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# LOVE, JEALOUSY AND GENDER IN POST-SOVIET HAVANA

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• HEIDI HÄRKÖNEN •

## ABSTRACT

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The efforts of the Cuban socialist state to create a ‘New Man’ shared basic characteristics with endeavours in Eastern European and Soviet state socialisms, including the promotion of gender equality and stable marital relationships. In Cuba, this also included the goal of creating greater stability in the largely matrifocal family relationships. Ethnographic evidence from contemporary Havana suggests that Cubans have widely embraced some aspects of the state’s notions of socialist marital relationships, but insecurities still play a significant role in love relationships. Infidelity, ‘plotting’ and shaky trust in their romantic partner are of constant concern for Cubans. Exploring how Cubans negotiate doubts and trust in love relationships, this paper relates jealousy to uncertainties endemic in the transformations of contemporary Cuban socialism. The material deficiencies and dissatisfactions of post-Soviet Cuba, indissociable from a major increase in international tourism, intertwine with local notions of masculinity and femininity and fuel insecurities in relationships. While Caribbean family relationships have for long been described as fragile and unstable, this paper examines new insecurities that have emerged in post-Soviet Havana as part of important changes in contemporary Cuban socialism rather than of *longue-durée*.

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Keywords: Love, gender, jealousy, money, Cuba, reciprocity, socialism

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

In the post-Soviet period, new insecurities have emerged in Cuban love relationships that are endemic to transformations in state socialism. While there has been considerable attention paid to the relationships that Cubans maintain with foreigners in Cuba’s post-Soviet transformations (e.g. Allen 2011: 157–185; Cabezas 2004, 2009; Daigle 2013; Simoni 2008a, 2008b; Placencia 2009; Fernandez 2010: 130–144; Roland 2011), less attention has been paid to how such state-level transformations are experienced in social relations between the locals (see, however, Andaya 2009; Pertierra 2008 for exceptions).

In discussing the transformations that have taken place in Eastern Europe during the post-socialist period, Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (2000a, 2000b) argue that gender has played a central role in the changes that have followed the collapse of state socialisms in the region. They suggest that gender is centrally involved in the ways that large-scale social, political and economic transformations such as increasing class differentiation, decline

in state subsidies or changes in the opportunities for social mobility, are experienced and shaped. Since gender plays a significant part in processes of political and economic change, such large-scale transformations also produce new types of gender relations. Gal and Kligman argue that examining post-socialist changes from a gendered perspective allows for a deeper analysis of how social and institutional transformations occur, since this highlights the often taken-for-granted aspects of the transformations; thereby sharpening our understanding of change.

Via a focus on the gendered negotiation of jealousy in heterosexual love relationships in contemporary Havana, this paper examines how the transformations taking place in post-Soviet Cuba connect with the emergence of new insecurities in gender relations that torment men with feelings of jealousy and a fear of losing their partner to a greater degree than women. These new insecurities relate to transformations in post-Soviet Cuba including significantly expanded tourism, the increased importance of money as an object of exchange and the dismantling of several state services. Gender plays a central part in the ways in which these large-scale institutional changes are experienced by Cubans, leading in turn to new forms of gender relations, examined here via the emergence of new insecurities in love relationships.

In the Caribbean, gender relations have for long been described as fragile, with both men and women changing partners frequently and entering into legal marriages in much lower numbers than in many other parts of the world (e.g. Clarke 1974 [1957]; Martínez-Alier 1974: 124–130; Morris 1979; Smith 1988, 1996; Barrow 1996: 181, 439; Olwig 1996; Simey 1996 [1946]: 39). Since the colonial era, state efforts to curtail the instability of Caribbean sexual relationships have been frequent across the region, and socialist Cuba is no exception in this regard. As a part of its efforts to create the socialist New Man, the state sought to promote gender equality and stable marital relationships—endeavours that Cuba shared with the Eastern European and Soviet state socialisms (see e.g. Gal and Kligman 2000a, 2000b; Verdery 1996: 61–82). Such efforts included struggles to eradicate *machismo* via women's full participation in the labour force, as well as state endeavours to promote intermarriage across divisions of race, age, and wealth as part of a policy aimed at erasing all types of social differences. Through a campaign of collective marriages and other state policies that allowed all Cubans to marry with the luxury of a bourgeois wedding ceremony for a very low fee ('*Operación matrimonio*', see Blanco 1960; Cabrera 1960; Martínez-Alier 1974: vii, 140–141; Nelson 1970: 399), as well as state incentives to newly-wed couples, the state sought to promote greater stability in the largely informal marital relations of the poorer section of the population in particular.

