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**Opening other Closets: A Visual Ethnography of Gender Roles and Social Change
among Transgender People and their Families in Cuba**

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Submitted for the Degree of
PhD in Creative and Critical Practice
School of Media, Film and Music

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Declaration:

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.

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UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Creative and Critical Practice

Title: Opening other Closets: A Visual Ethnography of Gender Roles and Social Change among Transgender People and their Families in Cuba

ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this thesis is to offer an insight into family attitudes toward transgender experience in Cuba, one of the few countries in the world where gender reassignment surgery is state-sponsored. Homosexuality was legalised in Cuba in 1975. In the early 1990s, new laws also encompassed legalisation for gender non-normative persons. Against this background, the present research involved a mixed repertoire of visual and narrative ethnographic methods and was conducted in Cuba between 2014 and 2016. This involved collaborative research to establish a photographic project reflecting on the experience of gender transitioning in the family and included the gathering of oral histories from eight Cuban families. It was intended to enable research participants to reveal the complexities that characterise life in contemporary Cuba and, more importantly, to explore the question of gender, sexuality and the Revolution. Data for this research were collected from eight Cuban families whose members' ages range from 25 to 80. This facilitated a space for conversation about family and gender transitioning across generations.

This thesis is based on the analysis of this participatory research, which has included assembling the participants' visual narratives and lived experiences through their family portraits and oral histories, including my own ethnographic visual reflexivity. These family photographs depict the apparently straight/hetero family as a space where sexual and gender difference is happening. They also provide a significant strategy for rethinking queer family spaces, not as separate or subaltern but as implicated within seemingly normative family arrangements. The critical written component of the thesis consists of 38,098 words. The creative work includes a photography exhibition/installation and a photography book. Also, as an integral part of the thesis, some parts of a published article are included in Chapter 4. (See Appendix 2 for Oral History Authors' Agreement). Each chapter includes descriptions of participants' thoughts on their own transgender experiences in relation to their domestic space, care arrangements, family relationships and kinship, and also their experiences with The National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX) and the Cuban State.

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This thesis is dedicated to Fernando Santos (Juany's brother) and Yordanka Valles (one of the twin siblings) who passed away in the months leading up to the completion of this thesis.

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List of Acronyms

CDR	Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (Comité de Defensa de la Revolución)
CENESEX	National Center for Sexual Education (Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual)
CTC	Workers Central Union of Cuba (Central de Trabajadores de Cuba)
PCC	Cuba Communist Party (Partido Comunista de Cuba)
UMAP	Military Units to Aid Production (Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Produccion)

Preface

I am submitting this document as part of my PhD in Creative and Critical Practice.

As an integral part of my creative practice, a printed copy of *Unapologetic take*, a photography book, and 'The Family as a Space for Gender Transition', a photography exhibition/ installation, will be shown as part of the Viva examination.

Documentation and dissemination of my research (2015-2017) can be found on the USB stick included with this document. More information can also be found at the following addresses:

<https://onca.org.uk/whats-on/past/2017-2/olisam-family-space-gender-transition/>

<https://photoworks.org.uk/showcase-olga-lidia-saavedra/>

<http://www.ohs.org.uk/journal/journal-search/>

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cssd/queory/2015>

Overview of the Thesis

Chapter one – Introduction. This provides a general overview of the research aims, the background contexts and the methods of my visual ethnographic collaborative doctoral research, which explores how gender roles affect the family landscape of transgender people in contemporary Cuba.

Chapter two describes the theoretical frame for my work. It situates my theoretical debate regarding family representation and gender transitioning across feminist theory, sexual anthropology, queer theory, transfeminist debates and visual ethnographic work. It also relates to contemporary ethnographic research on gender and sexuality in Cuba.

Chapter three – Research context and analysis of the methodology. The exploration of these participatory research methods is organised according to the range of ethnographic and visual research approaches used as ‘representation’ and as modes of inquiry. This examines the relationship between interviewees and interviewer. It provides more detailed information about the participants, the methodological decisions and the ethical issues. It also explores problems that arose during the research fieldwork, as well as the theoretical justifications for and the limitations of the study and the impact of this on participants’ lives.

Chapter four – Opening other closets: family, gender and sexuality as state policy through oral history narrative. This is an exploration of gender and sexuality within the Cuban family and of its historical relation with the Cuban State. This is discussed through the use of passages from my personal life, research participants’ own stories and critical theory, in connection with the various discourses that were part of the political, historical and social context in which the thesis is based.

Chapter five. This looks at connectivity, agency, belonging and resistance in transitioning families. It provides a significant strategy for rethinking queer family spaces, not as separate or subaltern but as implicated within seemingly normative family arrangements. It reflects on photographic representations of transgender people in Cuba. It includes a reflection on family portraits as powerful tools to open up other ways of representing trans experiences.

Chapter six. Using family oral histories within a creative and critical practice project, this section analyses the process of taking new family portraits and of using videos, and the creative critical outcome of this through the exhibition and photobook. It also includes a reflection of the audience in relation to the queer family photographs.

Chapter seven – Discussions. This summarises my arguments and main findings and the contribution made by the study. It also looks at the relationship with previous research, problems that arose during the research, the limitations of the study and recommendations for action research and change. My observations and self-reflections as a researcher in making sense of my own gender identity and family as an insider/outsider in relation to the people I have worked with in the project are also explored.

Chapter 1 Introduction

This thesis engages with the relationship between transgender individuals and their families in contemporary Cuba. The research took place at a critical moment, when the nation was both opening up its economy to global capital and becoming a ‘benchmark’ for LGBT freedom in Latin America and a global leader in gender and sexual equality. The study explored the memories and recollections of its gender-transitioning participants and their families, with a view to understanding sexual and gender subjectivities as embodying not only the present moment of transition, but recollections of the past and aspirations for the future, in changing times. It generated insights into how Cuban family members readjusted their constructed ethical, cultural and political ideology to the new circumstances. This required a comparison of past experiences and complex quotidian life. By conducting visual critical ethnographic research, I investigated the ways in which the ‘new’ gender identities of people who were transitioning gender in this social context might defragment their family members’ pre-established gender behaviours and assumptions, and through such processes bring about new understandings of gender and self-hood. This research drew on prior collaborative visual work with transgender people, conducted in Cuba in 2002, and considered changes over the last decade, through new visual photographic work. My project involved the making of new family portraits, and pointed the camera at each member of the family. This was intended to add new insight by situating the heteronormative family space as a significant site in which to address the dynamics of gender transition and queer family spaces, not as separate or subordinate, but as connected within seemingly normative family arrangements. Representing the space of the family using photography and oral history as a method allowed me to bring to the forefront the emotions embedded in participants’ subjectivities that come into play in family dynamics and interconnections. The process of telling enabled the research participants, and myself, as a Cuban-born researcher, to deconstruct our gender political/ideological models and come to terms with how, in Cuba, family dynamics affect the subjectivities and experiences of trans people and vice versa. Also, using oral history in this context allowed us to express, revealingly, the complexities that characterise life in contemporary Cuba, specifically regarding the question of gender, sexuality and revolution.

1.1 Locating myself

Who am I? Which category should I be *wearing* while writing this thesis? Would it be enough to say that I am human, or do I need to disclose my gender, race, sexuality, nationality and so on? I believe that in order to understand who I am, and how I was placed in this market of constructed self in relation to others, I have to re-locate my *gendered* and sexualised body in time and space, and also in relation to my research. Being born and having lived in Cuba for over 30 years during the ‘revolutionary period’ inevitably influenced my perception of the ‘self-other’ dichotomy. The early rhetoric and representation of the 1959 Cuban Revolution imagined the revolutionary subject as gender normative, ideologically Marxist, heterosexual and atheist. Based on reflections on my earlier experiences in Cuba and my later ones in Europe, I recognise that one can make use of many different cultural categories or labels of identity as a foundation or context with which to make a statement about oneself. However, I would rather not have to defend myself in relation to these labels, simply because I cannot choose any of them. It seems to me that being a woman or a man, or being white, black or green, cisgender, transgender or any other sexuality or gender variant was beyond my choice. In contrast, becoming a parent, friend, teacher, carer, or just a person for whom other lives matter, certainly were my choices. This research reflects my position and my encounters with different forms of discourse through my own body and daily lived experiences, in the face of the institutions, media and visual/cultural representations that have shaped my views about class, race, family, gender and sexuality.

These experiences, and other personal processes that emerged in my research, have helped me deconstruct my gendered self. Because of this, my work is an exploration of my own transition as an individual, as a member of a family, and as a friend or colleague of any transgender person. In my research, I intended to address this subject from my specific place of difference and unknowing, in connecting with people for whom my particular body and sexuality are also unknown. But more importantly, I went beyond imposed social categories by reflecting on what it means to be a human being who, like many others, believes in a more fluid way of perceiving gender. Exploring and understanding whether transgressions were made by trans people in their personal lives, families and society allowed me to challenge stereotypical

representations of family and gender transition and open up other closets that remain untouched when we avoid focusing on ourselves by always pointing the camera at the ‘other’. In order to counteract this tendency, I followed Patricia Hill Collins’ (2009: 10) reflections about ‘reconciling what we have been trained to see as opposites, a reconciliation signaled by my inserting myself in the text’. As a non-trans person, I located my gender and my sexualised self in this process as a conscious standpoint, by analysing my relationship to participants’ experiences and by reflecting on how I reacted to and negotiated my way within the gender transition discourse. I focused on questions that as a human I could relate to and which felt ‘universal’, such as searching for an identity, finding family, and making sense of the safeness and personal burden of any gender variant. My approach to representation endeavoured not to extract transgender people from their family or reduce them merely to a gender and sexual identity. I analysed the heteronormative family as a space where gender differences take place. However, my research was open to all possibilities of different types of family (Weston, 1997). Here, the family was the context/frame and the lens with which the participants negotiated their relationships within their domestic space, and by extension, their relationships to the outside world.

1.2 I wouldn’t photograph ‘strangers’

Seven years ago, I was unfamiliar with any academic feminist or gender theory and I did not even know that gender studies, queer theory or trans discourse existed. However, in my everyday interactions, I was inhabiting the same spaces as people who were discriminated against and rejected within society and within their family, simply because of how they were relating to their body, their gender and their sexuality. This was not a matter of empathy with trans people, as in Nan Goldin’s *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1989), which I read in 2006; these people were friends, family members, former students, classmates and neighbours. They were people close to me, because ‘I wouldn’t photograph “strangers”’ (Goldin, 2009). If I have to claim any source of ‘political energy’, it comes from these encounters and the ways in which they challenged my everyday life (Pirelli, 2009). Therefore, this thesis is the result and a continuation of a journey that began in Havana, Cuba in 2002 when I took my first photographs of non-binary people. I remember that at the time the biggest obstacle was finding an intimate space for the encounters, in which to feel relaxed and safe. Due to constant discrimination, that space was often not in my friends’ natal family homes.

Those first photographs reflected the constrained and limited spaces encountered, with the fear of censorship implicit in most of the images. The images were meant to be a happy depiction of my friends' own relation with their bodies. However, they depicted testimonies of 'isolated people', rejected by their family and society because of the prejudice toward their gender orientation. Reflecting on those photographs, it seems that I had psychological expectations at the time of how the images should look. There were the technical aspects, such as the state of my Zenit camera; I was using expired 35mm Kodak Kodacolor films that might be ruined during development. But as well as checking whether I had got the shot, there was also an urgency to see if the *final product*, my friends' photographs, contained only their 'real' gender and not traces of their 'unwanted sex'. Looking back at these portraits, it appears that I wanted to see whether my friends could *be read* as the gender they were and felt inside. Although these were pictures about those closest to me, at that moment, consciously or not, I framed them using a stereotypical heteronormative and gendered lens. I was trying to make sense of my friends' gender identities by placing their femininity and masculinity as opposites. The 'best' shots were those that highlighted traits that, at the time, were traditionally thought to be typical of women, in a Western culture, such as longer hair, a narrow waist, no facial hair, etc. At that time, I did not have any friends who were trans men. Although I gained some insights into issues of gender and sexualities through these personal connections, I did not come to an understanding of what it 'meant' to be a transgender person. These gendered body encounters and daily lived experiences prompted me to question those spaces where transitioning gender was happening. This thesis is my opportunity to value this experimental perspective by turning it into a more academic form of knowledge. However, these two forms of knowledge (experimental practice and academic knowledge) are not mutually exclusive and in this sense this separation is artificial?

1.3 The closet

The epistemology of the closet has been inexhaustively productive of modern Western culture and History, ... while that may be reason enough for taking it as a subject of interrogation, it should not be reason enough for focusing scrutiny on those who inhabit the closet (Sedgwick, 1990: 68-69)

My visual ethnographic work focuses on the epistemology of *the closet* as an important feature to explore in the visual representation of the queer family. I believe that everyone is in one closet or another. Through writing or through personal life experiences, I have encountered the metaphor of the closet many times. But it was in Cuba, and approximately thirty years ago, where I first heard the phrase ‘salir del closet’ (‘coming out’) and, since then, like many other people, I have used it almost automatically in reference to people coming out as gay or lesbian. I was one of those people who thought that the closet existed only to protect gay and lesbian people from discrimination and as such I took it for granted. Even though the meaning of the closet has changed over time, it still focuses on a dual sense of claiming a lesbian or gay identity for oneself and communicating that identity to others (Weston, 1997). I never questioned who the closet benefited until I encountered the work of Eve Sedgwick (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 1990) from which I learned that although the closet often serves gay men and lesbians as a protection against violence, the institutionalisation of the closet is a heteronormative mechanism that controls sexual and gender identities. Sedgwick was one of the few writers at that time to refer to the way in which heterosexual culture’s intimate space is conveniently excluded from the analysis of the closet. Yet her analysis considers the act of ‘coming out’ only from the standpoint of the gender binary and as a personal choice to enter or leave the closet, which she refers to as ‘*a degree of discretion*’ (Sedgwick, 1990: 68-69 original emphasis). I would argue that this degree of discretion is not an option when the stigmatised individual is a transgender person. Coming ‘in or out’ of the closet is more complex, if not impossible, as trans people’s sexuality becomes more visible and is questioned constantly because of its entanglement with the transitioning of gender identity. My aim is not to analyse the coming out of the singular subject inhabiting the closet, but rather to explore the family dynamic once everyone is ‘out’. What is challenged and why? What is reproduced? What is claimed back?

My work is not focused on the individual closets of the differently perceived gendered subjects, but it involves the closets of their family members, the Cuban State and my own closet as a researcher. Here I refer to ‘family’ as any formation in which there is a ‘deep and permanent sense of obligation between individuals through hard and good times’, (Alibhai-Brown, 2000) and also as a cultural institution that can be both enabling and constraining. The expectations and obligations created by traditional conceptual

frameworks of the family often lead to its fragmentation. One of these is the imposition of gender roles on how the self is performed, which generates discrimination when this self contradicts the ‘heteronormative framework’ as set up within familial relationships (Whittle, 2006). In these terms, opening the closet, as it were, is about interrogating everyone, including the heterosexist gendered subjects. In doing this, I point my lens at the idea that the transgender subject is not a singular entity, but is best understood as a ‘dividual’ a connected network of relationships wherein trans experience might be conceived.

For the purpose of framing my creative practice I used Sedgwick’s argument about the many possibilities around and outside the closet. This draws my attention to the changes that need to occur as part of the coming-out process. Putting everyone in the frame for interrogation in relation to the closet opens up space for analysis and challenges heterosexual identities around the closets. This is why the symbolic representation of the closet was not only a key motif in the process of creating this family portrait, but the reason behind my chosen frames and the way in which these images were framed or unframed. Also, my choices about gallery spaces for exhibiting and other forms of dissemination were also contingent upon the many closets I encountered during my research. I will come back to this point in Chapter 6.

In this visual project, the metaphor of the closet is explored through the visual representation of the family. Transgender experiences are part of the analyses of changing family and social relationships (Hines, 2006). For this, I transferred Sedgwick’s reflection on minoritising/universalising views onto the subject of transgender and family. The “minoritising view” sees the homo/heterosexual definition as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority, while the “universalising” approach locates sexuality as “an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities” (Sedgwick, 1990: 8). Like Sedgwick, my intention is not to validate one view or the other but rather to acknowledge the complexity in which they coexist. Therefore, while gender transition is an experience that is related to only a specific section of the whole population (minoritising view), gender as a social category concerns everyone, consciously or not (universalising). Trans people have gender, in the same way as cisgender people do, and while transitioning does not happen to everyone

it has an impact on people's lives, including in the seemingly heteronormative family. Also, confining the term 'normal family' to the heterosexual/non-binary household also constitutes a minoritising discourse, as does linking the term 'queer family' to only a lesbian/gay domestic setting. In this sense, families can also be minoritised and universalised within gender and sexuality. In this sense, the research findings suggest the apparently straight/hetero family as a space for sexual and gender difference. It is about exploring the omnipresent 'closets' that keep the transgender body out of the family portrait. The closet called society, and more particularly the one called family, also need to be opened and their members confronted with their own fears and prejudices. By doing that, closed (queer) closets in Cuba can be opened.

1.4 The Cuban context

The 1959 Cuban Revolution called upon men and women to participate fully in the paid workforce and in other tasks for the construction of socialism. The Revolution nationalised everything, including the family. Parenting was another role assumed by the State. Ernesto Guevara refers to this sacrifice of the family for the Revolution:

The leaders of the Revolution have children, who since their first babblings, don't learn to name their father; women that must be part of the general sacrifice of their lives to bring the Revolution to its destiny; the circle of friends corresponds strictly to the circle of revolutionary comrades. There is no life outside of the Revolution (Guevara, 1965).

This concept was tied to a model of traditional masculinity, in which the true revolutionary and the category of the 'true man' were non-negotiable parts of the new revolutionary subjectivity. As Abel Sierra Madero (2014) states, the concept of the 'New Man' offered revolutionary nationalism the ideal framework through which to intervene in family life. For Hamilton (2012) and de Rivera (1992), this 'New Man' narrative is depicted as a love story, an emotional event that implies total commitment based on deep passion for the ideals of the Revolution. The early rhetoric and representation of the 1959 Cuban Revolution imagined the revolutionary subject as gender normative, ideologically Marxist, heterosexual and atheist. All those who differed from patriarchal heteronormativity and gender binaries were called homosexuals (at that time both lesbian and transgender identities remained unnamed and invisible), and were considered to be deviants and a threat to the Revolution. In

1965 Fidel Castro himself stated: ‘We can’t come to believe that a homosexual might meet the conditions and requirements of conduct that would allow us to consider him a true revolutionary’. These ideals generated a State homophobia that lasted several decades. The creation of a political other also contributed to the creation of new spaces of exclusion and discrimination within the Cuban family. However, the traditional intolerance of sexual diversity in this socialist Caribbean island nation cannot be attributed solely to State authoritarianism.

Homophobia/transphobia is a historical phenomenon that survived the process of decolonisation and involves a broader history and geography of colonial inheritance. So, the struggle with the politics of memory is not only, or even primarily, with the revolutionary Cuban State but with the remaining foundations of the heteropatriarchal society that was implanted in Cuba. In this sense, while I point out some of the contradictions in the role of the State in relation to the family, especially families with transgender people, my intention is not to carry out an evaluation of the failures and successes of government policy but instead to explore how the Cuban State and its revolutionary historical discourses affect the lives of the narrators. After all, while ‘Oral history is not necessarily an instrument for change... Still it can be used to change the focus of history itself... and open up new areas of inquiry’ (Thompson, 1978: 25-35).

As public figures, both Mariela and Fidel Castro have spoken about the official repression of homosexuality and different gender identities in Cuba at the end of the 1960s and during the 70s. ‘Yes’, Fidel Castro stated, ‘I’m responsible for the persecution of homosexuals that existed in Cuba... they were moments of great injustice’ (Castro, 2014). Subsequent State acknowledgement and apology via certain media outlets has begun a healing process through a series of changes and strategies that erase key pages of history, such as those related to the UMAP (Military Units to Aid Production), from collective memory (Sierra Madero, 2014). However, the official analysis has not included the impact of these mistakes on the subjectivities of everyone involved. These memories remain part of many hidden and silenced subjects in Cuban family and political life. There are still closed doors and sensitive topics. For some people, these episodes are not part of their memories, but for those who were born before the 1970s they are still very much present. For some of us, our childhood brings

about memories of egalitarian benefits, hymns and songs of happy times. Yet for many others, this same past is a place to which they never wish to return. It might be because ‘One group’s need to remember is often “grist” for another’s desire to forget’ (Lustiger Thaler, 1996: 190). This was another aspect of the closet and it was intertwined with the iteration of the gender and political normative of that time. In this sense, the closet was also a space in which ‘others’ were placed and ‘forgotten’ about within heteronormative life-worlds.

Today the Cuban National Assembly is considered to be the most progressive legislature in Latin America for its laws on gay and transsexual rights. Gay pride events now occur annually, while the State sponsors anti-homophobia campaigns and the government provides sex change surgery without charge for qualifying Cuban citizens, which has a positive effect on many people (Acosta, 2016). This sexual revolution has occurred under the leadership of Mariela Castro, the daughter of President Raúl Castro and the late revolutionary feminist Vilma Espín, who was the long-time president of the Cuban Women’s Federation. Mariela Castro directs the National Sex Education Center (CENESEX), edits its journal, *Sexología y Sociedad*, and chairs the National Commission of Comprehensive Attention to Transsexual People.

1.5 About Transgender

“Trans phenomena are the new queer chic; our lives have been appropriated to demonstrate the theories of gender performativity” (Rubin 1998:276)

As a gender non-conforming person, I have to admit that my initial encounters with the spaces in which transgender theories were discussed tended to be problematic. In all of these spaces I felt invaded by the same questions: Who am I? Which category should I be wearing while inhabiting those spaces? Would it be enough to say I am a person whose life has also been affected by gender and gender categorisation? Do I qualify to speak about a transgender person? My answer was no, I am not authorised to speak about other people’s lives, and even less so without locating myself in relation to their experiences. It took me nearly three years to understand that my research was not only about transgender people, but about how the experience of gender transitioning affects everyone.

I assumed that, like everyone else, I was taking part (consciously or not) in spaces where gender transitioning was happening. It was my understanding that, like myself, the participants in this project were not doing politics with their bodies, nor aspiring to transgress gender norms. They were trying to live their lives as anyone else would, and in many cases struggling simply to survive. I realised, therefore, that if I wanted to challenge the heterosexual patriarchal roots of gender I had to put everyone in the frame. I had to reflect on how we respond as social beings in negotiating our gendered selves in the spaces where transitioning takes place. Why should our bodies feel either challenged and insecure, or just safe, when we are inhabiting gender transitioning zones?

The above arguments shaped my visual methodology and the theoretical research approach of this thesis. By putting everyone in the frame I am matching a wider conceptual argument about the nature of transitioning. This aspect of representation of the family within transitioning has not been given much attention – how everyone's lives are affected by gender. My interest in transgender is not as a 'theoretical category' but as the social context of gender transitioning (Hines, 2006). This research is an account of transitioning as a process that affects everyone and not only the trans person (Gonzalez-Polledo, 2017). I set out to visually explore issues around the framing and representation of family within transitioning gender experiences, through the case study of eight Cuban families. I used photography as a creative methodology to examine the individual and collective experience of transitioning within a theoretical framework of knowledge. Although my research was not directly addressing the biological or historical construction of gender or sexuality in terms of biomedical or archival paradigms, it took place against the background of these concerns, as the visual ethnographic research was aimed at exploring the everyday dimensions of families with transgender experiences in their domestic interior.

