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Cuba's Chords of Change: Music, Race, Class & Motherhood at the turn of the 21st Century

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Cuba's Chords of Change:
Music, Race, Class and Motherhood at the Turn of the 21st Century

by

Sandra Amrhein

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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DEDICATION

I would like to thank my husband, Cesar Domicó, who has been a beacon of wisdom and a rock of support through the numerous years of working on this project in its many forms, including getting to know the people involved and the subject material probably as well as I have. For his unwavering patience in listening to me talk about the thesis for hours on end, his enthusiasm in picking up at a moment's notice to travel with me for research, and for never complaining during the months I left to travel alone, for his precise cultural insights, his brilliant input on early drafts and his endless capacity to lend encouragement, I dedicate this thesis to him – *mi corazón*.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an ethnography and biographical study that examines the impact of the immense socioeconomic changes underway in Cuba at the turn of the 21st century and the flexible identity categories through which individuals navigate a social crisis.

The biography and ethnography in this thesis are centered on the life of Violeta Aldama, an aging revolutionary and Afro-Cuban mother who struggles to make ends meet while fighting to steer her son, Brian, through a classical music education and into a music career. Amid growing racial inequalities when many Afro-Cubans are locked out of the most lucrative jobs in the new tourism sector and less likely to have family abroad sending remittances, the booming dance music industry offers the greatest promise for advancement and wealth than possibly any other profession. With the retraction of the state in a growing market economy, Violeta must scramble to build new networks of support while also coming to terms with the idea that the system she fought for all of her life will no longer be able to sustain her son.

This study argues that individuals navigate through social crises through identity categories that are both socially constructed and subjectively fluid. In the process, they rely on these identity categories to build new contacts for support while also finding in them meaning and agency. I frame this thesis around three broad identity categories – race, class and national identity. The study also shows how Violeta in turn experienced

these categories – as well as motherhood and her revolutionary roles – and the ways that she used them to build networks of support.

The thesis is guided by the theory on “*lo informal*” developed by scholar Damián Fernández: the split in individuals between ideals and passionate beliefs versus life on the black market to help loved ones survive.

The study’s methodology draws from feminist ethnography, examining not only Violeta’s position in society as an Afro-Cuban woman and aging revolutionary, but also my relationship with her and her son as a white, middle-class American researcher during a time when relationships with foreigners became a crucial means of social advancement.

This research bridges academic areas of study regarding Cuba’s growing racial inequalities and the rising economic power of the music industry. It also contributes to the academic canon on social movements by highlighting roles of individuals – not just the state or opposition alliances – as social actors.

INTRODUCTION AND PRELUDE

It has been five years now, but I still remember the morning in February, 2007, being woken up by the sound of the old American upright piano in the next room of Violeta's house. For a moment, coming out of my slumber, I forgot where I was, curled up and stiff from the damp cold front moving over Cuba and seeping through the house's concrete walls. It was pitch black in the bedroom, the shutters and door closed tight, probably due to Violeta trying to help me sleep a little longer. But there was no blocking out the piano. I lay there, following the music, listening as Violeta's son, 18-year-old Brian, brought the piano's broken wires and worn hammers alive with a Bach Prelude, his fingers masterful and light on the treble melody, commanding and fast on the bass harmony that chased it in counterpoint until the piano thundered. And then silence, a pause between movements, filled with the scratch of Brian's sandal on the concrete floor near the pedals, and the soft call of a morning bird, signaling dawn. I knew if this was like many mornings – at least what I saw when I was with them and what Violeta described for me when I was not – Violeta would be in the back of the house, hanging clothes over the rope line in the small weed-filled yard and boiling water on the kitchen stove for Brian's splash-off shower. But I also knew – as the smell of fresh paint and lacquer hung heavily in the air – that it was not just any other morning for them. They were days away from Brian's graduation recital and reception – a milestone capping

more than a dozen years of excruciating preparation and sacrifice by the both of them. And with it, Violeta's anticipation and anguish over where Brian would land in Cuba's changing landscape.

In this moment of their lives, what I saw in Violeta Aldama was a person whose entire being was involved in *la lucha*. The struggle. In Cuba at the turn of the century, the phrase "*En la lucha*," was a common answer to the question, "How are you?" It meant, "In the struggle." In the collective daily struggle to make ends meet, to get by. But for Violeta, her fight was much more. It was the struggle of a single mother in a devastated economy. The struggle of a black woman in an increasingly discriminatory society. And the struggle of an aging revolutionary in a system she had fought for, was proud of and believed in – a system that had given her unprecedented opportunities as a black Cuban and as a Cuban woman, a system in which she hoped to raise her son – but now a system she no longer recognized. Even as she held onto revolutionary beliefs, her biggest struggle now, one that was physical and damaging her health, was for her son and to make sure he did not get crushed by this changing system. But the struggle was also internal – to make sense of her life, the changes around her and where she belonged.

This study – through the life story and struggles of Violeta Aldama – uses the identity categories of race, class and national identity to show how individuals in contemporary Cuba navigate various identity roles to cope with the contradictory reality of daily life and maintain a sense of self. While the construction of identity roles is common to all of us, a social crisis like the one in Cuba highlights the fluid manner in which individuals navigate these roles. This study will shed light not only on individuals' flexible navigation of identity roles, but it also has something to teach us about the

changing nature of the identity categories themselves. Ultimately it will show how individuals find a sense of agency in the process of navigating these roles and that the process impacts broader social relationships, networks and civil society.

This study is centered on the life history and struggle of Violeta Aldama, an Afro-Cuban woman in post-revolutionary Cuba at the turn of the 21st century, a woman fighting to help her pianist son get a foothold in a historically transforming society amid growing class divisions following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of Cuba's market-oriented reforms. Both Violeta and her son, Brian Zaldívar Aldama, are black Cubans, and Violeta is an aging revolutionary – categories of identity whose meanings and placements on the Cuban social hierarchy changed dramatically in the course of Violeta's lifetime. At the time of Violeta's birth on the eve of the Revolution, Cuba's wealth and national ideology of *mestizaje* – a nationalist myth of a mulatto “Cuban race” traced to independence war hero José Martí's nation-building notions of racial fraternity – belied a segregated society in which black and mulatto Cubans were blocked from luxury hotels, beaches, social clubs and top-sector jobs and private schools (De la Fuente 2001: 14-15, 260). After the Rebel Army swept to power in early 1959, Fidel Castro publicly attacked racial discrimination and declared war, and then victory, over its legacy through the elimination of class privilege. He and his new government implemented anti-discriminatory policies in housing, hiring and public spaces and established universal health care and education. A socialist revolution was proclaimed to have at last realized the nation's ideals for a colorblind society, and Cubans of color – many benefitting from the structural reforms – overwhelmingly supported it (De la Fuente 2001: 276).

But by this February morning in 2007 – after several decades of socialist reforms that had brought about one of the most egalitarian and racially integrated countries in Latin America – to be black in Cuba once again meant to be on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder (De la Fuente 2011; Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005; S.Fernandes 2006). The market-oriented reforms and austerity measures of the 1990s that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union – Cuba’s chief sponsor and trading partner – had led to widening socioeconomic inequalities. Growing class differences impacted Cubans of color the worst, for reasons described below (De la Fuente 2001, 2009, 2011). Facing the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the Cuban state increasingly appealed to nationalism over socialism in order to unite and mobilize the population behind the market reforms (S.Fernandes 2006: 34) – ideological and policy shifts that would unleash a crisis in values between egalitarianism and consumerism reflected in the vast gap between Violeta’s generation and that of her son. Indeed, what it meant to be Cuban would not be the same for Violeta as it would be for Brian.

Race, class and national identity are historically interwoven in Cuba. And they were important categories of identity for Violeta, Brian and Cubans in general through the crisis years of the 1990s and onward as new class distinctions arose along racial lines and national ideology differed from everyday reality. Meanwhile, corresponding structural changes gave rise to previously prohibited expressions of race-based identities – particularly in the arts. As this study will explore, blackness in Cuban society not only held different history and meanings from other countries, but it held different meanings *within* Cuba from the time Violeta was born to the time Brian was born – both in terms of an identity category as well as material consequences for income and the job market.

To be sure, all three identity categories are fluid and socially constructed. They are common in societies throughout the world and at times overlap and at other times conflict. Indeed, for Violeta, her subjective realities as a revolutionary and as a mother would appear to clash, as someone who simultaneously believed passionately in the values of the revolution but who increasingly despaired for her son's future in the country. Brian, meanwhile, centered his realities around his identities as a musician, as well as an aspiring member of the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería and the Abakuá secret men's society. These were categories of identity through which they saw themselves and tried to make sense of their lives amid historic social change. But they also helped guide them through difficult, and ultimately, wrenching decisions.

Violeta, Brian and *la lucha*

On this February morning in 2007, I stepped out of the bedroom to see the profile of Brian's slim frame, perched on a Havana phone book atop a stool, practicing at the piano in the hours before the packed passenger buses roared down Aranguren Street in Guanabacoa, their wheels kicking dust through the aluminum grates of the front window on their morning commute to Havana. I left Brian to rehearse and slipped down the corridor to the kitchen in the back, finding Violeta running through her morning routine. "Oye!" she yelled, laughing when she saw me, asking how I'd slept. Violeta stood only as tall as my chin – about 5-foot-5, but she was stout and broad and powerfully built, a dark-skinned Afro-Cuban woman with a shock of gray hair rising from her temples. Her baritone cannon of a voice could carry from one end of the house to another – "BreeYAN!" she would call out for Brian. Or across a crowded street filled with choking

old American Buicks and buzzing motorcycles – “*Como ANDA?!?*” she would yell in greeting to this or that neighbor on morning walks through Guanabacoa to find fresh fruit or bread, asking them how they were doing, waving or stopping to talk or inquire about someone’s kids. “*En la lucha,*” was the frequent reply.

It was in those moments of hearing her strong, authoritative voice – or when she recounted the times she had stormed up to the school to berate what she called a lazy music teacher among those who had not left the country, or how she’d needed to find private tutors for Brian, who sometimes had to take multiple packed buses into the city for lessons when teachers no longer made the trip to the conservatory themselves, a list of problems that she frequently ended with “*No es fácil*” – that I could imagine her younger days as an Army major leading a unit of paratroopers. These days she still religiously tended to her duties as a zone leader for the local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution – distributing new government-issued crock pots; listening patiently at her front stoop to residents who complained about noisy neighbors; or passing up the pipeline of the *Poder Popular* the residents’ desire to get Aranguren Street repaved. But behind the house, in her long, worn denim skirt and water-stained spandex blouse, discreetly washing neighbors’ clothes to save up extra money on the side, she was engaged in what had become her most primary “lucha” – her increasingly desperate struggle to see Brian get a foothold into a future in Cuba where he would do more than survive. In the duality that had come to encompass Violeta’s reality was the passion of a woman who was part of – and still believed in – the revolution, but who feared that the system no longer worked for her son.

On this morning, aside from her regular routine, she was planning out what she still needed for the macaroni salad, croquets, orange drinks, what she was going to wear since her nice dress slacks had a hole in them. Because several days from now was Brian's graduation recital from the Guillermo Tomás Escuela de Música conservatory in Guanabacoa. It would be followed by a party back at the house for which they had just painted the walls, expecting professional musicians whom Violeta hoped would help Brian's career. This was a moment for which Violeta had spent more than 12 years helping Brian to prepare. During that time, Cuba's economy and society had been turned upside down – along with Violeta's life and her plans for Brian's future – changing and raising the stakes regarding decisions before her in the days to come.

Brian's talent was obvious early on. He had fallen in love with the piano at the age of 5 – during the heart of the Special Period, the term for the economic depression that befell Cuba with the collapse of the Soviet Union, an era when many Cubans went hungry and a time Violeta did not like to recall. But Cuba was filled with music prodigies. In the ensuing years, Violeta would develop high blood pressure, diabetes and hypertension during her struggle to help Brian through the conservatories toward his goal to one day play in the prestigious National Symphony Orchestra – a goal Violeta once thought would grant him a secure future. But by the time he was set to graduate from the conservatory in February, 2007, that financial security in classical music was no longer a certainty (Moore 2006) – and Brian simultaneously had gravitated to a new style of popular dance music called *timba* that had exploded onto the scene, mirroring the consumerist values grown prominent since the 1990s. With its connections to a tourism industry opened after the economic crisis, this form of dance music promised musicians

the possibility of wealth and social advancement unlike any other in Cuban society in the previous four decades (Perna 2005; Moore 2006).

That promise came at a time when other post-1990s opportunities for survival and advancement were out of reach for many Afro-Cubans, principal among them access to newly legalized dollars from remittances sent by relatives living abroad – most of whom were white Cubans who had been among earlier waves of exiles (De la Fuente 2001; Moore 2006). Violeta’s family members had stayed in Cuba after the Revolution in the wake of anti-discriminatory policies and universal education, becoming engineers and members of the military. But after the economic crash of the 1990s, they had no one outside the country to send remittances or dollars while food and household products disappeared from peso and government stores and became available in dollar stores and on the black market at much higher prices (De la Fuente 2001). Violeta was bitterly aware of these ironies, made obvious during one visit when I accompanied her over to the house of some friends just as the family’s mother was showing off new blue jeans she’d bought for her son, a classmate of Brian’s, with money sent from her parents in Miami. Violeta watched and smiled politely as the young man tried on what turned out to be girls’ jeans but the only pair at the dollar store in his size. But when we got back to Violeta’s house, she fumed, wriggling her finger and calling the woman’s parents’ “*gusanos*,” the term for worm or traitor. About her own family, who had been, and continued to be, believers in the Revolution, she asked, hypothetically, “Where are we now?” and she waved her hand a few feet above the floor. The more we talked, what became clear was that what bothered Violeta was not necessarily the relatives of the woman – whom Violeta considered a good friend – but that she herself could not afford

these things for Brian, not the designer jeans that aspiring students in Cuba's competitive music world were now expected to wear; or a good electronic keyboard to substitute for their broken piano and the conservatories' aging instruments; or the iPods and computer equipment that the music students with family abroad now possessed to help them rehearse and record. And she at times struggled with questions of loyalty with this and other friends with whom she would lend items she didn't use from her government rations but about whom she complained were now slow to return favors. Amid these growing uncertainties she frequently voiced about not knowing any longer whom to trust, she seemed constantly to be working on new networks to help Brian in his music career, including in the days leading up to the recital, stashing a premium bottle of rum in a clothes drawer for an older professional musician who was starting to take Brian under his wing. Even as she lamented the fading egalitarian and communal values of her generation and lectured Brian in them, Violeta tapped into or created new networks in her fight to help him as they neared graduation. In the months ahead, they faced a decision: would Brian continue on a path toward what they once hoped would be a prestigious classical music career – but in which musicians were paid what were now nearly worthless pesos? Or should he segue toward a more promising popular music genre and industry – but one that was increasingly associated with consumerism and ostentation? (Perna 2005; Moore 2006).

Theoretical approach

Through Violeta's life story, this study will illustrate how categories of identity are fluid – particularly amid the negotiation of daily life in a social crisis – and are

connected to various subjective positions in which people operate not only to make sense of their worlds, but also to help themselves and loved ones survive and prosper. The theoretical framework I use is one developed by Cuban-American scholar Damián Fernández regarding Cuba and “*lo informal*.” Fernández’s work on *lo informal* is positioned in his analysis of the dynamics between the politics of passion on the one hand and the politics of affection on the other. The politics of passion are marked by moral imperatives and absolutes, a “crusade” for the community or the nation state at large (2000: 1). But when the system cannot provide for its citizens’ material well-being or there is gross distrust in the system, individuals turn to the politics of affection and *lo informal* – or smaller groups where ties are based on affection, familiarity and trust, with trust playing a crucial part. In this realm, individuals rely on these ties to circumvent the system under a different set of rules or morals. They do so in order to meet the needs of their households and loved ones (2000: 14-15). Fernández acknowledges that all societies have some measure of these dualities and that their manifestations vary depending on cultural, governmental and economic histories. Indeed, his work falls within a broader scholarship on “clientelism” in Latin America where scholars like Glenn Cuadill Dealy and others argue that a “two-track moral code” accompanies a lack of public civic consciousness on the one hand and fraternity in private relations on the other (2000: 15). These studies stress that this phenomenon has been widespread in the region amid yawning socioeconomic inequalities and political and social exclusion that lead to individuals’ participation in informal networks (Dinatale 2005; Philip 2003; Coppedge 1993; Auyero 1999). However, Fernández breaks with more recent scholarship that defines the informal in Latin America as “anti-state” and that focuses on collective action

in squatter communities, urban slums and informal settlements (Brillembourg 2006; Fabricius 2008; Kellett and Napier 1995).

By contrast, Fernández adds to the literature by focusing not on collective action but on individuals and their families that while alienated don't merely "retreat" from a broken political system to informal networks. Instead, the politics of affection coexist with the public, and in the Cuban case, "permeate the public, blurring the border between them" (2000: 17). Fernández analyzes how the politics of passion and the politics of affection co-existed throughout Cuba's political history. According to Fernández, *lo informal* and the politics of affection in Cuba stemmed from attempts to deal with or circumvent the colonial regime, and developed over time as a method to "satisfy the material and nonmaterial needs of the self, the family and the community" (ibid: 29). Rather than viewing the phenomenon simplistically in opposition to the state, he argues that the politics of affection become a strategy to deal with modern life and where individuals can find alternative meaning and belonging. In the process, they may sustain "politics as usual" even while eventually contributing to a new social order (2000: 17-18). However, during times of economic crisis – particularly post-1980s Cuba – the politics of affection and *lo informal* more prominently come into play as a survival mechanism. Over time throughout a prolonged crisis, Fernández posits, they lead to social networks that undermine the tenets of official ideology and become a source from which civil society emerges (2000: xii-xiv).

"The gap between theory and performance undermined revolutionary fervor (ibid.)...Lo informal, with its politics of affection, threatened the basis of Cuban socialism...During periods of economic scarcity the politics of affection served as alternative distribution mechanisms in the black market at the grassroots for survival needs. The politics of affection play more than a mere economic role. They have

also given Cubans space to articulate meaning and identity” (ibid: 60-61).

Importantly, Fernández fills another large gap in the literature and breaks with traditional political analysis by focusing not on rationality and strategy of actors but on emotions and affective networks in the informal. Incorporating emotions brings in the subjective to add to objective sources of behavior, fully embodying political actors and shedding light on the interactive relationship between external structures and individuals’ emotions (2000: 23, 24). As Fernández states: “Passion and affection are contributing factors in constructing and destroying social and political order” (2000: 23).

This theoretical framework becomes particularly instructive and insightful in what might appear to be contradictory positions regarding Violeta’s ideals versus the hard reality in which she makes decisions about what’s best for her son. The revolutionary values and national ideology of egalitarianism, volunteerism and the moral value of work in which her generation was raised have given way following chronic shortages of the Special Period and onward to absenteeism, individualism, hustling, rampant theft, consumerism and – as Fernández says is characteristic of a loss of affective attachment to a system – a public realm “marked by distrust” (2000: 15).

While *lo informal* as developed by Damián Fernández provides the theoretical frame to help us see how Cubans balance what appears to be dual obligations between collective ideologies versus loved ones, feminist theorists and ethnographers take us one step further. Fernández opens the door to consider subjectivity, but feminist theorists take us into individuals’ actual lives as they make decisions about new social networks; negotiate their daily struggles; and articulate identity, meaning and agency in various contexts. Slater (1994: 24) states that nowhere has this notion of a unified subject been so

effectively critiqued as in feminist theory, including Chantal Mouffe's argument that each individual carries multiple subject positions that correspond to different social relations as well as discourses around those social relations (Mouffe 1988: 90). Slater notes that in the general context of feminist theory, subjectivity is a process and that meaning can have no fixed external guarantee, in contrast to mainstream Marxism "where meaning flows from the laws of history or the logic of world capitalist development" (Slater 1994: 25). Gender studies scholar Veronica Schild cautions against framing actions as oppositional or "contradictory." She concurs with feminist theorists about how an individual's sense of self is not essential and that it is socially and historically constructed. But she takes to task other writers in arguing that "to refer to subjectivities as contradictory is to speak of an intricate negotiation that often involves pain and anguish, not the effortless slipping in and out of this or that 'subject position' posited by Laclau and Muffee" (Schild 1994: 232). Indeed, Violeta's sense of herself as a single mother, a black woman, revolutionary and other identities has been shaped by the era in which she was raised in Cuba, as this study will show. And, as Schild posits, her negotiation through these subject positions at many points caused pain and anguish, but also afforded her a path through which she made decisions and tried to make sense of her life.

Methods

Blending with the theoretical framework of *lo informal* and feminist theories on subjectivity, my methodological approach in this study is one that draws from feminist ethnography – particularly Ruth Behar and her work that centers the power of the personal story "to cross borders" (1993: xiii). The study also grapples throughout with

feminist methods' notion of "positionality" (Reinharz 1992). It does so not only through Violeta's social roles as a single mother, black Cuban and revolutionary, but my relationship to both her and to Brian – negotiating gender, class, race and ethnicity in a complex position as their friend but also as a white, middle-class American researcher during a time when the meaning of money and connections or social networks with foreigners were critical for survival.

I had first met Violeta and Brian years earlier, in 2002, by following a piano to Cuba. It was a mahogany upright with a mirror across a front panel and on which its late American owner had played Big Band music and jazz a half century earlier. At the time I was a reporter for the *St. Petersburg Times* (now named the *Tampa Bay Times*), and I had followed that piano from the Tampa home and garage of the late owner's daughter, to a port south of Tampa, where it was lowered into the cargo hold of a 110-foot schooner setting sail for Havana. Not brave enough to board that boat, I instead flew there to catch up with the mirrored and other donated pianos at the oil-slick waters of Havana's port. A photographer with me, John Pendency, helped us dodge an officious Cuban bureaucrat named Rita Olga by bumming a smoke from the driver of the awaiting moving truck and then asking the driver if we could squeeze inside the truck's cab with him and tag along for the piano's drive to Guanabacoa. Ten miles later, we pulled up outside the white stone façade of Guillermo Tomás Escuela de Música conservatory as the sun started to sink behind the rooftops of this former colonial slave port. In the days to come as we were told to wait and then wait some more for Cuban Customs officials to clear the piano, John and I harassed the exasperated principal to allow us to watch the first Cuban student to play the mirrored piano so that we could wrap up our feature story. It was Brian she chose –

one of her star pupils, she told us. He was 13 at the time. Brian led us to Violeta, and we spent a day with them, ending the article about their lives. But that was by no means the end of the story, or even a fraction of it. When I started to return later to visit them for my graduate thesis on Cuban music toward a master's degree in Latin American Studies, I realized how very shallow my article had been – despite the generous play and three jump-pages the newspaper had given it. With each visit, I grew to see that there was no such thing as easily “wrapping up” in neat conclusions a life story and the daily contradictions that had become a feature of Violeta's life, right down to the complex friendship that she and I were developing following many long conversations that played out in her front sitting room. Amid the ongoing home construction projects for Brian's future benefit, we sat across from each other in the room's only furniture – Violeta in a straight-backed chair, and me in the beach chair rocker she often insisted I use. And while I thought I'd gone there to learn about Cuban music and music education, what Violeta shared about her life and what she and Brian lived through in guiding him into the music industry revealed much more about a society at a crossroads than the hours I spent at Havana's numerous arts schools and music venues.

While my gender facilitated an empathetic relationship between Violeta and me and an almost protective motherly reaction from her – a common experience for women ethnographers (Reinharz 1992: 62; Behar 1993: 7) – it at times caused distance with Brian, who was tight-lipped about the male-only Afro-Cuban societies that he joined, like the Abakuá. In addition to lingering machismo in Cuban society despite the Revolution's years of gender-equality policies, he also seemed to keep me at arms' length as he came to see me as his mother's friend and grew more aloof when I teased and nagged him

about smoking. More complicated were the economic differences between us, the balance between friend and ethnographer, and the perception among the neighbors that I was a rich gringa (and by comparison to the circumstances, even affording a plane ticket there, at \$400 – more than two years’ of the average Cuban salary – made me seem so). This perception led to instances of neighbors’ trying to take advantage of both Violeta and me during my visits, events that strained her long-standing friendships with them. While Violeta referred to me both as a friend and someone like a daughter to her, Brian, as he grew older, vacillated between respectful distance, to cockiness as I saw him try on the personas and swagger of popular musicians, to friendliness and frustration as he directly asked me to bring him electronics and equipment that other young musicians had. My position in their lives was one over which I constantly wrestled and tried to draw some ever-vague line between, on the one hand, bringing gifts as their friend at Brian’s graduation; scarce items such as Advil to help Violeta’s inflammation and body pain; CDs of jazz and other music they both liked but couldn’t find or afford in Cuba; or help with construction material after a neighbor’s wall collapsed in on their house, causing flooding problems when it rained. And on the other hand, not buying or bringing the electronic equipment Brian asked for or helping to buy gifts for music officials who they sought to influence – which could have directly impacted the course of his music career and would have – or so I believed – led to my overstepping my role as researcher.

Like Behar and her relationship with her *comadre*, an indigenous Mexican woman, in *Translated Woman* (1993), the socioeconomic differences between us continually forced me to face uncomfortable questions: why were CDs and a graduation gift of a new outfit okay, but the electronics weren’t? I could make the case that I

couldn't afford some of the electronic equipment Brian asked for, which was true. And it was also true that I saw a difference between bringing jazz CDs – which Brian absorbed into his morphing sound and talent – versus helping him set up a recording studio in his house or helping bribe a music official with an important decision over his career. The former grew out of our relationships as friends and as ethnographer but the latter seemed to me to go much further in crossing the line from observing his music career to playing an instrumental role in shaping it. But the requests caused me to recognize my own reaction, as Behar did, as one of defensiveness and suspicion, and in my case, self-doubt: did I make a mistake and set myself up with the small gifts to be seen “as an easy source from which to tap funds,” as Behar called it? (1993: 6) Was the friendship and their willingness to talk with me influenced by these small gifts on some level with the expectation of bigger requests to come? Was I also trying to put my foot down and re-establish a professional distance I feared I was losing? Recognizing as Behar wrote that “the ethnographic relationship is based on power,” I questioned myself about whether I was annoyed that Brian was assertive and aggressive – and at times manipulative – in his requests, rather than “complicitous and cooperative as informants ‘should’ be” (Behar 1993: 6)? Or conversely, was my suspicion stemming from caution or paranoia about being taken advantage of by Brian given my experience with the neighbors, the prevalent hustling going on in Havana, and what anthropologist Katrin Hansing has called the “worrying proportions” of opportunistic behavior in Cuba, or “*la doble moral*,” as a survival strategy amid chronic scarcities in the post-Special Period era, particularly among the youth – in which “cheating, stealing, bribing, lying and cutting corners have become a facet of everyday life” (Hansing 2011: 18)?