While my informants embraced such aspects of the state's notions of socialist marital relations as love relationships across divisions of race and age, insecurities continue to play a significant role in contemporary *habanero* gender relations. Very few of my informants were legally married, preferring rather informal arrangements of dating and living together. It was not unusual for both men and women to be involved in more than one relationship at a time and break-ups could be frequent and sometimes very sudden. Moreover, wealth has emerged as an important indicator of attractiveness in love relationships. In post-Soviet Cuba, the increased importance of monetary exchange in obtaining day-to-day services, as a consequence of highly diminished state capacity to provide Cubans with the earlier standard of life, has emphasised the significance of

personal social relations in providing the needed material contributions in the context of day-to-day life. Moreover, the material deficiencies and dissatisfactions of the post-Soviet period have intensified Cubans' desires for migration, and strong state investment in the tourism industry as a way to try to save the country's ailing economy has brought to the island plenty of foreigners—attractive for their ability to provide fulfilment of all of these longings.

These changes in post-Soviet state socialism are accompanied by new insecurities in Cubans' love relationships that are importantly gendered and evolve around questions of jealousy. While both men and women may seek to embrace relationships with foreigners and the opportunities for wealth and migration that this may offer, it is men who most often accuse women of such behaviour. Indeed, situations of jealousy frequently play out a gender dynamics where men are afraid that their female partner will leave them for a foreigner or for someone wealthier. Women, on the other hand, often try to maintain a degree of independence in their relationships, including the liberty to come and go as they please, that also keeps the door slightly open to the possibility of meeting a better partner. As a result, men accuse women of being greedy, deceiving *bandoleras* (bandits) who are not to be trusted, while women blame men for being overly possessive and controlling.

#### *Gendered insecurities and jealousy*

'I supported Rosa, and even when we had already separated, I took her some things so that she could fix her house', said Ismael when we were discussing the recent break-up of his two-year-long relationship. He continued: 'And also after [the separation]; in October it was her birthday and I ran around like crazy in order to buy her gifts everywhere and I didn't even see her on her birthday, I couldn't find her. I can't understand it, a week earlier everything was perfect and then: as if nothing. That's why I think that Rosa must be fixing it on her own there, she won't say it to you or to me, but she's intelligent, *lo esta trabajando*; she's working on it. What happened was that she had a friendship with a foreigner and she said that it was pure friendship, but she kept it from me; for sure she was plotting something.'

Ismael and Rosa—both brown-skinned professionals in their late twenties—had met at a work party two years earlier and hooked up immediately.<sup>2</sup> Ismael moved away from his mother's to Rosa's tiny flat in the outskirts of Havana and they had plans to have a child. But there was an issue that was constantly there between them: they both had a great desire to leave the country. Rosa has tasted life outside during a short visit to Italy in the past when she had an Italian partner, but Ismael had just dreamed of such a possibility. There was a constant tension between them on the grounds that, if given the opportunity, they would abandon each other for a chance to leave the country if they met someone foreign. Ismael was very jealous and when Rosa was not home; he would go through her belongings in order to find out if she had been seeing other men. When she came home from work, he questioned her vehemently on her whereabouts. One day Ismael found out that Rosa had met a Canadian man and confronted her about the issue, but she assured him that he was just a friend. Being skilled in such matters, Ismael figured out the password to Rosa's email and broke into her account, finding messages