For this project, and as a theoretical starting point, I embraced Halberstam's approach to transgender as a term for:

...the cross-identification experiences of people who may not accept the protocols and strictures of transsexuality. Such people understand cross-

identification as a crucial part of their gendered self but they may pick and choose among the options of body modification, social presentation and legal recognition available to them (Halberstam, 1998:14).

Also, my approach to gender resonates with Kate Bornstein (1994) in relation to a more fluid way of interpreting the trans space, as a journey rather than a destination. Just as for Bornstein, for me there are many possibilities of gender and they exist within any length of time. While this understanding of the ambiguity and fluidity of gender was central to the selection criteria used for the research participants, the focus of my study was on trans subjectivities and how these were negotiated within intimate spaces such as the family (Hines, 2010), on people whose daily lives continue to be affected by the enforcement of rigid gender and sex systems (Namaste, 1996: 183).

1.6 Justification

Recently, new bodies of work on transgender research have moved from focusing only on the transgender ‘community’ to incorporating family members, friends and significant others in relation to the experience of gender transition (Hines, 2010; Pfeffer, 2010). These critical and reflective studies on kinship and friendship, while addressing the importance of ‘support and care’ from parents and other family members, still place the transgender person as the ‘other’, as the person ‘whose transition led to fractured relationships with their family of origin’ (Pfeffer, 2010). This project intended to place the heteronormative family at the centre of this conversation, not as a starting point for gender correction but by queering it (Warner, 1993). It includes the responsibility and role of each family member in that fragmentation. I wanted to confront the binary subject with their own gendered life and its ‘*apparent optionality*’ (Goffman, 2017: 69-77). I did that through a process of listening to the participants’ families’ stories and by putting *everyone in the physical and psychological frame kept* for transgender people. This study suggests that the transition of gender is not a one-person process. The trans person is not someone to be looked after, understood and accepted, but an equal part of the gendered family dynamic. So, if the trans subject is positioned as a ‘trigger’ for family fragmentation, how is its physical body visually framed in relation to the binary one? In this study, the creative process is not used to represent transgender life; rather it is an exploration of how creative works ‘can reach people in a way that sometimes you can’t by other means’ (Davidmann, 2017). Therefore, the main contribution of my work

is in reintroducing the transgender subject into the discussion of families within the context of the Cuban Revolution. ‘Families and intimate networks also work to constrain and regulate gendered subjectivities’ (Hines, 2006b: 609).

1.7 Family Representation

Photographs, their meaning and the way they are produced, disseminated and consumed are changing every day because of new technologies and platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. However, despite domestic narratives becoming part of a more public global discourse, family photographs continue to function as a tool that depicts family life and acts as an aid in relation to families’ memories. This project adds to the cultural politics of family photography because it not only ‘illustrates families, but also shapes the very idea of family in the contexts of gender, and sexuality’¹. Contemporary depictions of family have evolved and new visual works are now including same sex couples and non-gender binary people. However, I argue that this visibility does not necessarily incorporate the non-heteronormative subject into the nuclear family unit. Rather, it is still ‘othering’ it, by positioning *them* as a ‘particular type of family’, different from the ‘normal family’. Paradoxically, while this new representation of families might challenge family heteronormativity, its progressive lens still focuses mostly on couples and around the institution of marriage and children. In this sense, the boundaries between the queer family and the nuclear family are becoming blurry. I used photography to visually explore the boundary between the queer and the nuclear family. This thesis is intended to add a new insight, by situating the heteronormative family space as a significant site from which to address the dynamics of gender transition, and queer family spaces. Based on this analysis and within the process of creating new family portraits, this project added a new angle by pointing out the camera to each member of the family. Despite Cuba’s positive changes regarding transgender people, their visual representation is still around their being a sexual and gender ‘minority’ and does not include an analysis of trans subjectivities or their relationship with their family.

¹ Reframing Family Photography Conference. 21-23 September, 2017 in Toronto, ON <http://familycameranetwork.org/visual-stories/2017/11/1/reframing-family-photography-conference>. accessed on November 03, 2017.

1.8 Research aims and defining questions

The research questions are intended to explore how the transitioning process opens up spaces for families to reflect on their own gender subjectivities and assumptions, whether consciously or unconsciously; I was interested in what impact this might have on the ways in which family members react to, negotiate and readjust to the trans person's new gender identity. My research considers whether transgender people and their families make choices from a position of strength and empowerment, from a sense of being constrained about the choices they are able to make or from both of these. It also considers other motivations and influences too, as evidenced by their testimonies in Chapter 4. It also analyses the changes brought about in contemporary Cuba by the National Centre for Sex Education (CENESEX). The project seeks to answer the following research question:

How does the reproduction of gender roles influence the subjectivities of transgender individuals and their families in Cuba, once they are either accepted or rejected, reincorporated or not, into the social-family nucleus? How do images of transgender people challenge traditional patriarchal perceptions of gender and create new forms of representation within the Cuban family? Because of Cuba's distinctive socio-economic and political situation, the experiences of transgender people and their families cannot be investigated in isolation from the wider context. Therefore, close attention to the following questions is mandatory:

How do social changes, associated with the sexual revolution and the opening up of the economy in Cuba, create new spaces of expression and action for queer identities within a socialist, yet globalised, context? How do creative and visual participatory research projects/studies and the knowledge produced by them, contribute to generating new spaces for gender difference within the seemingly heterosexual family?

1.9 Methodology

This interdisciplinary approach allowed me to use creative practice to explore and represent family dynamics and issues of transgender representation beyond what Pink (2009) refers to as 'sensory turn' in ethnographical research. I employed photography as a creative methodology to explore the individual and collective experience of transition between families' members. I looked into conflicts around gender roles and social experiences at home and the life-choices these dictate. Chapter 3 will provide more

detailed information about the participants and the way in which the fieldwork was conducted. The mixed repertoire of visual ethnographic methods involved was (see Appendix 5):

- An ethnographic collaborative photographic project, reflecting the experience of gender transitioning in the family.
- Oral histories to enable research participants to express, revealingly, the complexities that characterise life in contemporary Cuba and, more importantly, their thoughts on? the question of gender, sexuality and the Revolution. This facilitated a comparative historical exploration of transgender people's oral histories within the socialist context (from 1959 to the present day), before and during the sexual revolution that started in the 1990s. This has shed light on how current social and political changes are affecting transgender people and their families. For this purpose, I collaborated with transgender individuals and their family members who belonged to the generations that entered adulthood in the 21st century. Therefore, the age range of my informants was from 25 to 80.
- Making new documentary visual representations and examining pre-existing archive materials that I have produced and collected for the past 13 years, including photographs, personal letters and cassettes. Importantly, in the context of taking family portraits, the research process also involved the creation of new images through a participatory approach.

Overall, this methodology was intended to combine the broader historical perspective with a small closet – the family one. It will offer an intimate perspective on changes in the participants' lives, as told through objects, personal possessions, oral history and visual narratives. Also, the fact that I never had any family pictures at all influenced my relationship with photographs, specifically my interest in family albums. This might explain my fascination with other people's family photographs, mostly those of people of my generation. In Chapter 3, I will refer to my own personal relationship with domestic photographs.

Chapter 2. Behind my theoretical approach

While writing this chapter I was thinking about the reasons behind my chosen literature. I understood that selecting my theoretical framework was not only about situating my theoretical debate regarding family and gender transitioning across global feminist, queer and gender theories or transfeminism debates. It was also about positioning these discussions in relation to the research participants' life experiences, as well as my own. Consequently, I was confronted with the need to contextualise my knowledge production process within historical political contexts and in institutional terms (Mohanty, 1984). I also tried to acknowledge the role of the colonial past in framing gender and sexuality in the colonised countries, as colonial ruling comes into being by mobilising gendered and sexual power (Morgensen, 2012; Lugones, 2008). This might explain why the majority of the theories and the critical literature about gender and sexuality was initially produced and consumed within a post-colonial context and why the epistemic privilege of gender theory frequently relies on Western literature (Lugones, 2008). This reflection led me to question the extent to which I could decolonise my own critical review, except that I recognised that this examination would probably lead me to another dissertation. Still, I started by acknowledging and re-locating my colonised past in this critical discussion and placing Latin American and Caribbean feminist theorists and their queer anthropology work not as subordinate forms of epistemic theory, but as central to my analysis of gender and sexuality in Cuba and in relation to significant Western work (Lugones, 2007; 2010; Anzaldúa, 2015).

As a researcher, my approach to the increasingly global debate in the field of transgender studies is parallel to Eve Sedgwick's thoughts on 'reparative reading' and Chandra Mohanty's advocacy for 'emancipatory knowledge'. In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Sedgwick challenged theorists to move beyond 'splitting and dualistic thinking' and to accept all the possibilities as a space for 'creativity and change' (Sedgwick, 2003). As in *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practising Solidarity*, (Mohanty, 2003) I was open to those theories and methodologies that I found revealing in relation to the questions I sought to examine, 'but within a framework of solidarity and shared values' (: 502). This approach was also important in reflecting and making sense of the current discussion on

family and gender transition by allowing a ‘reconciliation with what we have been trained to see as opposites’ (Hill Collins, 2009). This helped me to search for different methods and tools and to reflect on how to negotiate them, applied or not to the context in which this research’s life stories took, and are still taking, place, and drew me to literary studies that link queerness to memory, places, emotion, caring and affects (Borneman, 1997).

2.1 Critical Review

Esther Newton’s book, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1972), was one of the first-hand ethnographic works that helped me to understand the idea of gender as a performance, specifically, the notion of performance that ‘accounts for the extreme’ gender and sexual ‘stigmatised group’. Her fieldwork marks the evolution of an anthropological discourse concerning gender and sexuality as performed in cross-cultural contexts, as it emerged within the discipline in the late 1980s and 1990s, following Brennan (2007) and others, who pushed beyond staid boundaries to offer new ethnographies of gender and sexuality.

Within feminist and queer studies, and beneficial to this research, were current debates about the involuntary performance of gender, along with sex and sexuality interpreted as responses to regulatory discourse (Butler, 2004; 2006; Halberstam, 1998; 2005; Preciado, 2002), Goffman (2017) on gender display and Mattilda (2006), Serano (2007) Bornstein (1994) and Feinberg (1998) on heteronormative discourses that reduce transgender identities. Those debates challenge the idea that genders are symmetrical. The works of Lagarde (2005), Lugones (2008) and Anzaldúa (2015) help to locate my research in relation to the colonial past of gender and sexuality. They also play in the background of my research on the ways in which racial identities, social class backgrounds and immigration histories affect the experience of transgender. Also, Norma Guillard (2009) and Julio César Gonzalez Pagés’ (2011) research on masculinity in Cuba, and Sierra Madero (2006; 2014) proposes the formulation of alternative histories to those already established. Ethnographical research on contemporary sexual life in Cuba by Carrie Hamilton (2012) and Jafari Allen (2011; 2012) likewise provided me with a valuable account of the history of sexuality on the Caribbean island since 1959 and crucial observations and insights on sexual subjectivities in Cuba and Latin America.

The ethnographic visual component of my research draws upon Sara Pink's study (2001) of the roles of photography and video in ethnographic research, and Freund and Thomson's essay (2013) collection explores the intersection of photographs and oral history interviews. Also central to my research was the ethnographic work of Rooke (2009; 2010), Stryker (2009); Stryker, Aizura (2013) and Boyce and Hajra (2011), whose practice explores sexual subjectivity through the use of collaborative photography. Hines (2006), Namaste (1996) and Sanger (2008) explore and understand trans subjectivities and how they are culturally and socially contingent. Crucial to my exploration of family was the significance of feeling and emotions. Queer is, after all, connected to emotions as much as it is a body of theory (Rooke, 2010) ; Sedgwick, 2003). Stryker (2005) analyses the visibility of trans people's bodily surface. The work of Davidmann (2017) in relation to the role of images in reaching and educating audiences, Del Grace Volcano's (1990) observation about the 'need to narrate the transitivity of gender to a diverse audience and Halberstam (2015) on the notion of queer photography as 'unreadable', helped me to understand the complexity of representing the transgender body. My visual work is beyond photographs of 'before and after' ?hormones and surgery; rather it is focused on multiple aspects of trans people's daily lives and in relation to family dynamics. My formulation is also akin to that of Rooke: 'from what a transgender looks like to what a transgender looks at'². My photographs, like Boyce and Hajra's (2011) work in India, were taken from participants' viewpoints and in relation to their own personal stories. Boyce and Hajra and Rooke's works on gendered and sexual subjectivities locate my study in relation to 'day-to-day experiences', in finding ways to evidence the impact of creativity, and the role of artists as agency for social change. Also central to my research has been the 'Polk Street: Lives in Transition' project that interpreted original oral histories in relation to contemporary neighbourhood change and conflict. It outlines how history is an especially valuable resource for non-heteronormative discourse³. Because my work will look at a history of relationships between transgender people and their families in Cuba from the 1970s to the present, these projects add to my work tips on how to

² 'From what a Lesbian looks like to what a Lesbian looks at...' as part of a panel on the ethics of looking and seeing: researching, writing and teaching with images. Visual Methods Conference, University of Leeds, September 2009.

³ 'Polk Street Lives in Transition' (2010) interpreted more than 70 original oral histories in relation to contemporary neighbourhood change and conflict. <https://campuspress.yale.edu/jplaster/oral-historyaudio/>.

combine oral histories with archival knowledge and how to use visual ethnographic practice to document gendered subjectivities.

The creative part of this thesis – the exhibition/installation and my photobook – was in line with Friend's *No Place Like Home* (1999) use of image and text to enable the 'subjects?' to speak for themselves and to 'disrupt the objectification that can accompany photographic portraiture'⁴. The section about family photographs in Chapter 6 gained from Val Williams' *Who's Looking at the Family?* curating group show at the Barbican. The show helped to critically analyse the many ways of representing families by using new and found domestic photographs, specifically the colour images in Nick Waplington's work (*Living room series* and *Life with the Jewish settlers in the Occupied Territories*) and also Richard Billingham's *Ray's a Laugh* family photographs, for their 'complex' relation with their subject. Central to my analysis on the absence of a family album in the participants' lives and in my own experience were the works of Marianne Hirsch's *Familiar Gaze* (1999), which explore the power of family photographs in shaping personal memories and social conventions, and Spence's *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography* (2000), which offers accounts of how problematic familial experiences can be examined through photography. Holland's *Family Albums* (1991) helped me to examine my own earlier experiences and my connection with photography and memory. Likewise, Annette Kuhn's *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (1995) and Barthes' *Winter Garden's Photographs* (1981) were essential to the way I had addressed the absence of family photographs in my research. In terms of family politics and representation, *Issue 20, Photoworks* (2003) was central to my exploration of the many possibilities of visually representing the family and the private sharing of these family photos.

2.2 On terms and categorisation

My relatively recent arrival in the English-speaking world of gender and queer theory made it difficult for me to come to terms with much of the language used in gender and sexuality discourses. From my position, it felt as if my particular perspective was being drawn into a process of mainstream appropriation rather than it being a natural and self-reflective process. Following this, I navigated through my research with great care not

⁴ <http://www.melaniefriend.com/noplacelikehome/>

to enforce any of the sexual or gender identity categories produced by the global machinery of gender categorisation (Butler, 1990; Doan, 2013; Stryker). I believe that the use of gender terminologies is problematic, since even within the same cultural context they cannot reflect all of the possibilities of being related to gender and sexuality. These categorisations, while used to define others, usually frame sexual and gender possibilities in a very limited way, which marginalises and pathologises the subject and their agency. However, I also agree that we cannot escape from identity classifications: firstly because of how they structure social power relations and secondly because the ability to speak difference or sameness of any kind, even without these power relations, structures language and meaning. Also, and in line with Halberstam (1999), I understand categories as a means of creating places for acts, as identities and ways of being that ‘otherwise continue to be unnamable’.⁵

In this thesis, I only use terms that are recognisable in the specific local context in which my thesis is located and, even more importantly, this is the terminology used by the people whose experience of gender transition is explored through this project. I use pronouns such as she, he, her and his, because they were the terms used by the research participants to identify themselves while revealing their/our day-to-day gendered lives. However, I personally do not add any subjective connotations to these specific words. Quoting Mohanty, ‘I used the terms with full knowledge of their limitations, suggesting a critical and heuristic rather than non-questioning use of the terms’ (Mohanty, 2003: 501). Additionally, for most of the participants, gender identity is still conflated and associated with homosexuality. Lesbian, gay and trans are used indistinctively and only a few people self-identified as transgender, and often only after sex reassignment surgery. Following their sex reassignment surgery, they self-identified either as hombre o mujer (man or woman). Most often, people refer to them by using expressions such as, ‘la que antes era un hombre’ (the woman who used to be man) or ‘el que antes era una mujer’ (the man who used to be a woman). For this research, I was using transsexual and transgender as terminologies in ‘relation to each other rather than in relation to a hegemonic medical discourse’ (Halberstam, 1998: 54). Additionally, I do not use the term queer as a synonym or substitute for LGBT, but as a space for multiple

⁵ See Halberstam (1999) *Masculinity Without Men*: Annamarie Jagose interviews Judith Halberstam About Her Latest Book, *Female Masculinity*
<https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/1999/04/01/masculinity-without-men-annamarie-jagose-interviews-judith-halberstam-about-her-latest>

possibilities around race, gender and sexual, or other social, identities. These critical theories and terms are explored within the thesis chapters as part of the process of producing the family portraits.

Chapter 3 Methodology and fieldwork context

Following the formulation of the philosopher Edward Casey (1997 about place and place making, I see family as event (Casey, 1997), a space that is constantly being recreated (Pink, 2009) and as an ideological sign system (Spence, 1988). For this project, I refer to home as the physical place where these events are taking place, as what Gaston Bachelard (1975) calls an inhabited domestic space, imprinted with people's earliest memories. In contemporary Cuba, the economic situation (which varies even within the same house) means that the majority of households are not necessarily made up of people with kinship or affinities based upon affection, or shared moral, religious or political beliefs. It is a scenario in which several generations of actors happen to meet and then play out their historical role (Goffman, 1973). They play characters who are assimilating and negotiating their cultural, political, religious and gender identities. On this stage, they are portraying the complexities, wisdom and errors of Cuban home life. Cuban houses are both closed and open spaces, where women are still responsible for housework, despite egalitarian statements in the Cuban constitution and the principles established in the 1975 Family Code. This study was not ultimately concerned with the study of the family as an institution, but rather with the welfare of the people who live within it or who once made up the family. My aim was to shed light on those spaces where the experience of transitioning gender has been framed as the 'principal' factor in the fragmentation of the Cuban family. It is not primarily about being transgender or about sexuality, but about how the experience of gender transitioning affects everyone. This exploration of gender and sexuality within the Cuban family preconditions an account of its historical relationship with the Cuban State, something that is still a sensitive topic. Chapter 4 is dedicated to exploring this topic in more detail.

3.1 Fieldwork

The fieldwork period was from 8 July to 9 September, 2014 and 11 December to 13 January, 2017. The locations were the cities of Havana and Matanzas in Cuba. I focused on questions that I can relate to as a human being and that feel ‘universal’, such as the search for identity and family, and the effort to make sense of the self within and beyond patriarchal definitions of gender and sexuality (see Appendices 4 and 5). The research’s methodological process considered a variety of physical and subjective contexts, including the diverse ways in which gender transition is experienced, the family context and the connection with its past, and researcher negotiation with participants. I chose not to describe the participants in relation to their race, social background or religion because this makes no differences to me in terms of love and the need to belong to any family institution. As suggested by Pink (2004), the methods used were guided by the questions I asked and they are linked, where possible or relevant, to existing theory.

The participants

For this project, I worked with eight families, two of whom I had already developed strong links with over the years and who had participated in my 2002 photographic project. This selection of former participants and others I already knew enabled continuity in understanding transgender people and their families at different stages of their personal, social and political transitions over time. I chose a small sample because the level of intimacy required to explore any domestic spaces added to the difficulty in examining sensitive topics such as family, gender and sexuality within the Cuban Revolution. Between 2013 and 2016 in Havana and Matanzas, I interviewed thirty-three family members whose ages ranged from twenty-five to eighty years old, which enabled a longitudinal perspective and a long-term view of subtle transformations in gender and sexuality in Cuba. It also created an intimate space in which to explore the construction of family and memory through photography. These families came from different economic and social circumstances, which is reflected in their standards of living.

The interviews took place in the families’ own homes, which, as I mentioned earlier, can now be considered safe and private spaces. As I was conducting research among people who had previously faced discrimination because of the stigma associated with

transgender or gender non-conforming identities, while conducting the interviews I tried to develop an understanding that drew on extensive knowledge of the participants' social and living conditions. Finding new participants was not easy and the snowball technique of networking with contacts was useful. Interviewees were asked to refer to any anecdote about how an experience of gender transition might affect them personally, as individuals, brothers, sons, daughters, mothers, uncles, fathers or other family members. Some participants were reluctant to share personal life stories because of their subjective difficulty in separating their own lives from the history of the Revolution, and the fear that others might interpret their failures and frustrations as failures of the Revolution. This was evidenced during the recruitment process, when some transsexual people who had already undergone surgical therapy expressed conflicting feelings and did not want to be interviewed. For some this was because of their loyalty to CENESEX, for others because they were still awaiting new identity cards and preferred to avoid any possible problems.⁶ I discussed confidentiality with participants, and received their informed consent. Interestingly, they did not want to use pseudonyms, because they wanted to have their voices heard, and be the protagonists of their own stories. The main protagonists of this project are the transgender participants who invited me into their homes and showed me new ways to frame and un-frame transgender experiences and family stories. Their names are (in order of appearance in the text): Gillian, Yenny, Henry, Pollito, Juany, Gala, Yury, Oraida, Melody and Yordanka (see **Figure 1**).

Selection criteria

For more than twenty years I have been friends with Ariel, who became the gatekeeper for this research. He has worked with me ever since my first project in 2002. I met him when he was a student of mine at the Polytechnical School, alongside another transgender research participant, Gillian, who was, and still is, his neighbour and a mutual friend. Acknowledging the complexity of representing others helped me to design the selection process for the transgender participants and their family members. I was aware that I might be making assumptions or reproducing stereotypes in relation to the selection (or not) of the transgender research participants. Ariel and I agreed that within the main subjective eligibility criteria

⁶ The formalities begin with an ordinary process in the Civil Section of the Municipal Court. The sentence issued in the court allows them to proceed? to the Civil Registry, where changes of gender and name are made, and a new birth certificate is issued. A visit to the identity card offices is needed to formalise the change and a new identification document is then issued. See www.juventudrebelde.cu/cuba/2014-06-12/el-carne-tal-como-soy/?page=2&#comment

(people from our ‘political’ generation, with ages ranging from 25 to 80, who wanted to share their family stories) we would also look for people anywhere across the spectrum of gender transition, not necessarily with a gender goal but in any state, place or pathway within their own gender transition. We were also interested in people who had some sort of connection with their family of origin, in order to explore the family’s journey as well, and to place their family emotions at the centre of the conversation. We intended to exclude underage people or those with mental health vulnerabilities because of my own ethical principles in relation to visual representation. I did not choose any particular family formation but rather those people who wanted to be part of the project, who defined and brought with them their own family composition. Since this research focuses on interviews with transgender individuals as family members and with their families, it was necessary to bring any family member or relative into the project. This arrangement made it possible to explore the memories and recollections of gender transitioning in relation to the family. In other words, it offered a route to understanding gender subjectivities that embody the present moment of transition, past recollections and aspirations for the future. Additionally, this approach enabled a historical analysis of the relationship between the State and the family in Cuba with regards to gender and sexuality.



