good relationships with family and friends, and legitimacy in the eyes of the state. Women do not over-perform normalcy all the time or in all situations, but strategically where they think it will benefit them, and in relation to their social positioning along other axes, such as ethnicity, class, education, and income. Cuba's particularly conformist socialist society throws into sharp relief the idea of normativity as a desirable quality, and it shows (again) how the 'out and proud' discourse based on the value of difference is a specifically Euro-American model that should not be applied to all countries as the 'gold standard' of LGBTIQ life. I have thus contributed to moving the queer theory debate forward from a discussion of whether the desire to be 'normal' is a symbolic queer failure, as seen in the literature on same-sex marriage, to analysing how normalcy operates in its geopolitical context. I found normativity a useful concept to understand how and why people behave in certain ways, and importantly, that wanting to be normal is not a failure. Thus, I

have expanded on sexual geographers' critiques of homonormativity (Brown, 2012), by showing that it is not a universal monolithic discourse, but a concept which operates differently in different countries, and serves different purposes. Through a close analysis of gender normativity, I have proposed that it is vital to start with an understanding of what is normal in the place of study.

The specific study of lesbian and bisexual women in a socialist society provides a case study which pushes at the boundaries of what we know about LGBTIQ life, and the development of theory. In Cuba, my study is only the second after Tanya Saunders which looks exclusively at lesbian and bisexual women. Globally, lesbian and bisexual women are deeply under-studied in comparison to gay men, which masks gender inequalities between LGBTIQ groups. Hence, my thesis makes an empirical contribution by bringing a gender analysis into LGBTIQ studies, and makes an important intervention into the tendency to universalise the gay male experience. Cisgender white gay men have become centred as the archetypal norm of 'the LGBT community', but I have shown here, alongside other ethnographies from around the world, that what is normal for men may not be normal for lesbian and bisexual women (and by extrapolation, all other genders and sexualities). I have also brought in a consideration of ethnicity in many places, although this was not my main axis of analysis, and analysed how gender and ethnicity work together in Cuba to create compounded inequalities and oppressions, and how markers of gendered respectability are often coded white. I point out in many places in this thesis the importance of context and specificity for theory, and how Cuba as a case study challenges universalising tendencies.

While I have not focused on Cuban formal politics or socialism, I have contributed to knowledge of LGBTIQ lives outside liberal democracies. As in China (Bao, 2018; Engebretsen, 2014; Kam, 2013), I found that Cuban normativity and respectability for my specific group of respondents is sometimes framed as socialist values, and that queer belonging and 'being normal' can be aligned with being a good socialist citizen. Inclusion in the national project may be a thoroughly homonormative desire, but I offer that if the national project is socialist in character, inclusion can be a radical position to take, and does not necessarily represent assimilation or homogenisation. The specificities of Cuba help to think through what it really means to be included by the state. Like Engebretsen, I hope to have contributed to not just a greater empirical understanding of lesbian and bisexual lives, but to challenging the "dominant categories and explanatory frameworks" of queer studies (Engebretsen, 2008, p. 110), through analysing how normativity can at least sometimes, for some people, be empowering. I hope to

have captured, or at least indicated, how the specifics of LGBTIQ experience are deeply mediated by gender, ethnicity, class, and geopolitical context. While anthropologists of sexuality have been arguing this for decades, I add my voice and those of women I spoke to to the chorus.

I turn now to reviewing how I answered the sub-questions of my research in my four empirical chapters.

### On individuals: How do lesbian and bisexual Cuban women navigate gender norms, and how does their understanding of gender norms help them construct their own subjectivities?

I found a strong discourse valorising hegemonic femininity, or the characteristics of ideal womanhood, among the lesbian and bisexual Cuban women I spoke to. For the most part, these women mobilise a vision of traditionally gendered attributes as the ideal to which they aspire, such as looking attractively feminine. Among my research participants, women who uphold gender normativity feel themselves to be respectable and to receive respect from (heterosexual and LGBT) others in their communities, through their desirable social invisibility as 'normal' women. I draw the wider conclusion that gender norms are deeply important structuring factors through which Cuban lesbian and bisexual women orient and position themselves within wider social life; and through which they judge others and expect to be judged, which is in line with the literature on Cuban heterosexual women and Cuban gender.