from the Canadian. Even though the letters contained nothing referring to a romance between Rosa and the Canadian, tortured by jealousy, Ismael decided to write to the man posing as Rosa in order to find out the man's intentions. Ismael wrote a very amorous letter saying: '*Mi amor*, I miss you so much', and signed it as Rosa. After a little while, the man responded in a similarly amorous tone and Ismael felt his suspicions confirmed: this was not a case of pure friendship. He confronted Rosa and she was so infuriated by his actions that she sent him back to live at his mother's and refused to see him. After a while they got back together; however, Ismael soon caught Rosa in a café with yet another man, though she had told him that she was at work. Again, an argument ensued, but in Ismael's view, after a couple of days, things were again settled between them. Soon after Rosa left Ismael definitively for her new boss—a wealthy, white Cuban, who was employed in a desirable professional position, owned a car and a big house, was 20 years older than she, and had kin in Miami. Ismael did not know this, since Rosa had told him nothing and had effectively vanished from his life. She had left his possessions with her neighbour for him to pick up, but had given strict instructions to not divulge her whereabouts to Ismael; she herself moved to her new partner's big house—outstandingly equipped with running water, air conditioning and a large patio—close to the centre of Havana. Within two weeks, Rosa fell pregnant and later gave birth to her first child. Ismael, on the other hand, did not take the break-up well, and spent three weeks drunk. He was unable to sleep, very depressed for months and even spent time in hospital with stomach problems he had developed from not eating during his darkest days.

As this case shows, the gendered insecurities, jealousy, and accusations fuelled by Cuba's large-scale transformations during the post-Soviet period connect to actual practices in individuals' love relations. The measures adopted by Ismael present one example, but there are other ways for a male to try to maintain control of his female partner. He may sit by the roadside close to the woman's home in order to keep track of her comings and goings or of any passing men, asking a friend to perform sentinel duty when he himself cannot be there. He may prohibit his partner from attending parties or other social occasions without him. He may call her several times per day in order to check on her whereabouts. At her home, he may search through her belongings, questioning her as to where she got them. If he finds objects that he suspects to be gifts from another man, he may destroy them in rage. In a moment of intense jealousy, a young male informant even produced a gun, showing it to his girlfriend and threatening to kill her if he ever caught her with another man.

Women, on the other hand, have their ways of manoeuvring around men's possessiveness. If annoyed by the potential 'detective complex' (as stated by a female informant), a woman may prefer to avoid living together with her partner if at all possible, since co-habitation gives the man greater control of her whereabouts. If the man lives in a flat owned by the woman—as in the case of Ismael and Rosa—she may send him away for some time, or if the apartment is his, she may go to stay with a kin member for a while if he displays what she sees as excessive attempts to control her. She may refuse to see him for some time and carefully try to avoid any routes where he may have placed a friend to keep an eye on her. If he comes to her home, she may act as if she is not there or refuse to open the door for him. Some of these tactics may also open up possibilities for meeting other men. She may lie to her partner about her whereabouts, saying that she is staying

the night at her mother's house in order to escape for a night out at a disco favoured by foreigners, or she may accept an invitation to go out on a date from another man during the day whilst her partner is at work. While some of these measures may sound dramatic, they rarely lead to actual break-ups but are rather ways to negotiate space in the relationship. Even if a man catches his partner with another man, this does not automatically lead to a separation, even though there is more cultural tolerance of male infidelity than to female infidelity.

Gender is the central framework that organises how these new insecurities related to the importance of money, wealth and possibilities for migration are negotiated in the context of love relationships. The concept of a man as a real *machote* entails that he is capable of 'controlling his woman' and thereby a man is more at risk of suffering social ridicule if his partner is unfaithful to him. At the same time, men are also seen to be guided by their emotions and sexual desires to a greater degree than women, who are perceived to be more prone to mature, pragmatically oriented considerations. In Cuba (Martinez-Alier 1972), as elsewhere in the Caribbean (e.g. Newman 2010), since the colonial era, sexual relations have offered non-white women, in particular, a way to seek socioeconomic ascendance via maintaining relationships with wealthier or 'racially higher-status' partners. This dynamic pushes men to be possessive and women to seek out men who can provide them with wealth and opportunities.