Figure 1 Main research participants. Photo ©Olisam (2014-2016)

3.2 The application of research ethics

Throughout all stages of my fieldwork, my research adhered to the University of Sussex's ethical guidelines and also to my own sense of ethics. The participants were all literate adults. I discussed confidentiality with them, and achieved their informed consent, throughout the research process (see Appendix 3). However, they did not want to use pseudonyms, because they wanted to have their voices heard and be the protagonists of their own stories. I made sure that the participants were aware of the implications of my use of devices, photos and video files and that they were free to reject their use, in accordance with ASA guideline I-4. I made it clear to participants from the outset that any photos they themselves took would be returned to them, something I have already done. I have also given them copies of their family portraits.

I was aware of the need to engage with all the ethical research regulations. Even so, the contingent nature of this visual research project meant I had to identify and respond to unplanned ethical issues that arose during the fieldwork. Confidentiality was one ethical principle that I followed very closely in order to minimise any harm caused by the research process to any of the participants who entrusted their stories to me through oral history testimonies and visual images. I made sure not to disclose private or personal information without their consent, and any field notes, transcripts and video files were managed and stored in a safe and secure place during and after fieldwork, accessible only by me. The following account refers to one of the most difficult situations I faced:, an unforeseen encounter that intervened in and interrupted my planned journey. This narrative became intertwined in my research and in the domestic spaces of my participants and I use it to illustrate my ethical practices.

Intertwined histories, intertwined lives

It was in one of my participants' homes where I first met Maria and her child Rolando and heard their story. Unlike with the other participants, these are not their real names, and I have chosen to suppress any detailed references to their origins or extended family following my own sense of ethics. Maria was aware of my work and she wanted me to include seven-year-old Rolando's story. However, my other participants had been selected and consulted ahead of time and I had secured their consent to their stories

being told through the project. My first reaction was to ask Maria, ‘Are you sure?’ However, it was not really a question about her conviction, but a way of disguising my immediate negative response.

At first glance, the reasons behind my initial refusal were evident, considering the clear process I had followed to select participants, which took into account a minimum adult age limit of eighteen for the family members in gender transition. Since Rolando was a young child, his story would be told predominantly by his mother, which already created an ethical dilemma, that of a mother speaking for a child (Spivak, 2010). I found myself in a situation that opened up a series of complex questions with no foreseen responses. How would I disclose these circumstances, without creating further ethical complications? What was I to do with this information? What would I refuse to include? What part of this private story could be made public? Who should I protect, and from whom? Finally, in what ways would this disclosure enrich my research and, more importantly, the lives of my participants? Cox, McDonald (2013)

Maria

Maria told me that Rolando was born without any visible genitalia, and was urinating and evacuating through an aperture on one side of his small body. Everyone referred to Rolando as ‘hermaphrodite’, because, I assume, they conflated the absence of visible sexual organs with the existence of both in an intersex person. Rolando’s family is made up of his mother, and his three older siblings who I did not meet, and they were not included as a family in my research.

Sonia is a retired nurse from the state-funded William Soler Children’s Hospital in Havana. Her experience as a mother with a transgender daughter had a direct influence on Rolando’s life. When she met Maria and Rolando she was still working at the hospital. Maria brought Rolando to Havana at the age of one to have an operation. I was told by one of my participants that the doctors and nurses, including Sonia, were inclined in favour of constructing female genitalia, as this was considered to be less of a risk. However, Maria was unsure and Sonia’s intervention seems to have been a ‘decisive factor’ in supporting Maria’s doubts about the child’s gender assignment. Where everyone ‘saw a girl’, Maria’s own intuition, interpretative experience, and perhaps context, ‘saw a boy’ and a prospective man. The child I met in my participant’s

house, which was also Sonia's, was seven years old by then and had undergone seven surgical interventions, with three more remaining. However, Rolando looked happy and healthy. Everyone now treats the child as a boy, whose clothes, games, accessories and friends contribute to the confirmation and meaning of Rolando's boyhood.

No one knows what is going to happen, or if the 'right' decision was made. Rolando is a happy person today, so Maria's intuition may have been correct. Her son is accepted in this male body, and this may be because Rolando's identity is now expressed in accordance with others' expectations. Even while Rolando was clearly aware of the experience of bodily difference, and the health problems this caused, this child might not have been aware throughout most of the surgical process of the relationship between genitalia and gender assignment. The surgery responded to Rolando's need for genitalia for health reasons. It also appears to have responded to a collective need to understand how a body might 'work' physiologically without genitals and without a visible corporal gender identity. In the absence of a language beyond existing binaries, the construction of genitalia becomes a necessary, if unconscious, way of locating the child's social identity and belonging so that Rolando and the family are able to operate in understandable affective interrelationships.

Rolando's story was already known and discussed in the house, which was inhabited by three different families, and I was visiting there just as Rolando's process was unfolding. I became caught between Maria's urgency in wanting to tell me her child's story and my own urgency in wanting to understand my position and role at that very moment. I felt that there was a reason for the way in which we had all coincided in that place and time. It was not only a matter of intertwined stories and lives where gender transitioning was occurring. And even when I was not intending to visualise this account, it gave context and significance to the ways in which I was exploring the embodiment of gender. While I didn't examine the entirety of Maria and Rolando's story as a family, it enabled me to understand the weight and particular constructions of the gender discourse in the interrelationship with each of our bodies and between them. By defining the age limits of my visual representation, Rolando's story shaped my own sense of ethics and served as a standpoint for my other photographic choices. It makes me reflect on how complex decisions around gender are negotiated within the social

context of family. This experience helped me to frame the family in a more complex way, not as a fixed institution created by sex and gender but rather as a ‘gendered space’ created by family dynamics and interaction.

3.3 Visual memories

A central task of queer ethnography is writing and researching in a way that does justice to the ways that people live their gendered and sexual subjectivities with complexity (Rooke, 2010).

This section draws on Claudia Mitchell (2011) and on Sara Pink’s study (2001) of the roles of photography in ethnographic work, and Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson’s (2011) essay collection exploring the intersection of photographs and oral history interviews. In this sense, the ethnographic aspect of this research was not about collecting data from a local or different culture but rather ‘the process of creating and representing knowledge’ (Pink, 2009: 18) from my own experience as a researcher and in relation to the subject of the research. Photography was the main creative methodology I used to explore the individual and collective experiences of transition between family members. The process of creating these families’ portraits was guided by the dynamic of the oral history interviews. It was important for the fieldwork to bring transgender people into the project as members of families and include those they considered to be their close family and relatives. Everyone involved had a story to tell, and this could be expressed not only through words but also through photography, performances, writing, sewing and the arrangement of the domestic space.

Through using oral history methods, I could foreground emotions embedded within participants’ subjectivities as familial dynamics and interconnections surfaced. Group interviews can generate their own problems, particularly within a Cuban family setting, with people wanting to speak at the same time, or interrupting each other (Smith, 2016). However, having another family member present could also stimulate and help with recollection (Ritchie, 2003). During the interviews, the participants seemed confident and relaxed, because my relationship with them was not only as a researcher but as a friend and confidant who in many cases had a presence in their own histories and spaces of transition. My role as an insider-outsider, my similar background (born in Cuba, with the same generational, educational, political and historical background for thirty-six years), and my previous knowledge of several participants also presented me with the? space for an

affective and emotional encounter (Ahmed, 2004). It gave me, as a Cuban living abroad, the possibility to have space not only to talk – because we Cubans do that all the time – but to enjoy a familiar and intimate place, to sit down and remember, to nurse our wounds, and to have? healing and forgiving.

3.4 Reinventing the past through family photographs

Photographs, their meaning and the way there are produced, disseminated and consumed are changing every day because of new technologies and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media. These changes are having an impact on our relation to images and, as a consequence, the boundary between private and public photographs is becoming very blurred (Rose, 2010). However, even when domestic narratives are becoming part of a more public global discourse, family photographs continue to function as a tool to depict family life and as a memory aid. When I started this project in 2013, and as part of a paper I wrote at the time, I referred to how the fact that I did not have any family pictures at all influenced my relation to the present and shaped my domestic memories of the past. Having a family album also denotes those who do not have one and this might explain my fascination with other people's family photographs, mostly the domestic photographs of people of my generation.

This section contextualises and explores family photographs in relation to home, the family and gender in the period of the Cuban Revolution, through my own personal accounts and those of the research participants. It is also a critical reflection on how patriarchal concepts and practices of gender and sexuality were embedded and negotiated in Cuban state boarding schools known as *Becas*, the institutions that shaped my views from early childhood and where my path first crossed with some of the research participants. One of the aims of my research was to try to reframe these memories of my own through the participants' memories of their past, which coincide with my generation and that of my parents.

3.4.1 The absent photographs

Photographs provoke acts of memory recalling us to things, places, and people. They establish connections across time and space, including chains of association (Edwards, 2006: 121).

Early family photographs can become a source of knowledge through which to understand personal identity. Hirsch refers to photography as a family's main medium of self-representation (Hirsch, 1999). My parents both died when I was very young but, unlike Barthes or Hirsch, I did not inherit any known or unknown photographs and this 'perpetual' (absence) of family photographs makes it difficult for me, 'to locate the door of my memory' (Langford, 2001: 29).

For Barthes (1981), photographs are signifiers, autobiographical vehicles that allow the spectator access to a subjective 'identity'. In the second part of *Camera Lucida* Barthes recalled the moment he found the *Winter Garden* photograph, a photo of his mother:

There I was, alone in the apartment where she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the truth of the face I had loved. And I found it (Barthes, 1981: 67).

Whatever the case, Barthes does not show the *Winter Garden* photograph in his book; it might be that he wants to protect the child that was his mum and save for him the only evidence of his mother's 'true' identity. He stated that the only photo which gave him the splendour of her mother truth was this lost photograph, 'the photograph of a child I never knew' (Barthes, 1981: 103).

For Barthes, the *Winter Garden* photograph was the only evidence of his mother's 'true' identity. In my case, I've never had pictures of my parents or my grandparents, or even of my sisters and myself when we were little girls. The only picture I have seen of myself as a child was shown to me by a neighbourhood friend. It showed me and my sisters aged seven, eight and nine. We were at a neighbour's birthday celebration and there were many other children there. When I saw the picture, I asked Noel (my neighbour) if he was willing to give it to me, as I thought that for him it was just another birthday photograph. For me it was the 'only signifier' of my childhood. It has since disappeared. Unlike Barthes, I do not look for any specific sign of 'truth'. My urgency

is driven by the need to find photographs that ‘prove’ my connection to my childhood and help me recuperate those memories. As I search now for clues about how gender was constructed and negotiated in the unfamiliar domestic space of my childhood, I may be reinventing a past in which to place my memories. And even then, perhaps I am reimagining these memories. In my found image, and contrary to Barthes, I want to recall my mother’s maternal role toward me. But the image confronted me with a child that was always far from ‘home’.

3.5 The family album

Regarding the participants, similarly to Barthes, I asked myself: what relationship would they have to their family albums? Do such albums exist? And, if so, do the participants want to use them to share their memories? My initial proposal was to look at past family photographs with the interviewees as a visual methodological tool for opening up memory, influenced by the work of Holland and Spence (1991) and Freund and Thomson (2011). The focus was not to be on the before and after bodily narrative that frequently accompanies the experience of gender transitioning, but rather on revisiting past embedded moments of Cuban State and family interactions. At the same time, this focus facilitated a comparative historical analysis of trans-people’s oral histories before and during the sexual revolution that started in the 1990s. Nevertheless, the family album that gathered together their early memories of childhood was something that most participants decided not to share. After all, as Rooke (2010) states, not everyone wants to make their life public.

The lack of a family album was, for me, an unforeseen circumstance that influenced my study. I was expecting, through the deconstruction of pictures closer to home, to disentangle the connections between my own past memories and the stories participants told me about their past (Kuhn, 1995; Hirsch, 1999; Spence, 1988; Martin, 2009). But not having a visual past to hold onto prompted me to go back in time and look for my own first recollections of home in relation to family, gender and sexuality. These memories were found back in the *Becas*.

3.6 Recovering queer memories of the *Becas*

The *Becas* were educational institutions created in 1966 by the Cuban State, based on José Martí's idea of combining academic study with agricultural work to overcome the alienation of students from their working lives.⁷ This theory was interpreted and put into practice by Fidel Castro (1967), based on the Soviet educational model and Che Guevara's ideological thinking about the 'creation of the *New Man*' as an archetype for the new revolutionary citizen⁸.

My analysis here of the *Becas* comes from my own residence in this constrained space, in which we sang socialist hymns, marched and performed many other military-type activities as part of our Cuban communist youth training and education. I was a student at the *Becas* for eighteen years and later a chemistry teacher for another 10 in similar institutions. These state boarding schools no longer exist, as they were gradually closed by the State from 2009 onwards (Navarro Vega, 2013). The buildings that remain have changed their name and function. However, they still exist in our memories and are part of the largely untold life histories of four generations of Cubans, including all those involved in my research project.

I will refer to the *Becas* as a contextual place/space in which my first perceptions of gender and sexuality were formed. In order to explore my pathway through this institution, I will intertwine my memories of the *Becas* with those of my participants. I will examine what was seen in Cuba at the time as 'revolutionary heterosexuality' (based on gender binaries and heteronormativity) and how this coexisted and interacted with 'dissident homosexuality' (dissenting gender identities and sexualities). From early childhood until young adulthood, the *Becas* was my 'home'. Mine was not an exceptional case, but rather part of a normalised national strategy for socialist education. As I mentioned previously, the Revolution nationalised everything, including the family. Like me, many children from my generation were separated from the intimate space of the family home. We would return to our houses every 45 days, or

⁷ Martí J. (2003)

⁸ Che Guevara (1965)

sometimes in 21, 11 or six-day cycles, depending on the historical period and the place of study. The everyday routine was highly structured⁹.

The *Becas* were the new space of ‘family’ in which our first gender identities and sexualities were constructed and deconstructed. In the *albergues* (dormitories) it was normal for the girl students to wash the boys’ clothes, and this was even something to be proud of. It was as if the girls were happy to have some male person, not necessarily a partner, but a friend, for whom to wash and iron clothes, and of whom to take care. The girls also used to take care of the boys’ books, carrying them around and only giving them back at class time, since the boys were less ‘inclined’ to do this. I remember that some girls had three or four boys for whom they did this work. At the same time, the boys were in charge of getting buckets of water for the girls to wash when there was no water in the communal shower rooms. Also, once they had completed their own work, the boys sometimes helped the girls to finish theirs: picking citrus fruit, cutting grass and weeds with a machete, planting vegetables and the other agricultural tasks that we were all expected to do from a very young age. I would argue that all of these gendered gestures, inequalities and negotiations of power and affect were experienced as acts of acceptance and belonging between the members of new ‘chosen and given’ families within the wider collective of ‘home’. In my own circumstances, the *Becas* was not my biological family institution, neither was it chosen by me. However, I formed new bonds with people who at that time were considered my family.

Since many of us were separated from our families as children, the *Becas* were where we had our first conscious experiences of gender roles, with all the patriarchal weight that this brought. From a very young age, patriarchy determined how we (girls and boys) would be regarded by each other (bell hooks, 2004). These stereotypes and patriarchal acts were absorbed without question. However, the challenge was to negotiate spaces where hidden non-normative sexual and gender identities coexisted in closets that were firmly closed. In my memory of the years 1979 to 1999, the term *trans* was virtually non-existent in our lives in the state boarding school. Everything was channelled through the stigmatised term *homosexual*, and both students and teachers had to ‘pass’ as heterosexuals. Those visibly non-binary (‘effeminate’ or ‘*macha*’) were

⁹ See Valeriu Landau, in her review of Jorge Fraga’s documentary film about Cuban secondary schools in the countryside - *The New School* (La Nueva Escuela, 1973).

unable to hide in the closet and so suffered stigma and discrimination, sexual abuse and rape, and most were forced to abandon their studies at a young age. The impossibility of hiding in the closet was because of the lack of not only physical but psychological privacy. After all, we were the children of the Revolution.

3.6.1 Gillian

It was here in the *Becas* that I first encountered two of the people involved as participants in this project. Gillian was one of my students. I met her in 1996 while I was teaching chemistry in the José Martí Civil Engineering and Building Trades Polytechnical School. The *Becas* had not changed since the period in which I had been a student; the scarcity of materials and the worsening conditions were new¹⁰, but the performance *de la masculinidad* through aggressive *machismo* and *guapería* (swaggering, laddish and cocky behaviour) remained the same. As a student trying to fit in, I had also been in a closet. As I took on the position of a teacher, I was able to reflect more about this, to observe reality from another angle and confront the situation as best I could, although by then I was feeling impotent from seeing so much corruption and violence, double standards and broken dreams. I witnessed bullying and sexual violence against those perceived as different, in relation to sexuality and gender, especially those unable to ‘pass’. The ‘*degree of discretion*’ offered by the closet was not available for non-binary people (Sedgwick, 1990; Ahmed, 2000; Mattilda, 2006).

During the research, I conversed with Gillian about this period within the framework of heteronormative discourse:

...If I had been in the female dorms I would have been able to put up with school in the countryside. If I’d been like I am now, I would have wanted to be assertive and I’d have achieved the tasks that were assigned to me. But the situation in which I found myself, it was very difficult. But it’s not your fault, because [as a teacher] you were always there at my side¹¹.

Perhaps (I said to Gillian) ... if we had understood then, and knew what was happening... But because of our ignorance in terms of gender and sexuality we couldn’t help you. We thought it was something purely sexual, that you didn’t want to be with the boys because you felt attracted to them, so we were only thinking about sexuality. But that was a very different analysis from ‘I’m a girl

¹⁰ After the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, Cuba lost its primary financial benefactor, the Soviet Union, and people found themselves struggling to live in the difficult economic conditions of the Special Period.

¹¹ Interview with Gillian. Interviewed by Olga Saavedra Montes de Oca. 2015

and as a girl I don't want to be in the boys' dorm'. ... If I had known that Gillian was there inside you I would have been able to help in a different way, I would have said to the [other] teachers that you had to sleep in our dorm, with us. Perhaps, I don't know... we were helping someone based on the gender that existed, that we could see and that we expected. So, I'm saying sorry for not having been able to help, Gillian. Will you accept an apology?

'Of course, I will' (Gillian smiles).

Some years later, Gillian revisited the *Becas* to see if it was possible to change her education certificates and update her gender status so that she didn't have to tell her whole story every time she went to new doctors, places of study, employers or any other State institution. She recounted:

When I was with the deputy headteacher – remember her? I could see some of the teachers who taught me. But I couldn't say hi because the deputy headteacher told me: 'No, you'd better not say hi because they won't remember you' ...I had to walk past them and it was very hard because I couldn't approach them and tell them who I was... I had to go unnoticed, do you see what I mean?... I remember all my teachers with such a lot of affection, I would have liked to go over to them and say hello. I know I went through some hard times there, but I loved them, it was four years of my life as a student. And they were my teachers, and teachers leave a mark on your life because they are your educators... (She cries and we embrace).

This is why after knowing you for so long, and having kept up such a lovely friendship... you're not only my teacher, but also my friend, someone who understands me, who has always supported me. This is a really big deal for me¹²..

The above testimony illustrates how the *Becas* boarding schools for some of us created an opportunity to form another kind of family space. However, for others like the deputy headteacher it remained a patriarchal space in which there was no room for difference. By forbidding Gillian to see the other teachers she made use of her position of power and denied Gillian a sense of closure with her experience in the school. She also shattered Gillian's hopes of acceptance by other teachers in the present, by continuing, as an institution, to disconnect Gillian from belonging to the school community and the place where her memories are located. The deputy headteacher's attitude demonstrated her fear of acknowledging Gillian's experience of transitioning dating back to the times when she was a student in the classroom. This represents and reproduces the gender binaries and heteronormativity of state educational institutions, but also the teacher's incapacity to re-locate her own gendered body into the space

¹² Gillian, 2015.

where this transition was happening. The deputy headteacher's own lack of agency is translated into transphobia toward Gillian's female identity. In contrast, Gillian's own agency gives us space to understand the power of memory and connectedness as a human being beyond this discussion of institutionalised positionalities, when she affirms: 'Despite all that happened I remember my school with affection, because these were my student years and I remember my teachers with a lot of love'.

While a group of us functioned as an extended family in the *Becas*, we have no photographic depiction of this space of belonging. Considering the 'ideal' character of family photography in reinventing the past, I wonder how that boarding school photo would have turned out? Who would have been included and who not? How would we have been represented through gender binaries and heteronormativity when hidden non-normative sexual and gender identities were closeted? If that photo had been taken, how would that family space have been represented? I have no answers about how the boarding school photo would have looked. Still, Gillian's new family photographs depict a family space out of the gender closet. For the new photo she chose (as did the rest of the participants) how and where she wished to be positioned in relation to her house, her objects and her family members. My lens was directed at every family member, and in that sense I was framing new queer families, by reintroducing the transgender person into the discussion of families within the context of the Cuban Revolution. Gillian's family was the first portrait of this project (see **Figure 2**). Chapter 6 analyses the process of producing these family portraits.



Figure 2 Esperanza, Janet, Gillian and Alejandrito. Photo ©Olisam. 2015

3.7 Reflection on methodology

You do not leave behind your anxieties, your hopes, ... your prejudices, your class, race or gender, your location in global social structure [sic], your age and historical positions, your emotions, your past and your sense of possible futures when you set up an interview (Wengraf, 2001)

3.7.1 Negotiating my otherness

While living in Cuba till 2001, and as a thirty-six year-old, my definition of 'other' was only political. I believed that the other was the Coloniser and the Capitalist. We Cubans were identified as historical victims but not placed as 'other'. Now I am othered in several senses, because my context has changed and I am living in England, living within Capitalism. As an outsider/insider researcher, I was aware of the role of my Residential otherness in my ethnographic encounter, specifically in relation to the power imbalances on both sides (Cuban and England). By the participants, even the ones I am closest to, I might be perceived as a privileged 'other' because of my emigration and residence abroad. For Cubans, England is the other. Also, as stated,

given the predominance of a Western orientation in queer theory and visual work, my research might be perceived by a Western academic audience as an account of otherness from ‘elsewhere’ Cuba. During my research, I have learned to negotiate all of these forms of otherness on both sides of the research context. However, even when I live in a European society, Cuba is still home for me.