Or was I being ungracious and cold-hearted in light of what they were living through, as Behar thought she had been initially with her *comadre* after her lackluster sponsorship of a religious ritual (Behar 193: 6)? Like the guilt Behar later felt in light of her *comadre*'s generosity and her own stinginess, I compared my second-guessing to Violeta's quick readiness and openness with sharing her contacts to help me track down well-known musicians and music officials for my thesis. She would spend hours on the phone finding someone with a beat-up car to drive me into Havana for my interviews or to the airport so that I wouldn't have to rely on tourist taxis or the crowded and invariably late-running buses. She was always after me about whether I was eating enough during my visits, and before I would set out with Brian to a concert or a music street festival, she would lecture him about taking care to make sure I was safe. (I would joke with Brian that if anything bad were to happen to me, I worried more about the consequences for him than I did for myself.) Yet at the same time, I would have been naïve and foolish to think that in a context in which Violeta was desperate to even have enough food to feed Brian that she didn't see me as somehow a possible help to him in the future. And given the rank and role she used to hold in her profession, I knew it was embarrassing for her to be in this position and have to ask someone like me for favors. Adding to the discomfort was my crossing over from journalist to ethnographer, because unlike social sciences, my newspaper journalism background proscribed any sort of closeness or exchange of gifts and favors in a far more rigid application of the notion of "objectivity," which many social scientists dismiss as a false and unrealistic standard.

In addition to my initial interview of the family as a reporter in 2002, I returned as a graduate student twice in 2006, once in 2007 and again in 2008. Visits to Cuba lasted

anywhere from a weekend to three weeks at a time. Each time, I stayed with them for all or a portion of my time in Cuba, sometimes for as little as a weekend, other times for a week to two weeks at a time. I attended Brian's graduation from the conservatory and his rehearsals and performances with bands. I accompanied Violeta on her morning walks to the market and had countless hours of open-ended conversations with her as well as loosely structured interviews. I also interviewed more than a dozen music directors, musicologists, music officials and musicians in Cuba.

In my conversations with Violeta, I sought to find how she made sense of her world, the changes around her and her place in it all and not to read too much into any one conversation, as I grew to understand that – especially among Cubans suffering through the economic changes – deeply held beliefs, daily practices and surprisingly common frustrated rants may not at all resemble one another. As Alasuutari notes, the ethnomethodology emphasis is to not try to “outwit” local reasoning but to study the ways in which they try to make sense of situations, phenomenon and social conditions (1996: 382). And, I add, their own identities and place in changing social conditions.

In addition to ethnography – in which I observed aspects of Violeta and Brian's lives and interviewed them – this thesis also at points takes the form of biography, or a retelling of part of Violeta's history as she told it to me, and as I later arranged the information in the thesis around the context of historical developments in Cuban society. This differs from the literal “life history” approach, which tends not to reorder the material but record and reproduce the individuals' telling of his or her life story (Watson et al. 1985: 3). Biographies, including ones of ordinary and nonpolitical citizens like Violeta, stemming as they do from an individual's subjective and personal traditions, are

meant to explain as well as “capture and contain much in the epoch” (Inglis 1993: 234). Not only do biographies reveal much about a historical moment (ibid: 235), they also help us, as students of culture, learn how individuals “discover and invent a tale of identity with which to keep out the cold” (ibid: 237).

Literature review

Numerous scholars have written about the growing racial and socioeconomic inequalities in Cuba, particularly De la Fuente 2001, 2008, 2011; Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005; Damián Fernández 2000; and Perez Sarduy, Stubbs 2000. Others have explored the intersection of class, race and music in Cuba, notably Sublette 2004; Moore 2006; Perry 2004; Olavarria 2002; Perna 2005; Farr 2003 – with Moore and Perna more specifically delving into the recent phenomenon of the explosive opportunities for top dance band musicians (many of whom are black) to accumulate wealth and superstardom.

My research adds to the literature by bridging these two areas of study and revealing the personal and moral struggles of individuals, namely an aging revolutionary helping her musician son into this market-oriented industry as other opportunities close or threaten to lead him into a growing underclass amid worsening racial inequalities.

It will build on the work of Sujatha Fernandes, who also sought to “foreground the perspectives of ordinary people” in Cuba who, much like Violeta, were living through “extraordinary social change and contradiction” and “desperate to hold on to meaningful and deeply held values from the past” (2006: 3-4). A framework of music shows – like Sujatha Fernandes’ analysis of “artistic public spheres” in Cuban film, painting and rap music – the important role for the arts in Cuba in rethinking the revolution’s values, the

gap between ideals and lived reality and the reformulated “visions for the future” (2006: 3-4, 21). My study goes further, though, in examining not just identity and value expression through the arts, but also the material role of an increasingly market-oriented music industry for a long-time revolutionary family.

Like Sujatha Fernandes, other scholars have used some combination of ethnographic focus groups, fieldwork and participant-observation to illuminate the experience of ordinary people in Cuba while illustrating political processes and social transformation. More recently, that includes Marc Perry in his dissertation on Cuban rap, race and social change (Perry 2004); and Perez Sarduy, Stubbs in their compilation of in-depth interviews of 14 Afro-Cuban doctors, academics, artists and workers (2000).

However, my approach will be different from that of Sujatha Fernandes and the others in that instead of many voices and opinions of everyday people who either found reconstituted meanings and identity expression after the crisis of the 1990s – particularly through music and the arts – I will delve deeply into one case in particular. In this study, the life story of Violeta Aldama and her fight to help her musician son will reveal the fluid nature of identity categories over the course of a lifetime – a lifetime that paralleled historic societal transformations in Cuba – and how the navigation through those categories helped an aging revolutionary with unexpected decisions.

This research, then, aims to fill a gap in what anthropologist Katrin Hansing calls a badly needed area of study: the “everyday struggles for survival” in Cuba where “we can find important changes taking place in Cuban society, changes that are not only producing new social spaces, dynamics and values but also fundamentally altering the relationship between individuals and the state” (Hansing 2011: 19). Indeed, she says it is

these changes and growing sense of “personal agency” among ordinary Cubans and social actors that are often overlooked by the international community, which tends to focus on the Cuban government, the United States, its embargo and Cuba’s internal opposition. Instead, “both the Cuban government and the international community would do well to include ordinary Cubans as key social actors when thinking about the island, both now and in the future” (ibid. 19).

Organization of the thesis

The principal argument of this thesis is that subjective identities are constructed and flexible depending on the social context and that a time of social crisis forces individuals to examine those identities and act from within the dominant subjective position of the moment or problem at hand. This thesis is framed around three prominent identity categories that play an important role in Cuban society today as well as through the lives of Violeta and Brian: race, class and national identity. I will interweave Violeta’s life story and the ethnography through the structure of these three categories, understanding that aspects of each category intersect with the other two and that certainly others – such as gender, motherhood, religion and profession – play crucial roles as well. But before returning to Violeta’s story, I begin with historical context.

Chapter 1 entails a historic overview with an emphasis on class and music, with race playing a prominent role throughout. It details the historical and cultural context that gave rise to structural reforms of the 1990s, which simultaneously led to explosive economic opportunities in the music industry and dance music as well as class divisions and racial, socioeconomic inequalities. Chapter 2 provides a primary focus on race in

Cuba, with class playing a prominent role, interwoven through a biographical sketch of Violeta's life. Chapter 3, the ethnography, follows recent turning points in Violeta's and Brian's lives while exploring the changing notion of national identity after the crisis of the 1990s and the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Race and class intersect again in this chapter as it examines how the nation's ideological and policy shifts led to a crisis of values and changing social networks that played out in Violeta's and Brian's lives through critical moments and decisions. The Conclusion will end with Violeta's and Brian's decision in 2009 on whether he should stay in Cancun, Mexico, during a music tour there or return to Cuba; and finally Violeta's choice when facing the same decision in 2011.

CHAPTER 1:
CLASS, MUSIC AND THE 1990s

It was early on a warm Sunday evening in May, 2006, but already the nightlife stirred along La Rampa in the Vedado section of Havana, Cuba. This stretch of what is officially Calle 23 rises sharply uphill from the majestic Hotel Nacional on the seaside boulevard of the Malecón up to the Habana Libre, formerly the Havana Hilton. During the pre-revolutionary era of the 1950s, American Mob bosses hosted tourists and celebrities in Vedado's ritzy hotels, clubs, casinos and cabarets amid what writer T.J. English called "flash, ample flesh, and entertainment venues" that created a "veneer of prosperity" (2007: x). In the last two decades, long after the lights went out on the party, and prostitution and gambling were cleaned up by Fidel Castro's revolutionary government, some of these clubs and new dance bands were booming once more (Moore 2006: 127). By 2006, it was in this scene – where high-rolling dance musicians arrived in designer clothes and sports cars, where moneyed Cubans paid the cover and those who couldn't, accompanied tourists – in which Cuba's new class distinctions were prominently on display.

Violeta's life story mirrored these changes, as she struggled to ensure that her musician son, Brian, did not slip into Cuba's growing underclass. It's a class that increasingly consists of black Cubans after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Cuba's

implementation of market-oriented reforms. This study uses the categories of class, race and national identity to show the fluid nature of identity constructions for individuals and the flexible manner in which they apply them when navigating a social crisis. I show through this study that not only are those identity categories fluid through time and socioeconomic change, but that individuals like Violeta apply and experience various identities differently depending on the context. And it is through these fluid categories of identity that individuals find a sense of agency – in this case, an Afro-Cuban woman and mother following the crisis and economic reforms of the 1990s. Violeta’s life story, then, also provides what anthropologist Katrin Hansing has called a needed inclusion of “ordinary Cubans as key social actors” (2011: 19) in a discussion about changes underway in Cuba. While other identity categories such as gender, religion, profession and revolutionary play crucial roles in this study, they will be woven through the three larger categories of class, race and national identity that are profoundly affecting Violeta’s and Brian’s world.

This study unfolds as Violeta, an aging revolutionary, worked to help Brian train for and then enter a music industry that is both at the head of an economic transformation in Cuba and also accentuating the generation gap and crisis of values facing Cuban society. The crisis of values was most apparent in the dance music of *timba*, which became associated with tourism, prostitution, materialism, racism and misogyny. These associations would echo a historical racial bias in Cuba against Afro-Cuban dance music as crass and inferior to more European-influenced genres. But they would also reflect the social turmoil in Cuba in the 1990s and beyond. Violeta is like millions of other Cubans needing to re-orient their worlds, ideologies and actions in the face of what Sujatha

Fernandes called “contradictory, material forces such as a socialist political economy, a growing tourist sector, and foreign investment” (2006: 25) – and more specifically, in this case, the increasingly market-oriented music industry. Historically, Cubans have juggled competing obligations to collective principles versus immediate needs of loved ones through what Damián Fernández called the “politics of passion” versus the “politics of affection” – or “*lo informal*” (2000). That is all the more true during times of economic crisis, such as the one that began in the 1990s. While Damián Fernández’s *lo informal* provides a theoretical framework for this thesis, feminist ethnography and its emphasis on subjective identity constructions will bring this study one step deeper into Violeta’s process of making decisions and sense of her life through the guidance of identity roles.

But first, this chapter sets the historical context and groundwork for the rest of the study by focusing on class and what gave rise during Brian’s infancy to the growing class divisions in Cuba – in which race also plays a big part. Cuba’s music industry is a perfect context for this analysis not only because the arts held a special place in challenging and reincorporating hegemony in post-revolutionary Cuba (S.Fernandes 2006: 25), but also because of the unique and privileged position that popular dance bands enjoyed from the 1990s onward (Moore 2006; Perna 2005). This was the world luring Brian as he progressed through his classical training at the conservatories and exemplifies the consumerist values of his generation that clash so directly with those of Violeta’s.

What’s more, in the words of musicologist Ned Sublette, Cuba is a “world power in music,” where “music is so essential to the Cuban character that you can’t disentangle it from the history of the nation” (2004: vii-viii). Indeed, in his exhaustive social history of *Cuba and its Music* up through the 1950s, he reveals how such a history entailed the

interactions “of Cuba with Spain, Yorubaland, the Congo, Calabar, Dahomey, Haiti, New Orleans, New York, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Miami,” and in the process transformed American and world music, developing distinctive styles through military wind bands, percussion-driven rumbas, piano-flute-string *charangas* and many others. These gave rise to Cuban innovations such as the tres-bongo-clave combo in Cuban *son*, (later adapted into salsa), *danzón*, mambo, chachachá, Afro-Cuban jazz and others (Sublette 2005: xii, 155, 238, 257, 307, 308, 336). On the eve of the 1959 Cuban Revolution – which would seek to extend classical music education to the masses – the island was already awash with musicians and a strong musical heritage.

“Most Cubans didn’t frequent the Tropicana” (famous, lavish cabaret). “But everyone in Havana knew someone who was a professional musician. Many of those musicians’ fathers had been musicians, and many of their sons became musicians. After work, they went home to Guanabacoa, Cayo Hueso, Buenavista, Santos Suarez, and every other working-class barrio in the city.... Whatever happened on the stage happened better in the barrio. Cuban music continued to live where it had always lived, in the homes, fiestas, taverns, and neighborhood dances of poor people, where it was cultivated with great skill and care. It lived in every town, and it lived out in the countryside, where cane cutters argued in decimas during the hard months of dead time between sugar harvests. It lived in Oriente, where people played son and rumba, in that order; and in Matanzas, where they played rumba and son, in that order; and everywhere else in Cuba. Wherever a radio was playing music, someone was dancing to it.... Dancing and music were never very far away. It didn’t mean people were happy. It meant that – not for all Cubans, but for many – dancing was the way they walked, and singing was the way they breathed” (Sublette 2004: 585-586).

Much like previous genres and styles that were “made in the spaces created by society and empire” (Sublette 2005: viii) – from slavery to indentured servitude, from colonial influences to foreign occupation and revolution – the dance and *timba* bands of the 1990s rose to prominence at a confluence of historical and locally specific cross-currents of social, economic and musical change. By the next decade, top dance band

members, with close ties to the tourist industry and foreign investors, were some of the most wealthy people on the island, and dubbed the “nouveau riche” (Moore 2006: 239).

On that particular May evening in 2006 in the Vedado section of Havana, I stood outside La Zorra y El Cuervo, or the Fox and the Hound, a basement jazz club whose entrance was designed to replicate a British phone booth. Next to me was Brian, then 17. We stood waiting for his mentor and tutor, Lazaro Valdés, who decades earlier had been the pianist for legendary singer and composer Benny Moré. Lazaro was headlining at the club that night and had left our names on the guest list at the door. Otherwise Brian, like many Cubans, would have had a tough if not impossible time paying the cover – which at \$10 was about the same as the average monthly per capita income (Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005: 74). As Brian nonchalantly sipped a malta from the adjacent walk-up canteen and tapped his pack of cigarettes, tourists and their Cuban companions made their way inside, the trickle of a line much smaller than the large crowds I had seen mobbing the entrances to dance halls for the *timba* orchestra bands at Casa de la Música and other clubs. It had been Brian’s mother, Violeta, who had tracked down Lazaro through music contacts months earlier to ask if he would consider taking on Brian as a personal student. Music styles and opportunities had been changing drastically in Cuba since the 1990s, and still the conservatories taught a primarily classical canon (Moore 2006). Violeta and Brian hoped his exposure to popular music lessons would help him keep up and supplement his classical music training at the conservatory in their municipality of Guanabacoa outside Havana.

As we waited for Lazaro in order to say hello before the show, Brian motioned across the street. A newer car – a yellow Hyundai with a sun roof – was parallel parking

against the curb. Its driver got out and sauntered over to us, wearing designer jeans and a buttoned-down dress shirt opened widely at the collar, revealing a gold chain, which matched his small gold hooped earrings, one in each ear. Sunglasses were perched atop his smoothly shaven bald head. He looked to me to be about 40, a self-possessed, compact and muscular light-skinned black man who greeted us breezily. This was Lazaríto Valdés – Lazaro’s son and the head of Bamboleo, one of the hottest *timba* bands in Cuba that had reached superstar status (Perna 2005: 149; Moore 2006: 127; Robinson 2004: 84-90).

Brian, wearing pale blue jeans, a T-shirt and sneakers, regarded him warily but with respect. With time I grew to understand the extent of Lazaríto’s privilege – the right and ability to have a car, a new one at that, and the nice clothes, international tours and relatively exorbitant income compared to most Cubans, including doctors and engineers, who were state employees (Robinson 2004: 89; Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005: 75). These privileges are common to international artists in the global market. But according to scholar Robin Moore, in Cuba the popular dance band musicians “have been at the forefront of recent economic transformations.” Their ties to the tourism sector and international trade created a perception of them as the “embodiment of nascent capitalism.” Many of them stirred up controversy through pretentious lifestyles and songs that seemed to celebrate consumerism (Moore 2006: 247).

By comparison, after Brian and I took a Panataxi home – one of those white Lada sedans sometimes missing shocks and often avoided by tourists – the next morning he recapped the evening for his mother, Violeta. Once an Army major who had quit when Brian was born, too early to qualify for a military pension, Violeta now got by on

occasional help from Brian's father, a Santería babalao, or high priest, and by taking in extra laundry for the neighbors. When he told her about Lazarito's arrival and how Lazarito spoke briefly with the senior Lazaro then left before the performance, they both rolled their eyes about what they interpreted as a display of arrogance. Violeta was often telling me that Brian had the egalitarian values of her generation, not the superficial, consumerist and opportunistic traits and behavior prevalent since the 1990s. But Violeta – while promoting and encouraging his musical development and growing contacts in this world of popular dance bands – also lectured him and turned in desperation to his uncle and other relatives to enlist their help enforcing upon Brian the importance of humility and how to comport himself amid what they considered pretense and ostentation. His music education and career were increasingly intersecting with this tidal wave of change in the music industry. At the same time, as an Afro-Cuban mother and believer in the revolutionary socialist system, she also was vocal about – and painfully aware of – the growing inequalities developing since the 1990s and that the music industry – with its consumerist trappings and economic opportunities alike – might be Brian's best chance for a secure future.

Before I return to Violeta's story and struggle for Brian, as well as the context of race and national identity, I will first focus on the development of new class divisions and establish in this chapter the historic and cultural context of the transformation of the Cuban music industry in the 1990s. This chapter will be broken into three parts: starting with the structural reforms of the 1990s and subsequent rise of socioeconomic and racial inequalities that would be critically addressed in music and the arts in the 1990s but would also help create unprecedented opportunities for wealth among dance band

musicians. Then I will focus on the evolving stylistic changes in popular dance music and evolution of *timba*. And finally, I will describe the intersection of the economic reforms, the birth of *timba* super-stardom, and the new relationship between musicians and the market.

1.1 The Special Period

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of its robust aid and trade support to Cuba – valued at \$6 billion per year along with another \$1.2 billion in military aid – pushed the island nation into an economic depression in the first half of the 1990s, when in one year alone the economy suffered a drop of 40 percent in GNP (Moore 2006: 226). Oil imports stopped; buses were sidelined, resulting in a transportation crisis. Rolling blackouts and a critical shortage of food and basic domestic goods were common (Moore 2006: 226). The rationing system soon expanded to cover almost all consumer goods while cutbacks in rations left the average consumer with only one-half of monthly needs – fueling theft from state enterprises, decreased labor productivity, absenteeism and illegal activities (Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005: 16). With no industrial base and little to trade on the international market, Cuba’s government sought to survive the crisis by implementing substantial structural economic reforms and austerity measures. The measures were framed as the “Special Period in Time of Peace” and opened the economy to tourism and foreign investment. The changes would ultimately contribute to severe income inequalities and disparities and inadvertently reverse many of the Revolution’s enormous gains that had made Cuba up to that point one of the most egalitarian economies and societies of Latin America (Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005: 18, 71; De la Fuente 2001: 315). Overnight, wrote scholar Robin Moore, Cuba went from being one of

the wealthiest countries in Latin America “to one of the poorest” – contributing to the mass exodus of rafters trying to reach the United States in the summer of 1994 (2006: 226). Social tensions rose, as some weathered the crisis better than others. Some received remittances in newly legalized dollars from family abroad or were able to take advantage of the newly permitted renting of rooms to tourists in *casas particulares* or running home-based restaurants called *paladares*. Amid the crisis, theft between individuals became (and remains) a “serious problem” (Moore 2006: 227). Moore wrote: “In the past, almost all Cubans owned the same domestic goods and had no reason to steal. Now those who are needy live alongside others who are relatively rich, creating friction and envy” (2006: 227).

In fact, in 1989 before the economic crash, the ratio of highest to lowest wage was 4.5 to 1; but by 1995 it had grown to 829 to 1, and by 2002 the gap had swelled dramatically to 12,500 to 1 (Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005: 73-74). By then, some economists estimated that income inequality was worse in Cuba than in 14 countries in Latin America (ibid.: 72). In 2002, the vast majority of Cuba’s population was employed in the state sector and paid in pesos. For those workers, monthly incomes that year converted into U.S. dollars ranged from \$4 for those earning the lowest salary or pension, to possibly as high as \$23 for a cabinet minister, \$25 for a physician; and up to \$31 for a police officer or security guard for tourists. By contrast, in the private sector, the lowest monthly incomes started at \$40 for a domestic servant. Potential monthly incomes soared up to \$1,400 for a *jinetera* or prostitute; to \$4,000 for renters of rooms or homes; to the very exclusive and rare earnings of up to \$50,000 for the owner of a *paladar* (ibid.: 75). Just below the owner of a *paladar* near the top of that list are “artists and musicians

(known abroad)” making from \$600 to \$6,000 a month. While artists who were not well known earned between \$10 and \$13 a month, performers from the internationally famous Buena Vista Social Club group could charge \$6,000 for a night’s performance, while other huge stars like popular dance band Los Van Van held contracts paying as much as \$200,000 (ibid.: 75).

While the origins of the crisis were not defined by race and had affected large swaths of the population, some of the reforms had “racially differentiated consequences” that led to growing racial inequalities (De la Fuente 2001: 318). The two biggest reasons stem from the government’s legalization of the U.S. dollar (and then the 2004 implementation of the convertible currency – or CUC, known locally as the *chavito*); and access to jobs in tourism. Both examples speak to the key factor determining how well families fare today in Cuba – namely, access to hard currency. That’s because many goods, including food, became scarce in “peso” stores, but existed in new “dollar” stores at much higher prices or on the black market. In the case of family remittances from abroad, Afro-Cubans were at a disadvantage: 83.5-percent of Cuban immigrants living in the United States were white, according to the 1990 U.S. Census, while in Cuba, the 1981 Cuban census measured the island’s population as 66 percent white and 34 percent nonwhite (Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005: 79). The differences can be seen in who is getting money from abroad: while 44 percent of white Cuban households received remittances in Havana in 2000, only 23 percent of black Cuban households did (De la Fuente 2011: 32).

The resulting impact was not lost on Fidel Castro, who in 1993, shortly after the government allowed Cubans to receive funds from families living overseas, criticized the

inequalities and privileges that would result, but sought to reassure the populace: “We need to understand, and not be ashamed. That would never be the correct attitude for a revolutionary... revolutionaries make sacrifices throughout their lives” (quoted in Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005: 79). Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López added this observation (which bears out in Violeta’s life): “A decade later, even though remittance recipients are probably a majority of the population and the ‘ashamed revolutionaries’ a minority, the disparities caused by remittances continue to irritate the true believers” (ibid.).

Cubans of color also faced obstacles getting coveted jobs in the expanding tourist sector. That was true despite the fact that by the late 1980s, following the Revolution’s anti-discrimination policies, black Cubans’ educational levels were on par with those of white Cubans. Black Cubans also were slightly overrepresented in service jobs and should have been well positioned to segue into the tourism industry (De la Fuente 2001: 322).