In Chapter 5, I explored the importance of gender normativity to respectability through the example of *activa/pasiva* women, whose masculine/feminine (butch/femme) pairings are highly denigrated. *Activa* women were presented to me by most other lesbian and bisexual women as low-class gender transgressors, who replicate the patriarchy and who need to be 'educated' about the proper, modern way to be a lesbian; that is, how to be lesbian *and* feminine. *Activa/pasiva* constructions are perceived by almost all LGBT and heterosexual Cubans I spoke to as backward and un-modern, implicitly associated with blackness, and part of the patriarchal past that modern (feminine) lesbian and bisexual women are trying to leave behind. 'Modern' lesbian and bisexual Cuban women often identify themselves with international LGBTI rights values, as noted by Allen (2011); Hamilton (2012); Saunders (2010); and Stout (2014), but shown here in depth for the first time. The rejection of and distancing from *activa/pasiva* women shows how particular expressions of gender and sexuality can be

mobilised to elevate oneself as modern and 'normal', which is noted in academic literature as an emerging global trend.

Through the construction of *activa/pasiva* women, especially *activas*, as abject others, gender normativity is reinforced by other lesbian and bisexual women in this research. The way in which femininity is used here for being the 'right kind' of lesbian shows, more widely, how gender norms can structure sexual expression and how gender correctness can facilitate social acceptance and the construction of selves as 'normal'. The boundary line drawn around appropriately feminine gender and sexual expression is the central way in which lesbian and bisexual women in this research describe their subjectivities, usually framing themselves as 'normal' (that is, feminine) women – and through this boundary, elevating themselves as morally respectable. Thus, I suggested that, in this case study and perhaps more widely, gender underpins sexuality, and that gender normativity is a deeply embedded value against which Cuban lesbian and bisexual women develop their sense of self.

On family: How do lesbian and bisexual Cuban women understand, desire, or subvert norms of family life? How do they perform, resist, or subvert the dominant state and social narrative of women as mothers?

The continuing conflation of women with children, caregiving, and domesticity, and the *casa/calle* (private/public) discourse, means that family life is a central area where issues of gender normativity play out for lesbian and bisexual women in Cuba. Drawing on previous research on non-heterosexual men in Latin America, I advanced the new suggestion that the 'don't ask, don't tell' or *no dice nada* tacit knowledge paradigm within the family does not work well for women in this research. My focus on gender highlights that what works for men does not necessarily work for women, an important intervention into a field of study that has largely assumed that gay men's codes of behaviour are a norm for all LGBTIQ people. While women respondents also frame *no dice nada* as the 'normal' way of doing things, and may prefer to uphold this norm, in practice this code had broken for every woman I spoke to. Drawing from literature on Cuban women, and Latin America more widely, I argued that Cuban women's sexuality is always already semi-public, subject to intense scrutiny from family and the neighbourhood in a way which men's is not. Women in this research could not maintain discreet privacy about sexual activity, especially from their mothers – and perhaps some men also find this impossible. In this way, lesbian and bisexual women I spoke to were not able to uphold the *no dice nada* norm, and their experiences suggest it might only be a norm for men.

I discussed how the impossibility of *no dice nada* for women contributes to their performance of gender normativity as a strategy to compensate the family for their non-normative sexuality, especially their mothers. Where one norm was broken, another could sometimes be leveraged to make up for it. The perhaps ultimate expression of normative femininity in Cuba is to have a child. In Chapter 6, I described how lesbian and bisexual women in this research feel that becoming a mother is a beautiful, natural expression of womanhood, and how they can sometimes use this gender normativity to reassert themselves as 'normal' women. In the realm of family, lesbian and bisexual women that I spoke to mostly uphold the dominant narrative of women as mothers, using this as a way to gain positive relationships with their own mothers, protective invisibility, and social respectability. In comparison with the literature on queer families in other parts of the world, I suggested that Cuba's matrifocal norms inadvertently create queer space for lesbian and bisexual women as mothers, as it is relatively common for Cuban women to raise children without fathers' involvement. In line with the literature on Cuban parenting and LGBTQI parenting worldwide, I analysed how having a child, and raising that child well, are strategies based in family life which can bring some lesbian and bisexual women family and community respect and respectability. Drawing on the way in which my respondents specifically framed their parenting as 'normal', I suggest that the gendered normative invisibility and Cuban social approval of motherhood allowed some lesbian and bisexual mothers to 'prove' themselves to be 'normal' women. I suggested that gender and sexuality work together to make upholding gendered norms of family life a route for lesbian and bisexual Cuban women to compensate for sexual non-normativity and to access social acceptance. This strategy played out in specifically Cuban ways, but the intense pressure to perform gender normativity in family life is widely acknowledged in global case studies of LGBTI parenting, and more so for cisgender women than others, making this a worldwide observation.