Also, considering that the core of my research was related to gender transitioning within the family, I positioned myself in this context by relocating those aspects of my own identity that served as a link (connecting or disconnecting) between the research participants and myself (Van Maanen, 1988). Therefore, I posed the question: what facets of myself need to be disclosed in order to be out in this field? And to whom, how and where should I disclose these aspects? (Wengraf, 2001; Ahmed, 2006; Rooke, 2009; McDonald, *Cox and McDonald* (2013). I have stated that my age, race, class and gender were perceived by my interviewees when they agreed to an interview and that their participation was negotiated in relation to, and incorporating, their own agency, assumptions and interpretations. However, my sexuality was located in the same space of ambiguity as that of my participants, in order to focus on gender identity and the sex-gender binary in exploring gender transition in the family. After all, queer ethnography requires that as researchers we deconstruct the way in which our own gendered and sexual subjectivity is perceived as ‘un-problematically stable’ (Rooke, 2009).

3.7.2 Socio-economic class identifications in Cuba are different from those in Western cultures

Cuba has one of the highest literacy rates in the world but, unlike Western cultures and even other Latin American and Caribbean contexts, education and occupation are not necessarily indicators of someone's social class. While it is not unusual to meet Cubans who are making substantial amount of money, the majority of people have very few resources and a low standard of living. Cuba is ranked highest in Latin America on health and education. It also scores as satisfactory on the ‘Gender Inequality Index’ of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Almost all Cubans are enrolled in the national social security system, and fertility rates, at under 2.0, are the lowest in

the Western hemisphere. So by these measures most Cubans would fit into the middle-class category. In Cuba, it is very common to meet highly trained and skilled professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, who earn far less than unskilled labourers such as waiters and taxi drivers working in the tourism sector. Hence, socio-economic class identifications in Cuba are different from those in Western cultures and in my view they mirror people's chances and opportunities rather than their aspirations and potentials. Thus, looking at my Cuban family portraits, a non-Cuban audience might assume that the photographs are representative of a certain class. Doctor, musician, nurse specialist, hairdresser, technician, sex worker and accountant were among the occupations of the people depicted in these family photographs. However, the scarcity and the visibly poor domestic landscapes depicted in these images do not necessarily correspond with the participants' social achievements, such as their educational or occupational background.

3.7.3 On oral history

In the Cuban context, oral history is a vital tool in understanding popular experience, and in producing community narratives of social change (Dore, 2004; Hamilton, 2012). Yet in this context, visual oral history at times has also been a challenging experience for researchers, due to the ideological orientation of the Cuban revolutionary government and the weight of this as 'official history'. This tends to limit access for researchers, and the scope of the 'sayable' for citizens (Panichelli). 'Despite the rise of oral history projects taking place in Cuba, most oral history research about Cuba is still conducted by academics from abroad. It remains very difficult to receive authorization to carry out projects on the island' (Panichelli and Saavedra-Montes de Oca), 2017: 34).

In 2006, I was not yet aware that something called oral history existed and, even less so, that a study had been done in Cuba from 2004 onwards. This was a project based on interviews with Cubans and the life stories of 'different generations, social positions, gender and racial identities, religions and political perspectives'. At that moment, I was lucky to be in Southampton, the place where the 'Memories of the Revolution' oral history project conducted by a team of British and Cuban researchers came to

concretion¹³. And I say ‘lucky’ because it also coincided with my need to engage in a renewed dialogue with my own immediate past, with my Cuban-ness and my Diaspora. In 2006, I was asked by Liz Dore, who directed the research, to collaborate as a photographer on this project¹⁴. However, I felt I was only halfway through this conversation with my past because of the impossibility of using my own words, not only to frame and contextualise these images but also with regard to the process of opening the ‘ever-present closets’ that keep particular stories out of Cuban family photographs.

In the absence of a written and photographic history that speaks from a position of both my own and the research participants’ life stories and specifically from our perspectives as protagonists, the use of oral history methods provided a re-encounter with our memories. I remember that as I read the stories during the transcription process they evoked images of the participants’ daily lives (which made me laugh, become sad, reflect or simply listen more closely). I was surprised to find myself reacting as if I was right back there again with my neighbours, friends and family members. This was due to the way in which the narratives reflected my own personal experience, and also the encounter with deeply human emotions: ‘Oral history gives history back to people in their own words’ (Thompson, 1978: 226). I cannot help but compare the transgender participants to people like Namaste, Mattilda, Serano and Leslie Feinberg. What might be different if one day they could tell not only their own story without mediation, but also formulate their own critical theories?

3.7.4 On family album

For the purpose of my analysis, the physical absence of the family album in the reconstruction of memory was glaring evidence of participants’ relationship with their past. ‘I refuse to inherit anything from another eye than my own’ states Barthes (1981: 51). I argue that by refusing to show their family albums the participants as a family were not willing to be part of the before and after bodily narrative that all too often accompanies the experience of gender transitioning. Just as for Barthes in the *Winter*

¹³ See Dore’s research project ‘Memories of the Cuban Revolution’, which has been recording in-depth life history interviews throughout the island since 2004. Accessed online at www.southampton.ac.uk/cuban-oralhistory/english.page. See also Elizabeth Dore, *Cuban Lives: What Difference Did a Revolution Make?* Verso, forthcoming.

¹⁴ Cuban Oral History: Memories of the Cuban Revolution. Website photography Accessed online at www.southampton.ac.uk/cuban-oral-history/english/website-photography.page

Garden photographs, these family albums will exist only for them. As outsider viewers, if we had access to these images they would be perceived only as gendered photographs; as Barthes says ‘...at most it would interest your studium: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound’ (Barthes, 1981: 73). The participants’ family decisions not to show me/us their family album represents their own agency as families. Just as with any other family, they are asserting their right to privacy and to control how their life stories are narrated. For me, the physical absence of a family album was negotiated throughout the participants’ stories and specifically through the memories of the *Becas*. As with Spence, as explained by Dennet (2013), memory exploration served me as a form of therapy, by opening up a discussion from a past that, despite the impact it has had on my life, I had never talked about.

Chapter 4 Family, gender and sexuality as state policy through oral history narrative

This chapter is based on a selection of nine interviews with three of the eight families. It reflects how it felt to be a transgender person or a family member of a transgender person in Cuba before and after the sexual revolution that took place in the 1990s. Using oral history in this context was a valuable tool for revealing conflicts in the family in relation to gender and Cuban ideology during the 1960-2015 period. The discussion of sex-gender identity was not a sensitive topic for the narrators; they talked about it openly and frankly. However, how the participants’ stories about politics and historical state policies related to family and gender was extremely problematic and sensitive both for them and for me as a Cuban-born researcher. The main aim of this section is to analyse the ways in which social changes – associated with the sexual revolution and the opening up of the economy in Cuba – create new spaces of expression and action for some of the research participants within a socialist yet globalised context.

4.1 Sensitive topics. Opening other closets

The closets of gender identity and sexuality have multiple doors but many continue to be sealed by historical, social, political, religious, family and personal padlocks. In a broad sense, we all have a closet, understood as a space of privacy, intimacy or secrets. The closet called the Cuban family also needs to be opened and its members confronted with their own memories of fear and gender and sexuality prejudices. However, this exploration of Cuban family life has to include an understanding of its historical relation with the Cuban State, which is still a sensitive topic. On an individual level, and in families, there must be a negotiation of memory in order for individuals to re-encounter each other and help each other to heal and forgive. So at the time when homosexuality was considered a threat to the Revolution, many families, including those of Jenny and Henry, decided to prove their revolutionary status by repudiating homosexuality in their communities and their homes. In 2002 I interviewed Jenny and Henry in my home in Havana:

What is the most difficult family situation that you can recall?

It was during the 1990s when they told my mother that I dressed like a girl. The teacher would complain to my mother all the time and tell me off... Until my mum [finally] went barking mad and did not accept me; she did not want to have a 'homosexual' son. I tried to explain how difficult everything was for me and that I could leave if she wanted me to but that I would not change, even if they killed me... So, I left home.¹⁵

.....

At twenty-three I decided to make my homosexuality public, all that I wanted was to be independent and to live with my partner, but this was impossible, and from that moment they turned my life into yogurt.¹⁶ My uncle managed to drive me out of the house with abuse; we fought, he beat me up – and damaged my kidney. I was in therapy; then I was in prison, I paid 500 pesos in bail money, I went to court [...]. The police and lawyers treated me very badly, and all because I'm homosexual.¹⁷

People like Henry and Jenny, whose masculinities and femininities were not being validated in their domestic and social environment, were forced to abandon their families and they became more vulnerable to persecution and arrest. The feeling that

¹⁵ Interview with Jenny, 30 yrs. Born and grew up in Havana.

¹⁶ Cuban expression referring to the act of causing problems and making someone's life difficult.

¹⁷ Interview with Henry (33 yrs). Born and grew up in Havana.

dominates this earlier historical period is symbolised by what Carrie Hamilton (2007), following William E. Reddy, calls the emotional regime. It refers to how these reactions were a consequence of the political time. These emotions divided and affected many families because of prejudices about gender, sexuality and revolutionary commitment.

4.2 Memory, political commitment and nationalism

This next section draws upon on Hamilton (2010) and Portelli's (2007) analysis of emotions in political commitment and nationalism. I also refer to oral history's role in understanding collective emotions and memories in relation to time, place and political junctures (Puwar, 2004). I have thus used oral history to frame these family stories within collective memories and in relation to the post-Revolution Cuban ideology. This is illustrated by extracts from different interviews. Throughout their oral history narratives, the narrators locate their memories back in a time when the political closet of gender and sexuality was sealed by the family, and when their transgender relatives' bodies were perceived as *space invaders* as well as a threat to the heteropatriarchal family and to the ideal of the Cuban Revolution.¹⁸

Henry was thirty-six when I first interviewed him in 2002. His testimony was that of an isolated individual rejected by his family and society because of his gender orientation. As I have mentioned, the main impediment was to find an intimate space for our encounters in which we both felt tranquil and protected. That space was not in his home, which he had already abandoned, as indicated when discussing the initial challenges he faced in the early 1990s:

Losing the right to my house debilitated me a lot, and to survive I sold everything I had that was worth anything. I had to sleep in parks, schools, the Toledo Central stadium, even the funeral parlour in Marianao.

In the funeral parlour?

Henry: Yes...you might not believe this but it wasn't that bad...at least I had the company of the families of those who had died...

Were your neighbours supportive?

No...not at all and this was also a shock to me. For the trial, they collected signatures from the block. I was certain that the inquiry and the signatures would

¹⁸ Puwar, N. 2004

be in my favour because everyone knew that an injustice was being committed. They saw me grow up, and they knew what was going on... or at least, that's what I thought. However, it was clear that the CDR and the Party could not compromise themselves with a 'faggot', and so they supported my uncle.¹⁹ Once again prejudice prevailed.

Henry was stamped as counterrevolutionary because of his sexuality. His uncle, supported by the Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR), 'collected signatures from the block' that were then passed on to the police and resulted in Henry being brought to trial. The raw emotions that resurge through these narratives disclose how Castro's wish for 'loyalty to family, friendship and community' was missing at this time (Hamilton, 2010). These memories are filled with experiences of homophobia, abandoned children and emigration, along with the presence of the CDRs and their effect on Cuban family life. The CDRs, formed in 1960, were defined by Fidel Castro 'as a collective system of revolutionary vigilance' Castro (1961). Their role was to promote social welfare and report on counter-revolutionary activities²⁰. If sexual and gender 'deviance' meant criminalisation within Cuban society, another consequence was the loss of acceptance within the family. However, not all families rejected their non-heterosexual members, as shown by the testimony of Juana, the mother of Pollito, one of the transgender narrators (see **Figure 3**).

¹⁹ CDRs arose as a response to perceived internal and external threats to the Cuban Revolution. They were established in the early 1960s when a US invasion looked imminent. See www.ecured.cu/Comit%C3%A9s_de_Defensa_de_la_Revoluci%C3%B3n

²⁰ Castro F. (1961).



Figure 3 Juana, Jorge Luis, Pollito and Lázaro at home. Havana. Photo ©Olisam 2015

I remember before (around 1993), when they (referring to the police) used to do raids. Once we went as a family to one of the carnivals in Parque Maceo and he was there with us, although he was with his friends. And they came and rounded people up and right in front of us they took him away. They assigned places to them and they couldn't leave those places. If they wanted to go get an ice cream at Coppelía, if they did wear clothing that wasn't very masculine they couldn't get an ice cream. The family went and he couldn't go. We went through all that [...] I'm telling you, other people reacted in other ways but not him. He just got depressed, he'd take pills, sleep for three or four days, didn't wash or shave or go out onto the street. So, we suffered from the repression, when inside the family, we didn't do that...It made us suffer, but now thanks to Mariela that's over.²¹

Homosexuality or being a transgender person is no longer perceived as a threat to the nation's sovereignty. These same families and people who were previously excluded because of their identities now function under the umbrella of the 'new age of tolerance' and are seen as part of 'rebuilding the state' (Sierra 2014; Puar, 2007). This historical shift can be interpreted as a new facet of modernity, which in the Cuban State agenda is implemented as a 'fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the State, the Revolution and sexuality' (Hamilton, 2010). People have now adjusted their emotional

²¹ Interview with Juana, 61-year-old. Pollito's mother. Interviewed by Olga Saavedra Montes de Oca at Pollito's home. April 2015.

expression and public display to the new political circumstances by readjusting their constructed ethical and political ideology to the new contexts. This process has enabled people to reclaim their place within their families. The new sexual revolution and its emotional hegemony allows these family members to express their *real* attitude and not condition it to hidden feelings or a display of ‘contradictory loyalty’ (Hamilton, 2010: 87). What changed was not necessarily the loyalty of family and friends, but the focus on these previous emotions and their physical materiality.²² Also, and in relation to what Hamilton calls a shift of emotions, over the passage of time not only had the interviewees’ emotions changed but, by being able to take these narratives out of their closets without fear of censorship, my own emotional involvement as interviewer had changed too.

4.3 The Cuban family as the place for transition

‘I wish that people could learn to live without prejudices, I wish that I was less afraid...’, said Henry back in 2002.²³ Today, the participants’ domestic gendered lives have changed radically; they have freed themselves from a great deal of fear in achieving this acceptance. The sexual revolution and its associated sense of gender and sexual freedom has affected not only transgender people but also family and friends. This liberalisation permits memories of non-transgender family members in relation to the participants’ experience of gender transitioning to be listened to. However, the non-transgender participants’ initial thoughts about participating in the research were to support their transgender member rather than to locate their own personal experience of struggles, frustrations, fears or self-acceptance in relation to their own gender identity and that of the person in transition. When I met Henry again in 2015, he was in his own home, where he is still living with Yoandry his partner.²⁴ There I also met Rosa, his 55-year-old aunt. She wanted to take part in the project to show her support for Henry and her oral narrative indicates her shift of emotion (see **Figure 4**).

²² The liberation of social and moral attitudes toward sex and gender that happened in the early 1990s marked a change in the official discourse around homosexuality and homophobia in Cuba in relation to revolutionary ideology.

²³ Henry interviewed by Olga de Saavedra Montes de Oca in her home. 15 August 2002.

²⁴ Henry interviewed by Olga Saavedra de Montes de Oca at the narrator's home, 21 December 2014



Figure 4 Yoandry, Rosa and Henry at home. Havana. Photo ©Olisam 2014

We were distanced for quite a long time, but now we've grown closer again. [...] I started to see him looking like something I didn't like [...] What I didn't accept was... that change that he was doing in... dressing like a woman... he started a period in his life when I didn't like his physical appearance. It affected us... But we'll... all along... now after everything, we're united and ...he is my nephew however he may be.²⁵

Looking back has revealed aspects of emotion that were unexplored during the interview. I never asked Rosa any further questions in relation to her statement, 'It affected us'. Yet probably I would not probe further even if another chance arose to interview her. At that moment, being an insider was a disadvantage because I was confronted with my own personal, political and ethical dilemmas. Rosa's circumstances were too familiar to me. 'It affected us' put me back in contact with my own emotions of fear and shame (Sedgwick, 2003). Here we both – Rosa and I – knew certain truths about our common past. We knew we were dealing with sensitive topics, from the time when our love for family and friends was being tested against the background of the Revolution. Another example that reflects on past experiences of rejecting/accepting a transgender family member is evidenced in a conversation with Fernando:

Can you tell me your name, where you were born and what is family for you?

²⁵ Rosa aged 55. Interview by Olga Saavedra Montes de Oca with at Henry's house. 21 December 2014

My name is Fernando Santos Pérez, I am Juany's brother. I was born here in Matanzas. For me, my family is the foundation upon which our life has been built. ... We used to reject Juany. Today, you can see, we live together, we help each other and so does the whole family. Because both my mum and my dad, who was a stubborn old man, more stubborn than me, before he died, he got to accept him completely, without any problems. My sister, you saw her, has been like a daughter to him. The daughter he won't be able to have... And with the rest, with nephews, my children, he has been great, even with my grandchildren.²⁶

How did Juany's gender identity affect you as a person, as an individual, as a brother of a transgender person? In the past, how did you feel, how did you interpret what was happening?

I am going to tell you ... I am 70 [...] we have already lived a long time... Many years ago, we didn't agree about this situation. Because this situation that has occurred has developed and has explained itself over time. We were not in favour of it ... I told you that we used to burn the men's clothes that Juany wore and then he'd steal mine. Yes, yes, he fought, fought... We didn't want to accept all these things, we told him they were abnormal. He was criticised by the whole society and this is why we didn't agree, until CENESEX, where Mariela Castro gave us some guidance.²⁷



Figure 4 Fernando and Juany at Home. Matanzas. Photo ©Olisam 2014

²⁶ Fernando age 70. Interviewed by Olga Saavedra Montes de Oca at their home. December 2014.

²⁷ Fernando 2014.

Fernando's statements about why he did not previously accept his brother's gender identity highlight how his rejection might have been conditioned by the prevailing political ideology rather than by genuine homophobic or transphobic attitudes. Today, family members are authorised to accept and love their transgender family members.

These testimonies reveal Rosa and Fernando's conflicted emotions about past relationships with their transgender family members. Hence, using oral history became an important tool not only for listening to the 'hidden voices' of people who were marginalised during the Cuban Revolution (Thompson, 2000) but for creating spaces for reflection for those who might, unconsciously or not, discriminate against others due to the emotional ideology of the time. These testimonies tell us not only what they did but what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did (Clifford, 2012: 211). As Rebecca Clifford explains, such narratives may not offer a direct frame on individuals' past emotions, but they 'expose[s] the contrast between remembered past feelings and present reinterpretations' (Clifford, 2012: 219).

These oral histories also disclose other positive impacts brought about by enabling reflection on wider transgender family relations and dynamics. Narrators emerge from their past not only as othered victims but as individuals whose personal agency has had a transformative effect on their families. Thus, when I asked Juana (Pollito's mother) how the experience of gender transition had influenced her, she replied: 'I think...I'm a better person now, I learned to love better, to get to know them, to deal with their defects and appreciate their qualities because they're simply human beings. I'm more human after I lived through that stage'.

4.4 'Mariela Castro has given us permission'

While the participants' change in attitudes might be attributed to their families' own agency and learning processes, these oral narratives indicate that empowerment for an individual and their family, associated with coming out of the closet, has been promoted by the Cuban State, and in particular by Mariela Castro. Liberalisation authorises this gender freedom, reducing the use of 'emotion as power and control'²⁸ of the family

²⁸ Jaggar A. (2017)

space, as seen during the process of active remembering that took place at Pollito's home. Pollito was forty-one years old when I interviewed her at Los Pinos in Havana, where she shared her house with her mother Juana, then sixty-one, her brother Jorge Luis, aged 36, and her partner, Lázaro:

Although at that time Mariela was already helping us, in those neighbourhoods the police weren't informed yet that Raúl Castro's daughter, Mariela Castro, was protecting us and that this was now allowed. But the policeman said that I was lying. Right there on the corner he said to me 'Ah so you dressed like that again?' and I said to him 'Yes, I dressed like this again. And I'm going to keep dressing like this. Inform yourself, I need you to be informed because now Mariela Castro, Raúl Castro's daughter, has given us permission'²⁹.

People who identify themselves as LGBT, and specifically trans people and their families, have found some hope through Mariela Castro's leadership on issues of gender and sexuality. The legitimisation of gender reassignments, Pride celebrations, conferences, shows, films and more, has given them spaces they can inhabit, even within the uncertainty of contemporary Cuba. For most of the interviewees, her figure has been crucial in this new phase of their lives. Many refer to these periods as 'before and after Mariela'. They show, with pride, photos of her as the leader of this new revolution and some, including Pollito, even call her a God:

This Mariela Castro thing I think it started around '92 or '93 onward [...] During one period, there was a big raid... they went from house to house and rounded up all the transvestites... but by then Mariela Castro existed and Mariela Castro defended us. Even so, that time they stuck everyone in the police cells for days and days and days.

Why do you think this change has happened?
Because of Mariela Castro.

Can you explain that to me?
Mariela with all those programmes against homophobia, all that.

Do you think that's influenced your family as well?
Yes, that too, because they've started to understand more about how everything is. A lot of families thought that it was shameless, madness, a disgrace... a lot of people thought it was counter-revolutionary. But thanks, thanks, thanks be to... – apart from God – to Mariela Castro. She has been our God.³⁰

²⁹ Pollito interviewed by Olga Lidia Saavedra Montes de Oca in her home. January 2015.

³⁰ Pollito, 2015.

Such remarks reveal how Cuba's sexual revolution has enabled people to reclaim their place in their families and to overcome divisions caused by politics and religion as well as sexuality and gender. Still, this reunification has not necessarily deconstructed the patriarchal gender and heteronormative stereotypes and prejudices that created such divisiveness in the first place, as seen in comments made by Juana, a retired worker from Aballi Hospital in Havana:

I know a laboratory worker in Aballi, who has very long hair and has to keep it tied up and wear a cap because they don't allow loose hair, skirts or dresses... But the ones who've had operations and have changed their identity, those people can wear women's dresses as much as they want. But the ones who haven't, no. There's still a lot of things that this society doesn't see the way they really are. But anyway, less than before.³¹

Juana's words demonstrate how Cubans who choose to live in-between genders have more difficulty navigating social norms and gaining family and government support. Official public discourse still addresses gender transition as going from male to female or female to male within a binary gender framework, rather than acknowledging individual transitions in gender identity. The need remains for a more fluid way of interpreting the trans space as a journey rather than a destination (Bornstein, 1994). In spite of this, the reintegration of transgender members into the family is a positive opportunity for overcoming ruptures. It allows people to choose affective relationships over prescribed political norms and gives agency to the families themselves. Some participants felt the sting of failure within their family, especially those who never had the chance to be accepted and reconciled with those they loved and whose gender identity did not correspond with the prevailing political and social discourse. Others, as shown by these testimonies, have now adjusted their emotional expression and self-presentation to new political circumstances. The Cuban family is passing through moments of readjustment and transformation, while it continues to be the first resource and ultimate refuge for the majority of its members (Díaz, Durán and Chávez, 2014). Hence, any healing process must create safe spaces for collective reflection about the past.

³¹ Juana Interviewed by Olga de Saavedra Montes de Oca in her home. 7 January 2015.

4.5 Conclusion

The oral testimonies in this study acknowledge the very important role played by CENESEX in Cuba's shift away from past homophobia. Mariela Castro, Fidel Castro's niece, has been particularly important in the reassessment of attitudes toward gender and sexuality in Cuba and also in the personal life of some of my participants. Even so, within this new sexual revolution those people recognised in the official historical narrative as protagonists of change are directly traceable to the revolutionary leadership circles of 1959. Mariela Castro is known as the 'unquestionable leader' of progressive change regarding LGBT rights and the most prominent Cuban activist in this area (Lazin, 2013).