But decades of the Revolution’s anti-discrimination policies did not stamp out lingering racist views. Surveys in the 1990s found that prejudice was rampant against black Cubans. They were considered to have different “values” and levels of “decency” compared to white Cubans. These racial attitudes festered and grew in private spaces during a decades-long imposed silence on race stemming from a government that insisted it had wiped out the colonial legacy of institutionalized racism through its socialist revolution. Those who had argued otherwise were accused of acting against Cuba’s historical discourse of a unified mixed-race identity and the Revolution itself (De la Fuente 2001: 320-323). Now those latent racist views were compounded by the racist attitudes of foreign managers in joint-venture tourist and hotel operations. What’s more,

despite egalitarian gains in employment, education and health care, the revolutionary government over the course of three decades had not been able to overcome Cuba's persistent housing shortage. By the 1990s, higher percentages of black and mestizo Cubans were overrepresented in cramped, dilapidated urban housing. This limited their abilities to rent rooms to tourists or take advantage of the new *paladares* allowed starting in the 1990s – or home-based restaurants catering to foreigners. In fact, a study in 2000 found that the share of whites in self-employment was three times larger than that for black Cubans or mulattos (De la Fuente 2011: 32). The different earning potentials were enormous, given that workers in the private sector could make considerably more in hard currency than state sector employees paid in pesos. De la Fuente also noted that black Cubans blocked from the formal tourist sector have sought other ways to get access to direly needed hard currency. That included the informal markets, from prostitution – called *jineterismo*, a term also used to imply “hustling” by both men and women – to the black market. However, their perceived prevalence in these areas by police and society at large is often fueled by foreign and domestic racialized notions of black criminality and sexuality (De la Fuente 2001: 326-327). Cuban tourist agencies profit from these images of paradise, sexual indulgence and prostitution, using them in their advertisements: “Cuba: the fire and passion of deepest Caribbean flavor,” reads one (De la Fuente 2001: 327). In my six visits and stays in Cuba between 2002 and 2008, I have routinely seen white, middle-aged European and North American men with very young (possibly underage) black Cuban girls sitting on their laps or holding hands at clubs (a throwback to the pre-revolutionary practice of using the image of the sexualized mulatta and Afro-Cuban culture in general to lure tourists). Another social phenomenon that developed out

of desperation – and was at times exploited by foreigners – was that of young Cubans seeking to fall in love with – or at least find a potential spouse among – tourists or international visitors as a legal path off the island where exit visas were restricted. One 28-year-old Afro-Cuban woman I met in a Havana suburb let me write her story once for the *St. Petersburg Times*. She had married a 60-year-old white European man in order to leave Cuba for a better life for her son (Amrhein 2007). She wasn't in love with the European and was sure he had visited Cuba prowling for a young wife. She remembered one of his early jokes about their different skin colors: “*Café con leche*,” he had said. But she saw it as her best financial option – even though at the end of the paperwork process, it was breaking her heart to leave Cuba and she was changing her mind. Because of the structural barriers outlined here, economic prospects for her and other black Cubans continued to look grim with the expansion of the private sector and retreat of the state. In 2011, President Raul Castro – who officially took over for his ailing brother three years earlier – called for the end of the monthly ration book and announced an impending layoff of 500,000 state jobs and the issuance of hundreds of thousands of new licenses for small, private businesses (Archibold 2011). De la Fuente argued that racial inequalities will continue to grow alongside these measures unless specific policies are enacted to counteract the negative effects (2011: 33).

Before long in the 1990s, artists, musicians, filmmakers and writers took up the themes and pressing issues of the crisis' hardships and growing racial inequalities – including prostitution, hustling in the tourism sector, and the gap between the revolution's egalitarian ideals and everyday reality. This new artistic work included increasing complaints about police harassment of black Cubans and the new prohibition

against Cubans entering tourist hotels and beaches. At the start of the crisis, new social spaces were opening for debate, including among new civic groups, as the government focused on improving its record of tolerance and inclusion in the desperate move to attract international investment (S.Fernandes 2006: 38-40). But in 1996, following a slight economic recovery, the state closed these small political openings (S.Fernandes 2006: 40). Increasingly critical debate was being relegated to arts and culture, where Sujatha Fernandes argued that the state tolerated “greater diversity and freedom of cultural expression” (2006: 40). One big reason was the power of the music industry and the arts to attract foreign investment, tourists and hard currency, but Sujatha Fernandes pointed to another: through this tolerance, the state made increasing efforts to use “arts as a way of reincorporating and reintegrating the Cuban people into a new hegemonic project, increasingly defined as national rather than revolutionary” (2006: 40) Indeed, though at times closely monitored, the arts and culture long had held a privileged position as the state invested enormous resources toward the cultural cultivation of its citizens through free but extremely competitive conservatories and art schools as well as accessible community *casas de cultura*, dating back to the earliest days of the Revolution.

1.2 Music education, *Música bailable* and the development of *timba*

In the 1960s, Fidel Castro’s new government began to frown upon dance music and its supposed hedonistic carryover from the 1950s. In those pre-revolutionary days, Havana had been awash in flashy nightclub venues and American mafia-run cabarets that catered to a booming tourism industry and the rampant prostitution that went along with

it. Dance music was an integral part of that environment, not just in the tourist clubs but throughout the city, with more than 40 dance events every night. The Tropicana alone employed 40 musicians and 70 dancers and singers (Perna 2005: 22). Clubs and theaters hosted international stars like Edith Piaf, Sarah Vaughan and Nat ‘King’ Cole. U.S. jazz musicians poured into Havana; and Cuban musicians traveled north with styles like mambo and chachachá, many playing in the New York orchestras of Machito, Mario Bauzá and Tito Puente. Meanwhile Afro-Cuban *conguero* Chano Pozo had already been discovered by American jazz great Dizzy Gillespie, who merged Pozo’s “percussive brilliance” with the bebop jazz he’d pioneered with Charlie Parker to create something new called cubop (English 2007: 245; Perna 2005: 21).

But as Castro’s forces came to power in early 1959, many of the casinos in Havana’s entertainment district were ransacked by jubilant crowds elated at the news of the departure of dictator Fulgencio Batista (Perna 2005: 22). Castro’s government initially allowed the casinos to re-open under its supervision. Music events, with newly racially mixed crowds, flourished in the halls and cabarets. But the revolutionary government eventually nationalized all U.S. companies, including the hotels and nightclubs, kicked out the mob and by the late 1960s, shut down all of Havana’s music clubs and dance venues, some permanently (Perna 2005: 22-30). In general, during the Cold War and under Soviet influence, government support for dance music dropped drastically (Moore 2006: 107). The government and its supporters saw cabaret shows as cheap and crude, remnants of a capitalist society that commercialized art and numbed the masses with mindless, exploitative entertainment. Officials instituted massive literacy campaigns in the countryside and efforts to introduce the population to “high” culture,

similar to the Soviet model. Also in this early period of the Revolution, the government clamped down on errant cultural expression, sending a clear message to artists that they were expected to incorporate revolutionary ideals in their work and be part of the social transformation of the country. Their conformity was called upon because of the ongoing external threats from the United States, including an alliance between the CIA and the Mob bosses who were still licking their wounds from the millions they lost in their hotel and casino investments (English 2007: 323). Meanwhile, the new Castro government established institutions to support politically committed forms of expression: Casa de las Américas; the Cuban Institute of Cinematic Art and Industry (ICAIC); the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC); and the National Council of Culture (CNC). Those artists who didn't comply were purged, blacklisted or sent to re-education camps (Howe 2004: 11-12). Many performers fled the country for exile. Of those that remained, some continued to receive support from the government, like Orquesta Aragón, Estrellas Cubanas, Pacho Alonso and others – traditional Cuban dance music that was now, according to Vincenzo Perna, “defended by flute-and-violins *charangas*” (2005: 26). But government support came with conditions. Government directors of television and radio shows insisted that bands showed sympathies to the Revolution either in lyrics or in banter between songs during performances (Moore 2006: 109).

Meanwhile, marches and protest songs against imperialism received enthusiastic backing in this era. The government also promoted research into “black folklore” and the creation of national performance ensembles and Afro-Cuban folkloric groups like the Conjunto Folclórico Nacional (Perna 2005: 28). However, the Conjunto received little television airtime and few recording opportunities (Moore 2006: 185-187). The state's

greatest endeavor in the arts rested in bringing programs to the masses. It promoted lecture series called Popular Music Seminars and opened Professional Improvement Schools that allowed aspiring musicians of all ages to learn notation, harmony and theory. It started a widespread and high-quality initiative called the National Choral Movement and launched music, dance and art classes in neighborhood *casas de cultura*. These cultural centers provided children as young as six or seven with their first formal music education (Moore 2006: 88-89, 96-97). However, despite the party's insistence on cultural education among the masses, it focused its resources on developing elite artists at national conservatories. At the conservatories, the curriculum centered on Cuban and European classical composers along with wind bands, chamber ensembles and symphonies. Conversely, African-influenced styles, rumba ensembles and religious folklore were mostly ignored – until after 1979, when folk and traditional music started to enter the curriculum through percussion programs (Moore 2006: 94-95).

These free, but competitive music boarding schools opened throughout the island – often in abandoned mansions of the former upper and middle class that had fled into exile. The schools were separated into three levels: elemental, midlevel and advanced. The level of superior was added following the opening of ISA, or the Instituto Superior de Arte) (Moore 2006: 95-96). Admission into the schools, and progression to the next level, required passing rigorous tests. In 1960, the Guillermo Tomás conservatory of Guanabaco opened its doors along with another across town in Marianao, joining what later became known as the Amadeo Roldán conservatory in Central Havana (Moore 2006: 89). The Escuela Nacional de Arte, or ENA, opened in 1962 devoted to training classical musicians on the grounds of the former elite resort, the Havana Country Club

where Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford hit golf balls just a few years earlier (Moore 2006: 95). It also included the study of theater, ballet and visual arts. Through the 1980s, students who passed through elemental and midlevel schools throughout the island came to ENA to live in boarding houses on scholarships, but now music high schools exist in the provinces, as well. The best and brightest students who pass more tests after high school move on to the university level of ISA, adjacent to ENA. There are never enough positions for the students who apply, so teachers and administrators are constantly steering less-qualifying aspirants to other careers (Moore 2006: 97). After graduating from the art schools, young musicians must serve several years in military or social service in exchange for their free training. The social service often has included taking a job in a remote town or province teaching music classes for reduced pay. After finishing the social or military service, they could return home and seek jobs at higher pay. In general, graduates could expect to earn a state salary full time in their music profession, either teaching or performing, employed by a state artistic agency, called an *empresa*. The *empresa* traditionally set the number of performances expected of the musicians each month and determined their monthly salary based on a skill classification of A, B or C (Moore 2006: 91). Meanwhile, aspiring musicians who did not graduate from the conservatories had to apply for status as a professional. They could do so only after proving that they held down about 20 shows a month – unpaid (ibid.).

But for years the government's promotion of rigorous music training extended only to classical music. Through the 1980s, music students at ENA found that it was impossible to study popular music, including Cuban pop or traditional music – genres considered by cultural officials to be cheap. Jazz was also off limits because it was

associated with the United States (Moore 2006: 112). Those students caught or refusing to stick with a European classical curriculum were expelled, including the late Emiliano Salvador, one of Cuba's greatest jazz pianists (ibid.). Even Cuban *son*, *guaracha*, boleros and chachachás were considered the status quo and not part of the revolution's effort to lift cultural standards (Moore 2006: 101). For a time, officials openly considered African-based art and dance – an enormous part of Cuba's heritage – as “folklore” and less sophisticated. The schools only taught a classical canon of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Cuban composers, like Cervantes and Roldán. This is still true to present day, though with the exceptions in percussion that I previously mentioned and with post-1990s relaxed attitudes about what students can listen to in their free time. Now after they've mastered their classical assignments, students can play popular music on campus and include it in their graduation recital performances. During my several visits to ENA in 2002, 2006 and 2007, I routinely saw students trading burned cassettes of favorite American jazz greats like Charlie Parker, Oscar Peterson or the Yellow Jackets, along with Cuban masters like Jesús “Chucho” Valdés and Ernán López Nussa. Individual graduation recitals sometimes included at least one song in the style of *timba* (Amrhein 2002). Students learned popular techniques either through the music they borrowed, by taking private lessons with professional musicians or through jam sessions with one another, methods they commonly term, *en la calle*, or in the street, meaning, through informal contacts outside the school.

But for years, a rigid classical canon meant that countless students graduated with great technical skill, but with no basic knowledge of Cuba's great contributions, like the mambo, *comparsa*, or *son* – the spine of what later developed in New York as salsa

(Moore 1006: 113). Moore wrote: “The music personified by pianist Rubén González, *timbalero* Amadito Valdés, bassist Orlando ‘Cachaito’ López, trumpeter Félix Chappottín, and others ceased to be a dominant model after the mid-1970s. It was left to younger performers graduating from the conservatories to reinvent Cuban dance music with their own experiences and tastes” (ibid.).

In the 1970s, the isolation from restricted travel on the Cuban side and the U.S. embargo on the other provided a bit of space to refashion what was filtering in from the international community. Evening radio broadcasts picked up from Miami played a role. During this period, influences of bossa nova, jazz, funk – always felt by musicians to be a bit daring and subversive – along with more Cuban “folkloric” drumming seeped into popular music and were given a twist. This was demonstrated by Los Van Van, Cuba’s most enduring and perhaps most innovative dance band. Juan Formell’s group had a huge influence on younger musicians, and was among the first to mix funk and *son* with folkloric drumming (Moore 2006: 115). But one of the greatest experimental bands in Cuban dance music was Irakere, founded in 1973 by Jesús “Chucho” Valdés, son of Tropicana pianist Bebo Valdés. Irakere means “lush place” or “jungle” in Yoruba (the language and culture brought to Cuba with slaves from West Africa), and the band was packed with high-caliber, classically trained musicians (Moore 2006: 118). Irakere blended funk, jazz, *son*, classical music and Afro-Cuban religious repertoires. They also played dance music to reach a broader audience, which they did with smashing success with their 1972 hit, “Bacalao con pan.” The group would predate by a decade the use of Santería rhythms, liturgical melodies, jazz-influenced melodies, the prominent role of the drum set, funk bass lines and picaresque lyrics that would dominate the later *timba*

phenomenon (ibid.). But for years the band played in obscure locales with little institutional help because of the members' weak support for socialism and their incorporation of U.S. styles, like jazz and funk, officially considered "music of the imperialists" (ibid. 119). Eventually personal connections and the relaxation of relations during the Carter administration helped them score invitations to play and record abroad.

Despite the state-backed conservatories, up through the 1980s the arts were perceived as receiving less government support compared to other fields, and ambitious students avoided music and chose more "upwardly mobile" careers in law, economics, medicine or international relations (Moore 2006: 99). That changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Dance music, always loved by the public, surged once again in government priorities – with ironic echoes of pre-revolutionary 1950s – because of its role in attracting tourists to the night clubs and hotel cabarets as well as the money it generated in concerts and record sales abroad. The performance of dance music offered musicians and Cubans in general a route to some of the highest salaries on the island – far greater earnings than they could hope to make almost any other way (Moore 2006: 122).

Leading the pack was the group NG La Banda, and its director José Luis Cortés. In *Timba: The Sound of the Cuban Crisis*, author Vincenzo Perna described Cortés as "a black musician with experience in the fields of both jazz and popular music, and who, at the end of the 1980s, had been able to tailor a type of dance music that had become extremely successful among young Blacks. As the blueprint for *timba*, in the early years of the 1990s that music moved from Afro-Cuban barrios into tourist clubs, where it offered its audiences – a mix of young attractive Afro-Cuban women and middle-aged Western males – a platform for their encounters on the dance floor" (2005: 54-55).

During interviews in Havana in 2007, several musicians and musicologists also traced the origins of *timba*'s popularity to black Cuban *jineteras* and their foreign male "dates" who took them to the tourist clubs where the women danced to *timba* while the men watched. American-born musician Pablo Menéndez, who grew up in Cuba and formed the fusion rock-jazz group Mezcla in the mid-1980s, remembered it that way (Menéndez 2007, interview). So did Helio Orovio, a musicologist and historian with the Institute of Folklore and Ethnology at Cuba's Academy of Sciences. During an interview, Orovio agreed that *timba*'s popularity took off first among black *jineteras* and their foreign "boyfriends" who frequented expensive clubs. Orovio was disdainful of *timba* and its gyrating dance movements, the call and response, the shout-outs to "Mi gente de Cerro, mi gente de Marianao," that he said passed for singing (Orovio 2007, interview). He called it "black" music and believed by the time of the interview that it had not become as popular overseas as past Cuban musical styles because it lacked universal elements and didn't respect musical norms. This was a common criticism of *timba*, one that Perna countered by noting that many of *timba*'s elements were "already present in *son*" – such as reiteration, antiphonal alternation chorus-solo singer, vocal improvisation and musician-audience interaction – and that instead, *timba* reflected a connection to Afro-Cuban dance music of the past (2005: 128).

And like Afro-Cuban dance music of the past, *timba* garnered far less respect among the cultural elite and was deemed unsophisticated in comparison to music derived from European influences. The racial overtones in some critiques of *timba* were intertwined not only with the previously mentioned association with *jineteras* and prostitution but also its links to the black working class.

For instance, band leader David Calzado of the superstar-level Charanga Habanera *timba* group told Moore that despite dance music's popularity among the masses, Communist party leaders have never respected it, seeing it as “*cosa de negros*,” or “*música baja*” associated with “poorly educated Afro-Cubans” – but nevertheless used by officials as a tool to draw crowds to rallies and marches (Moore 2006: 110).

Other musicians and musicologists noted that despite its appeal to the masses, *timba* is far from simplistic. Leonardo Acosta, a musician and widely quoted musicologist and author of more than a dozen books on music and literary criticism (including *Cubano Be Cubano Bop*) praised *timba*'s musicality. He argued that musicians must be extremely talented to play in *timba* bands (Acosta 2007, interview). Indeed, many of them are classically trained. Others, including visual artist Alexis Esquivel and musicologist Liliana González, disputed that *timba* was “black music,” arguing that Cubans of many backgrounds identified with it.

González who worked at CIDMUC (Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Música), told me that her research revealed that *timba* was popular among all ages and backgrounds. Sometimes, she said, people liked it but didn't know it was called *timba*. She added that it resonated with a broad segment of the population because Cubans love their dance music. She believed that *timba* bands gained widespread popularity because, not only would they play in tourist clubs, but they'd hold concerts outside, making the same songs a bit more intense in rhythm and lyrics for the masses that couldn't afford the tourist clubs. However, she noted that one serious consequence of *timba* lyrics and the social circumstances of the 1990s was the degradation of women (González 2007, interview). This generation of musicians feels free to talk about women's bodies as pieces

of property because of increased prostitution after the 1990s, she argued, an echo of a pointed complaint about *timba* music that I'll explore further below.

Moore added a different perspective about the genre's popularity: that while the styles between *timba* bands differed, the music offered "a much-needed diversion for youth living in the difficult post-Soviet era" (2006: 127).

Perna called the years between 1993 and 1997 a boom for *salsa cubana*, as *timba* was termed at the time (2005: 55). Dance bands' success in tourist venues and lucrative deals abroad allowed them to flourish and multiply, with new bands on the scene modeling NG La Banda and Cortés's popular songs, "nervous horn breaks" and rap-inflected choruses. Amid scarcity, band leaders of groups like NG La Banda and La Charanga Habanera and singers like Issac Delgado, Paulito FG and Manolín symbolized the successful entrepreneur in Cuba's new market economy (ibid.). According to Perna, their success was born from a marriage between the artistic aspirations of the 1980s and the economic opportunities of the 1990s, when Cortés and other musical innovators...

"exploited fissures opened by the crisis, navigating between art music and barrio culture, the legal and the submerged economy. With timba, formerly taboo topics such as Afro-Cuban religion and sex tourism filtered into popular music and made the irruption into the public arena, becoming the subject of a string of successful songs and countless polemics. The new style acquired an outstanding symbolic importance because it celebrated, connected them, the culture and pride of the black barrio and the hedonistic mood of the youth of the periodo especial, unimpressed by the political rhetoric and desperate to escape scarcity. For many young habaneros, thus, timba became both a subcultural manifesto and a practical means to gain access, via tourist dance clubs, to a world of sophistication and plenty"(ibid.).

Moore outlined the difference between salsa and *salsa cubana*, or *timba*. Salsa, spinning off from the Cuban *son*, developed mostly in New York while Cuba was under a self-imposed and U.S. "blockade." Salsa incorporated many Puerto Rican rhythms like

bomba and *plena* as well as influences from Colombia and other countries. In contrast, Cuban *timba* bands don't use the bongo but replaced it with a drum kit, combining it with the congas, bass, a second keyboard, *timbales* and a large horn section that plays in unison, giving *timba* a harder, heavily syncopated texture. Its songs often start with a funk-like intro instead of ballad-like intros typical of Puerto Rican salsa (Moore 2006: 123).

Timba bands are fronted by multiple singers who improvise responses to the chorus. Dance moves involve less spinning and pairing than salsa and emphasize round independent motions of the hips and shoulders. Some of the choreography involves Afro-Cuba folklore and includes rapid pelvic and body movements, usually by women. Echoing Acosta's summation, the musicality of *timba* was considered highly sophisticated and wildly popular at the same time. Its dance moves are eloquently maneuvered by Cubans in Cuba but have been known to be difficult for Latin Americans in the United States to follow (Amrhein 2007).

Reinforcing the notion that *timba* was "black music," it was mostly performed by black Cubans. It also mixed Santería elements, like the sacred batá drum and ritual melodies, melding an identity as "black," cosmopolitan and modern. The role of Santería-associated percussion and melodies in *timba* coincided with a gradual relaxation by the government toward all religions. This increased religious tolerance dates back into the 1980s but accelerated with the economic crash of the 1990s. After this religious "boom," the government backed Afro-Cuban music endeavors and documentaries. Initiates could join the Communist Party. Members of any religious group now can identify themselves in public, a first in Cuban history for santeros (Moore 2006: 221).

Timba went a step beyond Afro-Cuban religious elements and blended African-American components, like jazz, funk and rapped lyrics. Instead of dress slacks or guayaberas, performers wore hip-hop clothing like baggy pants and ball caps. Its “blackness” also gave it an edginess because for decades under the Revolution, identity was supposed to be formed around the nation, not race or religion. Moore agreed with Perna that many of the groups from the 1990s and beyond owed much about their styles to NG La Banda, whose sound he described as “eclectic,” drawing from rock, jazz, mambo, chachachá, rap, salsa and samba. The group also was the first to expand the role of the chorus (Moore 2006: 127).

The lyrics of *timba* gave voice to frustrations of the generation coming of age during the Special Period. The lyrics differed drastically from those of *nueva trova* – the youth protest music of earlier generations whose artists were also college educated like those of *timba* bands. But unlike *nueva trova* songs that dealt with the socialist struggle, existential angst and international politics, *timba* lyrics are of the street. They are grounded in local experiences and problems, often using slang from black neighborhoods or creating new slang that becomes widely used. *Timba*’s lyrics discuss problems not seen in the country’s news reports – illegal business dealings, *jineteras*, negative effects of tourism, the shortage of food and goods (Moore 2006: 129). Examples include Los Van Van’s “Un socio para mi negocio,” alluding to the black market; and Manolín’s “Te conozco, mascarita,” about a hustler who prefers foreign men with money to Cuban men. NG’s “Soy,” about “la soya,” is a spoof on the meat substitute that was mixed with blood and entrails to give it the taste of real meat amid shortages. Probably one of the most controversial was Charanga Habanera’s “El temba,” which popularized the word,

referring to a middle-aged man with a lot of money willing to share it with young women in exchange for sex: “*Búscate un temba que te mantenga ... pa’ que tú goces, pa’ que tú tengas*” (Moore 2006: 130) The word, “*guaniquiqui*,” which means “money,” came from the same song and also became part of everyday speech (Moore 2006: 129-130).

At the same time, *timba*’s lyrics and the gyrating dance moves of groups like Charanga Habanera (once they were performed before international television crews and broadcast to a national audience in 1997) provoked debates, criticism and accusations in the Cuban press of vulgarity and offensiveness toward women. They also stirred a backlash by Cuban officials – who, empowered by a slight economic recovery and poised to reverse some of the earlier market-oriented reforms – decided to suspend Charanga Habanera in 1997 for six months following the concert in question. During the performance, band members showcased sexually explicit pelvic routines, one almost ripping off his trousers, and sang songs referencing sex and drugs as well as sexual tourism, materialism and the desire for a “pretty woman, then a lot of money to support her, and the chance to eat ‘first-quality meat’” (Perna 2005: 231-233). After the suspension, the group disbanded while David Calzado kept the band name and pulled in new members to start over.

Manolín González Hernández, known as El Médico de la salsa (the doctor of salsa), who was a doctor-turned-singer, also prompted criticism. Perna called him a “pioneer in self-promotion” who worked outside of the state-backed *empresas* and embodied the rise of dance band musicians “as part of a quickly upwardly mobile class that could be seen around Havana driving Japanese cars and sporting designer clothes, golden chains and mobile phones” (2005: 67). Manolín, who became the main target of

criticism by the Cuban press and later defected to the United States, reportedly made \$9,200 a month, compared to a doctor's monthly salary of \$15. He was a symbol to the establishment of the triumph of materialism over "revolutionary moral values." A doctor lacking a proper music pedigree, he also was one of many Cuban professionals abandoning low-paying careers for jobs in the tourism industry. According to Perna, Manolín's optimistic message and hedonistic lifestyle "expressed the dreams of young Cubans who lived in scarcity and did not believe in the promises of the revolution" (Perna 2005: 67-69).

The debate over *timba*'s alleged vulgarity and treatment of women mirrors the previously mentioned discussion in which critics linked the genre to the rise of prostitution and associated it with unsophisticated black Cubans. Perna argued that these critiques stem from "a conflict between low and high culture which in Cuba informs much of the dominant discourse on Afro-Cuban popular culture" (2005: 192). He posited that the depiction of women in *timba* songs did not differ drastically from many *sones*, now considered Cuban classics. Instead, "it seemed to conform to a wider male view of the subordinated role of women that is deep-seated in Cuban society. Such a vision informs the enduring myth of the Cuban mulatta as a sexual object, a common theme in Cuban popular music, but also a reference abundantly exploited by the tourism industry. The criticisms of *timba*, in fact, seem to have targeted the vulgarity of songs' lyrics in order to hit *timba*'s perceived contiguity with sex tourism and the illegal economy, and the negative image of Cuba that might result from that connection" (Perna 2005: 192-193). While authorities expressed concern with this depiction, Perna argued that they at first were ambivalent about it when the phenomenon developed, while the tourism

industry was complacent. Meanwhile, the burgeoning rap movement was credited with taking the lead in sharp social commentary of racism and sexual tourism (S.Fernandes 2006; De la Fuente 2008; Perry 2004; Olavarria 2002). But *timba* vacillated between social commentary and expressing frustrations of Cuban men – to misogynist lyrics and praise of audiences as *timba* bands held “waist-shaking contests” and encouraged *jineteras* “to strip off” (Perna 2005: 193).