### On community: How do lesbian and bisexual women navigate gender in community spaces?

This part of the research moved away from exploring how respondents use gender normativity to their advantage, towards showing how wider gender norms affect their engagement in community spaces and social life. In Chapter 7, I analysed how Cuba's *machista* gender norms are reproduced within LGBT spaces, indicating one aspect of how gender structures LGBTIQ life experiences and the importance of research with different genders and sexualities under the

queer umbrella. Some respondents describe CENESEX as ‘lesbophobic’ and not interested in lesbian and bisexual women’s issues; while gay clubs, the only officially sanctioned LGBT social spaces, are widely experienced as unwelcoming of women and geared towards cisgender gay men (usually white and middle-class). I then presented the case study of the *Iglesia de la Comunidad Metropolitana*, which I argued is popular with lesbian and bisexual women (and transgender women) because it is a respectable social space which specifically challenges gender inequality as well as sexual orientation discrimination. Cuba is by no means alone in centring white cisgender gay men as the acceptable face of homosexuality, but the absence of lesbian and bisexual women from public life is particularly stark in a country which has historically achieved many significant gains for heterosexual women. The specific experiences in Cuba that women told me about are extremely aligned with findings from LGBTI communities in the rest of the world, meaning that my conclusions contribute to a strong line of argument analysing how sexism can be deeply embedded within LGBTI community institutions. I argued that lesbian and bisexual women’s absence from community spaces in Cuba is not just preference or lack of interest on their part, as is sometimes claimed, but an outcome of the oppressive and active invisibilisation of women in public spaces more widely. Gender inequality in Cuba points to men having more disposable income and leisure time than women; the construction of gay men as more *important* than lesbian and bisexual women; the normative restriction of respectable women’s sexuality to private spaces; and their retreat from public spaces in order to avoid scrutiny and judgement.

As I have analysed how important gender normativity is to Cuban lesbian and bisexual women to access a better quality of life, it is consistent that they do not often challenge the gender norms that restrict their presence in community spaces. I suggested that the need to perform normativity and maintain respectability usually trump the desire to socialise in public, meaning that some lesbian and bisexual women only engage in social activities that do not threaten their reputations as morally upstanding women, with black women feeling this pressure more intensely than others. Lesbian and bisexual Cuban women in this research navigate gender in community spaces by tending to uphold gendered normative respectability and invisibility, which in this case is felt to be disempowering as it means not participating in certain spaces. I thus indicated that adhering to hegemonic gender norms can be prohibitive as well as a route to inclusion. For these women, appropriate femininity might bring social support from individuals and family members, but it also brings a need to adhere to traditional, restrictive, notions of public behaviour. One exception is the drag kings, who actively challenge (black) lesbian invisibility, and another is *activa/pasiva* respondents, who are not usually striving for

moral respectability and therefore feel more able to participate in social events that are not respectable.

### On nation: How do lesbian and bisexual Cuban women understand, desire, or subvert norms of marriage?

My final empirical chapter, Chapter 8, examined same-sex marriage, before the national constitutional debate on legalisation. Although I focus on gender normativity as a structuring social issue, marriage turned out not to be about normativity per se. Cuba's particular historical and political circumstances mean that heterosexual marriage is normal but not normative, and that social normativity is largely removed from the desire for same-sex marriage, perhaps the only example of this in the world. LGBT Cubans that I spoke to frame their discussions as desires for legal and economic protections, and social legitimacy and recognition for their relationships, especially from the state. In particular, I analysed the appeal to the state as an appeal to socialist values of equality and respect for all citizens, which rests on the correct performance of gendered moral respectability that I analysed in the earlier part of the thesis. For the lesbian and bisexual women in this research, at this particular moment in time, gender normativity is bound up with being seen as a good citizen by the state, from which position they can make a political claim of socialist belonging (whether or not they believe in socialist principles). From their experiences, I argued that LGBTI normalisation is not inherently disempowering, as here it is framed as a socialist platform for holding the state to account.