The resultant changes that now favour gender diversity have emerged from official government discourse that has produced policies that benefit the population. Arguably, however, this continues to reproduce the same top-down political culture within which Cuban state institutions have traditionally operated. This approach short-circuits the development of a social movement based on self-representation and, as such, limits transgender people's own agency. This reduces the empowerment of transgender people as political subjects and also the interconnection of independent grassroots activism, which could construct models of gender and sexuality that might differ from the official binary and heteronormative versions. Hence, any new spaces of expression and action for queer identities are conditioned and forms of self-representation are still enclosed within boundaries determined by the Cuban State. At the same time, by assuming a 'discursive monopoly' on gender and sexuality, the institution is effectively regulating what can and cannot be said in the public sphere (Sierra Madero 2014). Therefore, while CENESEX has opened up the discussion and social acceptance of previously prohibited expressions of gender and sexual identity, at the same time it continues to reproduce forms of control, censorship and self-censorship. In this sense, even when it has opened one closet, it operates from within the pre-existing State closet – its discourse and its political culture. Because of this, my focus on family is about opening the kind of closets (in all their ambiguous intimacy) that CENESEX-type policies and practices might otherwise close. This is why it would have been very difficult to depict the accounts above using only still photographs. Therefore, I explored them through a range of creative alternatives and by using media that best supported these families'

stories. As a result, the outcomes of these narratives are materialised in *The Family as a Space for Gender Transition*, a 15:21-minute video installation in conjunction with the family portraits.

Chapter 5 Connectivity, agency, belonging and resistance in transitioning families

My research focus and my ‘other’ was the family as a space and place where life begins, that encloses or cradles memories and expectations. This chapter analyses how, in this social context, the ‘new’ gender identities of people who are transitioning may defragment (or not) their family members’ pre-established gender behaviours and assumptions, and how, through such processes, they might be acquiring new understandings of gender and self-hood. By doing this, my research contributes to queer anthropology’s ongoing conversation by revealing the straight/hetero family as an important space for sexual and gender difference (Boyce, Engebretsen and Posocco, 2017). It provides a significant strategy for rethinking queer family spaces, not as separate or subaltern but as implicated within seemingly normative family arrangements (Boyce, 2011). By strategically appropriating the spaces that have enabled the oppressive exercise of power – such as ‘the family’ – we are able to have a more human dialogue that includes all forms of collectivity. I aimed to reappropriate the concept of family to counter the logic of patriarchy as a system of domination, to transform the concept from my own subjectivity, to stretch, mould, break, do and undo it in a dialectical way, and to explore all the diverse experiences of human relations contained within this space. Additionally, I intended to query essentialist binaries that might be seen otherwise to pervade the national logic of gender transition in the Cuban family.

5.1 Transitioning as a family dynamic

Considering the evidence from this research, I argue that this process of transition does not happen only for the transgender person. It is a process in which the trans person’s family members are also involved, consciously or not. Every family activity involves a great deal of gender performance. As soon as we wake up in the morning till the moment we are ready to go to bed, our daily life is dominated by performativity (Butler, 2004; Halberstam, 1999). The simplest things, such how to dress for bed time, how to dress or undress in front of the same or opposite sex, and how to sit or speak, take place

every day in any family context. So, this is the first site of gender validation. We carry our bodies wherever we go. They define us, they shape us, and they give us meaning and create meaning (Bischoff, 2012), although conversely, our bodies are shaped, formed and transformed in, by and through our interactions with society, and by extension with the world. But ‘these corporeal realities are actively inhabited, and this “activity” is not fully constrained by the norm’ (Butler, 2004: 217). Every day the binary family member is confronted with their own gender performativity, which varies when they and their trans relatives have come out of the closet. As suggested by these research interviews, on coming out of the closet as a family, once the ‘truth’ is revealed, the relationship between the transgender person and their relatives seems to adopt new ‘discourses’ in relation to gender roles and gender behaviour expectations.

In this sense, when we act and behave in order to negotiate our relations we are performing even within the domestic setting. Like Julia Serano (2007, I am suggesting that femininity and masculinity are both natural and social states and are present in both sexes. However, independently of physical gender appearance, the way we speak, dress and behave is also an account of how we want to be perceived and interpreted and this is performative (Butler, 2004). Still, for Serano (2007: 190-191 you can act as you might want to, but other people will gender you by the way you look.

To understand which ‘*images*’ of transgender people have been accepted in the Cuban family, we must first recognise how ‘women’ and ‘men’ have been globally imagined or constructed. Culture has differentiated men’s and women’s behaviours, perpetuating a patriarchal historical order. This gender separation not only has a negative impact on trans-people’s own personality, opportunities, social roles and interactions, but because trans subjectivities are contingent, this gender separation also has an impact on their relationship with their family and the local community. In the heterosexual gendered scenario that is the institution of family, the possibilities for gender negotiation are limited because even within these spaces of acceptance the ‘gender normal’ body is perceived as the somatic norm (Puwar, 2004). The gender identity transitions of participants continue within these existing power relations. Some non-transgender participants feel the need to validate their relative’s transgender identity as a transition into binary gender goals and as a ‘corrective’ measure. They feel this is part of their

loving relationship, based on acceptance and belonging through gender. These stories reveal how passing creates agency, which is negotiated throughout as part of family agency, love, affection and protection, giving a sensation of settling:

...I'm hoping to reveal the ways in which we're all caught in a passing net, even in our attempts to challenge, subvert, and dismantle this tyranny (Mattilda, 2006: 13)³².

During the interview process it was common to hear the transgender participants using expressions that might be framed as an 'assimilation' of binary gender roles and heteronormative stereotypes. But 'doing gender in a way that does not reflect biological sex can be perceived as a threat to heterosexuality' (Schilt, K., & Westbrook, L. 2009). Here the domestic tasks were rearranged in a hierarchical order, which was established primarily by gender but also by age, relationships within the household and other factors. To explore how domestic roles were negotiated within the family dynamics, I asked each participant about the roles at home, whether they were divided or not, whether the males did one thing and the females another. Below are excerpts from conversations with two of these families: firstly, Gillian and her brother Alejandrito, and then Juana, Pollito's mother.

[speaking of, her brother] Well he taught himself to cook and he knows how to do everything, but when there's a bucket of water and other things, he says wait a minute my sister, I'll get that, I'll give you a hand. And electrical things he tells me no, sister, let me do that. Things like that. But he doesn't have prejudices of any kind in washing or cooking because he knows how to do everything for himself³³.

Following the above extract, I asked Gillian, 'do you feel there's any harm in you doing electrical work or lifting a bucket of water?'

No not at all, what he does is because as a man he thinks that he's stronger and he does it so I don't have to do that kind of physical exertion. And in terms of the electrical stuff, he's thinking about the danger. But no, I think women can perform any task (Gillian, 2015).

In this case, as in most of the domestic spaces visited, traditional gender roles are in evidence as encounters and dis-encounters with unequal power relations, disempowerment and empowerment. I would argue that, paradoxically, the social

³² Bernstein Sycamore M. (2006).

³³ Interview with Gillian 2015, and her brother Alejandrito. Interviewed by Olga Saavedra Montes de Oca. 2015

integration and acceptance of trans-people depends to a large extent on conforming to pre-established patriarchal roles, which might reproduce inequality and prejudice based on gender attributes.

This echoes the work of Mattilda (2006) in relation to the desire for recognition, passing as a normalising process via which to be accepted and to function socially. These narratives express the experience of '*passing*' both for trans and non-trans members within the family, and collectively as the family (brothers, sisters, nephews, uncles, daughters, mothers, aunts, etc). In the personal sense, for each non-trans family member, as individuals '*passing*' in a patriarchal and heteronormative society while at the same time accepting trans family members, (*what* represents a form of resistance to the fixity of their own gender identities and roles. It is as if, in saying, 'She is my sister, I'm her brother, I protect her, I take care of her...' he validates not only his gender role as a male, but his humanity. And this is illustrated by Alejandrito, when he explains:

When my sister sees that I have some dirty clothes, she washes them for me. And I try to help her in anything and I always give her advice. Gillian don't do that, be careful. We've always loved each other, since we were children, we have never been apart, and we've always been together (Alejandrito, 2015).

The dichotomy of 'passing' or 'not passing' plays a key role in our perception of the other and the self, no matter to which class, race, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality or other historical/cultural construction one belongs. However, social passability is not only a complex mix of natural behaviours and learned affectations but also a combination of self-definition and personal freedom (Weston; Mattilda, 2006). Like Allison Bischoff (2012), I look at passing as a controversial tool for perpetuating discrimination, but also as a tool for the public and private confirmation of self and familial social recognition. In the latter case, it might be that it is 'only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings' (Butler, 2004: 2). As evidenced in this research narrative, some transgender participants are now experiencing 'new ways of belonging', which are negotiated and imagined once a transgender person is accepted by the family. And this acceptance in most of the cases implicitly involves a seeming reproduction of traditional binary gender roles. This appears to be a condition of acceptance of the self and the other. An example of this is

illustrated by Juana's account of Pollito. She began to feel freer after having recovered from the initial stages of shock of knowing about Pollito being transgender:

for me it became normal to see him choosing a pair of shoes, choosing lipstick [...] I started seeing it as normal, like having another woman in the house (Juana, 2015).

Juana's narratives regarding gendered behaviour dynamics and expectations were representative of the families that participated in this collaborative research. Based on evidence gathered by this project, I argue here that for Juana, just as for the rest of the non-trans family members, 'becoming normal' meant not only getting used to the idea of their loved one's non- binary gender identity but also being able to 'get rid of' internalised stigma and the shame that accompanied any discrimination sites (Goffman, 1973; Sedgwick, 2003). Also, by 'seeing him choosing lipstick and seeing it as normal' Juana gained some new understanding of gender and self-hood. However, just as for the rest of the trans participants, Pollito's 'new' gender identity comes with a new set of sexuality and gender role and behaviour expectations, which in turn become a burden for the transgender person. This is why I choose not to interpret the participants' pronoun use. I argue that re-locating participants' gender roles in terms of being feminine or masculine does not challenge gender expectations, but rather implies that each gender has a fixed function. So, if this is the archetype, what is the 'right' gender role reserved for the transgender subject once they and their family are out of the closet?

5.2 No one is immune to the transition process

Because this experience is happening within the social and domestic space that is the family, no one is immune to the transition process. However, many relatives are afraid of being confronted with their own self-gendered dilemma and choose to build a wall between themselves and this experience. Others feel challenged and disorientated, choosing to negotiate their own identity issues by rejecting their transgender relatives, rather than acknowledging that their own gendered self is also part of the 'problem'. The trans body unconsciously disrupts our heteronormative comfort zone, even within the trans person. While on the one hand this transgression unsettles heteronormative family relations, on the other, with most of the people I met, it comes from a place of survival. Most of the time, trans people are as culturally patriarchal and heteronormative as any non-trans person can be. They do not know any other way, because we were all

raised more or less in the same colonial and patriarchal way. Layered onto this, for Cuban people, is the socialist experience. In contrast to with my 2002 photographs, I had no visual expectations about gender this time. I did not want to explore masculinities or femininities as a recognition of the participants being trans. This time, and for this project, I knew that I wanted to do their family portraits. I did not interpret gender role's accounts from either the binary or the non-binary participants as proof of their gender identities. I assumed that these domestic narratives were evidence of their function as human beings within a familial context. Others, like Juany, transgress the daily act of passing by revealing themselves voluntarily as a means of resisting, by unsettling the gender and heteronormative closet:

Someone told me, what are you doing here, you don't need to be here, you pass already, you are man. Why don't you go home, and stay quiet... But I want to help others, this is the reason I'm exposing myself (Juany, 2015).

My research process questions the extent to which participants were aware of or concerned about whether their bodies transgressed patriarchal binaries and whether their actions had positive implications in terms of their own political agency as part of the wider 'LGBTI' community. I argue that while some participants, such as Juany, decide consciously to engage in activism, others are content to exercise this agency for their own daily survival as human beings and for reflections pertaining to their immediate social and family circles. However, this does not diminish their contribution to political change. On the contrary, it contributes to the generation of new forms of knowledge and interrelationships based on self-acceptance and self-care. This study has helped me to understand the burden of gender representation shouldered by people transitioning their gender. The reference to the space of transitioning as necessarily transgressing gender norms would require the theorising of all that occurs in the subjects' lives.

Acknowledging that gender roles and gender behaviours are constructed and are part of conditioned human acts might help lessen the burden of gender role expectations for transgender and non-transgender people. Taking the process of transitioning out of the closet within the nuclear family is a complex and very necessary process in order to challenge the colonial past in relation to heterosexual definitions and representations of family. It will help us to understand how gender roles have to be constantly rearranged and renegotiated in those domestic spaces where binary gender is unconsciously

contested. Additionally, as a mere reflection, in all the non-gender-binary families that I encountered in my research, marriage and children continued to be the goal of, and the means of achieving, family wholeness. So, either they are conforming and reproducing heteronormativity, or this might be a confirmation of their ‘normality’.

5.3 Visual representation of transgender people in Cuba

This section explores how images of transgender people can challenge, or not, traditional patriarchal perceptions of gender and create new forms of resistance within the Cuban family. I was aware of the power of the camera as a tool to speak against stereotypical representations of the ‘other’ and chosen minorities. So, I was questioning myself about which images I wanted to show, and which narrative I was willing to produce in the name of the ‘real’ representation of trans people. I looked at other Cuban images of the experience of gender transition to find inspiration or to use as a positive reference, but it was a difficult task. Only a few photographic works pop up when googling trans representation or photography in Cuba. Some of these photographic works include those of Paolo Titolo³⁴, the husband of Mariela Castro, and that of Mariette Pathy Allen (*TransCuba* 2014)³⁵ and Claudia González (REASSIGN – Work in progress)³⁶, the last two invited to Cuba by CENESEX as part of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health to participate in a symposium about transgender identity and culture. I have added this last piece of information to highlight that these three photographers had the exclusive privilege of having ‘official’ gates unlocked for them, not only with regards to Cuban trans people but in terms of having open access to the Cuban State. However, their photographs still depict a ‘one site trans narrative’, either the sexualised female trans body or the before and after body transition. Below are some reflections on their transgender photographic work in the photographers’ own words (see Appendix 8-A, 8-B and 8-C Cuba).

‘How one photographer is capturing the troubles and triumphs of trans women in Cuba’ is the title of an interview with Allen, who had been photographing the transgender

34 See Photo Exhibition Highlights Transgender Community in Cuba <https://vimeo.com/182511865> and <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/event/photo-exhibit-highlights-transgender-community-in-cuba-496387155#italian-photographer-paolo-titolo-poses-for-a-picture-next-to-two-of-picture-id450083950>

35 See *TransCuba*. 2014 by Mariela Castro Espín (Author), Allen Frame (Author), Wendy Wattriss (Author), and Mariette Pathy Allen.

36 <http://claudiagonzalez.format.com/personalwork#e-0>

community in America(USA) for almost 40 years³⁷. During the conversation, she was asked by WITW (Women in the World) what surprised her most about the women she met in Cuba:

One of the things that was a discovery to me was that all of these trans women, when they got to a certain age, wanted young, gay men [as partners]. They wanted teenagers as young as 15, 16. It was a sexual combination that I wasn't familiar with, and I felt that the women were being taken advantage of because these boys were usually good looking, but didn't work. Here are these women who are struggling to survive, and they adopt – so to speak – these young boys who don't do anything to help.³⁸

As evidenced above, it seemed that for Allen, 'transwomen's' relationships were constructed only in relation to sexuality and did not include any possibility of caring, affective or emotional encounters. Additionally, this sexuality was questioned and positioned only as disadvantaged, rather than the transwomen's agency to negotiate the relationship with their own body being acknowledged. Also, by positioning the young 'good looking' male figure in relation only to power, she diminishes the younger person's social and economic vulnerability as well. There exists, too, a narrative of the 'strong male versus the fragile female' that erases the gaps in age and life experience between the female transgender body and the younger figure. I argue here that the trans body is immediately constructed as vulnerable, because of its visual femininity and in order to do that any remaining association with the masculine body is to be expunged. Another reflection is about González's comment in relation to her ongoing photographic series REASSIGN): 'I feel a huge sense of responsibility for these people'.³⁹ In relation to this remarks I would only ask: who are these people? Do they have shelters, names, families? Why does she feel accountable for these individuals?

It is my understanding that despite having the best of intentions, these types of representation continue to be about framing the 'other'. While I acknowledge this photographer's good faith in 'supporting' and understanding the already framed 'minority trans community', this is done from an outsider's position, an approach that, in my opinion, does not provide the viewer with clues about these people's subjectivities but serves the needs of a voyeuristic audience. Additionally, portraying trans people only as an isolated sexual minority does not challenge the prejudice and

³⁷ See Allen (1990).

³⁸ Katz B. (2015).

³⁹ Cited by Andrea Romano 5 Jan, 2015. <http://mashable.com/2015/01/05/transgender-cuba-photo-series/#g9SaPzdZgZqa>

fear toward the trans experience. Considering these photographers' power with regards to levels of expertise, economic resources and official authorisation by the Cuban State, (alongside the critical questions asked) you would assume that their positions would lead to a more complex narrative of transgender people. However, every probe was answered in a way that reinforced the stereotypical perception of what a transgender person looks like, rather than opening new doors that allow the viewer to see what a Cuban 'trans person looks at' (Rooke, 2009; Stryker, 2005).

As I mentioned before, despite Cuba's positive changes regarding transgender people, their visual representation is still about them being regarded as a sexual and gender 'minority' and does not include their relationship with their family. In this sense, the transgender images might feel at 'home' while they are depicted within the non-binary space. But, what happens when these pictures leave their 'safe' queer territory and are framed within a heteronormative family space? It might seem as if the trans subject is entering a non 'authorised' public space. This analysis echoes Rose's (2010) reflections in relation to what happens to domestic photographs when they are inserted in the public world, in the sense that the trans body becomes unreadable out of the 'queer' space.

5.4 Family photographs

Whenever we look at a photographic image we engage in a series of complex readings which relate as much to the expectation and assumption that we bring to the image as to the photographic subject itself (Clarke, 1992: 27).

Heterosexuality and gender binary continue to be the norm, in spite of the gradual acceptance of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals in the family in the Cuban context. However, trans or intersex people who identify across or outside binary gender norms are often seen as a threat to the sex-gender mandates at the root of heteronormativity as well as to the hierarchical power relations among all non-binary heterosexual categories, and as such are often disqualified and invisibilised through silence, suppression, and marginalisation within many familial and social contexts (Lugones, 2007; 2008; Greenberg, 2002). Intersex and transgender people's own relation with gender continually defragments the gender 'comfort zones' that many of us retain inside and unconsciously reproduce.

The eight families that collaborated in this project were constituted by binary and non-binary gender people. Do Gillian, Henry, Juany, Gala, Oraida, Pollito and Melody's trans identities automatically position them as queer? How should I frame /unframe their binary family members' identities? Can all these 'identities' be in the same frame? And, if this is the case, is that a queer photograph or not? These are just a few of the questions arising from the process of creating these family portraits. This led me to challenge the notion of 'queerness' in relation to family representation. As stated by Sedgwick (1993: 8) 'queer can refer to the open mesh of possibilities...' but only in relation to gender and sexualities. For Warner (1993), 'every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that their stigmatisation is intricate with gender' (Warner, 1993), and according to Landreth (2010) queer subjects are 'alternative bodies', that exist in parallel with straight life. It was the status of queer as associated with either gender or sexuality that made me refrain from framing these photographs only as queer. In light of this analysis, this project aimed to portray the family within the contexts of gender and sexuality among other social categories. After all, as stated by Clarke, 'the portrait photograph is the site of a complex series of interactions—aesthetic, cultural, ideological, sociological, and psychological' (Clarke, 1992: 102).

While framing these images only as queer photographs seems 'suitable' for 'queer spaces', this representation still does not challenge the heteronormative family frame. However, including the trans subject in the frame as part of the nuclear family or family of origin seems to disrupt the binary family narrative, as evidenced by the conversation below, between **B** and me, about the cover photographs for a Cuban oral history journal. The photographs on which this analysis is based are the family portraits of Pollito and Juany (see **Figures 5 and 6**):

Olga, I suppose that the [picture] you chose was the one that arrived second. I mean the one where there is a transsexual holding the arm of a mulatto, both accompanied by the mum of one of them and another guy standing [...] I think it is a good picture to represent the new and controversial theme of your text, although I don't think that it is the most appropriate theme for a cover ... In reality, none of these pictures seem adequate as representations of Cuban society and its contemporary culture. Although from the three pictures I would have preferred the dull one where there is a father and his adult son. The important

thing, in my opinion, is that people who know nothing about Cuba and are contaminated by simplistic propaganda feel compelled to read more about our reality of poor people who struggle to live **B**

I must admit that this conversation came as a bit of a ‘shock’. Afterwards, however, I came to understand that by taking the trans subject out of the family closet my work was perceived as doing politics for ‘ideological purposes’ (Rose, 2010).

B’s statement came from an institutional power position and the patriarchal patronising tone of this conversation illustrated this. This was so, for example, when **B** noted that ‘[...] it is a good picture’ for the ‘new and controversial theme of’ ... ‘your’... ‘text’, but those photos are not ‘the most appropriate’ to represent a family. For **B**, the problem was not the photo but what it was framed around. **B** initially ‘approved’ the picture of the two male figures, rather than the photo showing a woman with three young males. What disqualified the latter was the transsexual and a mulatto figure. Additionally, by holding the mulatto’s arm the trans person was becoming a sexualised body. I was assuming that these images were representative of a shift regarding gender and sexuality in Cuba. Ironically, it seemed as though one thing was exploring this ‘new’ matter as a separate issue and another was indicating that these pictures were embodying the Cuban family. I argue that, for **B**, these images function only as a ‘particular kind of family’, maybe a queer family but not a ‘normal’ one. Reflecting on the above conversation, it seemed as though ‘particular’ people represented a ‘particular form of family in particular way’ (Kuhn, 1995). Below, and as part of this debate, was my response to **B**:

I understand and respect your point of view and your frankness [...] The photo depicts a family, and this is what I see. A Cuban mother with her children. The mum, like one of her children, is a health assistant and a State-recognised worker. The other ‘dull’ photo depicting a father and his adult son is another family made up of two brothers, and the one who looks like an adult son is a 67-year-old trans man who has worked in a factory for more than 40 years and who is known and respected by the whole province. Summing up, poor and marginalised people who are struggling to live, like any other Cuban (Olga, 2017)



Figure 5 Oral History Issue. Autumn 2017

For the participants, and for me, these images might seem to be a ‘valid’ representation of their family. But for some viewers, as in the case of *B*, these photos do not depict family portraits because the visible trans subject is framed alongside the other heteronormative subjects. Therefore, how might the participants (trans or not) respond, knowing that their photographs do not classify as family pictures? *B*’s email made me aware of the power of family photographs to challenge traditional patriarchal

perceptions of gender and create new forms of representation within the family, ‘beyond the rigid definition of the modern nuclear family’ (Chambers).