The debates over the depiction of women in *timba* were part of a larger crisis in values that I will explore further in Chapter 3. But it is worth noting here that they played out in a context that followed several decades of policies against gender discrimination. Mass mobilization campaigns had set out to educate women and end prostitution in the early days of the Revolution. The policies and new opportunities drew women in large numbers into education and the workforce with assistance of free child care and reproductive health care, generous maternity leave, and later a law declaring household work the joint responsibility of men and women (S.Fernandes 2006: 32). Sujatha Fernandes called the policies part of a view common in socialist societies in that “sex discrimination prevents women from engaging fully in the task of achieving collective goals” (ibid.). Minds were harder to change. Films like *Retrato de Teresa* (1979) argued that women continued to carry the double burden of work in the house and on the job. And as for the vulgar depiction of women in Cuban dance music in the 1990s, acclaimed Afro-Cuban poet Nancy Morejón agreed in part with Perna that the accusation is all too readily applied to black musicians. But she also attributed it to internalized racial stereotypes of black Cubans that are perpetuated by black musicians themselves for tourist consumption: “It goes with the bad black, the vulgar black who talks and acts bad.

There's a word used a lot, which is *chavacanería* that I think all Cuban blacks and mulattos get accused of (it) one way or another....I'm against that *chavacanería*, as it's called, but I see that behind the adjective there's a rejection of the black, or that stereotype we hang onto, of the black ogre, the uneducated black....Some black musicians ride the stereotype, because it sells. While rejected, it sells, it's a success, among blacks as well" (Perez Sarduy, Stubbs 2000: 167).

Morejón is from a different generation than the *timba* musicians. Her career spanned the life of the Revolution, and in its earliest days, she was among writers blacklisted (while others were imprisoned) for her association with what new cultural leaders considered the aesthetically unacceptable publishing house El Puente (Howe 2004: 11, 96). Since then, she has at times addressed race and gender with revolutionary enthusiasm. Other times she has been careful to address black consciousness as part of the socialist revolution. And according to Linda Howe, she has more recently used her position as a black female writer to "push beyond the parameters of revolutionary rhetoric about black women in order to revise notions of Afro-Cuban culture and identity" (ibid. 11). Some in the younger generation of Afro-Cuban musicians have a different take on *timba* lyrics, including Vannia Borges, one of two superstar female lead singers for Bamboleo – an exception, along with female-only bands like Son Damas or Anacaona, to the prevailing Cuban macho bravado in *timba* music, concerts and band makeup. Borges defended *timba* lyrics during a TV interview in which she said they reflected the social situation in Cuba. In fact, she and the other female singer had chosen to reject the image of traditional female stage performers – with the stereotypical heavy makeup, long hair and costumes – by shaving their heads, wearing casual clothes and

singing back at men in their concerts (Perna 2005: 149-150). Though the social debate continues, *timba* musicians do not worry about government censorship of lyrics like they did in the 1990s, when *timba* was most controversial and censorship more common. According to Moore, the government has grown to recognize the music's power to generate money and now lets circulate relatively freely those hits that drum up the most sales (2006: 129-130).

1.3 Music and the market

Timba dance music provided a much needed diversion for Cuban youth during the crisis of the 1990s and onward, and its popularity along with government support of dance music in general spiked dramatically during the Special Period. Decentralization during the economic crash helped musicians tremendously; the government allowed state-backed but quasi-independent music *empresas* to direct and promote dance orchestras. Older dance bands began playing in nicer places and the number of new bands exploded, like Adalberto Alvarez y su *son*, Dan Den, Issac Delgado, Azúcar Negra, Paulito FG y su elite, and many more. The vibrancy of the dance music scene now rivals the 1950s (Moore 2006: 100, 127).

The onset of the economic crisis brought significant benefits for the music industry, Moore pointed out. For one, the socialist government is now catering to a capitalist market. Just before the crisis, the Berman Amendment passed the U.S. Congress in 1988 as part of the Omnibus Trade Bill, exempting information materials from the embargo and permitting the direct sale of books, artwork, music and film between the two countries for the first time since the early 1960s. This paved the way for

U.S. record labels to release Cuban music in the United States as well as for Cuban bands to perform there more easily. The changes were concurrent with the smashing success of the *Buena Vista Social Club* – a reunion of pre-revolutionary-era singers brought back together by Cuban musician Juan de Marcos González. The musicians were filmed by American musician and documentary maker Ry Cooder, eliciting criticism by Cuban musicologists of “imperialist nostalgia” while modern, contemporary *timba* music had a harder time breaking into new markets (Moore 2006: 132). Indeed, during my visits, students from ENA complained about having to learn the Buena Vista hits and oldies in order to get gigs playing for tourists in restaurants and other subdued attractions – a style they called “sopa” – or soup – music that foreigners associated with Cuba but was far removed from the explosive *timba* genre played by graduates and the new generation (Amrhein 2002). Still, apart from Buena Vista’s dominance of the world music market among Cuban musicians, Cuban music of all types currently enjoys a tremendous increase in popularity abroad, despite the U.S. embargo, though overall numbers of sales are modest by international standards (Perna 2005: 81). Under the Clinton administration, Cuban artists toured extensively in the United States while American tourists visited Cuba on cultural visas. However, after 2003, the Bush administration eliminated cultural exchanges while blocking most applications for Cuban artists trying to enter the United States (Moore 2006: 232-233). The Obama administration reversed those policies and dramatically loosened travel restrictions after 2008, ushering in a new wave of Cuban musicians touring in the United States, including 12 stops in 2012 for Charanga Habanera alone (Hickey 2012).

The Cuban state saw other money-making potential in music, and in 1989 created an agency called Artex, which allows foreign record companies to buy and reissue songs held in the vaults of the national label, EGREM. Artex now has subdivisions that focus on licensing records from past years because it can't keep up with the financial strength of investment firms abroad in domestic production. But the state holds massive trade fairs to show off present-day artists. It also offers state-of-the-art recording studios for international use far below the prices in New York and London. EGREM holds one as do Silvio Rodriguez and Pablo Milanés, who helped oversee the construction of Abdala Studios in Miramar in 1998 in a joint venture with the Cuban government. Some of the first foreign labels to promote contemporary Cuban music were from Spain and Germany. Many followed. But U.S. entrepreneurs can only distribute Cuban products; they can't produce them. Many are too hesitant to even license Cuban CDs because of the confusing legal ground under the embargo (Moore 2006: 232-235).

At home, with the establishment of the music *empresas*, Cuban musicians have been given more freedom to independently negotiate job contracts overseas. Before foreign currency was legalized, the Cuban government acted as a patron, taking charge of musicians' promotion, sale and distribution of music, but also of their earnings, in exchange for their free music education. After foreign currency was legalized, the government no longer confiscated the musicians' foreign earnings. Its role has become more or less like the IRS, taxing the musicians' foreign income made abroad anywhere from between ten percent and fifty percent. (Moore 2006: 100). Another boon to musicians came when Cuba signed the international Berne Convention on copyright in 1997. This further opened the door allowing Cuban musicians to negotiate directly with

foreign firms. Many popular music ensembles have toured abroad since the 1990s, though the application, in Moore's words, is a "tedious" one (ibid. 239). Many agree that the difficulties obtaining permission to leave the country have created an obsession among the youth to travel. The chance to earn more money abroad also played a big role (ibid.). Enough musicians receive a portion of their income in foreign currency to constitute a higher class. Still, at home, many Cuban musicians are paid in pesos, although some receive payment in dollars or foreign currency after playing in high-profile tourist venues (Moore 2006: 238).

For instance, Lazaríto Valdés told author Eugene Robinson that when they played at state-owned Casa de la Música, 20 percent of the gate went straight to the house and nearly 50 percent to the Ministry of Culture. Robinson calculated the group's take: "That left just over 30 percent for the band. So if Bamboleo drew, say, three hundred people, paying a sky-high twenty dollars each, that would mean the group would take home less than two grand for the night. Any way you split that up among fifteen or sixteen musicians – more for Lazaríto and the star singers, less for the relatively anonymous percussionists – no one could walk away more than a few hundred dollars richer. If Bamboleo played as often as three or even four times a week, Lazaríto would be ultra rich in Cuba" (2005: 171). Still, as Robinson noted in the next sentence, in absolute terms, it would be hard for Lazaríto to make more in a year than an electrician in Chicago. However, as previous figures above from Mesa-Lago show, compared to what the average Cuban worker or doctor made in Cuba, it was a fortune.

Wealth is relative. And after the 1990s in Cuba, it became increasingly obvious who had it. Moore wrote: "Members of prominent dance bands are identifiable

immediately because of their designer clothing, beautiful homes, new foreign cars, and so on. They have effectively stood the social order on its head by accruing more personal wealth than classical musicians, doctors, even some politicians and military personnel” – a fact that could elicit complaints with racial overtones, like the white dentist who denounced in front of Moore the fact that “*negritos* banging on drums” were living better than he was (2005: 239). Chucho Valdés reportedly has a three-story mansion in the Miramar suburb west of Havana; José Luis Cortés of NG La Banda has two houses, including one with a studio (Robinson 2004: 71).

While these differences are common in capitalist systems, this is new for Cuba. Popular musicians starting out aspire for stardom, though right now many suffer the same daily hardships as everyone else. Packed buses break down on the way to rehearsals and often musicians can’t find or afford replacement parts for their instruments, let alone the clothes they need for performances. Shortages are rampant for recording and amplification equipment, as well as the instruments themselves, which at times the schools can’t even provide. Cities have been inundated with amateur musicians working for tips, offering dance lessons or selling home recordings, hoping to be noticed by foreign entrepreneurs (Moore 2006: 228).

What’s more, the talent is rich and the competition is fierce. Yet there are relatively few recording studios at all let alone ones that a young musician can afford in order to get a demo on the radio or television. In a country where the average Cuban cannot afford a \$15 CD, radio and television promotion constitutes an essential path to creating buzz about one’s group. Popularity with radio audiences helps tremendously in the nearly impossible feat of breaking into Casa de la Música or other prominent

nightclubs, which are usually booked with the top dance bands (Robinson 2004: 93; Perna 2005: 87).

Author and musicologist Leonardo Acosta told me that young talented musicians get frustrated because of the intense competition born of relatively few places to perform. Young musicians hope to be discovered in clubs that foreign musicians frequent; in the meantime, he said, they get paid the equivalent of \$5 a gig, about what it takes for cab fare for the musician and his instrument – unless he wants to take the bus (Acosta 2007, interview).

Increasingly the government is cutting back on paying monthly salaries to popular musicians because their independent earning potential is so much higher than everyone else's – thus cutting away the safety net for those just starting out. Instead, popular musicians get paid as often as they play. The band leader handles the pay, contracting directly with the club or event, an arrangement that led to rumors and complaints I heard often among younger musicians. They accuse some band leaders of pocketing an unfair share for themselves. The band leader then pays a portion of the band's income to the *empresa* as a tax. Cuban bands and musicians also pay promotion fees to their *empresas* (Moore 2006: 100). But a lot of musicians complain bitterly about the lack of promotion for their music, especially to foreign markets. They claim that's why *timba* hasn't reached the same level of fame as the *Buena Vista Social Club*, though others, including Perna, point out that it may also have something to do with the fact that *timba*'s lyrics and rhythm are esoteric, so rooted in the Cuban experience (Perna 2005: 149). Musicologist Ariana Hernández-Reguant thought that “imperialistic nostalgia is to blame” for the indulgence on Americans' part in the *Buena Vista Social Club* while ignoring current

musicians trained under the Revolution. Moore suggested that domestic commentators overlook the role of domestic policies in failing to promote and support prerevolutionary musicians and music until foreigners “discovered” it and carried it abroad (Moore 2006: 131-132).

Still, musicians realize that *timba* and dance music is the main money maker in Cuba, and sometimes they opt out of pursuing other musical forms, like classical music, in order to put food on their table. Others worry that Cuba is selling out to consumerism and losing its moral compass (Moore 2006: 243). And yet another consequence of the market-orientation of popular dance music, others note, has been the alienation of local audiences. They attribute it to limited access to musical performances because of a shortage of venues and transportation and the diversion of top musical performances to tourist clubs with cover fees that many Cubans can’t afford. Occasionally top bands will play at no charge for Cubans at outdoor events, amphitheaters or theaters like the Karl Marx. Sometimes Cubans can pay the cover fee in pesos while tourists must hand over hard currency. But local audiences complain about their exclusion from the tourist clubs and the long absence of bands touring abroad (Perna 2005: 85). To help spread the wealth earned from these bands through taxes and other income, the government has tried to open more music institutes and popular forums, expanding *casas de cultura* to a total of 200 (Moore 2006: 106).

But the novice musician still struggles to get a foothold in this scene. American-born musician Pablo Menéndez, director of Mezcla, said his young band members also play in other jazz bands, tourist clubs and classical gigs to get as much work as possible. He recognized that many, especially if they’re young and trying to start a new life for

themselves, do this to make enough money to get by and live well. Some end up leaving the country, but they don't have the business skills to promote themselves abroad and need to hold a day job to support their music. Menéndez said his group has received a state salary, which allows them to do their work full time as musicians. He acknowledged that some of the pop groups with access to gigs in dollars probably make ten times more money than he does but are constantly scrambling to find work to get paid – more like the U.S. system (Menéndez 2007, interview). Both Menéndez and Juan de Marcos González (in a 2007 interview in his Alamar home east of Havana) told me that while *timba* and dance music still pay the best, *timba* has passed its prime and that Cuba's music is morphing once more, with the new wave including groups like Roberto Carcassés' Interactivo, which mixes jazz, rock, salsa, hip hop and *timba*.

Carcassés, a lean, white Cuban man in his 30s with curly brown hair and a trim goatee and mustache, was the son of Bobby Carcassés, another famous musician. He was a bit subdued and brooding when I met with him for an interview in 2007 in his home in Marianao outside Havana. Carcassés talked to me about the hardships of working as a professional musician in Cuba. In fact, he said, he rarely holds concerts anymore. The halls are in deplorable condition, he told me; everything from the audience seats to the sound equipment is shot. International tours sustain him and other artists with that privilege, though many smuggle cigars and other items out of the country to sell for extra income. He has a computer, keyboard and grand piano in his home, along with equipment that can burn CDs. He makes extra money producing and mixing CDs for other bands.

When he does play, Interactivo can be found at the Karl Marx Theater and La Tropical. But the other venues aren't worth it, he says. I asked about the two Casas de la

Música nightclubs, the one in Miramar and the newer one in Central Havana. Those seemed nice, I offered. He looked at me wearily and said he'd have to get in line behind a lot of *timba* and dance groups to get booked there, something he's not willing to do.

“You have to be big outside before they take you seriously here,” he said.

1.4 Summary

This chapter not only has provided the historical and social context for the biography and ethnography that follow. It also has shown the fluid identity category of class (interwoven with race) in Cuba's recent history and how those changing meanings intersected with the music profession. For instance, what it meant to be working class – both materially and socially – differed before and after the Revolution, which sought to eliminate class privilege and exploitation of laborers while extending equal educational and other social benefits across the population, promulgating a moral value to work itself and extolling the social role of workers. New meanings and categories developed yet again after the economic crisis of the 1990s and market-oriented reforms, when new class divisions surfaced along racial lines and social hierarchies were determined not by revolutionary work ethic or education, but rather who had the greatest access to foreign currency, family abroad and tourists. More than any other profession, what it meant to be a musician shifted with and exemplified these changes. For example, while dance music raged with immense popularity in Mob-funded cabarets and casinos during the pre-revolutionary era of the 1950s, exploited black Cuban musicians went home to working-class neighborhoods and could not afford classical training. Following the 1959 Revolution, dance music, associated with imperialistic largesse, fell from grace as the

government promoted classical training to the masses – stressing a European aesthetic – and extended free but competitive conservatories throughout the island and a living wage to professional musicians. Change occurred again in the 1990s, when the economic crisis and market-oriented reforms led to growing socioeconomic and racial inequalities even while creating unprecedented opportunities for wealth for dance band musicians because of their relationship to the tourism industry and the foreign market. For some black Cubans, the participation in a dance or *timba* band became one of the most promising paths to money and success. It was in this context of changing class, race and professional categories in which Violeta was raising Brian. Their decisions and lives would be shaped by these changing identity categories, musical trends and class divisions – inequalities that Violeta, a lifelong revolutionary, feared would trap Brian in a lifetime of struggle. They in turn would navigate these flexible identity categories to get ahead and survive. While this chapter touched upon the connection between class divisions and race, in the next chapter I more fully explore the changing identity category of race in Cuba’s recent history through the biographical sketch of Violeta’s life.

CHAPTER 2:
RACE, REVOLUTION AND THE BIOGRAPHY OF VIOLETA ALDAMA

Cuba's history of race and social relations defies easy classification or summary. But the idea of a *mestizaje* or a mixed-race people or country can be traced to the mid-19th century. In that era, enslaved and free people of color made up the majority of the population. The initial leaders of the revolutionary wars for independence against Spain placed free men of color in "local positions of authority" and also "freed slaves, made them soldiers, and called them citizens" (Ferrer 1999: 2-3). All the way through to the start of the third and final independence war in 1895, the idea of racial equality formed the foundation of the new Cuban nation. It was an ideal held by the civilian and military movement's white, mulatto and black members – trumpeted by independence war hero José Martí – positing that the struggle against Spain had "transformed Cuba into a land where there were 'no whites nor blacks, but only Cubans'" (ibid. 3). This chapter shows the ways in which the identity category of race in Cuba has been socially constructed and fluid through time, and particularly how this malleable identity category impacted the life of Violeta Aldama up through the economic crisis of the 1990s. In doing so, this chapter continues establishing the foundation and context for the thesis, while the next chapter's ethnography will show how Violeta navigated through fluid and subjective identities to cope with Cuba's crisis and to help her son.

Race relations unfolded differently in Cuba's history compared with contemporaneous North American racial theory, spatial segregation, racial violence and later what were termed Jim Crow laws (Ferrer 1999: 4). But the U.S. intervention in Cuba's independence war in 1898 and its occupation of the island and subsequent interference and dominance over Cuba's domestic affairs and economy were seen as the thwarting of the founding nation's ideas. Fidel Castro firmly held this belief, proclaiming his Revolution in 1959 to be the fulfillment of those earlier anti-imperial and anti-racist goals of the independence movement (ibid. 6). However, despite the racial fraternity myths, scholar Alejandro de la Fuente argues that neither "unqualified racial integration nor linear exclusion characterizes the history of Cuba as an independent nation" (2001: 11). Even though Cuba lacked "a social order based on rigid, codified distinctions of race...(a)mbiguity is what best defines the evolution of race relations in twentieth-century Cuba" (De la Fuente 2001: 11). The first decades of the 1900s were marked by racial divisions in the emerging labor movement. Those divisions were fueled by the influence of the United States and "scientific racism" that openly disdained darker, lower-class Cubans and favored the colonial elite. Yet those racist notions butted up against several decades of cross-racial movements and egalitarian and inclusive ideology or "nationalist myth-making," which placed Cubanness above racial identities, even erasing them (ibid. 12). The ideal of a racially integrated and harmonious society did not reflect realities, but it was so strong that it prevented a legally defined racial order (ibid. 14). According to De la Fuente, elites placed emphasis on schooling as a pre-requisite to social advancement and holding public office, which initially served "to justify the exclusion of Afro-Cubans from white collar jobs" but then became a route of social mobility for many Afro-Cubans

benefitting from Cuba's public school system that (in contrast to the United States) did not base admission on race (2001: 14-15). The resulting sizable black and mulatto professional classes, because of their precarious status, distanced themselves from the black masses even as black and mulatto intellectuals tried to speak for all Afro-Cubans. Many of their efforts centered on the significant obstacles faced by highly educated black Cubans as racial barriers worsened up the professional ladder. Afro-Cuban professionals, excluded from white bourgeoisie social spaces, responded by forming their own exclusive societies (ibid.: 14-15). In the 1920s and 1930s, the intellectuals' Afrocubanismo movement took Martí's notion of Cubanness one step further – "inventing a synthesis that proudly proclaimed miscegenation to be the very essence of the nation – a mulatto 'Cuban race'" (ibid.: 14-15). Cuban music has often been seen as the very embodiment of Cuba's mixed racial heritage, illustrated in the sentiment of Afro-Cuban poet Nancy Morejón, who said: "I think that music expresses most our *cubanidad*" (Pérez Sarduy, Stubbs: 167).

The mixed-race and colorblind ideologies of nationhood would continue to play a large role – and take on added meanings – in the Revolution after 1959 while structural changes in the 1990s resulted in still newer expressions of racial identity. However, as Alejandro de la Fuente argued, it is not enough to say that race is an important social construction in Cuba: "It is necessary to explore its importance in comparison to other forms of social organization and identity" (De la Fuente 2001: 7). To be sure, this chapter, in its biographical sketch of Violeta's early and adult life up through the economic crisis – information provided by Violeta during our interviews – weaves the context of race with developments that also framed class, family, revolutionary, religious,

musical and professional identity for her and the people close to her. In doing so, this chapter begins to show the tangible ways that race and other changing categories played out in Violeta's life, how they shaped her subjective experience of herself and how she in turn changed the way she saw herself – and took action or found agency – in navigating her identity roles amid changing circumstances.

2.1 Violeta's early years

Violeta Aldama was born in 1954 in Guanabacoa, a hilly *municipio* across the bay from Havana whose name, given by the Taino indigenous people who had lived there before the Spaniards arrived, means “the place of waters” or rivers (Jimenez 2003). Sitting off the main plaza or tree-shaded square called Parque Martí of this sprawling town, are several colonial-era churches and convents, including the baroque church of the Convent of Santo Domingo, with a gilt altar inside and an elaborate Mudéjar craftsman hand-pieced wood ceiling, or *alfarjes*, built in the 1700s by artisans from the Canary Islands (Carley 1997: 68). During the 1800s, the town's richness in mineral waters made it a hotspot for French travelers and well-heeled Cubans from nearby Havana for whom old *palacios* were turned into elegant hotels and holiday spas (Carley 1997: 85). But by far what has long distinguished Guanabacoa across the island has been its association with Afro-Cuban religions and cultures – as the town popularly became called the “barrio of the *babalaos*,” the name for high priests and diviners in the Santería faith (Sublette 2004: 222, 381). Along with the adjacent town of Regla, which abuts the harbor, Guanabacoa had been a major slave landing center during the colonial era, particularly in the 1800s, during the peak of Cuba's sugar production and use of slave labor, which

coincided with civil war and strife in Yorubaland of current day Nigeria that sent multitudes of Yoruba – or Lucumí – slaves in chains to the market (Sublette 2004: 208, 211). The Lucumí – a cross-section of a disintegrating empire and society that included religious officials, skilled musicians and drum masters – were picked up “and plunked down *en masse* to reassemble” around Havana and Matanzas (Sublette 2004: 210-212), as colonial Cuba imported African slaves into the 1860s and was the “last Spanish colony to abolish slavery” in 1886 (De la Fuente 2001: 3). The Lucumí subsequently made a powerful imprint on Afro-Cuban religions and the nation’s music. Integral to the Santería religion as it developed in Cuba was the “repertoire of the *batá* drums,” what Ned Sublette called “the great classical music of Africa” and “one of Cuba’s greatest glories” (2004: 228). That – along with the Cuban invention of the conga drum and bongó from Congo constructions (2004: 189) and the musical influence of the Abakuá secret men’s society from the Calabar region of West Africa – would not only greatly impact Cuban culture but would create a legacy for world music (Sublette 2004: 189).

By the time Violeta was born in 1954, her native town of Guanabacoa was home to some of Cuba’s most famous musicians. Ernesto Lecuona was possibly Cuba’s best-known composer around the world. Rita Montaner, the light-skinned vocal diva who sang everything from opera to Yoruba religious songs, was the first person to sing the international megahit of “El manisero,” or the Peanut Vendor. Black pianist Ignacio Villa, famously known as Bola de Nieve, accompanied Montaner. Years earlier in the orchestra he led in Guanabacoa, Villa gave a job to a young Israel “Cachao” López – the person Sublette called “the most important bassist in 20th century popular music” – and who likewise was from Guanabacoa (2004: 381-387, 451). But Guanabacoa was also

where many unheralded, underpaid, working-class black and mulatto musicians returned home after long sets and hours at the glitzy Tropicana and hotel cabarets and clubs that fueled Havana's thriving night life, tourism industry and the city's middle class (Sublette 2004: 585; Moore 2006: 53-55). Some of Guanabacoa's 112,000 residents also found jobs in the town's Jewish business sector or its textile, shoe and other factories. They likewise commuted to the nearby oil refinery and into Havana to work in the tourism sector (Jimenez 2003). Their prospects often hinged on their skin color. Before the Revolution, blackness blocked social ascent, and Afro-Cubans remained barred from certain jobs and professions (De la Fuente 2001: 260). Despite the island's wealth and sizeable middle class, there were vast disparities among racial groups and throughout rural Cuba and small towns, where poverty levels were high and education levels low. As mentioned earlier, open and non-racially based access to a public school system helped form a sizable black and mulatto professional class. But black Cubans disproportionately made up the ranks of the unemployed and the residents of shantytowns around Havana and other cities (De la Fuente 2001: 14-15). Segregation was common in public parks and discrimination against black Cubans and mulattos routine in luxury hotels, bars, beaches and social clubs. Their children couldn't attend the best private schools even if the families could afford to send them (ibid.: 260; Moore 2006: 30-32).

Violeta, born to teenaged parents, was raised by her paternal grandparents, aunts and uncles – an Afro-Cuban working-class family that supported the Revolution. One uncle was a colonel in the revolutionary forces. Shortly after the Rebel Army declared victory on Jan. 1, 1959, Fidel Castro confronted what was deemed a colonial legacy of racism and racial inequalities carried over from a slaveholding society. He vowed to live

up to Martí's colorblind ideals of nationhood. Spurred by labor, Communist party and Afro-Cuban leaders, Castro declared racial discrimination one of the four main battles for the Revolution (De la Fuente 2001: 261-263). During a speech on March 22, 1959, Castro called on all Cubans to eliminate racism on the path to create a new "*patria*" or fatherland (ibid.: 261). This was an era of massive public and volunteer participation in literacy campaigns, mixed-race youth work camps, the nationalization of private schools, banking, transportation, agriculture and foreign and domestic industries – along with it, the government's increased control over anti-discriminatory measures in hiring. Shantytowns were dismantled and residents moved to new housing complexes in middle-class neighborhoods, while scholarship students from poor families were put up in mansions of the wealthy who had fled for exile. Former domestic workers were housed at the previously exclusive Hotel Nacional during training courses for administrative and commercial jobs. New mass organizations like the Revolutionary Militias and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution further indoctrinated Cubans of different social and racial backgrounds in the "values of a new, integrated society" (De la Fuente 2001: 274-276). Not only did the organizations channel revolutionary enthusiasm, but they gave symbolic power to groups, including black Cubans, who had previously had minimal influence on political life (ibid.: 276). Given the previous socioeconomic inequalities, black Cubans benefitted greatly from the new policies: a survey in 1962 showed that 70 percent of workers had a favorable opinion of the revolutionary government, while among black workers, the share was greater – 80 percent approving of Castro's government (De la Fuente 2001: 276).