Since heterosexual marriage is not normative nor especially valued in Cuba, my case study moves the study of same-sex marriage beyond the confines of homonormativity theory, which is revealed as a not especially useful analytical framework outside liberal democracies. Women in this research desire some of the social goods that homonormativity theory identifies – inclusion, belonging, respect, legitimacy – but marriage is seen as only one, not overly important, route to acquiring these. Instead, at this particular moment when same-sex marriage was not an option, respondents turned towards leveraging gender normativity as a more effective route to access these social goods. The case study therefore shows that it is important to look at what same-sex marriage represents or is imagined to bring in each country context, rather than as a universal rights claim and end in itself. I argued that same-sex marriage is not always or only about depoliticised assimilation versus queer resistance to normativity, but can be a strategic means to an end and a socialist political stance. Almost all

the lesbian and bisexual Cuban women I spoke to are aligned with the Cuban norm of not regarding marriage as a significant relationship marker or life stage, but tend to invest it with a political meaning as a route to gaining LGBTI rights. Since they often frame this as socialist equality and belonging, same-sex marriage could be considered reformulated as a politically radical stance. In the local sense, then, they uphold ordinary or 'normal' attitudes to marriage, but in the wider sense, same-sex marriage is mobilised as a political stance which may contest or change marriage norms.

### Avenues for further research

I have picked at a few threads of the knot of how gender and sexuality work in Cuba, but there is plenty of scope to research numerous other situations, places, and relationships.

*Activa/pasiva* women are hardly studied in Latin America, and an in-depth ethnography is sorely needed to increase our knowledge of how these gendered subjectivities are constructed and how they operate. We would need to carefully examine the relationship between the denigration of these subjectivities and the liberal, 'modern', international human rights discourse which promotes a specific model of acceptable lesbian femininity. My research has hinted at an uncomfortable nexus between lesbian femininity, fluid sexualities, higher class, the privileging of whiteness, and liberal democratic values, which would benefit from a deeper study. In the meantime, development practitioners must support women's authentic local expressions of sexuality, and avoid applying models from one context onto another where they do not fit. More broadly, the development and sexuality literature would benefit from a global review of female masculinities, including an analysis of *how* liberal international lesbian feminism has equated a model of femme/femme relationships with 'modernity', and *why* this has taken hold so vigorously across the world.

There are very few studies of lesbian or bisexual motherhood from Global South contexts, and as yet, it is hard to draw strong conclusions for international development. There is enormous scope for further research on how lesbian and bisexual women in the Global South choose to have children, raise children, conduct their household duties, and maintain relationships with their families of origin. My findings on Cuba's matrifocal family norms suggest that places which do not have nuclear family structures as the ideal might be more supportive of queer families and LGBTI-headed families. It would be worthwhile to explore this further in other matriarchal, matrifocal, or non-nuclear societies.

My findings on same-sex marriage were restricted to a particular time period, and the debate has shifted considerably in Cuba since my fieldwork in 2017. The same-sex marriage literature would benefit greatly from a deeper study about Cuba, since its heterosexual marriage norms are so different to many other places. So far, our knowledge on same-sex marriage is limited to mainly Euro-American, post-colonial, and Christian heritage contexts. My case study raises interesting questions about what same-sex marriage would look like in all kinds of societies: matriarchal, polygynous, Muslim, Hindu, and so on.

### Último/Finally

In this research, I have analysed how normalisation and normativity for lesbian and bisexual women in Cuba relies on adherence to traditional forms of femininity. My analysis shows that, in Cuba, respectability for the lesbian and bisexual women I spoke to requires and relies on gender normativity, and that gender normativity is key to the normalisation of sexual diversity. Through the specific Cuban case study, I hope to have shown the importance of gender to constructions of sexuality, and the importance of considering separately each different gender and sexuality within the 'LGBTI' or queer umbrella. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that lesbian and bisexual women have specifically gendered experiences of navigating family, community, and social life, as will each other gendered and sexual subjectivity. Cuban lesbian and bisexual women's individual experiences especially highlight *machismo* or patriarchy, which continues to constrain and restrict their lives. I conclude that tackling discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation requires a deep and careful analysis of gendered inequalities at the same time.

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