‘We have no way of knowing definitively...but there is more to the image than meets the eye’ says Halberstam, in her analysis of Diane Arbus’ 1965 *Friends in Central Park* photographs (Halberstam, 2013: 180). Here she refers to how photographers have to use a variety of visual strategies in order to represent the ‘multiple meaning of kinship, identity and relationality within the queer context’. I tried to play around with this complexity, while stating that my portraits were about families, and about their experience with gender transition. I query a focus on transition as a contemporary, individual process, in order to locate it in personal and family histories beyond the singularly imagined trans-subject. However, while this project shows transition as part of family arrangements, I do not know whether this ‘specific’ household is a queer family, but it seemed to me that because of their sense of cohesion they were functioning as a family. Therefore, in these photographs the ‘manifest is the message’⁴⁰. All the people depicted in these photographs were living together as a family and were depicted as such. However, as shown in their visual and oral narratives, they did not perceive and experience family in the same way. In this sense, family portraits may open up other ways of representing and conceiving trans experience. But what constitutes a family photograph? Is it the subjects’ kinship and love connection, as in Nan Goldin’s portraits? Or is it a domestic drama, as claimed by Nick Waplington? Or perhaps a ‘referential figure’ in an interior setting, as claimed by Richard Billingham?

5.4.1 Whose family?

This section draws on ‘Who’s looking at the family?’ an exhibition selected by Val Williams, Carol Brown and Brigitte Lardinois that was held at the Barbican in London in 1994 and, specifically, on the analysis of two UK-based photographers, Nick Waplington and Richard Billingham, because they were located in what is now my second home – England. I am going to discuss here three works as relevant to my analysis of family portrait. Their relevance is not necessarily about colour, large format

⁴⁰ See Halberstam (2015), ‘*Empire State Building wedding photographs*’, *Photoworks: photography, art, visual culture*, Issue 20, *Family Politics*. (pp179-187)

or technicality but about the way in which these artists explore the concept of family and how this is intertwined with class representation. As mentioned earlier, living in England for fifteen years has enabled me to have some understanding of social class and how it affects every level of society, including the way art is produced, distributed and consumed. Contemporary visual representations and interpretations of the family are consciously, or otherwise, also mediated by class.

Richard Billingham portrayed his family in their council flat in the West Midlands between 1990 and 1996, and his photobook *Ray's a Laugh* (2000) is the result of this work. For most art critics, Billingham's work is read as 'political art or reality-drama distraction'⁴¹, but he opposes all political and social explanations, claiming that his purpose was to analyse the human figure within interior space. As Billingham has explained many times, his photos were never intended to be presented as photography but as painting, however it was as photography that these family narratives were known. Billingham's aims for the project are described below:

I want to portray my childhood as it was, without any of those stereotypes or clichés that you find. I think by reconstructing my memories as authentically as I can, I'll get past that and hopefully make something truthful⁴².

Richard Billingham's *Ray's a Laugh* family photographs were labelled as 'candid snapshots, depicting his parents' daily lives in a raw, intimate, touching and often uncomfortably humorous'⁴³. I agree that they represent an intimate and domestic family space. However, the connection and closeness with his subjects (his parents) is questioned, because of the way in which they were framed. Billingham wanted to portray his childhood memories without any 'stereotypes or clichés'. But to me, the class generalisation implicit in his work states the contrary. It implies that he was 'capturing the essence of the working class in Britain', as is usually claimed about his work⁴⁴. I argue that while this family narrative might be representative of some domestic settings across the UK, labelling it as a specific type of social class assumes

⁴¹ See Outi Remes (2007), Billingham's family series is often seen as a representation of poverty, even as a 'human catastrophe'. originally appeared in Afterimage, at <http://www.americansuburbx.com/2010/04/theory-reinterpreting-unconventional.html>

⁴² <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/29898/1/capturing-the-essence-of-working-class-britain-on-screen>

⁴³ Outi Remes (2007)

⁴⁴ Gamble, I (2016). Capturing the essence of working class Britain on screen . Arts+CultureLightbox http://www.errataeditions.com/author_billingham_1a.html

that ‘working-class families’ behave and live in certain ways. This assumption positioned his work as a depiction of otherness even within his own familial setting. The images and the text accompanying them (‘dysfunctional parents, alcoholic father, messy council flat, large mother’) gave the spectator the chance to express the dislike they might feel toward a particular social class or, as Billingham claimed, made it more difficult to see the ‘beauty’ of his interior images (see **Appendix 9-B**).

After I did the family pictures, I soon realised that people liked the family pictures for reasons that I never intended There are very few people, I think, that get beyond the subject matter and can identify the artist’s intention They just like to look at my mum’s tattoos or the stains on the wallpaper or the dirty floor.

We are so used to judging at first glance, that most of the time this makes it impossible for us to see the entire frame. Billingham’s images can look surreal because of the context and the social expectation, but they are ideal in the sense that they portray a family that still belongs to somewhere. We, as viewers, bring our own preconceptions and stereotypical ideas about family life, together with Billingham’s own perceptions of his parents. For the spectator, this moment might be framed just as a social failure. However, as Kuhn states in ‘*Family snap*’, the struggle is in how family pictures can show us our past, but the way we use them is really about today, then she continues), there can be no last word about any photographs. For Outi Remes, Billingham’s work does not represent the typical family album, because of the lack of poses in his photographs. I would add that, not being able to pose takes away from the subject the chance to choose what of their appearance to show or hide, or what part of their social and personal lives they want to make public or not. The same might be applied then to Nick Waplington’s *Living Room* (1986-91) series of family portraits.

What is remarkable about Waplington, is the special way in which the intimate became something public... It is obvious that Nick [...] knows and loves the friends he has photographed (Berger, 2013)⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ Berger J. (2013). *Understanding a Photograph*. 1st ed. New York: Aperture Foundation. *John Berger, Living Room, 1991*

While I was struck by Waplington's daily depiction of the domestic realm, I was intrigued by the way intimacy was portrayed. It seems as though the people portrayed have never had the chance to sit and pose for a family photograph, or maybe they have never been asked. Waplington's work, as in Billingham's social accounts, is identified as an exploration of the daily struggles of the working-class in 'England'. However, considering the four years Waplington spent photographing his subjects, I wonder what difference it would have made if we had the names of those depicted in *Living Room* photographs? If we had access to other personal information, would that allow the viewer to have a different insight and a more thoughtful understanding of the subjects' lives? See Appendix 9-A.

Paraphrasing Waplington's words about the catalogue of *Who's Looking at the Family?*, he said that if something was absent in the exhibition it was the representation of other 'alternative' family groups. 'I am struck by the traditional nature of what the exhibition considered a family to be' said Waplington (2013: 93), while alleging that it might be one of the reasons why Nan Goldin's alternative family work or that of other artists working with non-traditional notions of family were absent from the exhibition (Waplington, 2013: 93). Even when Waplington and Billingham were not perceived as representative of the 'ordinary family' because of their 'working-class framework', their work was still classified as family album because of the nuclear domestic setting of parents, partners and children. And maybe, as Waplington suggested, it was the reason for the 'absence' of Goldin's alternative family photographs.

The last work to be analysed in connection with my own work is Nan Goldin's, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986), also because of her close relationship with her inner circle of family and friends. This body of photographs is about gender politics and people who tell their own stories in their very particular way. Most of Goldin's portraits depict interiors (domestic space, clubs), with people connected to her, mostly groups of friends who she considers her family. The use of flash is characteristic of her work. Goldin's work challenges the heteronormative nuclear representation of family and suggests the possibilities of 'new models' of family representation and the statement that nothing is less natural than the family. My portrait photographs, while technically composed and carefully framed, still embraced Goldin's ways of capturing love,

atmospheres and life. Putting it in Goldin's words, the people depicted in my photographs are my friends, these are my family and 'there is no separation between me and what I photographing' Goldin (1991). As with the works of Nan Goldin and Zanele Muholi, I also portrayed the intimate life experiences of my close non-binary friends and family. However, it was only their family portraits that I decided to display publicly, because my focus was on transgender subjectivity in relation to other beings. As I have explained previously, the more personal photographs of the participants are included in my photobook. Still, this thesis' main body of work is created against the background of the seemingly nuclear family.

Chapter 6 Using family oral histories within a creative and critical practice project

This section analyses the process of producing the family portraits, videos and other visual materials, and its creative critical outcome through the exhibition/installation and photobook. It explores how creative and visual participatory research is done and how the knowledge produced by it contributes to generating new spaces for gender difference within the seemingly heterosexual family. It also includes a reflection on the audience in relation to these new types of 'queer' family photograph.

A number of themes were gathered from the interviews, as the eight families that participated in this project recounted passages of love, persecution, resistance, admiration, adoration, recognition, reconciliation, precaution, healing, resilience and hope. Their testimonies are reflections of many hidden and silenced topics in Cuban life. Before the 'new sexual and gender revolution' everything was sensitive and never spoken of in the official pressor in the family. The memories are filled with experiences of racism, abandonment (as children), societal rejection, HIV, internalised homophobia, transphobia, jail, sex work, family prejudice and rejection, family acceptance and support, relationships between parents/siblings/twins/partners, relationships with the researcher, conservatism regarding stereotypical male roles and female roles, and emigration. Alongside these experiences was the presence and effect of the government, through the CDRs and the PCC, on Cuban family life and, later, CENESEX and Mariela Castro's role in participants' lives. Underneath all this, is portraiture of fragmented families, testimonies waiting to be heard one day in the voices of their own

protagonists. Furthermore, this research was an opportunity for these stories, which have been ‘hidden from this chapter of Cuban history’, to come to light.

As seen in the above paragraph, it would have been very difficult to depict these issues using only still photography. Therefore, I explored them through a range of creative alternatives and by using media that best supported these families’ stories. So, alongside photography, I used video and written text to convey these meanings. As a result, the outcomes of this study are materialised through a photographic exhibition, in conjunction with a video installation and photobook. This project highlights the complexity of gender variant representation. The need for gender clarification ‘makes visuality a highly unstable medium for the representation of queerness’ (Halberstam, 2013: 180). Gender, like race and sexuality, is salient as a challenging category. Consequently, using only still images to explore this topic would have provided only one side of the story and have explored gender transition by focusing only on the non-binary subject. This is why my target household was the nuclear, seemingly heteronormative, family.

6.1 The family portrait

I consider my family to be not only those people who are blood relations, but those who I love and care for and who love me?⁴⁶.

Similarly to Halberstam’s (2013) analysis of Landreth’s photographs, I tried to create a visual landscape from the relationships that transgender people forge with other human beings, such as family and friends. As mentioned earlier, the family of origin was the initial focus of my research, in order to explore the participants’ history in relation to the closet of the family and the Cuban State. However, the participants chose who they considered to be their family, and explained why. The majority based their selection not necessarily on blood relations but on relationships of caring and support, wherever this came from. However, the mother figure was central in all the family contexts. Therefore, these criteria were the ‘family stamp’ used to frame these family portraits, and they covered all kinds of family. These family photographs were not intended to depict traditional roles or to frame masculinity versus femininity. Nor do they try to

⁴⁶ Interview with Alejandro. Gillian’s brother at their home. Havana. 2015

impose on the viewer any symmetrical or asymmetrical representation of ‘happy family’ spaces. Here, queering the family frame was not only about directing the focus onto the non-binary gender subject in their family context, but about locating the transition experience in relation to everyone in the family.

Some blood relations were living in the same domestic space but were not part of the participants’ ‘chosen family’. The families’ photographs were produced taking into account the particularities of each family. In the context of taking family portraits, the process involved a participatory approach, in which transgender participants were asked to decide the place and space they wanted to be positioned in, in relation to their house, their objects and their family members. These families came from different economic and social levels, which was reflected in their different standards of living. The interviews were my first ‘sketches’ for these families’ portraits.

6.1.1 The complexity of representing others

The first questions with which I confront myself each time I direct the camera toward others are, ‘Why do I want to take this photograph?’ What is it that is so important, challenging or fascinating that needs to be framed? How can I represent the way other people experience their own gender identity? Frankly, I do not have the answers, yet I placed myself as the ‘other’ through the heteronormative family space. I located my gendered and sexed self in this transition process as a conscious standpoint, by analysing my relationship to the participants’ experiences and by reflecting on the way I reacted to and negotiated my way through the experience of gender transition. As a photographer, my approach was not to reinforce a disconnection in which, paradoxically, the closet became a safe space for me as a researcher while attempting to frame the other’s outing experience (Cox and McDonald, 2013); Sontag, 2003). My focus was on the heteronormative family as a space where gendered differences take place. However, my research was open to all possibilities of different types of sexual and gender identity within the family (Weston, 1991; Watney, 1997).

6.2 Acceptance and negotiation through portraits

All the subjects were in their family space. Despite being connected to them in their domestic space, I was an outsider. While the interviews were taking place, the camera was also there listening to the conversation. It was observing and waiting, getting ready to capture that *decisive moment*. There are eight family portraits. I did only two or three photo-shoots for each family. The reason for this was not only the discipline I had acquired using traditional film photography for many years in Cuba in times of scarcity, but also because these portraits were taken in very intimate spaces, created after a few hours of oral history interviews. My aim was to capture that instance of connection and the feeling of belonging among other human beings within a particular physical space. I was aware of how the photographic portrait is one of the most problematic areas of photography because at ‘virtually every level, and within every context, the portrait photograph is fraught with ambiguity’ (Clarke, 1992: 101). I argue that the photographer’s objective position and their subjectivity is also part of this ambiguity.

In Western societies when we are photographed as a family, the social expectation is that people group together, pose and smile (or not) (Hirsh, 2002). In the family portraits in this research, even though the participants were not necessarily smiling, their expressions were in line with the emotions that had emerged during the interviews. Still, as with any individual or group portrait, they also posed for these photographs:

... the pose is at once a conscious attitude and an involuntary expression of psychic dispositions and social norms. It can intimate the conditions under which the portrait was created, and it can bear signs of agreement as well as resistance (Holschbach, 2008: 172).

The analysis above is important for an understanding of how, for the participants, the act of getting together and posing for their portraits was not only connected to their sense of personal and collective appearances (Badger, 2007), but also might have implied a sense of belonging, a human and social standing, as individuals and as family. Furthermore, it was another way to be perceived and recognised as a person at all (Holschbach, 2008: 174). Because of the constrained domestic spaces, the camera was very close to my subjects, but still the subjects’ familiarity, plus the rapport and complicity gained through the interviews, allowed the participants to feel calm and

relaxed. Still, these portraits have the theatricality and the posing characteristic that accompanies most portrait photographs, as in Muholi in *Faces and Phases 3 Years, 3 Continents*, (beginning in 2007), using only natural light and without any photo manipulation (see **Appendix 9-D**).

I had control of the camera, the technical details and the settings, but I had to work with the light provided in the house and by the circumstances. In these homes, the lights were as diverse as human life. I understood that there was no ideal light, therefore my challenge was to understand that every light and every shadow found in those transgender spaces were telling their own stories. Using external elements (such as the simple act of lighting the scene by adding a reflector or diffuser), would only have destroyed the sense of everyday situations that as a researcher and photographer I wanted to recreate. But also in a subtler way, as an outsider, this was a form of acceptance and negotiation within a daily space unfamiliar to me. Choosing not to add any unfamiliar elements to this space other than my 10-year-old camera and my tripod, enabled me to depict a more ‘natural’ domestic setting, while reframing a closer relationship between the participants and their homes and objects. I did not allow myself to manipulate or edit the images afterwards. My key reflection at this moment involved thinking through how to accept the family dynamic by letting go of the desire to change others. By agreeing to be framed as a family, each participant (trans or not) ‘disrupts a consensus of representation’, while challenging the viewer to account for every part of the politics of the photographs, involving my own act of looking (Newbury, 2011: 152-155).

Within the limits of their home, each family decided the location they wanted their portrait to be taken in; in many cases, it was the living room. Universally, this is the space used as a meeting point for family and friends. No one chose the bedroom for the family photographs, but they did use it as a place for more intimate personal portraits. Each portrait narrates a story in relation to gender transition; each family represented a new possibility for an exploration, to find answers, or not, to my research questions. So, reading these images in conjunction with the interviews added to the process in which the photographs were taken ? a sense of intimacy and trust. The participants’ gazes are direct and offer a powerful dignity. Drawing on Jo Spence’s work in collaboration with Rosy Martin (1985), I identified this process as photo therapy:

...lest looking beyond the surface of the image, or outside the frame, might upset the delicate balance of agreement on which [...] the narrative of the family rests (Hirsh, 1997: 107)

These images were about ‘shared stories’ but, as suggested by Hirsh (1997), this ‘complicity’ is far from ideal. While most of the family members were happy to be included in the family portrait, some chose not to be photographed. An example of this was the partners of two transgender participants, who inhabited the same house and had been in relationships with them for more than 15 years. While they were not included in the participants’ family testimonies and did not appear in the family photographs, they were still part of the family dynamic and performativity. Even when they were visually out of the family frame, they contributed to the project by supporting their family’s participation. For example, in both cases they opened the front door for me and prepared the family dinner while the interviews were taking place. I interpreted this as another way of being part of the project as a family member. However, this raises questions about the visual representation of family – who is in the frame? Who is behind the frame or getting out of the frame? I have to ask whether my participants’ family portraits are, in fact, definitive proof of their family relationships.

6.3 Photobook

‘*Unapologetic take*’ is the title of the photobook I produced to represent another window through which to explore the transgender participants’ lived experiences. The intention of putting these specific photographs in the album is to reflect on the different ways of being in relation to the experience of gender transition and home. Here, the trans subject is located within themselves and in relation to space and time (Halberstam, 1990). I intended to use text to empower the audience. By placing ordinary, banal and seemingly uninteresting interview extracts, I tried to disrupt the body-oriented narrative that often accompanies trans representation. It was not my intention to lessen their daily struggles and experiences, but I wanted to confront the reader with the trans person’s quotidian life, as one that is just like everyone else’s. This is in line with the art of Lorna Simpson (1992), Melanie Friend (1999; 2007; 2010) and Zanele Muholi (2004; 2010; 2014), whose work on ‘problematic’ and sensitive topics (for example race, refugees, gender and sexuality) employs text alongside images to ‘empower’ their subjects and dislocate the objectification that often occurs in photographic portraiture by

controlling the gaze through the set-up. I also wanted this photobook to function as a 'new type of album', as in the case of Jo Spence, and as stated by Dennett (2013). I sought to 'include under-represented aspects' of Cuban family life, such as gender variance and its impacts on the family.

While the photobook preserves the family frame and narratives, the images include a focus on the trans participants' personal accounts as individuals. It is made up of 38 colour photographs, accompanied by interview extracts, to orient the reader and draw their attention to each participant's individuality and subjectivities. Unlike the family portraits (taken in their living rooms or by their front doors), these personal photographs were taken in different domestic locations, and in ways that reveal the relationship between each participant and myself as photographer. Most of these images were taken weeks, months or years after the family photographs. The photobook is also reframed as a photo album, as it includes underrepresented aspects of Cuban family life.

As an individual, I was there with my camera to learn how to position my body in relation to theirs, and to understand how my representation of their experiences is a mirror to my own way of negotiating the space of gender and the family. As Bernard (1971) cited by Riggins (2012) suggested, the 'relationship embodied in domestic objects can make a great contribution to the sociology of the family and gender' (Riggins, 2012: 109). Drawing on *Fieldwork in the Living Room* (Riggins, 1994), I also asked my participants for their permission to take photographs of their 'personal' domestic objects in order to explore the meaning of material artefacts in their everyday life. These objects did not necessarily have a specific functionality but they were there as an account of participants' self-presentation (1994). The objects presented in this book also had a story to tell, which might have coincided, or not, with the stories told by the participants.

6.4 Photography exhibition and installation

My research intended to explore spectators own relation with the experience of gender transition, and therefore the gallery served as a space for the audience's self-reflection. I aimed to analyse how the audience responded to these family portraits, and their relationship with the space. There are elements that we recognise and associate when we think about a specific, place, country or culture. For the exhibition, I recreated a room scene with those elements that, when I think about Cuba, make sense to me and to

the participants as Cubans, for example, the armchair, and the Soviet-made blender and iron (see **Appendix 11-D**).

The photographic exhibition was intended to show nine 60 x 26-inch colour photographs, which represent the eight families whose stories were narrated in this collaborative research project. The photographs were directed at viewers who were unfamiliar with the experience of gender transition. Each portrait narrates a story in relation to gender transition; each family represents a possibility for the exploration involved in finding answers, or not, to my research question. While looking at these photographs, the audience is invited to bear witness to a particular way of experiencing gender within a family setting, beyond the heteronormative gaze about what is meant by the ‘queer family’, or visual anthropological and cultural assumptions in relation to what is meant by ‘the Cuban family’. Overall, these images are about the celebration of being alive in these very specific moments, about being human and being among friends and family, and caring for each other alongside the harsh material conditions in which the narratives took place. The challenge was how to embody this knowledge in the exhibition space. What details should I hold on to? How could I give voice to these photographs? How could I turn them into a continuous conversation, so that this dialogue would never end?

Framing the prints and finding ways to hang and display them was another element to take into consideration after taking the family portraits. It was not only a matter of reducing the costs, but of considering the space available and how it dictated the solution. I wanted to hang large, heavy pictures as a way of taking the family stories out of the closet; I wanted to use raw wood to negotiate the space within the photographs. Using wood in its natural form was a statement about how we construct ‘differences’ as a natural process. I did not want to choose the ‘right’ colour to frame my photographs, neither did I want to justify that choice. It was my understanding that accepting wood’s own irregularities would offer a sense of symbolic freedom in terms of what it means to be a person, a transgender person, a family. The floating framings, as many people refer to them, were used to provide a space of safety, as a way of acknowledging that we cannot escape from being framed by others. But, “*at the same time*” their irregularities depicted how these identities refused to be part of the static frame (see **Figure 7**).



Figure 6 The floating framing. Onca Gallery. Photo ©Olisam 2017

As part of the photographic exhibition, and as an extension of the family portrait, I decided to use an installation to recreate the living room scenario in which the participants and visitors encountered (or did not encounter) each other as their gazes and voices coincided (Lutz, Collins, 1993), just as in any Cuban household. From the beginning of the exhibition design, I knew I wanted large-scale photographs to bring the viewer as far as possible into the participants' homes. I wanted the audience to be able to interact with and immerse themselves in what could be their own reality, if only for a moment. By opening up their home, the participants are coming out as a family to show that therein is nothing to declare. They would also be able to 'try' on some of the domestic objects and accessories made, used and donated by the research participants, such as a fan, shoes and bracelets. Also, as part of the exhibition installation, there was a suit (**see Figure 8**). It was tailored by my friend Ariel, the gatekeeper of the project.

The suit was made for a drag queen performance and was part of Ariel's journey within this project. It was used only once and then donated for this installation. Ariel, like many Cuban people, wanted to travel and go abroad, and sending Maya's suit (Maya is Ariel's alter ego) was a way of travelling for him.



Figure 7 Maya's suit installation. Photo ©Olisam 2017

Most Cuban homes are painted green, so I used a green curtain to simulate this⁴⁷. The curtains; my house curtains. One of my friends told me 'you can use your Cuban curtains, the ones you have hanging in your window'. And I said, 'Oh yes, the ones in

my window, I will use them. I like the idea, but they are not Cuban. I bought them at a car boot sale in Brighton marina'. I used these curtains because it appears that they are interpreted and read as belonging to my home country, maybe because of the colour of the fabric or the vibrant/cheerful flowery forest design. This is not to suggest that certain curtains represent certain countries, but I do like this textile identity 'mistake' and I took advantage of it to adorn the wall of this exhibition and to recreate a living room scenario.