The revolutionary government took direct action to eliminate discrimination in the workplace and segregation in schools, parks, clubs and beaches, while instituting racial integration through housing and youth work camps. It also set the public tone and ideal for the Revolution: that to be racist was to be imperialistic and like the pro-Yankee white bourgeoisie fleeing Cuba for Miami; to be racist was anticommunist, antirevolutionary, antinational and was a sign of “ideological backwardness” (De la Fuente 2001: 278).

But not long after the battle over racism began, the revolutionary government declared victory. The Second Declaration of Havana issued in February, 1962, announced that the revolution had eradicated racial discrimination: “Our patriotic, democratic, and socialist revolution has eliminated from Cuban life the odious and humiliating spectacle of discrimination because of skin color” (De la Fuente 2001: 279). Castro’s public proclamation that discrimination disappeared with class privilege shaped the discourse and became a theme subsequently echoed in the press and scholarship, making further discussion of racial integration – except in the context as a success of the Revolution – a taboo topic and work of “the enemy” (De la Fuente 2001: 279). Facing real and perceived threats from exiles and the United States – including the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, assassination attempts on Castro and other CIA-backed acts of violence (Moore 2006: 102) – the revolutionary government – much like Martí in the independence wars against Spain – placed racial consciousness and the struggle for racial equalities within the broader notions of national cohesion or *patria* because, as Alejandro de la Fuente notes, “unity was the priority” (2001: 265). This time, the fight for national racial integration – the very underpinnings of Cuba’s long-held national mestizo identity and *cubanidad* – was officially determined to be accomplished through a socialist revolution. It was a

position that would silence attempts and stifle careers in the arts and by scholars and others wanting to address ongoing racist acts and attitudes for the next three decades. With no autonomous political space in which to operate – as Afro-Cuban study groups were forbidden and cultural organizations thwarted after the Revolution in favor of a unified, socialist front – Afro-Cuban artists and intellectuals continued to try to explore the topic of race. Some adapted to new officially acceptable aesthetics of Marxist rhetoric to discuss black heritage, discrimination and integration. Others faced dire consequences when they did not – including those who were blacklisted and held in rehabilitation camps (Howe 2004: 11-12, 84).

Meanwhile, for their part, Violeta's paternal grandparents and aunts and uncles took advantage of the material gains experienced by many black Cubans. Her grandparents attended adult education programs extended by the Revolution. Violeta's aunts and uncles joined the military, becoming engineers, while as a teenager, she was sent to a military academy. After Violeta graduated from the military academy, she won a scholarship to study military training in the Soviet Union and then got a job working in the Cuban embassy in Moscow. She would later describe this as one of the best times of her life. She loved the work and travel, though she considered the Russians, for all their technical advancement over Cuba, to be a bit boorish and behind Cuba in social programs, like reproductive care and other rights for women. Throughout this period, Cuba and the East Bloc routinely traded students from military and other disciplines, including music. Foreign students from Latin America, Africa and the East Bloc were given full scholarships, for example, to study at the Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA), while Cuban students wanting to pursue careers and advanced instruction in instrumental

performance or musicology received scholarships to study in Russia, Bulgaria, Poland and East Germany. Arrangements changed in 1976, when enough returning graduates from these programs founded the ISA, or the Instituto Superior de Arte, next to ENA and could stay in Cuba for higher-level training (Moore 2006: 95).

When Violeta returned from Russia in her 20s, she was given a plot of land by the government on which she could build a house with the money that she had saved. But the land outside Havana was far from her father, aunts and uncles. Buying and selling of homes was not allowed, but swapping was. Violeta found an attached, concrete-block house on Aranguren Street in Guanabacoa, and the man who lived there agreed to trade it for Violeta's plot of land. Settled in Guanabacoa, she continued her military career, climbing the ranks to "major," training paratroopers. On Aranguren Street, she was voted the zone leader for the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) – in charge of overseeing nine blocks. I once asked her how she got to be voted into this position by the neighbors, and she laughed. "*Soy Revolucionaria!*" she said, meaning that it was obvious and that everyone in the neighborhood knew what a dedicated revolutionary she was. She presided over community meetings where issues discussed ranged from domestic spats to loud neighbors to potholes. She made calls to the delegates of the *Poder Popular* and passed local concerns up Cuba's bureaucratic corporate structure. Armando Chaguaceda called this an example of Cuba's "participatory democracy" that in practice is a "vertical model of central management" established by the state, which relegated citizen participation to a "consultative" basis organized by the government through the local Popular Power assemblies. Meanwhile the execution and control of the national agenda was in the exclusive hands of the leadership and the State Council and Politburo

(2011: 21). Nevertheless, Violeta's duties kept her busy. She tracked residents' monthly ration cards, or *libretas*. If the local clinic called to ask about a new mother in Violeta's zone who hadn't obtained immunization shots for her infant, it fell to Violeta to visit the woman to find out what was wrong. When I once asked if she was compensated or paid for this work on her free time, she looked at me in mock offense and laughed. "*Muchacha!*" she answered proudly.

While Violeta was devoted to the military, the male members of her family, especially her father, had an additional allegiance. They were deeply involved in the Abakuá secret men's society. This mutual aid society in Cuba can be traced back to the 1830s, when it was recreated from several local variants of the Ekpe leopard society of West Africa's Cross River Basin, derived from the Abakpa community of Calabar, the "historical capital of the Cross River basin of southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon" (Miller 2009: 3). The male initiative society is marked by masquerades, drum construction, musical structures and ritual language expressed in hundreds of chants that depict historical events. In Africa, the social life of people in the Cross River basin was organized in dispersed and sovereign communities with their own lodge of the leopard society with specific functions, united "by networks of obligation and prestige" (ibid.). It enabled mercantile interaction and safe travel between settlements (ibid.: 175). Enslaved and forced to migrate to the Caribbean, several generations of West Africans regrouped and reestablished a homeland institution in the form of a mutual aid society in and around Havana while passing their values, philosophies and way of life on to their offspring while also liberating many African slaves, as Abakuá was formed in the nineteenth century mostly by free "urban black workers in the port zones of Havana and Matanzas"

(Miller 2009: 4, 7). Knowledge and chants were passed along through initiation families and an apprenticeship system. Spanish colonizers outlawed Abakuá membership, and police arrested black people and took their sacred objects, which later became artifacts in museums (ibid.: 9). The first lodge established in Cuba was in 1836 in Regla (ibid.: 41), the town adjacent to Guanabacoa, but members expanded urban networks through African nation-groups, free black artisans, black militias, urban fugitives and others (ibid.: 176). Ivor Miller writes: “Abakuá groups functioned as antislavery cells that maintained a sense of morality and history among their communities. Although members paid dues, one could not buy membership. Instead, candidates for initiation underwent a long period of probation to verify their moral character among family and community members. The ability of Abakuá to maintain silence about their activities is alluded to in the phrase ‘Friendship is one thing, and the Abakuá another’” (ibid.: 176). The Abakuá eventually incorporated white men. Members played a key role in the development of almost all of Cuba’s various popular music genres (ibid.: 178). Most of Cuba’s hard-core *rumberos* from Havana and elsewhere were and still are Abakuá members. The music, themes and dance repertoire were taken from and closely associated with the Abakuá – forbidden in the same laws that banned Abakuá and santero gatherings (Sublette 2004: 205).

After independence, Afro-Cuban mutual aid societies like the Abakuá were a target for electoral propaganda and a stop on tours for presidential and congressional candidates, even though the Abakuá were often cast as a criminal syndicate of “African savages” (De la Fuente 2001: 162). This was true of Afro-Cuban religions in general, as brutal campaigns to suppress them took place “in the name of progress,” while

practitioners of Santería were falsely accused of crimes, and police inspectors gave orders to have believers arrested and instruments confiscated if used in ceremonies (Moore 2006: 198-199).

Similar repression continued after the 1959 Revolution. While on paper, the state was neutral about religion, in practice it intervened vigorously to suppress religious activity from the first years of the Revolution (Moore 2006: 198). Despite the rhetoric on racial unity, a Eurocentric aesthetic was followed by the revolutionary leadership as everyday practices of African-based music or religion were deemed crude unless placed in the context of folklore or history. For instance, while all religions were discouraged by the new revolutionary regime as an “opiate” for the masses, authorities considered Afro-Cuban religions to be primitive, antithetical to racial integration and associated with crime and antirevolutionary behavior, placing limits on their practice and recruitment (De la Fuente 2001: 292). Afro-Cuban rituals, songs and culture, meanwhile, were stripped of lived meaning, relegated to and celebrated as folklore, while former Afro-Cuban mutual aid societies and clubs (though not the Abakuá) had dissolved, seen as contradictions to the racial integration project of the Revolution (De la Fuente 2001: 283). In other words, blatant racism was “un-Cuban,” but to disparage Afro-Cubans and their culture might be considered “patriotic” (De la Fuente 2001: 336).

Despite an association with delinquency, practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions and practices continued, though they often had to deny their involvement in order to get a job or entry into the university. Meanwhile, santeros needed to apply for government permits before holding a “toque de santo” – a ceremony for the orishas, or deities, that included drumming and dancing. Certain Abakuá ritual events were nearly impossible for

years. Police continued to confiscate musical instruments of prominent spiritual leaders after they died (Moore 2006: 211-213). Only in the 1980s did more relaxed attitudes prevail.

Violeta wanted little to do with this aspect of her father's and uncles' lives, or that of René Zaldívar's, the man she met at a party, fell in love with and married. René worked as a merchant marine, but he was also a santero, and by the time I met him, a babalao, or spiritual leader in the Santería faith. While the Abakuá was an all-male secret society, Santería's important deities were both male and female, and its followers, priests and priestesses included men and women – though only men could become babalaos (Canizares 1993: 35). Violeta's lack of interest in the Abakuá and Santería stemmed not from a feeling of exclusion – particularly from Santería. Instead, her attitude toward both mirrored that of authorities and members of the middle class, many of whom dismissed Afro-Cuban religions as backward, even if they secretly consulted a babalao before making important decisions. While not outright disdainful, Violeta would quickly shake her head whenever I'd ask about her practice or participation in the religions and would say that she was a military person, and military people were not into those sorts of things (though her uncles were involved in both). She expressed respect for her late father, who held a prominent role among the Abakuá, and she fondly recalled that in his era, members wore suits and were well-educated professionals. But by the time Brian was a teenager, she called the Abakuá a gang and tried to prevent him from joining. Through her own youth and much of her adult life – which paralleled the trajectory of the Revolution – Violeta's subjective identity was dominated by her role as a “revolutionary” and her professional position in the military. There she felt purpose and great pride in her

ability as a woman and a black Cuban to rise to the rank of major, thanks to the Revolution. The Revolution – not religion – was her compass. She believed in its mission for the country and steadfastly called herself a “revolutionary,” long after the economic crash of the 1990s. While both Santería and the Abakuá would come to play an enormous role in Brian’s life, and subsequently, Violeta’s life through him – a development I will explore further in the next chapter – she would not turn to these groups for help following the crisis. She had never personally identified with these groups, and despite her praise for her father, distinguished them from her own professional class and the professional life she envisioned for Brian.

But before the crisis hit, Violeta and René lived comfortably through the 1980s. Cubans in general experienced relative improvement in living conditions due to limited market-oriented policies implemented from 1971-1985 (Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005: 13) Also, by then, the Revolution largely had eroded racial inequality – though many black Cubans continued to live in the poorest urban neighborhoods and close to poverty (De la Fuente 2009: 713). Violeta enjoyed a steady military income and René had his salary as a merchant marine. The merchant marine was a source of national pride since the 1960s when, facing a U.S.-imposed shipping boycott, Cuba worked with Spanish and other countries’ ship-building industries to undergo a massive expansion of Cuba’s fleet. It eventually reached third in rank among Latin American countries and generated profits and foreign exchange to fund the Revolution’s projects on land (De La Pedraja Toman 1999: 55). René often brought back gifts or appliances for Violeta that he had picked up at foreign ports – items she would hide in the back of the house, careful to conduct her CDR duties on her front stoop so neighbors wouldn’t see the items and gossip about her

having things others did not, she told me. Meanwhile, she and friends would trade products from their ration baskets with each other depending on what they didn't use and what the other needed. For instance, she didn't drink coffee, so she might trade hers for someone else's cooking oil, or *aceite*.

Dominating this time of her life were their attempts to have a baby. Violeta suffered from diabetes, to which she attributed 10 miscarriages that she had before the birth of Brian – whom she named after a character in one of her favorite American Western films. Despite Cuba's generous paid maternity leave – about a year – she decided to quit her job in the military, a few years short of qualifying for a pension, which would have been potentially six times higher than the minimum monthly pension for workers in the state sector (Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005: 75, 92). Her commute to work was more than an hour by bus one way, and after struggling for years to have a child, Violeta wanted to be home to take care of him. Brian was born less than a week before the 30th anniversary of the Revolution – in late December, 1988. The economy had been in retraction for several years because of government policies to reverse previous limited market reforms (Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005: 15). But Violeta and René believed they could easily get by on his one income. Despite the rumors in Europe, Violeta had no idea of what awaited them. Nor did she anticipate the rapid decline of her marriage, and that René would soon start spending most of his time at the home of his adult children, leaving Violeta alone to raise Brian. Less than a year after Brian's birth, the Berlin Wall started to come down. Soon after, Violeta's life, along with the lives of millions of other Cubans, changed drastically.

2.2 Brian's early music education

By the time Brian was 5 years old, Cuba was in the throes of the Special Period, the country's previous recession leaving it vulnerable to a deep economic depression when the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc ultimately collapsed. This calamity for Cuba was followed by the opportunistic tightening of the U.S. trade embargo by Congress in an attempt to hasten Fidel Castro's demise (Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005: 15-16). Oil shipments were cut; hundreds of investment projects halted; thousands of Soviet technicians went home; foreign trade fell by 75 percent; and chronic shortages in food, consumer goods and other items were pervasive (ibid.). Conditions deteriorated so badly that thousands of Cubans, many of them black and young, took to the streets after authorities blocked a ferry hijacking, and protested in Central Havana and along the seaside Malecón in 1994 – the first such popular action since the Revolution (Mesa-Lago, Pérez-López 2005: 17; Sanchez 2009). The riot, smashing of tourist shop windows, overturning of patrol cars and violent response by the police prompted Fidel Castro himself to speed to the scene in a Jeep and wade into the protest to calm the crowd (Sanchez 2009; McClintock 1994). He promised that anyone who wanted to leave could – a declaration that spurred a mass exodus that summer of about 35,000 Cubans in what came to be known as the “balseros” or raft crisis (Perna 2005: 56-57).

Violeta shivered when talking with me about that time and said she didn't even like to think about it. She remembered how during persistent black-outs residents would come out of their homes around Aranguren Street, screaming in frustration. They vented a long litany of complaints, the same ones that Violeta shared, but she didn't pass them along to the Poder Popular. She felt there was no point. Violeta sometimes went hungry

to make sure Brian had enough to eat, but many days they had to make do with the fruit that grew on the trees in the yard behind an aunt's home. Before they separated, René was often without work. Imports from the former Soviet Union plummeted by 70 percent in 1990 alone, and Russian and Eastern European vessels started requiring hard currency for their services. The Cuban merchant marine was left woefully unprepared to pick up the slack – or 80 percent of trade volume (Scarpaci et al. 2002: 238). As Cuba turned to joint-venture operations, Violeta said the Greek managers were hesitant to bring on René, something she attributed to his age and the fact that he is black. She told me the loss of work changed him. Increasingly, he spent time away from the house and stayed with his adult children in a neighboring town, occasionally returning for a few days.

During this period, 5-year-old Brian fell in love with the piano. It happened while they were visiting the home of one of Violeta's aunts who lived on the other side of Guanabacoa. This aunt, like her other favorite aunt with the fruit trees, had helped raise her and had been in the military in her younger days. Violeta did not come from a music family, she would later note bitterly while networking to help Brian keep up while she complained that other students had relatives pulling strings. Music family dynasties tend to be common in Cuba. But while Violeta's family was a military family, these two aunts both had their daughters – Violeta's cousins – already studying music in the conservatories. This aunt had a piano in the house.

The piano had long held an important role in Cuban music. The presence of pianos in Cuba dated back to the arrival of the first one from Paris to Santiago de Cuba in 1810. It soon became the favored “amateur instrument” for bourgeois girls throughout the rest of that century. Pianos then arrived in large numbers from the United States in the

form of “uprights” following the U.S. intervention in the independence wars against Spain at century’s end (Sublette 2004: 307).

Elevating the piano’s prominence even more, by the 1940s, Arsenio Rodríguez and his band were tearing through clubs in a new format that added trumpet and piano to the *son* band formation. *Son* had developed on the eastern end of the island in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Sublette called it a blend of “Bantu percussion, melodic rhythm, call-and-response singing, melding with the Spanish peasants’ guitar and language. Its balance of the Bantu and the Spanish, and their common adaptability, made it the great mother form for Cuban music in the twentieth century” (2004: 333). The *son* by the 1920s had moved to Havana, where it was “penetrated by the rumba” and took the configuration of the tres – with its three pairs of double strings – guitar, claves, maracas, bass instrument and the bongo. The bongo was a Cuban invention, mimicking the sacred drums of the Lucumí and the Abakuá forbidden in public. It thereby introduced Afro-Cuban drumming into Cuban popular music, and by extension world popularity (ibid: 333-346). The *son*, considered “scandalous” by polite society and associated with black Cubans (ibid.: 344), transformed the *danzón* – Cuba’s colonial-era “national dance” associated with European couple’s dancing, a style that would give birth to the mambo and the chachachá. When Rodríguez took the *son* further in the 1940s, adding trumpet, piano and later the conga, he popularized what would become the basic format of the salsa band (ibid.: 478-479). According to Sublette, Rodríguez’s various pianists were known for the “ripping, percussive piano solos” that expressed what had become Cuba’s distinctive piano sound – “imitative of the tres in its use of octaves to outline sub-melodies within rhythmic arpeggios” (2004: 479).

After the Revolution, the piano gained further importance in classical education. The network of music schools required all students to start on the piano for the first three years while learning music fundamentals. After that point they could continue their studies on an instrument of their choosing, which they had to master with exceptional skill to continue to the next level (anonymous CNEART official, interview 2006). When Brian cried to Violeta to be taken back to play the piano at her aunt's house, she obliged several times to see if his fascination with the instrument were a passing fad. When it was clear that it wasn't, she and René had a serious talk. What should they do? She later told me they both knew that preparing Brian to get into the conservatories and advance was a daunting endeavor, given the competition and the state of the economy. But it seemed worth it. Brian loved to play and showed talent at what appeared to offer a stable and promising career. In what would be the first of many networking efforts for Brian's music career, she contacted a cousin's music teacher – Miriam Valdés, the sister of Chucho Valdés – who agreed to take Brian on to coach him to prepare for his admission performance. But Miriam lived in Old Havana. During the Special Period, many buses stopped running. Bicycles from China flooded the streets along with horse-and-buggies and tractor-pulled wagons. Two days a week, Violeta would strap Brian in a seat on the back of a bicycle and pedal with him two hours one way – skipping the more congested route of Via Blanca and heading down Independencia Avenue, through Regla, past the oil refinery, around the port and into Old Havana. After the lesson, they would make the return trip, arriving home – Violeta exhausted and soaking with sweat and needing to cook something for their dinner. When it would rain, they waited hours for the bus – where inside the cramped vehicles, pressed against the other standing passengers, Brian

would fall asleep leaning into Violeta. To help him practice learning musical notes, Violeta cut strips out of cardboard and labeled them as keys, including the flats and sharps. After months of lessons, Brian passed and was admitted into Amadeo Roldán Conservatory – in Central Havana. The bike trips became daily. This time, Violeta waited all day outside the school. I asked her how she passed the time, and she said she would sit on a bench, finding one under a tree, and nap or eat the small lunch of crackers and fruit she brought for herself. (She later would trace the worsening of her health to these years – including her diabetes, high blood pressure and problems with a sciatic nerve.) Once Brian was admitted into the conservatory, Violeta and René decided to sell their refrigerator in order to buy an old America upright piano from a man who lived in Central Havana and was leaving the country for the United States. They took Brian to check out the piano, and when he said he liked it, they paid \$135 for it. They hired a truck driver to help them hoist it with ropes over the owner’s railing of the apartment on the fourth floor, lower it into the street and drive it to Guanabacoa. After about a year, Brian was able to transfer to the Guillermo Tomás conservatory in Guanabacoa, and the grueling bike trips into the city came to an end. Violeta and Brian said he did not have a childhood, never learning to play jacks or baseball with kids in the street. When he wasn’t at school, he was home practicing. The neighbors later told me they grew attached to hearing his playing. Violeta said once an old man passed by the window and perched his chin in his hand, resting his elbow on the outside window sill, listening. When Violeta caught sight of him, she went over to the window. “*Tío*, can I help you?” she told me she inquired. The man asked if he could just stand there and listen for awhile longer. He had had hopes his own child would make it into the music conservatories, but it never came

to pass. When Brian and Violeta talk about this period of their lives, both of their identities intersect with music. For Brian, it is through his love of the piano and it being the most important thing in his life. For Violeta, it was through her role as a mother and her determination to help Brian through his rigorous education into a stable career amid growing racial inequalities – even if she had to operate through the black market to help him.

Brian quickly stood out at the conservatory in Guanabacoa – becoming a favorite of the principal, who tapped him to play for visiting foreigners and tourists (which is how I met him when he was 13 and in seventh grade in 2002). Violeta still possesses a binder filled with the international awards Brian began to accumulate. He had easily passed from the elementary to the equivalent of the middle school level. Which is why it was a shock when Brian was nearing the performance exam to pass from the middle to the higher level, after eighth grade in 2003, and one of his music teachers visited the house to tell Violeta and René that she did not think he would make it. She believed he was not growing, that his hands were too small to be a classical concert pianist and that he should be steered into teaching. The news, coming on the day of a blackout, was devastating. “I was crying. My aunt was crying,” Violeta said. She told me that Brian couldn’t sleep or eat. He lay in bed facing the wall, refusing to touch the piano. All the neighbors were worried. Brian later told me a different version. He said he was determined to prove the teacher wrong. He visited his Santería padrino for a consultation, though he wouldn’t specify what the older man said, only that “Everything was going to be okay.” Violeta took no chances. She worked the phones, calling music contacts, including musical parents of Brian’s classmates for help and advice – among them, Juan de Marcos, who

later told me he tried to console Violeta that Brian was definitely ready. The teacher was crazy, he said. Through contacts, she reached Ulises Hernández, a prominent Cuban concert pianist who agreed to give Brian several lessons to help him prepare for the performance. His opinion was the same as that of Juan de Marcos: Brian was ready.

On the given day, dozens of parents and anxious students – Brian’s peers – gathered at the Amadeo Roldán conservatory in Havana, waiting outside the performance room as each student, one by one, went inside to play before a committee of music officials. Those who didn’t pass would be steered to a different course of study and career. Violeta and Brian waited nervously. The tension was thick, she said. She knew many of the parents and was aware that a lot was at stake for everyone present. They all hoped their children could continue on to graduation as professional musicians. Students who didn’t pass came out of the room sobbing, she said, while the father of one child who didn’t make it erupted in frustration and began to bang his head against a wall. When it was Brian’s turn near the end of the day, he went inside, sat down and played the five songs he had been told to rehearse. When he finished, they told him he had passed. Outside, he gave the news to Violeta, whose blood pressure was spiking to dangerous levels.

“I went straight to the hospital from the school,” she said.

Both Violeta and Brian would later recall that it was around this time – following this shaking experience in the classical music education system as well as the growing infatuation among Brian’s peers with dance music – that Brian began to turn more of his attention to *timba*. It was a music genre exploding with popularity among his generation, mirroring in its lyrics the experiences of Afro-Cuban communities and reflecting among

its band members a lifestyle young musicians wanted to emulate. For her part, Violeta considered *timba* lyrics to be superficial and crass, and the prominent *timba* musicians to embody an ostentation and materialism that clashed with her generation's revolutionary values. But the music also carried the potential to lift Brian into a class of black professionals. In her subjective identity roles as a mother as well as a former black professional who sought the same status for her son in order for him to survive the economic turmoil and growing racial inequalities, the popular dance band industry started to offer the clearest route in which she could take action on behalf of Brian and his future.

2.3 Summary

Following the 1959 Revolution, the Castro government declared that it would finally realize Cuba's historic nation-building ideal of a color-blind mixed-raced nation through socialism. Indeed, many Afro-Cuban families like Violeta's benefited by the overturning of structural segregation and discrimination along with the implementation of universal education, health care and anti-discriminatory policies in hiring and housing. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of the economic crisis of the 1990s, subsequent market reforms led to increasing class divisions along racial lines. Afro-Cubans like Violeta once again saw racial markers as indicators of how they and their children might fare in the economy. Her lifelong identity as a "*revolucionaria*" would now not matter as much as her skin color – a fear she had less for herself than for Brian and what it meant for Brian's future. This fear became one of the driving forces behind Violeta's determination to steer Brian through his competitive music education so that he might have a stable career and not wind up on the bottom rungs of the economic

ladder. As the decades-long socialist experiment began to unravel, along with it the very promise of a color-blind mestizaje nation, Cubans began to examine, question and grapple with national values and identity roles. In the next chapter, I will show how Violeta's (and Brian's) navigation of identity roles as well as the shifting nature of those categories and values amid a national identity crisis, shaped their decisions in the final years of his studies and first years of his professional career.