#### *Heightened monetisation and gendered exchanges*

In Soviet-era Cuba, the strongly egalitarian socialist state policies kept many social differences less prominent, but in the post-Soviet period, money and wealth in particular are something new that have come to play a significant role in fuelling insecurities in relationships. In the context of contemporary social relations, money is importantly gendered; it is something that men are expected to contribute to women in a system of reciprocal exchange where women respond with nurture, sexual access and children. This does not mean that women only desire sexual relationships with men for the money, but rather that money is an object that allows men to create relationships; both sexual and non-sexual. While women also have their own money, money is importantly the means via which a man expresses interest in a woman: giving her little material gifts and taking her out to eat, for drinks or dancing. It is via his material contributions to her that she assesses whether he is a responsible man and someone who can help her in life.

While many Cuban men also seize the opportunities of wealth that maintaining relationships with foreigners may provide, due to the gendered nature of money the fear of losing one's partner to someone wealthier concerns men more intensely than women. Although there are men who have relationships with women in such arrangements that money flows from the woman to the man and not vice versa, this is an inversion of how things *should* go. Some of my male informants felt uncomfortable with such gendered exchanges. However, for women, to receive money and material support from their partner represents the correct way in which a man should behave towards them and confirms their femininity.

With the transformations in post-Soviet Cuban socialism, the dismantling of many state services has intensified the pressure on Cubans' personal social relations to compensate for state deficits. Along with the growing differences of wealth in post-Soviet Cuba and the increased monetisation of the country's economy (Eckstein 1994), the significance of men's material contributions to women takes on an increased importance. Moreover, the presence of tourists as possible providers of a ticket off the island provides them with an advantage that is hard for a Cuban man to compete with. All of these factors bring about new opportunities as well as challenges to Cubans and fuel insecurities in relationships since there is the constant possibility that someone will appear who offers more than one's current partner can offer.

At the same time, the framework in which these new insecurities are experienced derives from a deep-seated conceptualisation of gender difference. In this framework, women come across as making pragmatic decisions to seek social advancement via engaging in romantic arrangements with men, whereas men appear consumed by emotions beyond their control, eaten up by possessive, desperate efforts to control the object of their affection. These behaviours resemble ethnographic descriptions of gender relations in the Caribbean over the long term. In particular, in the context of the classic literature on Caribbean matrifocality (e.g. Clarke 1974; Smith 1988, 1996), women are described as nurturing mothers and responsible caretakers striving to get ahead, while men as fathers are seen as marginalised in their ability to display mature adult behaviour, following their amorous desires in whatever direction they may take them. Women thereby appear as committed 'adults', seeking out opportunities to take care of themselves and their children, while men seem to be at the mercy of their sexuality. There are considerable similarities between such long-term historical and ethnographic conceptualisations of Caribbean masculinity and femininity and the ways in which Cubans negotiate situations of jealousy in post-Soviet Havana: women's rather pragmatic considerations can make them come across as plotting and calculating in regards to men, while being overwhelmed by emotional and sexual desires may make men possessive and controlling in relation to women. This suggests that deep-seated notions of gender difference play a significant role in the ways in which Cubans experience the new insecurities brought about by the transformations in the post-Soviet socialism.

The widening differences in wealth and standards of living in post-Soviet Havana have increased the significance of wealth in a person's attractiveness in love relationships. The decline in state subsidies intensifies the importance of social relations in compensating for state deficiencies, again making those persons who have the means to provide material support attractive as partners. Finally, both the increased differences of wealth inside Cuban society, as well as the possibilities of migration via forging relationships with foreign tourists, change the types of possibilities available for social mobility amongst Cubans, again heightening the attractiveness as partners of those persons who are in a position to provide such advantages. All of these factors fuel insecurities in *habaneros'* love relationships.

