

Connecting (to) Cuba

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Connecting (to) Cuba: Transnational Digital Flows between Havana and the Cuban Diaspora

ABSTRACT

For several years Cuba's *paquete* has attracted international attention for its ability to procure and circulate much foreign digital content, with many supposing that this content is imported to Havana from the nearby diasporic center of Miami. This article explores how the island's domestic networks of digital media sharing are in fact also exported to the Cuban diaspora as an object both for public exhibition and for personal consumption. Cubans in the diaspora import *el paquete* as a means of connecting with their homeland and with media that invoke nostalgia for them, but also as a way of maintaining a variety of choice that they once enjoyed in Cuba but that, because of US copyright restrictions, remains prohibitively expensive for them to access in the diaspora. Meanwhile, others in the Cuban diasporic community are seeking ways of inserting targeted advertising for Miami businesses into *el paquete*, in the hope of drumming up further business via relatives and remittances. This article thus argues that quite apart from being an isolated or unconnected island, Cuba is in fact highly interconnected with multiple transnational communities, and that by tracking *el paquete* and flows of digital media, we see the island as central in connecting these otherwise-disparate digital communities.

RESUMEN

Durante varios años, “el paquete” de Cuba ha atraído la atención internacional por su capacidad para adquirir y distribuir una gran cantidad de contenido digital extranjero, y muchos suponen que este contenido se importa a La Habana desde el centro de la cercana diáspora de Miami. Este artículo explora cómo las redes domésticas de intercambio de medios digitales de la isla también se exportan a la diáspora cubana tanto como objeto para exhibición pública como para consumo personal. Los cubanos en la diáspora importan el paquete como un medio para conectarse a su patria y a los medios de comunicación que invocan nostalgia de ellos, pero también como una forma de mantener una variedad de opciones que alguna vez disfrutaron en Cuba pero que, debido a restricciones de derechos de autor en los Estados Unidos, siguen siendo excepcionalmente caros para acceder desde la diáspora. Mientras tanto, otros en la comunidad de la diáspora cubana buscan formas de insertar publicidad por empresas de Miami en el paquete, con la esperanza de crear más negocios a través de parientes y remesas. Por

lo tanto, este artículo sostiene que, en lugar de ser una isla aislada o desconectada, Cuba está de hecho bastante interconectada con múltiples comunidades transnacionales, y al rastrear el paquete y los flujos de los medios digitales, vemos a la isla como central en la conexión de estas comunidades digitales desiguales.

In November 2017 I was asked to give a lecture about *el paquete* at Florida International University in Miami; it was a lunchtime talk in a small room on campus, and I expected only a handful of attendees. To my surprise, the event was widely attended and was in fact broadcast by several local Spanish-language television stations, along with short interviews on the topic recorded immediately afterward (Cearns 2017). As my Miami household couldn't afford a TV, I never saw the footage, but to my even greater surprise, a friend's grandmother in Havana saw the coverage later that night on the "local" news, courtesy of a *parabólica*—a covert antenna she had had installed to receive television signals from Florida. She recorded the program and convinced a neighbor to send me some of the clips via his work email address. And so, in what became a gloriously ironic *pièce de résistance* to the whole affair, I was ultimately able to see coverage of my own Miami lecture about *el paquete* courtesy of an elderly lady in Havana and her deftness with a USB stick.

For several years Cuba's *el paquete* has attracted international attention for its ability to procure and circulate much foreign digital content despite state-imposed media restrictions, which is presumably why my lecture gained such unexpected notoriety. Many suppose the digital content is imported to Havana from the nearby diasporic center of Miami, which, given the constant flows of remittances and material goods from the sizable diaspora located there, is undoubtedly a reasonable presumption. However, this article explores how the island's domestic networks of digital media sharing are in fact also exported to the Cuban diaspora as an object both for public exhibition and for personal consumption. While much of the media consumed in Cuba is indeed procured from foreign sources, including (but by no means limited to) the United States, this content in fact flows in multiple directions (Laguna 2017; Farrell 2019). Some Cubans in the diaspora import *el paquete* as a means of connecting with their homeland and media that invoke nostalgia for them but also as a way of maintaining a variety of choice that they once enjoyed in Cuba but that, because of US copyright restrictions, remains prohibitively expensive for them to access in the diaspora. Meanwhile, others in the Cuban diasporic community are now seeking ways of inserting targeted advertising for Miami businesses into *el paquete*, in the hope of drumming up further business via relatives and remittances. This article thus demonstrates that quite apart from being an isolated or unconnected analog island, as it is so often characterized, Cuba is in fact highly interconnected with multiple transnational communities.