CHAPTER 3:

NATIONAL IDENTITY

The Revolution's ideals of income equality, common sacrifice and racial fraternity were deeply ingrained in the generation of Cubans who came of age after the 1950s. But these ideals also formed the foundation of a national identity that dated back to José Martí, the wars of independence against Spain and the construction of the nation state itself (S.Fernandes 2006: 30; De la Fuente 2001: 335). Fidel Castro and revolutionary leaders argued that the long-interrupted national project was at last being implemented through their socialist experiment (De la Fuente 2001: 337). The identity categories of class and race explored in this thesis' earlier chapters did not disappear during the Revolution. But revolutionary leaders taught – and in many cases proved – that class privilege and racial inequalities left behind by colonial and imperialist forces could be removed through socialist ideology and policies – equating socialism with Cuban national development, independence and advancement (S.Fernandes 2006: 33).

Other identity categories surfaced during the years of the Revolution – such as “revolutionary” or “the people” – identities that were intertwined with national identity itself (De la Fuente 2001: 335). Violeta's generation grew up within a relatively color-blind ethic and egalitarian country, socialized into believing that “socialism, *patria* and

social justice” were one and the same (De la Fuente 2001: 338). Violeta often referred to herself as a “*revolucionaria*.”

But when the socialist experiment began to unravel after the collapse of the Soviet Union, so, too, did this association between “socialism, *patria* and social justice” – triggering the dissolution of the long-constructed cohesive national identity. While implementing emergency and ongoing market reforms, the state tried to rely on its familiar socialist appeals to collectivism to rally the population behind new programs of “productivity” and “austerity.” But this strategy, combined with chronic shortages, only further disillusioned the masses by emphasizing the contradictions and growing gaps between the revolution’s principles on the one hand and increasing inequalities in everyday reality on the other (S.Fernandes 2006: 35-36). Instead the rising tourism industry along with the state’s downscaling of employment and social services created skewed chances for self-employment and individualism along with burgeoning consumerism, prostitution and class differences (*ibid.*). Racial categories of identity re-emerged with great vigor – as the reforms disproportionately hurt black Cubans; the government relaxed restrictions on religious and artistic expression; and long festering racist attitudes blended with those of foreign managers in joint-venture operations (De la Fuente 2001). Meanwhile, frustrated youth and artists looked beyond the nation in forming transnational ties with international hip hop artists, Rastafarians, *timba* audiences and rock and heavy metal music.

Still, transnational social movements like those of the Zapatistas in Mexico and the Landless Laborers in Brazil did not create equivalents in Cuba. Though the Cuban youth express a great desire to travel and connect with peers abroad through Internet

access, many Cubans struggle to find where – and if – they fit into their own national landscape. That is particularly true for former revolutionaries like Violeta – a category of people Sujatha Fernandes called “a weary and contemplative population questioning and searching for the value of their revolution in the midst of hardship, defeat, and new possibilities” (2006: 43). The economic crisis created a national identity crisis. Between socialist principles and a limited market economy with its accompanying inequalities, Cubans struggle with identities and values that no longer match their circumstances.

Very often, this crisis plays out across a vast generation gap between the one that came of age with the Revolution (Violeta’s), and their children who came of age with the Special Period (Brian’s). One of Sujatha Fernandes’ older informants summed up the frustration of the older generation:

“It’s what our generation feels. It’s what thousands of people of our generation feel, that we sacrificed, and many people who are now retired look back and say, ‘So what? I can’t live on what I have.’ Isn’t that true? Now we’re not suffering from such a major economic crisis as before, but the ideological problem is bigger because we live in two worlds. At that time we were all eating cabbage together. Now there are people who are not eating cabbage and those who are still eating cabbage. It’s a strong contrast. The utopia is coming apart. The model is unraveling, because we are in this strange transition, nobody knows what it is and nobody knows who will win out in the end. Will the successful ones be those who do things legally ... or those who leave?” (2006: 78).

Indeed, what does it mean to be a revolutionary or even an upright citizen when everyday needs call for operating on the black market or through quasi-illegal transactions? How does one believe in communal sacrifice by the “*gente*,” or people, when some do so much better than others, and hustling, cheating and lying have become commonplace, even among long-time friends and neighbors (Moore 2006: 227, 231)? Who are the defenders of the nation when what were once considered “*gusanos*” or traitors leaving the country are now lifelines for relatives and friends living off the

remittances and hard currency they send back? By numerous accounts, it is nearly impossible for many people to do things “legally” in Cuba and survive (Pérez Sarduy, Stubbs 2000; S.Fernandes 2006; Moore 2006; Hansing 2011). The official rhetoric posits that the benevolent state provides for its citizens – ignoring the role of the black market, which is widely acknowledged and used (S.Fernandes 2006: 156). This compounds the split between the revolution’s long-standing moral value of work, particularly among the older generation, and the everyday necessity to *luchar, inventar, resolver* to survive (D.Fernández 2000: 109).

This divide between national identity and values on the one hand and lived reality on the other is what Damián Fernández has framed as the difference between the politics of passion and the politics of affection, or *lo informal* (2000). In Cuba’s recent history, the Revolution’s politics of passion that fueled its earlier literacy brigades and volunteerism collapsed in the economic crisis of the 1990s, giving way to a surging politics of affection in which Cubans operated through *lo informal*. In this context, new or enduring networks are the means to survival (ibid.: 110). In other words, he argues that it is the combination of who you know, who you love and your personal connections and networking that “provides greater access to goods than do the institutions of the state” (ibid.). Indeed, *lo informal* and the politics of affection formed the “backbone” of illegal culture in that they created a new code of morality and effectiveness in providing justification for breaking the law in order to satisfy the needs of one’s family and loved ones (D.Fernández 2000: 111). While the Cuban government has more recently tried to crack down on rampant corruption and theft and attempted to regularize the black market through small business permits and high taxes, Cubans have already been socialized “into

ways of breaking the law” to help their families (D.Fernández 2000: 112-113). According to Fernández, when one Cuban mother was asked if she felt it was wrong to steal light bulbs, food or other items from her workplace, she said no, arguing that taking from the state did not count as stealing and that she would do anything necessary to help feed her children (ibid.).

Indeed, in Violeta’s life, the collapse of a cohesive national socialist identity and project along with the rise of social and racial inequalities also led her into the realm of *lo informal*. With the state no longer able to provide guarantees for her son’s future, she turned to various identity categories and networks not only to find meaning, but also for help and resources – connections based on race, gender, friendship, family, profession, money – and even the remnants of her changing revolutionary stature.

3.1 *Lo informal: “Todo es contacto.”*

The sun was blinding as I stepped outside the José Martí International Airport terminal south of Havana. A crowd stood quietly pressed up against a barrier, watching and waiting outside this drab hangar-like building that handled direct charter flights from Miami. Down the road sat the much larger, sleek international terminal building for flights from Europe and Latin America. I scanned the faces of the people, some with video cameras in hand, and who were by now looking past me, waiting to see loved ones come out from the doors behind me. In those split seconds, I registered the face of a young man who seemed to be smiling at me. Not realizing who he was, my eyes kept scanning, until they returned to the woman next to him, who was also looking at me and smiling, and whom I immediately recognized. It was Violeta. And the young man next to

her was Brian. It was May, 2006, my first time back to Cuba in four years since I had written the newspaper article about them (Amrhein 2002a). In that time, while Violeta looked the same – now dressed in black slacks and a white blouse – Brian had morphed from a skinny 13-year-old boy in glasses, to a hip-looking young man in white jeans and a pullover. The glasses were gone. Though still slim, Brian had filled out and developed a signature male Cuban posture and walk – a confident glide with shoulders back and chest out. Once we had all hugged and greeted each other, we climbed inside their neighbor’s old Volkswagen Bug. My backpack road under the front hood (the engine was in the rear), while Brian and I squeezed into the back and Violeta into the front passenger seat next to their neighbor, a white Cuban man named Oscar (a pseudonym). Brian asked them to put a Charlie Parker jazz cassette into the tape deck. And as we drove away from the airport, Brian followed the notes on an air piano with his large ebony hands – which, defying his teacher’s predictions, had grown enormously in the past few years. Smiling slightly, he coolly and expertly snapped his wrists at just the right musical junctures, as if he were clinching the acrobatic chord changes himself.

Over the previous four years since I had met them, Violeta and I had stayed in contact through emails with the help of Brian’s uncle who worked at the University of Havana and had rare Internet access. She also kept up communication with Sandy Garcia, the Tampa woman whose mirrored piano I had followed to Brian’s school, where he was the first student to play it. Sandy was a retired African American professor from the University of South Florida (“Garcia” was her late ex-husband’s last name). After reading the newspaper article, she felt an affinity with Violeta and Brian because of their

race and their daily struggles, given the difficulties her late father had gone through as a black American Big Band musician in the 1940s and the 1950s in Buffalo, N.Y.

This relationship would be one that Violeta would work to cultivate based on what they both perceived as mutual identity categories of race, music, class and gender, as she appealed to Sandy for help as a single mother in raising Brian through economic hardships – economic difficulties that Sandy also had faced growing up. Yet, before Brian’s birth and the economic crisis, Violeta’s life as a military major in socialist Cuba held very few similarities to the life of Sandy – an upper-middle class Buddhist African-American university professor. Back then, no one in Violeta’s family left Cuba for exile; they considered those who left to be *gusanos*, or traitors. And they certainly did not look to U.S. citizens for support, as they tied their futures to the state. What’s more, the historical context of race relations and a music profession also differed between the countries – despite some real and imagined parallels in the women’s lives. But with the collapse of the socialist model, Cubans – including old revolutionaries like Violeta – were desperate to look outside the nation for help. And those without family abroad turned to other sorts of relationships – those beyond national identity, forged through religious, racial, professional or personal bonds.

To be sure, Violeta was grateful for Sandy’s interest, letters and copies of the five-CD set from Ken Burns’ *Jazz* documentary, sent for Brian through acquaintances traveling to Cuba. Violeta forbade Brian from trading the CDs with friends. She sent letters to Sandy through friends’ relatives returning to the United States. “*No tenemos nada más allá,*” she would tell me frequently, referring to the remittances other Cuban families received from relatives living in the United States. In letters and subsequent

emails through Brian's uncle, Violeta asked Sandy if she could help them buy an electronic keyboard for Brian. The old upright piano they had purchased during Brian's youth was badly out of tune and broken down. Working pianos at the conservatory were in short supply. What's more, though Violeta and Brian still planned for him to try to go to ISA after graduation, Brian and his classmates had increasingly been gravitating to *timba* outside of class. Hanging out at bands' rehearsal sessions around Havana, Brian met Tirso Duarte, a prominent *timba* pianist and singer with top bands like Charanga Habanera and NG La Banda. Tirso began to mentor Brian, who started getting calls from professional bands when they needed a pianist to sit in on a gig. Violeta and Brian told me he was called back for a second audition round with NG La Banda, who needed a pianist for an international tour, but Brian was only a junior in high school at the conservatory and would not have been given permission to leave the country before graduation and his obligatory social service. With these developments, Violeta was desperate for him to have a keyboard. She sold part of her living room furniture to rent one from another young musician. But it was too small and she wanted something permanent. Also, Brian had thrown together a band at the conservatory and they were trying to burn a demo to get on the radio. Right now he was writing all the parts out by hand for each instrument. If he had a better keyboard and USB cable, he could compose and write directly into a computer. Sandy looked into many options – including the risky one of shipping a keyboard to Brian, but she feared it might get confiscated by Cuban Customs. Instead, knowing I was planning to return to Cuba to work on my thesis, she sent \$600 with me to give to them to buy one in Havana. This was an example of the domestic and international networking in which Violeta engaged – like thousands of

others in *lo informal* – given that the state was no longer able to provide workable materials and musical instruments.

The day after I arrived, Violeta and Brian returned on a Saturday with Oscar to pick me up to go shopping for a keyboard. For that first week, I was staying in Miramar, a western suburb of Havana where many embassies and former estates of the wealthy are located along tree-lined boulevards. Some of the estates are now carved up into multi-family housing. For that week, I needed to be close to the ENA, where I was following a group of international piano tuners for my research, and I rented a room in a *casa particular*, or homestay, for a daily rate of 30 “chavitos” – the local name given to the only convertible currency allowed in retail outlets and “dollar” stores starting in late 2004. After losing about 10 percent in value after the exchange rate, U.S. dollars would incur an additional 10 percent tax – a fee that helped the government capture some of the currency remittances sent from relatives in Miami. When they entered the apartment, Violeta looked uncomfortable. And I later realized why. Despite the dilapidated appearance of its exterior – chipped concrete and large shards of broken glass in the stairwell window panes – the interior of the individual fourth-floor apartment was spacious and gorgeous – marble floors, wicker and glass furniture, four bedrooms and three bathrooms with showers and hot water. While another apartment building blocked a direct view of the ocean, the vast indigo colored water and horizon were easily visible from the windows at an angle and off the apartment’s side balconies. The owner, a white Cuban woman I will call Gloria, had an adult daughter living in Europe who sent her money to help maintain the apartment so that she could obtain the permit to host tourists. When I later went to stay with Violeta in Guanabacoa, she fretted to me in an

embarrassed tone that she worried I would not be comfortable there because it did not have the comforts of Gloria's home.

Her feelings about her circumstances highlighted several disadvantages for Afro-Cubans outlined by Alejandro De la Fuente. White Cubans were more likely to have relatives abroad sending remittances and to be living in locations and homes suitable to rent to tourists (2001; 2011). Moments like these were sharp indicators of the reversal of Violeta's identity category or position in society – formerly firmly established as a faithful revolutionary and black professional in the military middle-class with nice things of her own in her house. But now she felt inferior to someone like Gloria, who was living off her daughter's remittances and rent from tourists, while Violeta sold pieces of her furniture to help Brian and scrambled for basic household goods. For instance, while in Miramar, Violeta also asked Oscar to stop at a grocery store, remarking that the stores on this side of town were more likely to have toilet paper in stock while the stores in Guanabacoa were all out – again. When we got in line with arms full of toilet paper rolls, she did not make a move to pay, and I realized she didn't have the money, so I paid. Still, as shown below, Violeta's ongoing attempts to find new sources of support and resources were not to recapture some sort of lost status for herself. Rather, all of her efforts in her identity role as a mother were geared to helping Brian into a professional class of his own, even if that profession and industry encapsulated a materialism that was an affront to her revolutionary values.

Back in the Volkswagen to shop for the keyboard, we stopped first at EGREM in Miramar, the state recording company, but it was closed. Next Oscar headed for the Malecón seaside boulevard on our way to stores in Old Havana. As he drove at a

crawling 30 mph to conserve on gas, we were passed by motorcycles, Cocotaxis – yellow shell two-seaters pulled by a scooter – horse-and-buggies, boxy Ladas, lime-green Buicks and red-and-white finned Chevrolets. (Violeta later told me that she had saved up several weeks’ worth of pesos from washing laundry to pay Oscar 10 chavitos for gas. It took 24 pesos to equal one chavito. Without knowing that, and after he repeatedly dropped hints to me about what he normally charges for his informal taxi, I paid him 30-40 chavitos for gas, while he separately continued to charge Violeta – something she and I would later discover after comparing notes. It would lead to a rift in the friendship between Violeta and Oscar, his wife and their two sons, who had grown up with Brian. I will explore this more fully below, but this problem speaks to the vulnerabilities inherent in the networks of *lo informal* and the decay of communal trust following the collapse of a national societal ethic, system and identity.)

On the drive to Old Havana, Violeta, Brian and Oscar talked about how expensive everything was becoming – the costs of recording studios, the taxes on popular musicians, the overall cost of living. Violeta and Oscar said they believed music careers were the best options for their kids. Violeta said she now thought there were more opportunities for Brian overseas. She hoped he could get an invitation to play in a band or orchestra so that he could travel back and forth from Cuba to jobs out of the country. “I’m an old woman now. I can be content here,” she said. Though Violeta had geared most of her life’s ambitions around the goals of the state and her identity as a revolutionary, as a mother she was thinking about what was best for her son – including the possibility that her life’s work – the national project – wouldn’t sustain him and that he might have to leave the country for periods of time to work elsewhere.

Oscar dropped us off in Old Havana, whose narrow streets – lined with large porticos, art nouveau buildings, tall windows and louvered shutters – were packed with pedestrians, both tourists and Cubans. Some Cubans were in designer jeans, others in shorts, spandex, trendy sunglasses and sandals. We stopped every few blocks so Violeta and Brian could greet a young passing fellow musician they knew with an “*Hola! Como anda?*” and a cheek kiss. “She plays cello,” Violeta told me, or “He plays trumpet.” The network of musicians was vast. I would soon see the role it played for Violeta, echoing Sujatha Fernandes’ point that “professional networks” along with family and friends became for many Cubans in these years “the most important means” of dealing with daily problems (S.Fernandes 2006: 156). Meanwhile, the storefronts we passed offered sneakers for anywhere from \$40 to \$70 (in chavitos) – on par with prices in the United States. Clothes were just as expensive. We stopped in several music stores, where electronic keyboards were going for \$1,200 to \$2,000. Next Violeta and Brian wanted to try the music store next to Teatro America in Centro Havana for something less expensive. Brian spotted a keyboard that he liked for \$600, but it was a Chinese model that neither of them recognized and weren’t sure to trust. (By now, along with Venezuela, China was becoming a significant trading partner with Cuba.) The one they were renting was of the established Japanese brand of Yamaha. Brian asked to play the Chinese model, and the clerk pulled it back from its window display and plugged it in. Brian, with a serious frown of concentration, crouched down over the keyboard at floor level. He opened his large hands over the keyboard – and made it explode to life with a piano *tumbao* – which Perna defined as the fast, percussive, irregular “rhythmic-harmonic interaction” that “greatly contributes to creating the sense of urgency typical of the

montunos of *timba*” (2005: 115). The other Cuban shoppers in the store came over to watch. I was stunned. The last time I had heard Brian play was four years earlier, when he performed a lovely *danzón* on Sandy’s father’s piano at the school and several classical pieces on the old upright at home. His talent was obvious then. But this was different. He was now at another level. Brian touched different components on this keyboard to see how they worked. Violeta hovered close by. He stood up and told her he liked the keyboard. It wasn’t everything he was looking for, but he liked it. Outside, tapping into their network of fellow musicians, Violeta found a phone booth to call his piano instructor and other music friends to see what they thought about this Chinese brand. No one recognized it. Aside from this uncertainty, it was becoming clear that the money Sandy had sent wouldn’t be enough. We hadn’t gone to convert it yet, but as we started to calculate the conversion rate plus the 10 percent fee, the 600 U.S. dollars would only amount to about 480 chavitos. Brian and Violeta began discussing buying the Yamaha they were renting.

The next day, Mother’s Day, I rode over to Violeta and Brian’s house on the back of a motorcycle with one of the international piano tuners, Ciarán Ryan, from Ireland. Pedestrians criss-crossed the streets carrying colorfully frosted cakes on slim pieces of cardboards. “*Feliz día de las madres,*” people greeted me, wishing a happy Mother’s Day regardless of whether they knew if I had children. I didn’t, but I said thank you and returned the greeting to the women. We had called ahead first from a payphone, and when we arrived, Violeta had us roll the motorcycle in across the chipped and faded pink mosaic tile floor of the front room, which was empty of furniture. Then she showed me the work she had had done on the house since I was there last – slowly having saved her

pesos to pay a construction worker she knew to do projects in increments. The tall ceiling of the front two rooms was now blocked off with a lower ceiling forming a second-story floor for a half room – a common indoor subdivision of space that Cubans call *barbacoas* to help with the chronic housing shortage. A concrete staircase hugged the wall in the center room going up to this new incomplete second floor. Violeta told me she wanted to complete that second story so Brian could live up there one day when he got married. For now, his bedroom was off the center room. The long corridor ran adjacent to his room and Violeta's bedroom behind it, to the bathroom and the kitchen in the back. She was also stressed to get the improvements done by the time Brian graduated the following year so that he could host other professional musicians at the house and possibly take in students to earn extra income as a private teacher. This was evidence of Violeta's unending maneuvering to find ways to best position Brian to take advantage of the new private sector and market-oriented music industry.

For now – with the walls unpainted and water-stained, and building material tucked under the steps – the house had the feel of being under construction. The old upright piano, rocking beach chair and straight-back chairs were in the center room, where some friends and a cousin of Violeta's were sitting drinking rum and listening to Charlie Parker. Brian had rigged a mobile CD “Premier” player into his Recor stereo radio system with a turntable and cassette deck. Ciarán and I offered to go get beer for everyone.

At the store, Brian bought us ice cream cones while Ciarán and I bought some Bucanero beer. “My mom knows I drink, but she doesn't know I smoke,” Brian said on the walk back. Violeta's cousin, a large and flirtatious man, was a prominent bass player

and professor at Brian's conservatory who had caught him smoking behind a tree near the school and lectured him about it. "It's that lifestyle of a musician," he said now. Brian tried to defend himself: "I don't smoke and drink everyday," he said. It was becoming obvious to family members – and worrisome to Violeta – that though the music industry offered the most promise for Brian's future, he was starting to imitate and identify with the macho behavior of its members.

Back at the house, Oscar had arrived with his wife and two sons, one who was Brian's age and the other in his 20s. Both were saxophone players. They started a jam session of Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man" and other songs, with Brian on the upright piano, which was so badly out of tune that I caught a look of pain pass over Ciarán's face. Brian abandoned any attempt to make music on the piano and pulled the keyboard they were renting out of his bedroom and started to play on that. Violeta was embarrassed at not having much to offer us, but she gave us large bowls full of cut fresh fruit, which was delicious. But during a break in the confusion as Ciarán tried to talk in broken Spanish to everyone else, I got Violeta and Brian alone in his bedroom. I wanted to hand off Sandy's money to them, as I was increasingly uncomfortable carrying around the cash in the money belt and concerned that my role in their lives would be conflated with her gift. Violeta told me they had decided to use the money to buy the keyboard they had been renting from another student's family – again, an example of the trading taking place in *lo informal* and the type of professional or music networks Violeta had to nurture to help Brian.

After I gave them the money, Violeta, sitting on the bed, said she worried about Brian's skin color, being black, and for emphasis she rubbed her index finger on her

forearm. Brian sat next to her listening attentively. Most kids at ISA continuing their classical education are white, she said. Later I could not find statistics to support this, and several professional musicians I interviewed, like Juan de Marcos González, said that they didn't think was true. Still, the perception to Violeta was an important one framing her perspective on options that would be open or closed to Brian in what she increasingly saw as a society where Brian would have an unfair disadvantage because of race. The white students, she said, have connections. Though schools are free, parents have to pay the teachers under the table, just like she had to do through the years with Brian's piano teachers. This would echo a familiar conversation I would have with Violeta, who would tell me in the week to come: "Everything depends on who you know. Contacts. And people like us" – rubbing the skin on her arm – "don't have contacts." One of these conversations followed a visit to the home of Oscar and his wife, who had family in Miami sending them money for jeans, home appliances and instrument parts for their sons. "My family was military, communists," Violeta said after that visit. And then she asked, hypothetically, where they were now, answering her own question by waving her hand a few feet above the floor. But Violeta did have contacts, though of a different sort. As the CDR zone representative, she had eight blocks reporting to her. When I came to stay with them, I would notice a routine banging on the aluminum door or yelling through the window by neighbors: "VIO'!" or "OYE!" or "BUENO!" She steered people to the right delegate or place to call for permission to sell glass panes for doors or to try to negotiate a housing trade. Oscar's wife called for her help in finding a doctor to give a last-minute physical for their son to travel on a music tour – an important contact since

she and others complained about the shortage of doctors after many went to Venezuela as part of a trade for oil.

But the kind of contacts that mattered most to Violeta now were those that could help Brian with his education, jobs or money. The source of much of her frustration was that after a lifetime as a revolutionary, her contacts might not hold the sway of others, namely a growing moneyed class in Cuba. Or, as Brian's father René would tell me later, rubbing his thumb against his fingers, indicating cash, "*Hay contactos, y hay contactos.*"

Increasingly, Violeta relied on connections outside of the state – connections she built on music or other alliances and identity categories. For instance the current relationship with the senior Lazaro Valdés was helped by both professional and racial ties. The lessons Brian received from Lazaro came about after Brian saw him perform his mix of jazz, classical and popular music on a night-time cultural television show. "Mamá, listen!" Brian said to Violeta. "Mamá, I want to do this!" Brian had told Violeta, she later recalled. She talked to a professor at the conservatory, who was a bass player for Lazaro and helped set up a meeting. One of the first things he asked Violeta: Was Brian black? Lazaro later told me he asked that because he wanted to tutor and mentor young black musicians in the roots of the music and that too many white Cubans were appropriating black styles without appreciating the history. Brian's talent steered the relationship from that point. On the first meeting, Lazaro told Brian to sight read a piece. He was impressed – later telling me that even among the bevy of musical talent in Havana, Brian had a gift for playing by ear and picking up a song on the first reading. He took Brian on as a student for \$1 *chavito* an hour, two times a week. He later waived the fee after he started to invite Brian to sit in on songs at his gigs. "*Todo es contacto,*" Violeta said when

relating this story. And with the state no longer able to guarantee a stable future or career path for Brian, Violeta turned to these other identity categories and contacts, like race and musical connections – helped along by Brian’s growing talent. These contacts were especially important for Violeta in order to make up for the lack of contacts that were considered most important – those of family abroad.

“We don’t have any family over there, just you guys,” she was saying now on the bed, arguing that the white students at ISA were helped there by family in the United States sending money for instruments and lessons. “You guys are doing more than our family.” I shook my head. Sandy was the one to thank, I said, not me. “Do you think I’ll get to talk to Sandy?” Brian asked. Violeta had more to say about their situation, and at this point we were talking in hushed tones so that Oscar and the other friends in the next room wouldn’t hear.