While new elements, including the influx of foreign tourists and the highly increased significance of wealth, affect and bring changes to the lives of both men and women, it is men who most often suffer from these new insecurities in love relations. Since these new insecurities are experienced in a framework of local notions of gender, men are expected



to be in a position to provide women with material wealth. They are thereby more at risk of losing their partner to someone who provides more, given the availability of historical models for female social mobility through relationships with wealthier partners. Combined with cultural models that allow for and expect men to control their partners, and express fierce jealousy when fearing the loss of such control, it is men who most often experience these new insecurities as increased jealousy in their love relationships, while women try to manoeuvre around male possessiveness as they best can.

### *Conclusions*

In their discussion of post-socialist Eastern Europe, Gal and Kligman (2000a, 2000b) suggest paying attention to the coexistence of changes and continuities by examining the different temporalities of distinct processes in post-socialist transformations. My ethnographic material from post-Soviet Havana suggests just such a co-existence of new elements and long-term continuities in the context of love relationships: while transformations in post-Soviet socialism have brought about new insecurities in intimate relationships, these anxieties are experienced in the framework of deep-seated local conceptualisations of gender difference, formulated historically as a part of Cuba's past as a Caribbean colonial island, as well as by socialist state policies.

Whereas gender relations in the Caribbean have long been described as fragile and unstable, the transformations in post-Soviet Cuban socialism have caused the emergence of new insecurities in *habaneros'* love relations. Yet these new uncertainties take shape via a historically and culturally formulated framework of gender difference that gives meaning to emotions and social relations in the context of post-Soviet state socialism. Therefore, insecurities in love relationships bring into play both new features in Cuban gender relations, as well as the more *longue-durée* gender difference via which such transformations are experienced. At the same time, while the long-term continuities importantly define the meanings through which post-Soviet transformations are experienced, these transformations themselves bring about changes in love relationships that are entirely new.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on ethnographic evidence gathered amongst lower-income, racially mixed Havana residents over nine months in 2007–2008. The totality of my fieldwork periods in Havana amounts to 14 months of research since 2003. All the names of the research participants have been changed. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Despite of decades of socialist politics that has officially claimed to erase racial inequalities, skin colour continues to matter in Cuba, yet in very complex ways. Several authors point out that the post-Soviet era has sharpened older racial inequalities (e.g. Allen 2011; Roland 2011; Cabezas 2009; Fernandez 2010: 7, 47–48; de la Fuente 2001a, 2001b), although some argue that simultaneously new opportunities have arisen to previously racially marginalised groups (e.g. Allen 2011; Fernandez 2010). White Cubans receive more remittances from abroad than others and also tend to be disproportionately represented in



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jobs that allow for a better than usual income or other advantages, like in the official tourist sector (de la Fuente 2001c: 318–322). Racial categorisations matter also in romance. Nadine Fernandez (2010) argues that love relations are characterised by a racial endogamy, although the frequency of interracial romances varies according to class. In the light of Fernandez's argument, Ismael and Rosa would thus represent a typical couple. However, this differs from the general tendency amongst my informants, as interracial romances were highly frequent amongst them. This is possibly related to the fact that my research participants were mostly from lower-income backgrounds. Moreover, Ismael and Rosa both fit to the category of *mulato* (m.) / *mulata* (f.), which most of my informants saw as the aesthetically most attractive racial categorisation. This relates in particular to the long-term historical position of racially mixed women and the image of *la mulata* as erotised in Cuba (Kutzinski 1993). At the same time, amongst my non-white female informants there was a tendency to prefer lighter-skinned men as their partners, in particular if they were contemplating on him as a potential father-candidate for their child. Such racialised and gendered practices have a long history in the Caribbean (e.g. Smith 1996: 79, 153; Yelvington 2001: 242–247; Roland 2011: 22–25) and they draw on inequalities that were established during the colonial period when the societies in the region were marked by racialised status hierarchies (e.g. Martinez-Alier 1974).

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