By tracking *el paquete* and flows of digital media, we see the island as central in connecting these otherwise disparate digital communities.

While the development of a media ecosystem resulting in *el paquete* goes back decades, as set out in the introduction to this dossier, the Cuban government's response to the Special Period of economic crisis in the 1990s of opening the island to economic remittances, primarily from the diaspora in Miami, also had the "unwanted effect of creating an opening for 'cultural remittances' that fuel[ed] the transnational imaginary on the island" (Laguna 2017, 159), including increased media flows. Cubans had managed to access foreign content before this time (indeed, the socialist revolution had encouraged the consumption of certain art, literature and film from across much of Latin America, Europe, and Africa), but it was during the 1990s that the floodgates were truly opened to foreign media content.

This was also when Kike first started to send video content back to his family in Havana from Miami. Kike had been the cameraman who filmed much of my *el paquete* lecture on behalf of one of the major Spanish-language Miami channels, and once the cameras were cleared away, he quietly passed me his business card and said he had things to tell me, but wasn't able to do so in front of his colleagues. The following week, he confided to me over a coffee that he had been secretly making copies of television content at work for decades and sending them to Havana. This had begun in 1992, when he had first gone back to Havana to visit relatives; he took with him some cassettes of music and was struck by how delighted they were with them. In fact, a queue formed outside the door as neighbors "booked in" slots to listen to the cassettes of Willy Chirino music.¹ Upon his return to Miami, Kike started making short movies of Miami on his camcorder to send back to his relatives, with a voice-over explaining what they were looking at. Episodes included "how to use a microwave" and "planes taking off from the runway across from my office":

Since I worked for Telemundo at the time, I had access to the original tapes, so if I was editing something I thought was good, I'd make a copy to Betamax or VHS and then I put them all together at home. Once I'd got a few together, I'd send them over with someone who was going, and we'd label them as "wedding videos" in case anyone in the airport asked.²

As there was limited communication between families on and off the island at that time, Kike also expanded into making movies of people talking to camera about their lives, so that they could send "video diaries" to their estranged relatives. "It was very very emotional you know? People hadn't seen their mother for 25 years, so on camera they'd hold up their new-born baby and say 'here, this is your grandson,' Kike told me. Such audio-visual remittances allowed separated families in many cases to see and hear one another

for the first time in years, but also to confront alternative ‘Cuban’ lives. They become not merely a way of staying in touch, but also ‘an integral part of how Cubans on and off the island produce and negotiate their respective subjectivities’ (Knauer 2009, 165).

Undoubtedly, then, it was in part thanks to Cuban émigrés like Kike that foreign media consumption began to increase sharply in Cuba from the 1990s. With the expansion of digital technologies through the 2000s, such flows increased in frequency and velocity, to the extent that nowadays many Cubans in Havana at least can access Spanish-language content aired in Miami live, or shortly after, as was the case with my lecture recorded by my friend’s grandmother. Others, however, have taken a greater interest in creating or adapting domestic content and using local digital media forms as a further medium for sharing this content across a wider platform.

Curating *el Paquete*

Nestor is a Cuban artist in his early thirties, originally from Camagüey, but now living and working principally with digital and visual media in Havana. His first artistic interaction with what would later become *el paquete* was back in 2009, when he created a short film exploring the layers of creativity applied to the audiovisual product by all whose hands it passed through, resulting in an quasi palimpsestic digital product with multiple authors:

It was about the process my grandfather lived when he rented out disks. He received the film from a matriz in Camagüey, burnt it, watched it, and then chose which genre to assign it, which actor to name, he made the cases and chose the information to put on, and then distributed them around the neighbourhood, so all that post-production process, which had nothing to do with the actual film itself, was what I made the film about.³

As a result of this, Nestor met the organizers of one of the major Havana *matrices*—Omega—in 2013, and he was invited to place his artwork into *el paquete* itself:

I didn’t like the idea, I wanted to create something more horizontal so that other artists could also participate. So I used the invitation to create an “online” pirate event, the first in Cuba, and I used el paquete like an ‘online’ platform to circulate all the artists’ work.