“You look at the students when you’re at ISA,” Violeta whispered, tapping her finger just below her eye and nodding knowingly, referring to the upcoming week when I would shadow the international piano tuners at ENA and ISA. Most of them are white, she insisted. Black students can easily get into salsa and popular music, she said, but they’re not trained at ISA. She and Brian wanted him to be trained at ISA to perfect his skills as much as possible, including his burgeoning talent in composition. But that would probably entail five more years of struggling to get private lessons or paying good teachers under the table. Her concern about the quality of teaching at the schools was echoed in my separate interview later that week with Zenaida Romeu – descendant of one of the most prominent families of Cuban music, and the orchestral director and founder of the Camerata Romeu, an all-female chamber music group. Zenaida lamented the loss

of an entire generation of teachers who fled the country following the economic crash of the 1990s. Now there was a shortage of professors, and those who remain sometimes fail to show up for class or lessons. The quality of education is “*bajo bajo*,” Zenaida said, adding that with fewer professors at ISA, there were fewer positions available for music students. Indeed, later Oscar’s oldest son told me that he gained admission into ISA but declined and instead accepted an offer to join a band, figuring that ISA was a waste of time and money in private lessons because he didn’t stand to make a living salary in classical music.

Family remittances not only helped pay for instruments and lessons, Violeta said. In some families they also helped pay for nice clothes by which professional musicians were increasingly being judged. She wanted to be able to afford nice clothes for Brian. When René was a mariner, he made good money. Now he had stomach cancer and lived with his daughter from a previous marriage, but the cost of living was different then. René was now paid \$9 chavitos a month in pension, she said, plus whatever he made as a babalao in divinations and other services. He helped out a little, but mostly Violeta washed clothes to save on the side to pay for the escalating demands of Brian’s music education and career. “It’s not easy, Sandra. I just want to see him do well. I can get by putting money in the drawer,” she said, meaning if she just had herself to worry about, it wouldn’t matter as much. Everything she was doing was for Brian’s well-being. This reveals how various identity roles aren’t experienced in isolation but are lived and navigated in relation to one another. In other words, the fact that she, a longtime revolutionary, was now at the bottom of the social ladder concerned her most where it impacted her identity role as a mother.

Ciarán and I climbed back on the motorcycle before it started to get dark. He was worried about hitting potholes we wouldn't see, plus getting lost navigating back to Miramar, on the other side of Havana. The group followed us outside, laughing and joking, with Violeta cautioning us to be careful. Ciarán promised to come back and tune the upright piano. After I put my helmet on, we waved our goodbyes and Ciarán took off up Aranguren Street. Over the buzz of the motor and the wind in our faces, I asked his professional opinion of the keyboard. Yelling over his shoulder, he said it was okay, but that Brian needed something better – with more octaves and more weight on the keys. Piano keys weigh 50 grams, and those on this keyboard were probably half of that.

“He'll return to the piano and be lost,” he said, explaining to me that now was the most important time for a serious musician like Brian to have good equipment – while he was learning. “This keyboard could hurt his development.” We did return one evening later that week, when Ciarán took several hours to tune the piano and jerry-rig some of its decrepit wires the best he could given the lack of replacement parts. Violeta told me that when Oscar learned we were coming, he asked Violeta to please ask Ciarán to come over to their home and tune their piano, too, which he did, all the while plied with cigarettes and Bucanero beer, doing probably several hundred dollars worth of work. The local blind piano tuner who kept after the conservatory's pianos charged \$25 chavitos for a house call – too high for Violeta to afford. Plus, she complained, the blind tuner's work wasn't that good. Throughout that whole evening as Ciarán tuned, Violeta fretted that Brian had not yet returned from his private lesson in the city. After midnight, *guaguas*, or buses, would only run every three hours. She wanted to buy a cell phone for him but couldn't afford it. In the past, at times when he was late or missed a bus, he called from

payphones and sometimes missed Violeta because she would be up at the corner of Aranguren and Independencia watching for him to get off the bus. When Ciarán and I got back to Miramar around 2 a.m., I called Violeta, who by now was in a panic because Brian was still not home. I went to bed, and a few minutes later, Brian called and woke up Gloria, trying to get a message to me to let me know he was home safe. The next morning, Gloria told me she thought Violeta was an overprotective mother and that Brian was probably out with friends the night before and didn't want Violeta to know. Other parents had the same impression of Violeta. During my interview with Juan de Marcos, whose daughter attended Brian's conservatory, he related to me that Violeta had a reputation for storming the school to complain about Brian's teachers or some other failing she came across. Revealing how identity roles are also shaped through subjective experiences, Violeta told me herself that aside from the hardships they were living through, she was so protective of Brian in part because her own mother had nothing to do with her after her father's parents took her as a newborn. She also felt attached to Brian because of the numerous miscarriages she had suffered. When I went to stay with Violeta and Brian the following week, I saw firsthand the strain she lived through raising a young man mostly on her own.

3.2 *Lo informal*: Motherhood, race, music and betrayal

On one rainy afternoon during my visit that May of 2006, Brian went next door to spend time with a girl his age from Miami. The girl was a toddler when her mother moved them out of the country. They were back to see the girl's grandmother before she died. Meanwhile, at Violeta's house, Violeta was venting about the hardships of

motherhood. She found a sympathetic ear in Tony, René's younger brother and Brian's uncle who was visiting. Tony had been the uncle relaying messages between Violeta and me all these years through his Internet connection at his job as an engineering professor at the University of Havana. He was a longtime revolutionary, like Violeta, his brown dress slacks, cotton shirt and soft-heeled black sneakers a sharp contrast to the designer jeans and silk shirts worn by younger men. In his own youth, Tony had served on brigades to help build houses in Nicaragua. Violeta saw him as a peer – but also as a possible male role model for Brian, one she felt he direly needed and that she was not able to provide. Her frustrated rant to Tony illustrated the difficulties she faced juggling multiple identity roles – as a black woman, a single mother and a revolutionary.

As I sat down to join them, she complained to Tony that René was not supportive financially or emotionally and had changed from being a devoted communist after becoming more involved in “the religion.” She said she couldn't be racist because she herself was black, but that there were different classes of black people – “*negra clase y clase negra*.” Echoing my observations in an earlier chapter, Violeta equated her position as a communist and former military major with a higher class of black Cubans compared to others like René who were heavily involved in Santería. This attitude mirrored that of the party elite, which had for decades been dismissive of Afro-Cuban culture before the surge in the tourism industry in the 1990s. But Violeta's feelings about Afro-Cuban religions could not be easily categorized. Tony also was a follower of Santería, and Violeta would later speak in a respectful tone when telling me about his initiation process, known as “*hacer santo*.” The difference for Violeta was that Tony was also highly educated and a fellow revolutionary. Violeta was aligned with the Revolution's

principles that education and the socialist struggle would elevate the masses, including black Cubans, but that religion alone would hold them back. Still, she reserved judgment depending on the character of the person, like Tony or her father. However, her own lack of personal identification with Santería explained why she did not turn to religious circles for help with Brian during the economic crisis. Instead, for male role models, she sought support from older music professionals like Lazaro Valdés or family members like Tony.

“A boy needs the influence of a man,” Violeta said. “I can tell him something and he looks at me like ‘sphh!’ He needs a man to tell him.” Violeta was concerned that Brian was starting to copy the arrogant, materialistic behavior of other young musicians and *timba* band directors. Tony nodded and listened. A few minutes later, René – a tall, reed-thin, bald and dark-skinned Afro-Cuban man with a scraggly beard at his chin – walked in. He shook my hand and asked about Sandy. Brian came in a few minutes later and sat down next to him. René affectionately tapped him on the back of the head and grasped his leg. Violeta avoided eye contact with René and addressed Tony instead. For his part, Tony offered René a glass of rum. Before drinking any, René spilled a little on the floor for Elleguá, a Santería orisha, or deity. When he got up and walked down the hall to the kitchen, Tony leaned over to talk to Brian.

“You need to be a simple person,” Tony told him, starting in on a short lecture. “Let your piano playing say everything. The more you talk, the less people are going to think of you.” In my talks with Tony, he shared Violeta’s worries about Brian’s generation, which grew up taking the Revolution’s gains for granted, knowing only hardships of the Special Period and the *doble moral* of *lo informal*. Brian’s generation watched older relatives profess one thing and do another or leave professional jobs for the

lucrative tourism sector. He and his peers became apathetic to politics and grew motivated largely by consumption, making a quick buck and living for the moment (Moore 2006: 247; Hansing 2011: 18-19). Violeta tried to instill her revolutionary values in Brian, while, as a mother, guiding him into the music industry as one of the few promising career outlets, hoping he wouldn't absorb its ostentatious lifestyle.

As Tony spoke, Brian looked around the room, absent-minded, distracted. Tony got up and walked over to him, placing one hand on his back to get his attention. "I'm serious," he said. "You need to be a simple person. Don't worry about how you're dressed. Put all of that into your piano playing."

Over the next few days, I accompanied Brian to his private music lessons – one with Lazaro in his home south of Havana, focusing on popular dance music and jazz; and the other with Patricia Melí, his classical music piano instructor in her large flat in Barrio Chino, or Chinatown, in Central Havana. Patricia did not charge for lessons since she was his professor at the conservatory. Still, Brian had to take the bus or multiple taxis into the city to get to her home for his lessons. Lazaro no longer charged him, either, now that Brian sat in with him for parts of songs, or *temas*, during his performances, including at the Fox and the Hound in Vedado. Lazaro helped in other ways, too. For instance, students at ENA often played part-time gigs at nightclubs before graduating with a professional title as long as they got a letter from a professor. Lazaro did this for Brian, writing a letter on his behalf to sit in with a band at La Tropical for a few weeks after they had put a notice on the radio that they needed a pianist and Brian won the audition. Brian had been sitting in for parts of gigs for about two years by now. "All thanks to his mom," René had said at one point at the house, directing his appreciation of Violeta

toward me. “If it wasn’t for her, he wouldn’t be where he is right now.” Violeta looked down without saying anything, but to me the hard look in her eyes softened slightly at the compliment. Brian told me that he sometimes made about \$8 chavitos for a gig – half of which he would have to pay the *empresa*. Then he would give \$2 chavitos to Violeta and sometimes \$2 chavitos to his father to give to his mother as if it were coming from René himself. Other times he saved up to buy things – like the new mattress and bed frame in his room. And he also used the chavitos to take the taxis for Cubans – the old American Buicks, Plymouths and Chevrolets from the 1950s – to avoid the buses at all costs.

I was impressed with how smoothly Brian operated through the city, including the sometimes aggressive haggling with taxi drivers. One of their neighbors had told me that Brian liked the street life. Brian had become adept at life in *lo informal*, whether it was through the trading of music equipment, the making of music contacts to help his career or tricking a colleague of mine out of change in order to buy a pack of cigarettes. He certainly seemed to be trying to stretch his wings out from Violeta’s control, even though he depended on her greatly. He attributed his street-smartness to his orisha, Elleguá, the deity of the crossroads, and whose paraphernalia and small figures lay on shelves in Brian’s room. While walking through the city to his lessons, I asked Brian how he felt about continuing classical studies at ISA versus going straight into a professional dance band upon graduation the following year. Both Lazaro and Patricia told me they thought he had the talent to do either, though Patricia predicted it would be popular dance music because of Brian’s flair and vivacious personality. Backing up her point, later when he took command of Lazaro’s electronic piano for part of a song with Lazaro’s band at the

Fox and the Hound, a group of tourists leaned over to me, wide eyed, as one asked, “How *old* is he?”

Brian felt torn. On the one hand, he wanted to press on for ISA to be the absolute best, he said. And he wanted to learn much more about composing. But on the other, he wanted to start working right away, to help Violeta. The idea of struggling like this for five more years was daunting. “I want my mom to be able to sit down and relax, have a beer,” he said. He didn’t want her running around looking for new private teachers for him, lining up tutors to help him pass exams or working on the side to help them get by – the exhausting life in *lo informal* that was almost guaranteed for classical students and beginning performers like one of Violeta’s cousins, a few years older than Brian and now at ISA. Even with his occasional gigs, Brian was already making more money than this cousin, and he had not yet graduated. He could see the toll that this pace of life was taking on Violeta after all these years. Though he playfully mocked her at times and affectionately called her “*Gorda*” – or Fat Lady – he grew quiet and concerned during her tirades about problems and tried to calm her down. Violeta told me that despite Brian’s playfulness, he was quiet and private about personal affairs in the house. She said he never complains.

Violeta, echoing the themes between the sexes that arose in *timba* songs, told me she worried about Brian getting sidetracked by girls expecting boyfriends to spend a lot of money on them today. Brian was already very popular. Violeta lectured him, warning him not to become sidetracked by girlfriends’ materialistic demands or by getting someone pregnant. Though a woman herself, when it came to Brian, Violeta’s identity

role as a mother came first, and so she was less interested in these admirers' feelings or his becoming serious with someone and more concerned that he focus on his career.

But the issue of materialistic demands was a recurring theme and a complaint I heard from young men who felt marriage was impossible for them – they didn't have the money to buy the new consumer products they said their girlfriends wanted and there was nowhere to live short of crowding into their family's home already packed with several generations, in-laws and children. Violeta complained about his ex-girlfriend of three years whose mother, Violeta said, expected Brian to spend a lot of money on her daughter. The girl, she said, frequently passed the house and looked in the windows. The new girlfriend had a jealous streak, too, Violeta and Brian said. Even as we were speaking, she called, and instead of taking the phone, Brian passed it to me to play a prank on her. "Who is this?" she demanded to know of me as Brian and Violeta listened in, laughing softly. "What is your business with Brian?"

As Violeta fought as a mother to protect Brian from pitfalls and distractions while steering him toward graduation and his career, she often felt vulnerable taking action on her own as a woman while navigating *lo informal*. She no longer knew whom to trust.

"*Qué lucha*, Sandra," she told me one afternoon when I returned from interviewing the town's blind piano tuner. The bathroom was a disaster. Water was everywhere. The last plumber "*particular*" who had charged her \$5 chavitos to fix the toilet had done more damage than anything, including breaking the toilet. A second plumber had been here, charging \$10 chavitos to fix everything. These guys were not state workers, and Violeta had no one to turn to for help. "It's always something in this country," she said. "If it's not the water, it's cooking oil, if not cooking oil, it's something

else. It's this or the school." She sat down on the bed, exhausted. She told me she charges 5 pesos for pants, 2 pesos for shirts, 50 cents on the chavito for sheets for the wash in the little machine that she has. At this point, it took 24 pesos to equal one chavito. She was working seven days a week to save this amount of money. Overworked, feeling vulnerable and helpless, her blood sugar had spiked the other day. Her neighbor tested it for her. "There's not a place to walk and complain if they did a bad job. You don't have any rights," she said.

Violeta's feelings of vulnerability illustrated Damián Fernández's point:

"Although the informal can be perceived as the arena of 'positive' sentiments – honor, honesty, affection – among loved ones, in practice the informal also carries a host of 'negative' feelings: mistrust, anxiety, incivility. Mistrust is as much a part of the realm of the informal as trust" (2000: 111).

This became particularly difficult to watch as it played out between long-time friends. Near the end of my stay that month, when Violeta and I finally compared stories and realized that Oscar was charging both of us exorbitant amounts of money for gasoline well beyond what he reasonably used to transport me or us anywhere, Violeta exploded. "René was right!" Violeta yelled. "He told me not to leave you alone!" The way she cast René's advice, they were specifically referring to the rampant hustling and con-artistry among Cuban men and the neighbors who might drop in upon hearing through the grapevine that a foreigner was staying at Violeta's. This happened again on a subsequent visit when two neighbors I knew stopped by, one hinting that she would like some beer and the other directly asking a colleague and me for money – causing Violeta to erupt in angry embarrassment when they left. Violeta was not only angry at Oscar. She was

morally offended and hurt because their families had been friends and had helped one another for years. He was very familiar with Violeta's economic difficulties and probably guessed – correctly – that I was helping pay for food and other expenses I incurred while there, and thus was indirectly trying to obtain this money from Violeta by asking for gasoline compensation. Like Ruth Behar in her ethnography *Translated Woman* (1993), my own observations were caught up in my emotions about the situation – as I tried to pull apart my anger and feelings of foolishness at being hustled. About myself, I could come to terms with his bilking me of what in the United States did not amount to much money – probably overall less than \$70 – and the likely scenario or justification that he was doing it to help his own sons – the logic of *lo informal*. But what felt worse was his taking advantage of Violeta – the type of theft or *doble moral* so commonplace that one singer told Spanish journalists it had resulted in a society that is “psychologically ill” (Moore 2006: 227). Anthropologist Katrin Hansing said *doble moral* had reached such troubling proportions that it had begun to tear at the social, civic and moral fabric of Cuban society (2011: 18-19). Meanwhile, Violeta, in addition to being hurt, was also embarrassed and angry at herself on my behalf, believing it was her fault for allowing this to happen. When René came in moments later, his comments only made her feel worse. “Didn’t I tell you?” he said.

Violeta told me later that after I left Cuba she walked over to Oscar's house and took back her small television that she had let them borrow. He told her it didn't matter because his wife's relatives were sending \$400 from Miami to buy a bigger one. This angered Violeta all the more because Oscar had access to resources outside the country that she did not, and he still took advantage of her. This incident shows how in the

collapse of a national identity and social ethic and during an economic crisis, individuals and families – in fending for themselves – were forced not only to re-examine their own identity categories and dependable contacts. But – as with Violeta toward Oscar – it made them question the validity of long-term friendships. “There are no friends here anymore,” Violeta once told me. While she and Oscar would eventually resume a strained friendship, they were not speaking three months later when I came back to Cuba after Fidel Castro’s collapse and emergency surgery.

3.3 *Lo informal*: Money, identity and networks

While Cuban-Americans rallied in the streets of Miami and pundits filled the airwaves and U.S. newspapers with (ultimately erroneous) analyses and prognoses about Castro’s health and life expectancy that August of 2006, Cubans went about their business on the streets of Havana. The city’s television channels were filled with track-and-field matches, kids’ cartoons, Jerry Lewis reruns and Kung fu movies, which is what Violeta was watching when I returned. Despite the normal hubbub on the streets and the blackout from international coverage except through illicit television antennae, there was an obvious increase in police presence throughout Havana. Violeta told me that everyone was privately talking about Fidel’s health. In these sensitive times, I initially was not sure if she was taking extra precautions with what she said to me, because she seemed quick to add that all Cubans were worried about Fidel and that they were “Fidelistas.” But in the same conversation she lamented how things had worsened since I had left just a few months earlier – that she had a harder time finding eggs and chicken cutlets and other food during her morning walks to search the markets for bread and papaya. She was

afraid of what lay ahead for the country and for Brian and often framed her fear in racial and class terms. In the absence of the socialist national identity and project, race and class identity categories were not only prominent for Violeta, but they left her feeling vulnerable given the state's declining role in providing professionals a living wage after graduation and the growing social and racial inequalities.

One day while we were driving back to Guanabacoa from Havana in the rental car I had, she said she feared a day when things would get so bad for black Cubans that their pent-up frustration would boil over into violence. "That's why I tell him he can't go out," Violeta said of Brian. She wanted him to stay in the house and not get caught up in any trouble. Opportunities were already starting to open up for him – like the audition he and several peers had won to tour with NG La Banda when its pianist couldn't leave the country. But Brian was too young. "This is why I want him to hurry up and graduate, in case something happens, just get that piece of paper." During a visit to her aunt with the fruit trees, we were sitting on the front porch when the aunt told us how one of their black relatives got stopped on the Regla ferry by the police who questioned the sharp key medallion he was wearing around his neck. Violeta wrinkled up her face as if to say, "What?" Then asked sarcastically, "What did they think he was going to do with that key?" She turned to me, running her index finger up and down her arm. "You see? That is why we need Fidel to get better." Violeta equated the positive structural changes, anti-discriminatory policies and material gains for black Cubans under the Revolution with Fidel. Without him – or if there were massive changes in the system – she worried that conditions would not only get worse for black Cubans but return to the way they were before the Revolution. But at other times, she lamented that "everything was a mess."

When at times I asked her how she thought things got this way, she just shook her head, defeated. “*No sé. No sé.*”

Violeta’s thoughts rarely veered far from her concern about Brian’s future. One scorching afternoon that August in 2006, on the hot sands at a beach in Santa Maria, east of Guanabacoa, Violeta repeated her fear that life for black Cubans will worsen with a change in the system. She predicted that frustrations will erupt in black neighborhoods like Cayo Hueso and Cojimar. “There are different types of black people,” she said reiterating her familiar argument on divisions by class and education and the importance of Brian graduating soon so that he could enter the work force as a professional. Brian grew weary of the conversation. “*Ya,*” he said, standing up and slicing his hands through the air. “Let’s go swim.”

Violeta stayed back on the blankets as Brian and I floated in the gin-colored ocean water. As we talked, it was clear his mind-frame differed starkly from Violeta’s. As a mother, she was gripped by fear for his well-being and what was in store for him after graduation. Brian had his own list of complaints, like the high cost of renting studio time to record a demo and the difficulty getting promoted. But unlike Violeta, Brian was also full of hope and youthful confidence in his musical talent. “I can be somebody over there,” he said, meaning the United States – the land mass on the other side of the Florida Straits, that while not visible, loomed large in the imagination of Brian’s generation. Despite Brian’s membership in the Communist Youth League, his identity roles differed from his mother’s. He had fewer obligations or commitments to the Revolution. He planned to be initiated into both Santería and the Abakuá. And as our conversation bore out, he most strongly identified as a musician. If his career called him to leave the

country, he would do it – a thought Violeta did not like to entertain. Underscoring this future possibility, as Brian and I returned to Violeta and the blankets, he suddenly pointed out to the water again. “*Mira!*” he yelled. The three of us followed the gaze of some of the other beach-goers, watching a high-speed fast-boat miles out at sea to the west, zooming toward the shore. “Brian, put your arm down,” Violeta said, shh’ing him. The boat was coming from the direction of Florida and likely would be hidden inside a cave in the rocks until it could escape with Cuban passengers at night, Violeta explained. Within minutes after the boat disappeared, a stream of Cuban Coast Guard helicopters raced across the sky in its direction while small military water craft appeared out over the horizon.

Eventually Brian and the classmates in his band were able to record their songs at a make-shift studio. Brian copied them onto an old computer that he acquired in a trade with the keyboard Sandy had paid for. To practice, Brian used the upright piano at home that Ciarán had tuned and composed by hand. He wanted his upcoming graduation recital to be memorable, one that people talked about for years. He also dreamed of becoming an important figure in the history of Cuban music. His teachers and mentors felt he had the potential to go very far. He had the talent, to be sure, they said. But there was a lot of talent in Cuba. But they also noted that Brian had something else, namely a laser-like focus and discipline – and the force of Violeta behind him. For her part, Violeta felt she was fighting against the odds – a growing disadvantage against black Cubans, numerous financial obstacles and a lack of the right “contacts” that were indispensable for economic advancement. While she continued to rely on her credentials as a revolutionary and her old friends and contacts in the system for access to prescriptions drugs for her health and

information on finding available doctors, she worked tirelessly to build new contacts to compensate for what others had that Brian did not.

Meanwhile, as they neared his graduation recital in February, Violeta called around frantically searching for the sheet music to a Prokofiev sonata, which, like many music materials, was in short supply. She used two bars of soap I had left behind on my last visit to grease the wheels with one music instructor, but eventually they found a copy through friends of friends at ENA.

Also, Violeta was grappling with a number of other problems, including the caving in of one wall thanks to the deterioration of the neighbor's adjacent roof. In a letter she got through to me in the mail, Violeta was despondent and said that for the first time, Brian was threatening to leave the country. Her other main worry – aside from preparing the house for the graduation reception after the recital – was working on trying to guarantee that his social service could be performed with a band in Havana – not teaching several years in *el campo*, or the countryside. That fate, she feared, would kill his timing of getting picked up by a good *timba* or dance band. Every year more talent graduated out of the conservatories, and a few years in the countryside would doom his career, she worried. (This was a common complaint and concern I heard among students at ENA, as well.) When I pointed out that some of Cuba's famous musicians in the past performed their social service in remote areas, she answered that times were different now. The economic situation was worse. Her requests for assistance from Lázaro paid off in that he was able to help Brian get a spot that fall of 2006 as the keyboardist for an old salsa band popular in the 1970s called Los Reyes de 76. Violeta saved up to buy perfume and special little gifts for the head of the *empresa* that oversaw Los Reyes, in the hopes

that the woman would lobby government music officials to allow Brian to do his social service with the band. She also encouraged Brian to take the woman out to lunch in what Damián Fernández called the importance of “individual charm” in *lo informal* (2000: 111). “If he gets sent away,” Violeta told me, “it will be a disaster.”

Los Reyes mostly got gigs at street festivals around Havana and interior cities, and for the first time in his life while on bus tours with them to Holguin and Pinar del Rio, Brian left the outskirts of Havana. Back in the city, he deftly tapped his own musical contacts. He maneuvered through crowds of students at a free concert by Los Van Van at ENA to position himself near the stage so he could get the keyboardist’s attention to let him come up and play a part of a *tema*, or musical interlude. During one of my visits, he hoped to do the same one night at a street concert of Denis y su Swing near a black working-class part of Guanabacoa. When I said I planned to go with him, Violeta, in a protective motherly role toward me, said she did not think it was safe. If I insisted, she would forbid Brian from going. Brian laughed, agreeing, as we all ate a pizza. “*Yo conozco mis negros,*” he said, explaining that knife fights sometimes broke out at the street parties. In the end, I stayed back and spent the evening talking with Violeta. Brian told us the next morning that though he got to play a *tema* with the band, the concert was cancelled by police after five songs when people started throwing beer bottles into the crowd.

Violeta had little respect for Brian’s generation. “*La juventud hoy están perdidos,*” she would say. It was another reason why she sought – unsuccessfully, as it turned out – to limit Brian’s contacts with the Abakuá. She feared its members would distract him from his career. She said that unlike her father and his peers – who were

professionals and respected members of their communities – today’s Abakuá are a bunch of criminals. The younger generation of men turned it into a black gang, she said. “The youth today don’t want to sacrifice. They want things given to them and don’t want to work for it.” She often said Brian had the values of her generation, even though they both angled for designer clothes for him to keep up with the other musicians. But she didn’t want to take any chances with him.