6.5 On Video

The video was part of the same family narrative as the photographs and the installation. It served as a space to glimpse and listen to different aspects of the participant families' dynamics and gave additional insight into particular family conversations. For the installation, I was not interested in using projections, because they do not provide the audience with the same level of intimacy as the TV. Hence, I used television, because of its universal status as part of intimate everyday life. It is a medium that is used by all categories of family, within which its function is the same – entertainment. Despite the introduction of new technologies into Cuban homes, television continues to be the medium around which the family gathers together, and it still functions as a close site for the family (Spigel, 1992). Global and national social changes are explored, consumed and negotiated through the television. While challenging the nuclear family's views on gender, sexualities and the family, the TV challenged ideas on families and gender and as Spigel refers as the change occurred in the domestic ideology of the family.

The 'Caribe' TV model was among the most used for the majority of homes in Cuba. Bringing that setting here allowed me to bring the audience closer to the Cuban home. However, for the 'foreign' person the sound is abstract (if they don't speak Spanish), making the viewer an outsider to this intimate family relationship.

These families are not representative of all families in Cuba, but their stories, voices and silences are part of three generations of Cubans from within the revolutionary period. By listening to their thoughts, hearing them laugh or cry, feeling their happiness or frustration, the audience is in a position to make the '*border*' (between them and the

people portrayed) either invisible or stronger as a marker of difference. The video subtitles helped ease communication, not only across the language barrier but also in terms of cultural ideas about home and the family. Its narrative might have also served to disrupt the fantasy of the 'other' by dismantling heteronormative and colonial preconceptions of what we mean by 'family'. The sound of participants' voices not only functioned as an aesthetic part of the living room installation; they also became a social, political and cultural extension of the family portrait narrative. By challenging contemporary visual representations of 'queer domestic space' the video reflects queer families not as a sexual or gendered partnered arrangement. Nor does it use a patronising frame in which the non-binary subject needs to be 'supported' and understood by their heteronormative relatives and friends; rather, it reflects a space cohabited by multiple gender identities, as well as race, sexuality, religion and all socially constructed identities.

6.6 The audience's responses to the family portraits

While thinking about the saying, 'A picture tells a thousand words', I reflected on how it relates to my photographs. How many opinions could arise from these images? What assumptions and expectations can be conveyed by these family portraits? For Halberstam, 'queer photography, to the extent that it has dwelled upon gender variant imagery, has always run the risk of being unreadable' (Halberstam, 2013: 1980). Framing binary people within a space of gender transition was my way of making these images readable, while challenging the heteronormative people on their own prejudices and gendered life. The spectators' closets are ones that were consciously explored as part of the dynamics of outing. Global shifts in gender and sexuality also affected the way in which spectators negotiated their masculinities and femininities in the gallery space. Everyone in the audience was welcome to bring their own ideas about gender transitioning, about family and about Cuba into the exhibition space; they were also invited to renegotiate them. Below is an example of one of the many uneasy reactions I have witnessed while sharing my work with a diverse audience.

An artist friend came to visit me in my flat in Brighton. He was accompanied by his female lover, who was also a friend of mine. On the table were some prints of the family portraits that I was working on at that moment. My friend picked up one of them

and seemed very pleased with it. However, before he even considered looking through the rest of the photographs, he wanted to know if those depicted in the first photo were men. Questions about the ‘original’ sex or gender of the people depicted in these family portraits seem to be a precondition for the viewer to relax and enjoy the art work. It seemed that the ‘before and after’ gender transition narrative(consciously avoided in my photographs) help the spectators to navigate in and out of the closet within the exhibition context.

I argue that the need to know who is who in non-gender binary family photographs is not mere human curiosity; it seems to serve as a self-affirmation of one’s own sexual and gender identity. In this sense, our own insecurities place us, the viewer, in a very vulnerable situation. I am lucky enough, most of the time, to navigate in a more fluid context in terms of sexuality and gender. However, the people asking questions and wanting to know ‘*who is who*’ were not necessarily only those from a heteronormative audience. Being part of an academic audience versed in gender and sexuality did not exonerate them from asking the same question, as has occurred repeatedly during presentations of my work, be it here in the UK, or in Barcelona, Havana or Sao Paulo. It seems that we need to be sure that we are reacting in the ‘right way’ with the ‘right gender’, and this occurs with everyone, trans and non-trans people. Is it that we are not allowed to enjoy and relax until we are certain enough that what we are seeing is what ‘it is’? In the gallery space, the need to place the subject as the ‘other’ for us to feel comfortable and exercise our right to the gaze, means that we reinvest in the illusion of gender. Thus, considering the cultural assumption of the normal body, the normal hair, the normal skin colour, the normal gender, the normal sex, and so on, I argue, as shown above, that most of these transphobic reactions are part of an internalised mechanism of social and cultural notions of body gender representation, rather than acts of hateful expression. So, based on this I have explored how the audience is also part of the transgression, even from their own space of discomfort.

6.7 Reflections on the family portrait

While looking back at these family portraits, I realised that this photographic work is about myself, as a human, and my very own experience of family, gender, sexuality, race, class, religion and culture. It was not necessarily about empowering the subject of

the photographs. When I reached their doors, in spite of all the hardship in their lives, they let me in. They were empowered already. They allowed us, the viewers, to experience the many ways of being a family and of kinship in relation to gender. So, if my research is to endorse the notion of empowerment, it is located in the audience – that is us – and not necessarily in the subjects depicted in these photographs.

On reflection, the participants never asked me for a family portrait. I was the one with the personal urgency and the academic ‘necessity’. However, once they were in front of the camera, these photographs were a means for them to say, this is us, we function as a family. Asking friends, colleagues and audiences in general their views about these portraits, about the ways of representing gender transition families, was a self-conscious, liberating, and empowered act. I could not see myself asking the participants what they thought about being the subjects of these photographs. My research questions were answered through a visual dialogue – a conversation, exchanges of life experiences. I wondered what it would be like for me to do a portrait of the royal family and to ask them what they thought about it in order to ‘give’ voice, or to listen to their voices. For me, the participants’ photographs are their statement. They agreed to share their life experiences and made it possible for me to grow as a person while producing my thesis.

The gift of this journey has been to see the change of attitude of some family members and friends who are socially classified as ‘heteronormative’ people. Many of them have thanked me for this research and for the positive impact it has had on their life. When I reflect on any impact that my work might have already had, I think about a friend of mine living in Southampton, who called to thank me for helping her understand that because her son dresses in a girl’s dress does not mean that her son wants to be a girl. She said that through this work/project she has understood that it is better not to try to place any meaning on any dressing or undressing activities that her son does. Another friend told me about how this project, and all the conversations we have had in relation to it, had made him realise how much he took his masculinity for granted. ‘I never thought about how easy it was for me as a person born male’, he said.

Also, Omar the driver, thanks to whom this project travelled from house to house within Havana and the surrounding areas, reflected on how prejudiced he was toward transgender people from our generation (those aged over 40), because of their lack of instruction and piecemeal education (considering the high level of education per capita in Cuba). He said that, thanks to this journey, he now understood ‘why most transgender people have this low level of scholarship; it is because of the rejection and discrimination they experienced that forced them to abandon school’. Another moment that allowed me to understand the impact of this project was when I read some of the feedback comments left after part of this work was shown at ONCA Gallery, Brighton (see Figure 9).

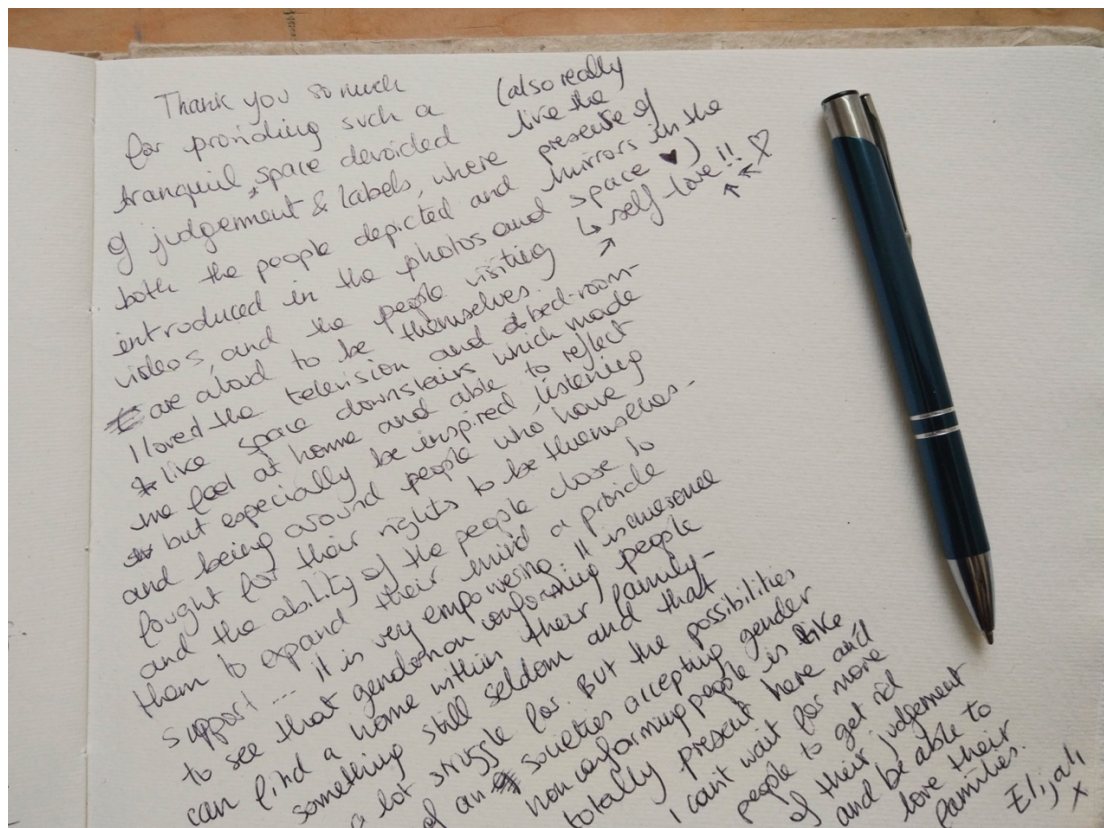


Figure 8 Elijah. ONCA gallery 2017

Chapter 7 Conclusion

This thesis was based on an analysis of participatory research methods that assembled participants' visual narratives and lived experiences through family portraits and oral histories and it included an analysis of my own narrative. Overall, this project is about framing life, humanity, being together and working in the context of the Cuban

Revolution and the post-Revolution toward the category of ‘family’ and the ways in which experiences of gender transition are shared. Photography continues to be an important tool to explore the dynamic of familiar and domestic contexts where gender transitioning is happening. The production of the participants’ family portraits and their testimonial evidence ruptures not only ideas of family brought about by the Revolution, but also the way in which gender is assimilated and represented within the Cuban family. It also ruptures imaginaries of families produced by normative thinking that locates transgender-experiencing subjects outside of the family, or as a problematic object within it. With this study, I intended to work against both these framings as a way to reconcile family analytically, creatively and practically in my participants’ lives, and in my own. In this sense, this is a project of reconciliation, but one that recognises that none of us are ever reconciled, because we are in the constant flux of becoming and unbecoming together. The research has evidenced that visual participatory research and the knowledge produced by it contributes to generating new spaces for sexual and gender difference within the seemingly heterosexual family.

7.1 Autobiographical reflections: transitioning through my lens

People are more similar than they’ll ever be different and we should live and let live. Creating special protected classes is not the answer and neither is creating special discriminated classes of people (Feinberg, 1998).

It was easier to write the proposal for my thesis and to formulate my research questions than to decide which interview questions it was appropriate to ask my participants. It was also a challenge to identify what was different in their lives in comparison to my own. But once I was placed in front of my research participants I understood there was ‘nothing to declare’. In the same way as any and every other individual, they are simply people living their lives and struggling to be recognised as human beings. They are living in a similar way, with similar values or prejudices to everyone else. I could not see them as a minority, nor see any major ‘problem’ other than our own prejudices, ignorance and intolerance. The participants in this project simply know how they want to live their lives because they have their own embodied (Stryker, 2006). This was a key reflection and finding in and of itself, given the risk of ‘othering’ research participants that can occur even within sensitive participatory or ethnographic methodologies (Krumer and Sidi 2012).

When I began this project, I was clear that I only wanted to explore gender identity, despite acknowledging the direct relationship between the sexed body and gender, and the way in which these are intertwined. However, I was not prepared to be confronted with the fact that the ‘surgical/hormonal process’, while it may not have been my main focus, was nevertheless key for some of my participants. The challenge was to understand that the preoccupation with genitalia – as a defining element of gender subjectivity – is relevant not only to transgender people but to everyone else. Individual gender transitioning implicates the entire family in a voluntary or involuntary process of transition.

Class, just as race and religion, was playing its part in the domestic spaces where gender transition was happening. However, it was my understanding that by centring these social categorisations, the family photographs could be read only as representative of a particular social class, rather than providing a better understanding of participants’ own family relationships within the transition process. So, considering the context in which my research was produced and consumed (that of a Western audience), I focused my lens on the human interactions that were happening in these domestic spaces in order to avoid the stereotypes that often accompany social and cultural categories. Consciously, I tried to avoid categorising the participants in relation to their sexuality, race or economic position. I was trying to explore whether the transgender person could *be read* as a family member, as a *person*, within the family portrait.

7.2 Challenging the heteronormative patriarchal family

Trans people have had to negotiate other physical and psychological spaces of belonging, or not, on seeing themselves deprived of their primary family context. But the trans person is part of this family dynamic in which everyone’s gender identity forms part of the gender diversity. I argue that trans people play their part in this family space, even from their place of exclusion. Empathising and portraying trans people as a ‘gender other’ or as isolated individuals functions as a wall to cover up the fact that they are already mothers, fathers, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces or nephews. Until now, like it or not, we all are, or have been, part of the heteronormative patriarchal family. Within their chosen family, trans people begin to experience new positive ways

of being with themselves at the same time as creating new dynamics of gender that challenge or reinforce the heterosexual model of family. I argue that these physical spaces, while they may be recognised socially and politically, in most cases are perceived out of otherness. From that place, as evidenced in Chapter 5 of my research, patriarchal heterosexuality does not feel necessarily threatened. Thus, it is my view that within the space of the inherited nuclear family we may be able to challenge the invisibility of diversities of gender, confront them and take on the responsibility that corresponds to each one of us. In this sense, the heteronormative family closet becomes an analytical device for expanding the conceptual frame of a queer family. I am proposing here that the Cuban family closet, and the opening of other closets, offers a viewpoint of social change.

7.3 Encountering and negotiating the closets

My work continues to be an investigation into/response to the cultural and political spaces that continue to frame my identity as a Cuban-born person working within an English framework. During my fieldwork, I realised that living outside of Cuba opened some doors for me and closed others. On the one hand, it placed me in a position of economic and social privilege with respect to my participants and this gave me advantages and the possibility of navigating outside of the political closet inside Cuba. On the other hand, it made it more difficult to navigate in the internal space when negotiating with institutional spaces inside Cuba and those involved in Cuban research internationally. With the advent of the current sexual revolution in Cuba, it was relatively easy to be out in terms of gender politics. For me, this offered the possibility of being able to reveal myself and allow my not-so-fixed gender identity to flow and mix with all of the infinitely dissimilar ways of expressing gender that I found along the way. In contrast to this, any discussion of the State and its family policy is still very limited and in this regard I am still moving in and out of the closet.

7.4 Contribution to research and main findings of the study

Relocating the experience of gender transition, not as an isolated individual experience but as a family dynamic, demonstrates its key role in providing an environment for the health and wellbeing of transgender people and their interrelationships. This research reveals the seemingly hetero family as a space for sexual and gender difference and

provides a significant strategy for rethinking queer family spaces, not as separate or subaltern but as implicated within seemingly normative family arrangements.

Transgender participants were not interested in talking about their past in relation to their gender identity. They were focused on their present and future life. They did not refer to their past as a positive event. They felt that every day was a struggle to be accepted by themselves and by others. During the interviews, the non-transgender participants never questioned their own gender identity. Their initial thoughts about participating in the research were to only ‘support’ their transgender member rather than to locate their own personal experience (struggles, frustrations, fears, self-acceptance...) in relation to their own gender identity and that of the person in transition. I aimed to reframe them, to position them and myself in relation to other participants’ experiences of gender identity transitioning. They took photographs of me, as well as of me and them together. Also, I did self-portraits with some of the participants. By taking photographs of themselves, the participants took me to spaces that were difficult for me to physically access, places such as workspaces, hospitals and more intimate domestic areas. Here I also became the photographic subject and the participants created a sort of auto-ethnography by documenting aspects of their lives, and in relation to the research project (Pink, 2001) (see **Appendix 10-B**).

Being transgender – understanding gender, as an issue of embodied social identity – is different from being non-heteronormative. Also, being trans does not mean that people are by default free of gender, racial and sexual prejudices. Almost all my participants (transgender people and their families) do not distinguish between sexuality and gender identity. Even so, it was helpful during this journey that people were willing to incorporate new ideas and, more importantly, that some were willing to confront their own prejudice about the sex-gender binary and separate it from sexuality. While most of them are not aware of these differences in theoretical terms, they all centre themselves nevertheless in the knowledge of who they are and what they want in their lives.

7.4.1 Other findings

In addition to the above, the research also produced interesting findings that, while not encompassed by the research questions, are equally important, as they arise from the

participants themselves. The discussion of sex-gender identity was not a sensitive topic for the participants, but stories about politics and historical State policies related to family and gender were extremely problematic and sensitive. The participants with HIV do not consider themselves to be ‘victims’ of the disease, but refer to the privileges they have attained by being reported as HIV positive. My work was focused on exploring gender roles and for this reason I did not ask questions specifically about HIV and AIDS. However, through people’s testimonies I was able to understand their close relationship with their families as people with the virus, and how they managed to obtain privileges within the family because of this. I also gained insight into the role of the health institutions in supporting people with HIV and/or AIDS. Non-transgender family members have little awareness of the significance of the struggles of transgender people to get through their everyday lives, even when caring and support were present in their domestic family life.

7.5 Reflections

Through my encounter with oral history I have returned to my camera and have been able to establish a more honest dialogue with the image. The participants were involved in the whole creative process, from the construction of the image to the editing stage and the dissemination; by doing this, their voices might return to the place where they were recorded. I think that only in this way will it be more difficult to decontextualise the image. ‘Reyita’, the character in Daisy Rubiera’s work (2011), is an example of how life stories reproduce the social and cultural environment of a particular period. I recognise that any interpretation of these life histories will depend on the subjectivity of those who listen, and therein lies the human responsibility and commitment for those of us who participated in the process of gathering these stories. As Clifford (2012) would say, the researchers’ own experiences and histories affect the way in which narratives are interpreted. However, regardless of the way in which the stories emigrate, or the kind of spaces in which they are represented and the number of times they are heard or not heard, I believe that at the moment they emerge to be told they have already walked a long road.

While these experiences cannot be extrapolated to a larger population, they have already had an effect on the people involved in this participatory project. The relationship I?

established with the participants allowed all of us a space of intimacy in which to explore the difficulties involved in gender transitioning and its relationship to memory, as shown by Gillian:

After knowing you for so long...This is a big deal for me and the fact you're doing this work which could help other families, who might be going through the same things. Such wonderful work can help alleviate so much pain that human beings go through. This work that you are doing is a very big thing (Gillian, 2014).

Gracias.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Certificate of Approval.



University of Sussex

Certificate of Approval	
Reference Number:	ER/OS81/1
Title Of Project:	Opening other Closets: A Visual Ethnography of Gender Roles and Social Change among Transgender People and their Families in Cuba.
Principal Investigator (PI):	Olga Saavedra Montes de Oca
Student:	Olga Saavedra Montes de Oca
Collaborators:	Supervisors - Boyce/Friend
Duration Of Approval:	n/a
Expected Start Date:	20-Jul-2014
Date Of Approval:	14-Apr-2014
Approval Expiry Date:	20-Jul-2015
Approved By:	Jayne Paulin
Name of Authorised Signatory:	Stephen Shute
Date:	23-Apr-2014

*NB. If the actual project start date is delayed beyond 12 months of the expected start date, this Certificate of Approval will lapse and the project will need to be reviewed again to take account of changed circumstances such as legislation, sponsor requirements and University procedures.

Please note and follow the requirements for approved submissions:

Amendments to protocol

- * Any changes or amendments to approved protocols must be submitted to the C-REC for authorisation prior to implementation.

Feedback regarding the status and conduct of approved projects

- * Any incidents with ethical implications that occur during the implementation of the project must be reported immediately to the Chair of the C-REC.

Feedback regarding any adverse and unexpected events

- * Any adverse (undesirable and unintended) and unexpected events that occur during the implementation of the project must be reported to the Chair of the Social Sciences C-REC. In the event of a serious adverse event, research must be stopped immediately and the Chair alerted within 24 hours of the occurrence.

Appendix 2 Oral History Authors' Agreement.



Oral History Journal
The British Library
96 Euston Road
London
NW1 2DB
journals@ohs.org.uk

ORAL HISTORY AUTHORS' AGREEMENT

Oral History is the journal of the UK Oral History Society. The Oral History Society is a membership organisation that seeks to promote the collection, preservation and use of recorded memories of the past. The Oral History Society Authors' Agreement and our approach to copyright reflects our interest in providing benefits to our members (through immediate and exclusive access to our publications both in print form and online via JSTOR) whilst also recognising the rights of authors to be able to share their own work. Once an article has been accepted for publication the author is asked to assign copyright in their article to the Oral History Society using this Agreement.

The Oral History Society's Authors' Agreement is the following:

Copyright

- This gives the Oral History Society the right to republish your work (e.g. in edited collections) and to keep any revenue generated to support the Oral History Society's activities. If we are going to republish your work we will make every effort to contact you.

Copies of your article

- On publication you will receive a PDF copy of your copy-edited and designed article by email.
- You will also receive two hard copies of the issue in which your article is published.

Self-publication and Institutional Repositories

- Once an article has been accepted for publication and an issue identified, authors are immediately free to publish the Word version of their article – before it was copy-edited – on their own websites or in their institutional repository. We ask that you fully reference this pre-published version and add a URL link to the *Oral History* journals section on the OHS website, website which gives advice on accessing the journal (www.ohs.org.uk/journal).
- There is a one year embargo on authors publishing the final PDF of the article as published on their own website or institutional repository. Again, we ask that you fully reference the published version and add a URL link to the *Oral History* section on the OHS website (www.ohs.org.uk/journal).

I understand the Authors' Agreement and assign copyright in my article to the Oral History Society. I agree to future correspondence from the Oral History Society and Journal editorial team regarding my article and possible future submissions.