One afternoon during my visit a young man knocked on the door looking for Brian. “Who are you?” Violeta asked. He left, so she scurried up the street to the barber, where a lot of men tend to hang out. The guys vouched for him, said he was a responsible member of the Abakuá. That sent Violeta into a tailspin. Later when Brian was hanging out up the street, she called for him: Within a few minutes, Brian came back to the house, where, seated in a chair, he listened as Violeta lit into him about his acquaintances. “Now is your moment. You are a musician!” she yelled. He needed to be spending time with other musicians, she told him, not guys like that. Later, to me, she said: “They need to put these lazy kids in the street out in the countryside for social service.” But officials won’t do that, she complained, because they say those kids aren’t responsible enough. They look for students like Brian. “Instead, they take my son,” she said, blaming it on his race. The white kids of prominent musicians get to tour, she said. “*Mi hijo, pobre negro.*”

When I returned for his graduation recital in February, 2007, Brian was spending a lot of time with friends from his Mason lodge – young men and women, many of whom were musicians, who had helped Violeta, Brian and René paint all the rooms of the house leading up to the recital reception. Violeta told me Brian had grown up with a lot of these friends, but she stressed that she saw an important role not only in the mutual aid

projects, but that if Brian eventually went on international tours, he could tap into assistance of Mason members all over the world. This relationship was another example of Violeta nurturing new networks for Brian. It also illustrated what Damián Fernández called “alternative spaces for expression of self-identity and meaning” and “self-help ventures” that became more pronounced in *lo informal* after the crisis of the 1990s (2000: 113). Freemasonry memberships may have been part of what Fernández called an emerging “proto-civil” society (ibid.). But the Masons had long roots in Cuba and connections to the Abakuá dating back to the 19th century, when the secret society Masons and their protection of the disenfranchised influenced, paralleled and overlapped with the Abakuá and other Afro-Atlantic fraternal organizations (Sublette 2004: 194-195). Still, despite their historical connection, Violeta held the Masons in high esteem, while she actively tried to keep Brian out of the Abakuá. As for Santería, she didn’t resist it as much, and she took seriously the reading of the shells or divination that René, a babalao, did on my behalf one day, with Brian watching studiously, already knowing how to interpret some of the meanings. However, its principles were not those by which Violeta lived her life. Despite her feelings or efforts, within the next two years Brian would undergo initiation into the Abakuá and save up to “*hacer santo*” or go through the Santería initiation process under his orisha, Elleguá.

By the time of the recital at the conservatory on February 21, 2007, Violeta and Brian had exhausted every form of networking at their disposal through professional, family, racial, fraternal and informal contacts. Professional musicians were on the guest list, including Lazaro, some of his band members and the band director and members of Los Reyes. Fellow music students were accompanying Brian on two of the popular music

songs on a program that also included three classical pieces, a *danza* and a song Brian wrote for Violeta. Brian had gone to see his Santería *padrino* for a blessing the week before. Mason members had helped paint the house, while Violeta hounded unresponsive contractors to fix window panes and to stuff preserved couch frames for living room furniture. I brought Brian a pants-and-shirt outfit as a graduation gift, while Sandy sent him \$100 as a gift.

Violeta's networks and relationships with women proved instrumental in preparing for this milestone. Damián Fernández posited that women are at the forefront of *lo informal* through long chains of friends and extended family members in what often amounts to a full-time job to meet life's basic needs (2000: 110, 113). That is true for Violeta on a daily basis, but even more so during a crisis or large event. In the weeks leading up to the recital, she reached out to aunts, female friends, neighbors and CDR contacts to help with food, drinks and other preparations. For instance, when news surfaced just three days before the recital that the school's amplifier was broken, setting off a frantic, last-minute search, Violeta was the one to find a replacement through one of her old female friends who oversaw a *casa de cultura*, or cultural center.

Then Patricia, Brian's piano instructor, sent word that she needed transportation from Havana's Chinatown to the conservatory in Guanabacoa – launching another search for a car. Violeta swallowed her pride and asked Oscar's wife, who pressured Oscar to do the "favor" – for which he charged Violeta \$10 *chavitos* – highlighting the current role of money even in long-standing relationships. By contrast, Oscar's wife jumped in and helped with the flower arrangements in the recital room, illustrating what Damián

Fernández called “solidarity based on empathy” among women in *lo informal* (2000: 113).

In the end – despite the preceding chaos and then the loss of electricity at the school after a car hit a nearby power pole, killing the lights and the amplifier – Brian pulled off a recital that elicited a raucous standing ovation, a perfect score of 100 and tears in the eyes of one of Lazaro’s band members during the Prokofiev piece. Less than a week later, Brian got word that the *timba* band Chispa y sus Complices was holding an audition for a pianist or keyboardist. Violeta did not want him to go. She feared losing all the groundwork that she and Brian had accomplished with Los Reyes’ director and its *empresa* to help lobby music officials regarding that summer’s upcoming decision on Brian’s social service. Brian told her it was an opportunity he couldn’t pass up. Chispa had far more exposure and work in the clubs than Los Reyes. She couldn’t stop him. Later, he arrived home with the news, bursting through the front door. “*Soy pianista de Chispa!*” he yelled out to Violeta, telling her he was the new pianist for Chispa y sus Complices. I reached her by phone later in the day, and by then, Brian had already sprinted down the street to visit with Oscar’s sons to see if they had connections with Chispa’s *empresa* to start the lobbying effort regarding his social service. Violeta sounded tired and was ambivalent about what for Brian was great news – including Chispa’s gig that upcoming Saturday at the popular Casa de la Música tourist nightclub in Miramar. By now, with these developments and with the expected expense to prepare for entrance exams for ISA, they had decided to give up on the classical music route. Brian’s future in popular dance music looked promising. Still, a lot depended on officials’ decision that summer about his social service. Violeta had to start working on new

contacts and networks from scratch. “I don’t know what to do with this,” she told me. “*No es fácil.*”

3.4 *Lo informal*: One more time for the Revolution

The day of the social service announcements, the news was about as bad as Violeta could have anticipated. She and Brian and René gathered on July 18, 2007, with dozens of other students and their parents in the same theater where Brian had his graduation recital at the conservatory in Guanabacoa. The commission sitting at the table in the front of the room consisted of one official each from CNEART, the Ministry of Culture and the Institute of Music. Violeta, Brian and René waited two hours as the commission moved down the list alphabetically, with parents standing and angrily discussing results among themselves. Finally, they got to “z.” “Brian Zaldívar Aldama,” one official read aloud, Violeta remembered. “Specialization: piano. City: *Isla de la Juventud.*” The Island of Youth was a small island south of the mainland island – probably about as far away from the professional music scene as one could get. Violeta shot out of her chair and demanded a meeting with the commission down in the principal’s office, she later recalled. When the officials gathered there after the proceedings, first Violeta addressed the principal, with whom she had had run-ins over the years. “This is your responsibility!” Violeta said. She blamed the principal for not effectively conveying to the committee that Brian had shown his dedication and promise. In addition to being a member of the Communist Youth League, he had worked the past three years with Lazaro, Tirso Duarte and other professional musicians while studying full time. Brian and René remained mute and let Violeta talk. The principal and

commission answered that there was a shortage of teachers in the countryside. “I’m not against him being a teacher,” Violeta said she replied. “But isn’t there a way he could be a teacher here in Havana so that he could continue playing with the band? If he’s working with the band that means the band needs him.” She told me later that she was furious that someone with so much talent and promise like Brian – who had won international competitions in his youth and was already picked up by a prominent *timba* band – was being sent to the countryside while, to her perception, students with less talent but the right “contacts” got better assignments. She told the committee that she was also upset because Brian had received a notice at the house that said that he also had to perform military service. She told the commission that was not fair, since pianists were supposed to be exempt, and she warned them she planned to take the entire matter up with top government ministries. Later, in telling me this story, she laughed with satisfaction at the fear she saw in their eyes at this threat to use her revolutionary credentials to report to top fellow revolutionaries what she saw as mid-level bureaucrat incompetence. In the end, the principal told her she had done everything she could. Violeta said she stood up. “Then is this for the need of the country?” she said she asked. The principal said yes, because there was a shortage of teachers. “In that case, he will do it for the needs of the country. One more time, he will be a revolutionary.” And she left.

But the matter was far from resolved. Though she learned that the military service was actually an abridged one-month training reserved for certain musicians, the social service entailed two years of both playing in the local concert band on the Island of Youth as well as teaching in its conservatory. That meant Brian would not have time to go back and forth to Havana or stay with Chispa. Violeta began a letter-writing

campaign, of which she showed me copies, dating them the 49th year of the Revolution and sending them to the offices of CNEART, the minister of culture, to the Communist Party and to Raul Castro himself at the ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, or MINFAR. In the letters, she evoked her family's and her own military background and experience, Raul Castro's recent speech that July against corruption, and then explained her current situation, including how she had no retirement, was ill with hypertension, circulatory problems and diabetes and needed the assistance of her son. Two officers from MINFAR visited her to take her statement to look into the case, but by that August, there was no decision, and Brian left for his abbreviated military training. When he returned, he would have to leave for the Island of Youth in October for his social service. When I reached Violeta by phone on September 5, she broke into tears. "I could never find a resolution," she said. "He's going to have to find a new career, psychology or something. I never imagined this would happen." I offered again a few examples of famous musicians I had read about who had done their social service in remote areas in their early years. "That was another time," she answered again. "Things are different now. When he comes back, there is no way he can work as a musician. Times are really hard." She named off for me several musician friends of theirs I had met and said they were all without work.

In October, Violeta made the trip with Brian to the Island of Youth, taking a bus to the ferry depot, where they slept overnight in the station, catching the boat early in the morning. Once they arrived at the music center dormitory, the living and sleeping quarters for the professional musicians were so cramped and in such terrible conditions that Violeta and several other sets of parents were in an uproar. What's more, Violeta

learned that there was no information about a teaching position available for Brian.

Violeta and several other pairs of parents decided to bring their children back to Havana.

At home, Violeta lodged another campaign of complaints with top government and music ministries and offices, stating that she refused to let her son go back to the Island of

Youth until his case was resolved. Meanwhile, Chispa unofficially took Brian back on.

Violeta was flouting his social service assignment – something they knew in the worst scenario could cause him to be stripped of his music title. But Violeta was pulling out all of her revolutionary connections and credentials, using the anti-corruption language of the new interim administration, to work within the system to help Brian on a case that she thought was morally unfair. Acting through her identity role as a revolutionary, she was appealing to the heart of the values she was raised with in the Revolution and counting on these connections to cut through what she saw was part of larger bureaucratic failures in a changing system that was putting revolutionaries like her at a disadvantage.

But before there was a decision, another development unfolded. Brian answered a knock on the door several months later in February, 2008, they both told me. A musician friend asked him if he had heard: Azúcar Negra needed a pianist. Its director, Leonel Limonta, was holding auditions at his house on the other side of Guanabacoa. Brian splashed off, changed his clothes and raced there. Azúcar Negra had been one of the top *timba* bands of the late 1990s, formed by Limonta, who had been a writer for other top bands like Bamboleo, before leaving to form Azúcar Negra and taking wildly popular female singer, Haila, with him. The band had lost fame since then even as Limonta established international contacts and toured extensively overseas. He was hoping to make a come-back with local audiences for its 10th anniversary that April with a big

outdoor free concert on the Malecón, inviting Los Van Van to play as well. In late February – amid major national news such as the National Assembly’s official naming of Raul Castro as the nation’s president and his brother’s successor – Brian won the audition and became a pianist for Azúcar Negra. The group approved of him and so did its *empresa*, Clave Cubana, but the final decision rested with the Ministry of Culture, which needed to sign off on re-assigning Brian’s social service with the group. The following month, Violeta got a letter in the mail stating that it was official – it had been approved. She said she never knew what, if any, impact her role as a revolutionary and letters to the government ministries had had on the decision. For his part, Limonta told me in an interview in April, 2008, that he flatly told his *empresa* director that Brian was now working with him. Case closed. It is not hard to imagine that with the growing clout and economic power acquired by dance band directors that Limonta had a big influence on the turn of events.

When I arrived in April, 2008, for the concert on the Malecón, I expected to find Violeta in better spirits. With a meaty finger, she pointed to round, dark bite scars on both arms left from mosquitoes on the Island of Youth. Her blood pressure was higher than ever. She still had to go back to the doctor for an operation to relieve the swelling of her breast. She had put it off until Brian’s placement with the band was official. That was a month ago, but she still hadn’t gone. The pressure was unbearable on her neck and sciatic nerve – damaged years ago from carrying Brian by bicycle to his piano lessons two hours each way.

“It’s by pure chance that I’m still even alive after this past year,” she said. She was happy that Brian was spared going to the Island of Youth and now with Azúcar

Negra, given the opportunities to travel abroad, even though Chispa was better known and got more gigs inside of Cuba. But she was still distraught over their current circumstances, struggling day by day. Meanwhile Brian had changed tremendously in the year since I had seen him last. He was more muscular, his hair cropped tight to his head, wearing chains and hip clothes and caps – his boyish playfulness gone. That night after the concert on the Malecón with Azúcar Negra and Los Van Van – a concert that attracted tens of thousands of people – Brian and some of the other young band mates stood behind the stage under the big flag poles and black flags erected in front of the U.S. Interests Section housed in the Swiss embassy, waiting for the yellow school bus that would take everyone home. I stood with them, trying to follow their banter and trash talk. Suddenly they went quiet as members of Los Van Van exited out of the back stage lounge area and got into awaiting luxury Nissans and a BMW. The guys watched the cars drive away, and their chatter quickly resumed. “Man, how long do you think it’s going to be before I have one of those,” Brian said, eliciting laughter and more trash talk.

Though Brian seemed elated, Violeta was exhausted.

“This country is not easy,” she told me, the next night, sitting on my bed after looking for a taxi *particular* for several hours to take me to the airport before dawn. “I never thought we’d get to this point, but Brian can’t stay here. There is no future here.”

She said she didn’t trust anyone. She couldn’t find a neighbor with a working car. One guy had no gas. Another’s car was broken. The guy she’d hoped to ask never returned home to eat that night. Problems like this seemed to spill over into every other struggle Violeta had, leading to this feeling of resignation about Brian’s future in Cuba. The fight the past year had depressed her greatly, she said. Though she had always hoped

he would be based in Cuba with tours overseas, she now was starting to believe that Brian might need to find opportunities that kept him abroad. “I’m too old. I can’t go anywhere, not with my health. I’m so sick,” she said. “But Brian, he has to travel.” She won’t relax until he is in a top orchestra. She wanted to see him aim for Manolito Simonet y su Trabuco, though Brian still dreamed about getting into Los Van Van. She had not stopped fighting: “*No terminé luchando por él.*”

3.5 Summary

The unraveling of the national socialist identity and project in Cuba has given way to a “politics of affection” or *lo informal*. With the dismantling of national identities that bloomed under the Revolution – like “revolutionary” and “the people” – Cubans instead turned to other subjective identity categories in which to build new networks or establish a source of support. This chapter has provided an ethnography on part of Violeta’s life and her fight for her son, Brian, on his path into a music career. It showed how, in the absence of a cohesive national identity and the withdrawal of the state in a growing market economy, individuals like Violeta turned to identity categories such as race, class, gender, family, profession and international friendships to build contacts for resources and assistance. Violeta’s experiences also revealed the pitfalls and vulnerabilities in *lo informal* for a woman and single mother who was taken advantage of by hustlers – including a long-time friend and neighbor. The hustling and the increased prominent role of money in both professional as well as personal relationships for favors and decisions left Violeta exhausted and disillusioned regarding the civic and moral fiber of the society around her and whom she could trust. As a mother, however, in this context

she felt justified about making money on the side in order to help Brian get ahead, even as she grew resigned to the possibility of his need to work outside the country. Her subjective identity roles were also paths of agency. Seeing herself as a black, professional, former military woman, she sought out kindred contacts in *lo informal* that were consistent with the type of “black, professional” Cuban she wanted Brian to be, such as fellow musicians and the Masons. Eventually, regarding his social service appointment, she fell back on her revolutionary credentials to help him – an identity that gave her a great sense of agency but that she acknowledged might not have made a difference compared to the influence of the director of a prominent *timba* band – part of Cuba’s growing moneyed class.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has shown not only how identity categories of race, class and national belonging are constructed and shaped through time and at points by the actions of states. It also has demonstrated how individuals cope in a social crisis by navigating through flexible identity categories, both to find meaning in their lives and also to discover a path toward agency and new networks of help and support. These processes – always dependent on context – were most vivid in the lives of Violeta and Brian when they found themselves outside of Cuba.

The sun beat down on the white sands and glinted off the blue-green waters in the surf. Under a canopy at a small beachside restaurant, Violeta sipped a beer and ate the fresh fish from her plate. It was January 2011, and we were eating in the fishing village of Puerto Morales, Mexico – halfway between the resort towns of Cancun to the north and Playa del Carmen to the south. My husband had accompanied me on this final trip to see Violeta and Brian. Violeta was here visiting Brian for a few months, having obtained an exit visa from Cuba. Brian had been here for 18 months – deciding not to go back to Cuba at the end of Azúcar Negra’s tour in Cancun in the fall of 2009. At that time, Brian and Violeta’s high expectations of his first international tour fell flat when the band ended up playing – and getting paid – far less than what the band director had promised. Brian and the other young band members wound up being housed in a dangerous

neighborhood. At one point, circumstances got so dire for Brian that instead of his sending earnings to Violeta, it was Violeta who had to scramble to borrow money from friends in Cuba to send to him through other musicians traveling to Cancun. Trying to decide what to do, in the middle of the tour Brian flew back to Cuba without his band director knowing – his ticket paid for by Cubans for whom he carried goods in his luggage for their families. He was considering staying in Cancun when the tour was over, and he needed advice. In Havana, he consulted with the support network of contacts that he and Violeta had long worked to build – his music mentors like Lazaro Valdés and Tirso Duarte; his Santería padrino and his Abakuá brothers. All of them counseled him to go back to Cancun and stay there. They thought Cancun held more job opportunities for musicians than Havana, where all but a handful of top dance bands struggled to find work. Though she did not want to let Brian go, Violeta was forced to agree with their assessment of the economic climate and Brian’s prospects if he came back to Cuba for good. Violeta struggled to recount the moment Brian left her house to go back to Cancun. Eighteen months later, she was still too overwhelmed with emotion to talk about that day Brian said goodbye and climbed into a friend’s car for the Havana airport. Brian, who was normally aloof with a touch of macho bravado when speaking with me, nearly broke down in a separate conversation about that day. “*Es que yo amo mi Gorda,*” he said.

Now sitting in this fishing village over lunch while Brian was off rehearsing with a new makeshift band, Violeta spoke of the past year – the hours she spent crying at the homes of her aunts and old friends from revolutionary days for comfort – and the confusing emotions she felt about a system for which she had fought all of her life but which now forced her to live apart from her son. Brian’s visa was still valid in Mexico,

but he was working toward Mexican residency or a passport before he could travel back to Cuba as a visitor. Neither knew how long that would take. Meanwhile, tapping into the networking skills he learned in *lo informal* in Cuba, Brian scrambled tirelessly to make contacts with other Cuban and Dominican musicians working around Cancun. At first he sat in on gigs and then formed his own band, arranging musical parts for its members and scoring playing times with club managers. For brief periods he lived at hotels that employed him to play the lobby piano. Other times Mexican women he met invited him to move in with them. One girlfriend said it was considered a status symbol to date a Cuban musician. Another, whom Violeta really liked because she was career-oriented, bought an electronic keyboard for Brian.

A common experience for immigrants, both Violeta and Brian felt a *cubanidad* most intensely only after leaving their country. Instead of comparing themselves to other socioeconomic classes of Cubans as they had done back home, now they felt their identity categories in comparison to Mexicans. For example, Brian was surprised to see people with indigenous features, remarking, “They still have Indians here.” For Brian, his subjective identity was experienced through music and Afro-Cuban religions. “I miss my *timba*,” he said – complaining that this style of Cuban music was not popular here among Mexicans and tourists, and in fact was dissuaded by club managers, who told band members they wanted only salsa *suave* or merengue – a style of music completely foreign to Brian. In addition to music, for solace and camaraderie Brian sought out other Caribbean immigrants who were practitioners of Santería. By the time of this visit in early 2011, he and his band were getting enough gigs in resorts, clubs and hotels near Playa del Carmen that he could afford a used car and was renting an apartment with his

girlfriend in the nearby town of Villas Morelos. He was able to send money to Violeta in Cuba. Now Brian was trying to convince her to stay and live here with him.

“What would I do here?” she asked. For Violeta, her identity categories – as they had been in Cuba – depended on context. In Cuba, she was first and foremost a mother, and while also a staunch revolutionary, she worked in *lo informal* and under the table when needed for the sake of her son’s survival. She navigated through changing identity categories to build new networks outside the system in *lo informal* to help her son land in a promising career. Her networks and sense of agency were also shaped by how she perceived changing identity categories in Cuba. Identifying as a black Cuban, she saw the impact of market reforms and the increasing trend for black Cubans to be locked out of lucrative tourism jobs and other positions while being less likely to receive all-important remittances from abroad. It shaped her sense of agency in steering Brian toward the “right” kinds of professional and music contacts, away from those whom she considered to be lower-class black Cubans who might hold Brian back. Her identity role as a woman and as a mother also helped her build important contacts among family and female neighbors, as well as with foreign women like Sandy – something a revolutionary might not have done just a few decades earlier when contact with the United States was considered traitorous. She still derived moral satisfaction – if not at times frustration – from her role in Cuba as a revolutionary, tapping into high-level government contacts to help Brian, even if she was unsure if the action brought about results. But again, her role as a mother in Cuba surpassed that revolutionary role when it came to Brian – in helping him into a music industry that offered promise but also exposed him to a materialism that threatened to undermine her socialist principles. And ultimately, as a mother, she had to

let Brian go – resigning herself to the reality that the system she had fought for most of her adult life could not sustain him.

But here in Mexico, her work as a mother was over, she told us. Brian, though still working day by day, was established in his career. The way she spoke, Violeta's identity category and the way she saw her life was now in national terms – one that identified with Cuba and the Revolution – particularly, in practical terms, Cuba's health care system. Though Cuba's universal health care infrastructure had frayed during the economic crisis, she repeatedly praised it while disparaging Mexican doctors as both inferior to Cuba's system and expensive. She cited what she found to be Cuba's superior health system as one of the chief reasons she wanted to return, given her illnesses. But another reason was her daily responsibilities. Here in Mexico, there was nothing for her to do but cook for Brian, which was important to her, but not enough to keep her here because he was otherwise self-sufficient. Back in Cuba, she still had her revolutionary CDR responsibilities, a position she took seriously and that gave her a sense of identity, agency and purpose. Yet the Cuban system could not sustain her financially, either. She would soon qualify for retirement, but it would not provide enough money to survive. It was Brian's earnings sent from Mexico that had been helping her get by. Yet here in Mexico, it was Cuba's system they praised – for Violeta, regarding the health care system, and for Brian, in comparing the quality of musicianship and overall education levels – with Cuba coming out well on top in Brian's estimation. In fact, both Violeta and Brian recognized that his "Cubanness" gave him a certain status here, not only with women, but also in music circles, in which Cuban musicians were considered in high regard and could get a lot of work in this busy tourist zone. Brian was adapting well to a

new music industry. It was one that offered fewer safety nets and sponsorship than Cuba's system, but it also brought more freedoms to play wherever he could set up the contacts – a process for which Brian was well groomed through the networking he learned in Cuba's *lo informal*.

Ultimately, this thesis both adds to the academic canon and opens up new lines of inquiry for future study. It adds to the literature on *lo informal* by showing that not only do individuals turn to informal networks to survive during a time of crisis – but *how* they do so. By focusing on emotions and affection, Damián Fernández opened the door to consider subjective experiences and decisions of social actors. But as this study has shown, feminist theories and treatment of subjectivity and fluid identity categories take us through the door to show how individuals make decisions about relationships and social networks in *lo informal* through identity categories. The study has something to teach all of us about our identity categories by showing that they are not only socially constructed and malleable through history – but that they are experienced and applied by individuals in their own lives depending on the social context and needs at hand. They also give rise to individuals' sense of agency and direction in the networks they build for support and resources.

The study also adds to the literature on *lo informal* by raising new questions about Damián Fernández's position that trust is the glue holding together the relationships in *lo informal*. Instead, as we have seen through the life experiences of Violeta and Brian, money in Cuba has now frayed the ties of trust holding together the politics of affection. What were once exchanges of favors by inter-dependent neighbors, friends and even family members are now done only for a fee. Old friends steal from one another and gloat

about what they receive from relatives in the United States. Violeta repeatedly lamented that there are no more real friends in Cuba; Brian complained that everything was about money – who had it, who didn't, and what people needed to do to get it. Serious questions about the impact on Cuba's future civil society need to be explored given the growing role of money and deterioration of trust in the politics of affection and *lo informal*. This is particularly true in light of ongoing distrust of the state and its inability to jumpstart the economy or replace revolutionary fervor with a new moral imperative in the realm of the politics of passion.

This study also raises questions for future inquiry about how Cuban musicians apply *lo informal* practices in adapting to capitalistic music industries in other countries. And finally, it raises questions about the long-term prospects for aging revolutionaries in Cuba in how they are able to cope while holding onto their socialist principles amid ongoing market and private-sector reforms.

For Violeta's part, her decisions about her identity and where she belonged as always depended on context. She felt a responsibility to her CDR duties back home and relied on Cuba's medical system as her health declined. Her major motherly responsibilities were now behind her. She had raised a son according to her values and principles but also helped steer him into a career path that he loved and that could offer him a promising future amid socioeconomic hardships. It was a path that ultimately took him away from her – a sacrifice far greater than any she had ever made for the Revolution – but it was a path that would now sustain the both of them, economically, and give her the freedom to choose where she wanted to live based on where she felt she belonged at this point in her history. “My life is in Cuba,” she told us. And so later that

year, she flew back to Havana and returned to Guanabacoa and her house on Aranguren Street.

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