Signed: OLGA

Name in block capitals OLGA LIDIA SAAVEDRA MONTES DE OCA Date: 06/07/2015

Address: FLAT3 131 DITCHLING RISE BN1 4QQ BRIGHTON

Email: os81@sussex.ac.uk

On behalf of the Oral History Society:

Signed: ELIZABETH

Name in block capitals LIZ ISON Date: 11/07/17

Please return by email to journals@ohs.org.uk

Or by post to: Editorial Assistant, Oral History Journal, The British Library, 96 Euston Road, London, NW1 2DB

Revised March 2015

Appendix 3 Information sheet

Information Sheet

Purpose of the Study: As part of the requirements for My Doctorate study at Sussex University, Department of Media Film and Music. I have to carry out a research study. The study is concerned with explore day-to-day experiences and relationship among transgender person an their family members.

What will the study involve?

It will be a collaboration intended to establish collaborative, portrait -photography project, trough life story interviews and examination of family albums. In the context of taking family portraits, the research process will involve the creation of a documentary and will involve a participatory approach where participants will decided how they want to be represented.

The research will be conducted in Havana and interviews taking place largely in family's homes. The interviews will take one hour.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been asked because you are specifically capacited and suitable to provide data for my study.

Do you have to take part?

No– participation is voluntary. You have to sign a consent form, and get to keep the information sheet and a copy of the consent form. You should have the option of withdrawing before the study commences (even if you have agreed to participate) or discontinuing after data collection has started. Your data also would be destroyed if you decided to let the project. As participants you have the right to see transcripts of interviews, to alter their content, provide additional information or clarification, or withdraw any information.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes. I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis. Any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the thesis will be entirely anonymous.

What will happen to the information, which you give?

I will take full responsibility at all times for making sure that any field notes, transcripts, audio or video files are managed and stored in a safe and secure place during and after fieldwork. I will be using a password-protected and encrypted hard drive accessible only by myself. The information you provide will only be used for the purposes of my research. The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. On completion of the thesis, they will be retained for a further six months and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results?

The results will be presented in the thesis and review by my supervisors, an external examiner. The thesis may be use by future research students, or may be published in a research journal. In the case of photos or video files, you are free to reject their use, any photo you take will be returned to you; photos will be anonymised so that no one else need know it was you who took it if you so wish. Due to ethical implications of featuring people in photos or film you need to provide informed consent for your image to be taken, or disseminated beyond you.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part. But it is possible that talking about your experience in this way may cause some distress.

What if there is a problem?

At the end of the interview I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. If you subsequently feel distressed, you should contact Dr Norma Gillard Psy.

Who has reviewed this study?

Ethical Review Application ER/OS81/1

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me:

Olga Lidia Saavedra Montes de Oca

Mobile: + 44 7864983416 Uk, and +5358180531

Email address. camelisam@yahoo.co.uk

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form overleaf.

Appendix 4 Semi-structure interviews question

The Research Context: The Family Home in Cuba.

Based on oral history interview methods, the questions were adapted taking into account the particularities of each family, and of each person. But the general semi-structure interviews questions were as follow:

1. Can you tell me your name, age and place of birth?
2. Can you tell me what for you is the family? Can you explain it to me?
3. Whom do you consider to be your family and why?
4. Could you tell me a story about your family when your transition stage began? What year was that?
5. Do you remember the place you were living, with whom and how were the first experiences?
6. Do you have any anecdote about how the transition was affecting you personally, as individual, as brother, son, daughter, mother, uncle, father etc.?
7. Did you understand what was happening? In which way, how you reacted? How you were affected?
8. Do you think that this transition has been a positive influence in your your life? In which way, why?
9. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix 5 Fieldwork period

Fieldwork period (July 8th –Sept 9th 2014 and Dic11 – Jan13th 2016) Location: Havana and Matanzas. Cuba

Participants	No.	No. Families	Focus groups (families)
Focus groups: transgender people and their family at different stages of personal, social and political transition. 8 families: mix gender, sexual, social, economic background. Age range: 25-80-year-old	25	8 Families	F1- 2 participants
			F2- 5 participants
			F3- 5 participants
			F4- 4 participants
			F5- 3 participants
			F6- 2 participants
			F7- 2 participants
			F8- 6 participants
Other participants not related to the families focus.	7	Gatekeeper, driver, 1 gender activist, 1 neighbour, 3 members of the researcher family.	
Total participants	32		

Methodology	Engagement
One –hour videotape Oral histories/ semi-structured qualitative interviews. (Memory image work)	8 Families
Digital camera interaction	4 families.
Looking at family photographs.	2 families
Photo elicitation	1 family.
Others type of interaction or engagement: sewing, writing, and performance.	1 participants /sewing 2 participants /writing 1 family/ performance
Other Videotape interviews include	Gatekeeper, driver, researcher some member of the community and the researcher's family.
Other observations in events beyond the interviews	Researcher's family, a neighbour and all transgender participants
Total of participants	33

Appendix 6 Consent Form

Consent Form

I.....agree to participate in Olga Lidia Saavedra Montes de Oca's research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with Olga to be video-recorded.

I give permission for my photographs to be taken by Olga.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

I agree to publication of my video/photographs.

I do not agree to publication of my video/photographs.

Signed.....

Date.....

Appendix 6 Consent Form Spanish version.

Consent Form given to participants. Spanish version

Yo.....estoy de acuerdo con el estudio de investigación de Olga Lidia Saavedra Montes de Oca. ☐

El propósito y la naturaleza del estudio me ha sido explicado por escrito. ☐

Yo estoy participando voluntariamente. ☐

Yo doy mi consentimiento para que la entrevista con Olga Saavedra sea grabada en video. ☐

Yo doy mi consentimiento para que Olga tome fotografías. ☐

Yo entiendo que puedo retirarme de la investigación, sin repercusiones en ningún momento, lo mismo antes de empezar o mientras yo estoy participando. ☐

Yo entiendo que puedo retirar mi permiso para usar mis datos dentro de las dos semanas después de la entrevista, en cuyo caso el material será eliminado. ☐

Yo entiendo que el anonimato será conservado en caso que así yo lo decida. ☐

Yo entiendo que extractos de mi entrevista pueden ser citados en la tesis y en cualquier publicación posterior, si yo doy mi consentimiento abajo. ☐

Por favor marcar la casilla:

Yo estoy de acuerdo en citar/publicar extractos de mi entrevista ☐....

No estoy de acuerdo en citar/publicar extractos de mi entrevista ☐

Yo estoy de acuerdo en publicar mis videos/fotografías ☐....

Yo no estoy de acuerdo en publicar mis videos/fotografías ☐....

Appendix 7 Photographs produced by participants.



Gilian at work. Palace of ma...



Gillian in her works'garden.JPG



Gillian playing at work.JPG



Jorje Luis in his home.Cook...



Juana ,Pollito and a friend o...



Juana baking a cake .JPG



Lazaro and Yuri.JPG



Lazaro Friend.JPG



Lazaro.JPG



Maykol and Zenaida. Carvaj...



Maykol performed for the f...



Pollito & her friend. Parra...



Pollito eating at home .JPG



Pollito y Lazaro's friend, a N...



Preparing the meal.JPG



The corridor.JPG



The gate.JPG



The guitar.JPG



The park in the night .JPG



the radio.JPG



Yuri at work.JPG



Yury and a colleague at wor...



Yury and Lazaro.JPG



Yury preparing dinner.JPG



Yury preparing the meal in ...

Appendix 8-A Cuba.

Paolo Titolo: *'Photo Exhibit Highlights Transgender Community In Cuba'* |.



Appendix 8 B Cuba

Claudia González - REASSIGN | LensCulture



Appendix 8- C Cuba .Mariette Pathy Allen

Laura and Lady at the Las Vegas Club, Havana, 2012, © Mariette Pathy Allen

Appendix 9 - A Nick-Waplington 1991

Appendix 9- B Richard Billingham Untitled (NRAL 13) 1996 Fuji long-life



Appendix 9- C Nan Goldin

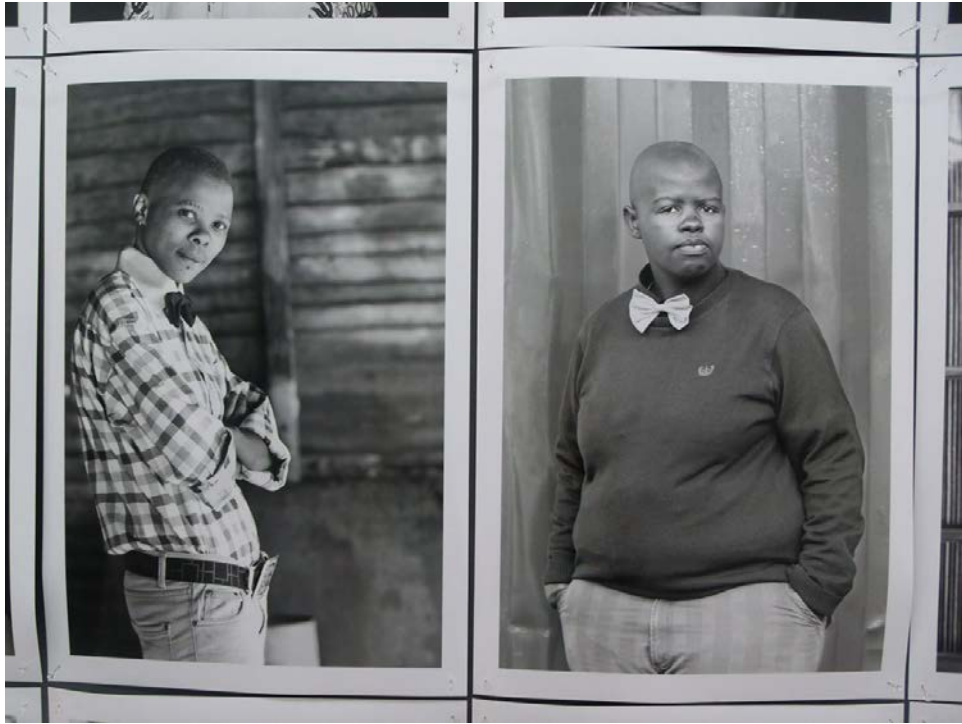


Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a taxi, NYC 1991. © Nan Goldin



jimmy Paulette and Taboo, New York 1991© Nan Goldin

Appendix 9 -D Precarious Imaging Exhibition Installation View.



Precarious Imaging Exhibition Installation View, 2014, Dakar, Senegal. Photo by Joseph Underwood



Zanele Muholi: Faces and Phases 3 Years, 3 Continents, 3 Venues

Appendix 9- E Del LaGrace Volcano. Portraits



Kael & Vincent, Paris 2004



Kael & Vincent, Paris 2004

Appendix 10-A Photos with Participants.

Appendix 10-B Photos with Participants.



Self Portrait. Maria. Ariel, Olguita, Maykol(Oraida), Odalis, Dayane (my niece) and Olisam 2015.



Self Portrait Juana, Pollito, Olga, y Ariel. by Pollito's brother. 2016

Appendix 11 -A Families Portraits

Frank, Beatriz, Marta, Jean Carlos(Gala), Julio at Home. Photo ©Olisam 2014



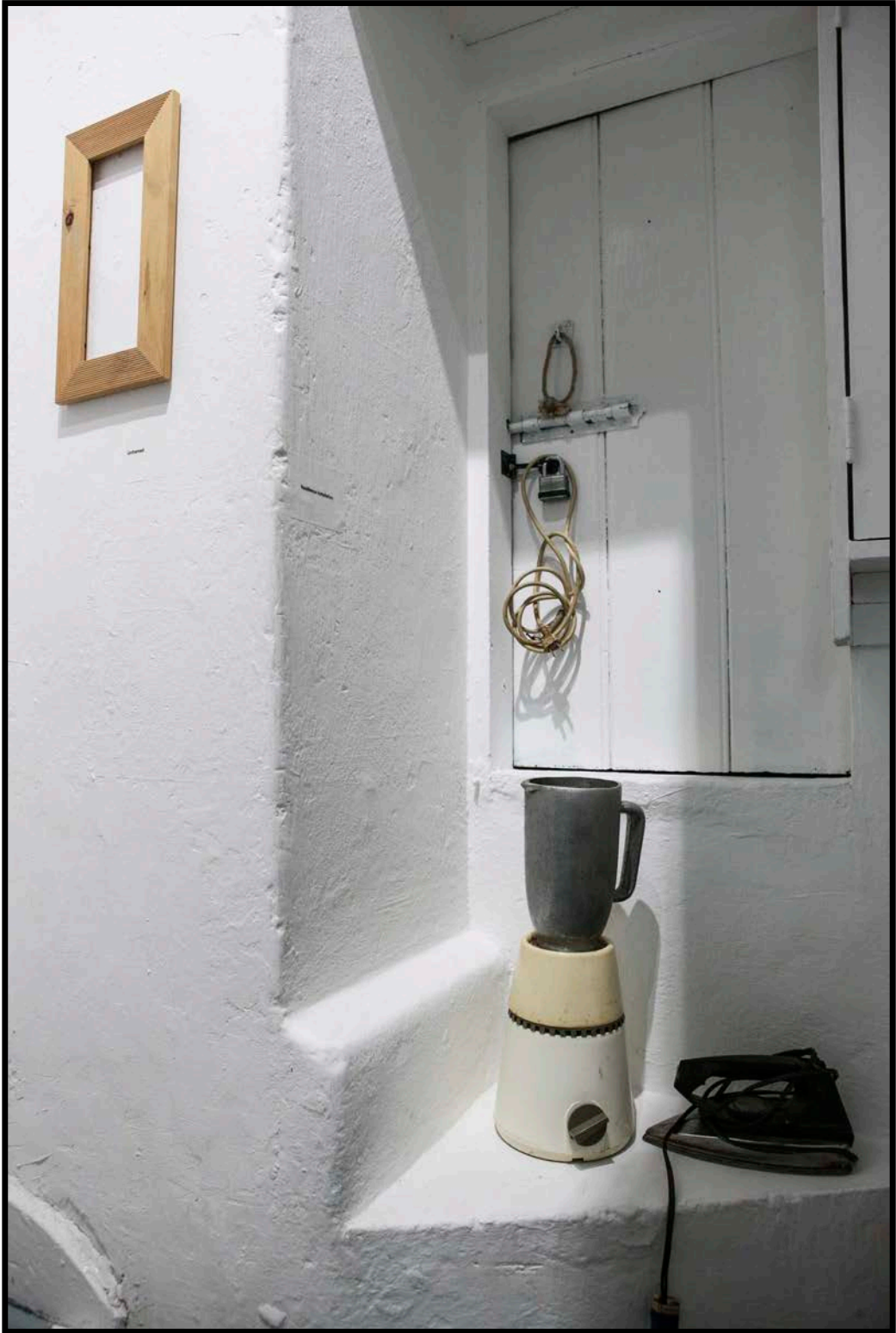
Miguel, Maria, Oraidia, Zenaida, Luis, Sonia at Home. Photo©Olisam 2015

Appendix 11-B Families Portraits

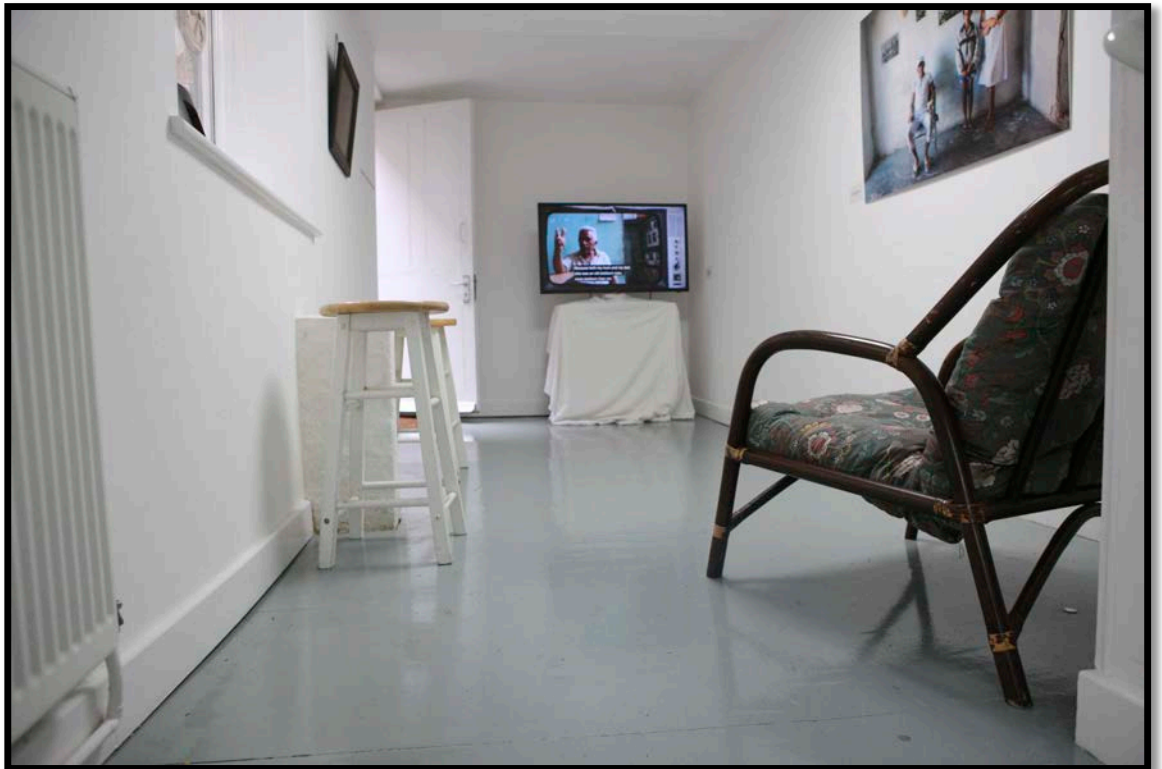
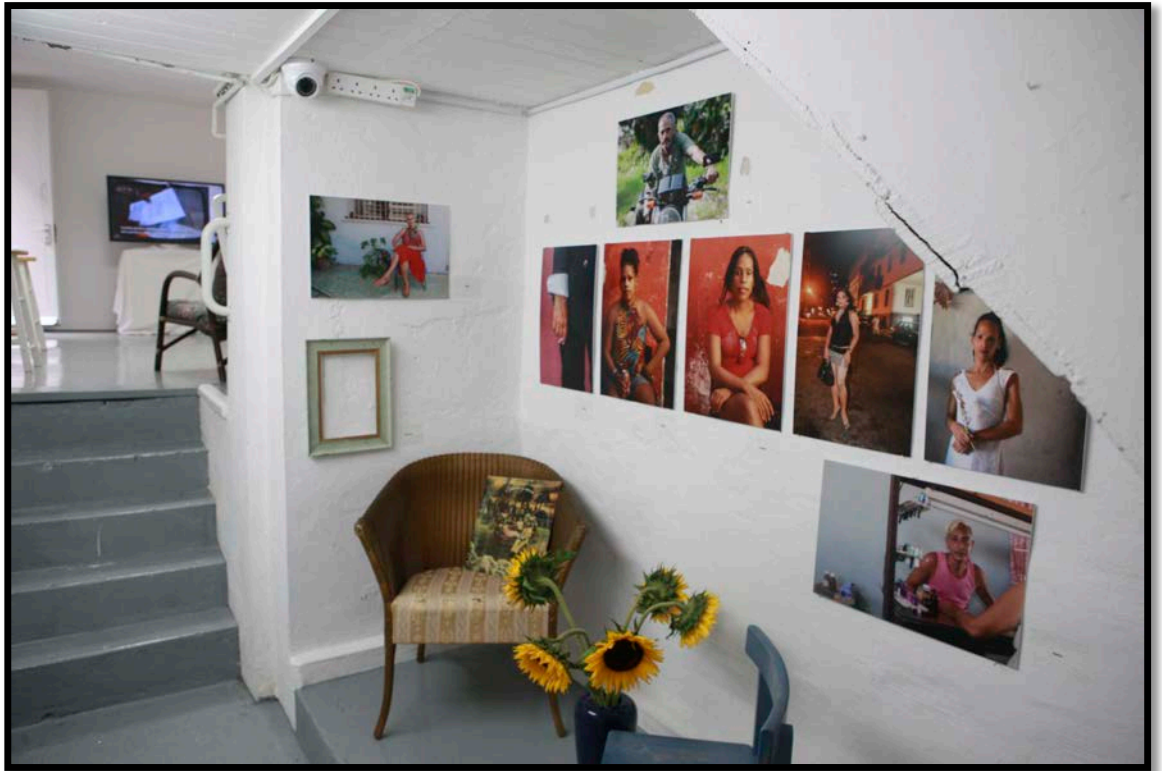
Yordanka and Melody at Home. Photo ©Olisam 2015

Appendix 11 -C Families Portraits

Lazaro, Amary and Yuri and at Home. Photo ©Olisam 2015

Appendix 11-D Appendix Work dissemination.

Soviet made blender and iron. Exhibition Installation. ONCA gallery. Photo ©Olisam. 2017

Appendix 11-E Work dissemination.

Living room, exhibition Installation. ONCA gallery. Photo ©Olisam. 2017

Appendix 11-G Work dissemination.



Exhibition Installation. ONCA gallery. Photo ©Olisam. 2017

These family portraits depict the apparently hetero/normative family as a space where gender difference is happening.

...family as a space and place where life begins and that encloses or cradles memories and expectations.

...it is not primarily about being transgender or about sexuality, but about how the experience of gender transitioning affects everyone.

...queer family spaces, not as separate or subordinate, but as connected within seemingly normative family arrangements.



Gallery space. Onca. August 2017 Photo ©Olisam

ABOUT THE WORK.
Olga's work is about humanity, life, and being together – working with ambivalences in the context of the Cuban revolution toward the category of the "family" and the ways that experiences of gender and kinship are shared. It relocates the experience of gender transition, not as an isolated individual experience, but as a family dynamic. The production of the participants' family portraits and their testimonies evidence a rupture in the way gender is assimilated and represented within the Cuban family.

OLISAM
Contact: +44 (0)7864983416
oab11@outlook.co.uk

Olga Lidia Saavedra Montes de Oca (b.1967) is a Cuban born photographer and final year PhD student in the Media and Film Department at the University of Sussex. She is also a post-graduate in Photography and Urban Culture at Goldsmiths' College, University of London. Using photography in the context of Oral history she works on perspectives of everyday life in societies, migration, gender and sexuality. Her work has been featured in international publications and media. She has collaborated with The Leuzakura Trust, Oral History Journal Magazine, Harvard Review of Latin America, and with the research project "Memories of the Cuban Revolution" (University of Southampton), among others.

PHOTO EXPO

THE FAMILY AS A SPACE FOR GENDER TRANSITION
Olga Lidia Saavedra Montes de Oca. (aka Olisam)

ARTIST STATEMENT:
This ongoing project focuses on the family as a space and place where life begins; that encloses or cradles memories and expectations. I aim to shed light on those spaces where being a transgender person has been the principal factor in the fragmentation of these Cuban families. It is not primarily about being transgender or about sexuality but about how the experience of gender transitioning affects everyone. As a gendered person I assumed that, like everyone else, I was taking part (conscious or not) in spaces where gender transitioning was happening. It was my understanding that like myself, my trans friends, family members and many others were not doing politics with their bodies, nor did they aspire to transgress gender norms. They were trying to live their lives as anyone else would, and in many cases struggling simply to survive.