This project eventually became a folder called “!!!Sección A R T E,” which goes out in the Omega *paquete* once a month and circulates the latest artwork by various Cuban artists, as well as well-known art from around the world.⁴ Nestor subsequently met the American artist Julia Weist, and together



FIGURE 1. !!!Sección A.R.T.E appearing in a January 2018 copy of *el paquete*

they agreed to curate a project on *el paquete* at Queen's Museum in New York in 2017–2018.

For this project, the artists created a collection of content to insert into Omega's *paquete* and then traveled across Cuba to each *submatriz* to see how their content was stripped out, altered, or copied in different parts of Cuba. In most cases, the content was removed by local *paqueteros* who deemed it to not be of interest to their regular clients, but in some cases Nestor discovered he had enthusiastic followers in even the most geographically remote of places across Cuba. They were also able to observe the way the territorial nature of *matrices*, *submatrices*, and *paqueteros* affected how and when content was circulated around emerging power networks. For example, even the controller of domestic flight schedules from Havana airport had considerable agency in this process, and when the first flight to Guantánamo was swapped to arrive before the first Santiago-bound flight, *paqueteros* realized they could drive their *paquete* on a motorbike from Guantánamo to Santiago before the latter's arrival, thus undercutting the market with their own supply of digital content. In this way, Nestor and Julia's artwork changed as it moved, with each layer of subsequent curating thus altering the end product. Their artistic practice, mediated by the highly material digital landscape of Cuba, became a practice of texts constantly being reinscribed and reinterpreted by new authors. Echoing poststructuralist debates of the twentieth century, the text (or artistic work, or indeed, jpeg file) detaches itself from the author(s) and moves beyond his or her control or intention, assuming its position in a public, co-constituted space (Barthes 1977; Burke 1998; Foucault 1977; Sterne 2016, 826).



Rhizome
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Traveling to Havana & back from the US soon? Interested in helping Rhizome in the analog transport of some digital content? Let us know for more information!

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nestorsire Sollicitando ayuda para enviar archivos digitales desde la habana para el próximo proyecto en NY. @rhizomedotorg @yonlaycabrera @j.weist

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15 NOVEMBER 2017 · SEE TRANSLATION



FIGURE 2. Social call via Instagram for help transporting hard drives to New York from Havana, November 2017

If following these digital and material flows across Cuba was to challenge their ideas of artistic creation and authorship, exporting *el paquete* to be the centerpiece of their New York exhibition revealed yet further acts of reinterpretation (Hernández Tapia 2017). A further element to their exhibition was to be a sixty-five-terabyte hard drive, displayed in the gallery, with an entire year's worth of *paquetes* saved onto what would be the first material archive of this otherwise-ephemeral (unarchived) digital library of Cuban popular culture.⁵ First, they had to find a way of physically exporting all of this data, which could not be sent by email because of the considerable size of the files. In the end, social media was harnessed to recruit tourists, tour guides, *mulas*, and visiting scholars to aid in the attempt.

Once compiled in the museum, American visitors could for the first time scroll through a year's worth of Cuban digital content (something that would never be possible in Cuba itself, as hard drives are rewritten again and again to make use of space), and they could even buy a piece of their own *paquete* in the museum gift shop.

In this regard Nestor and Julia exported Cuba's public material-digital space and exhibited it in a public material-digital space in New York. From the success of this exhibition, another followed a few months later at the Gwangju Biennale in China, and then, having gained substantial recognition outside of Cuba, Nestor and Julia's curated *paquete* was in turn exhibited back in Havana



FIGURE 3. Visitor at Queen's Museum browsing *el paquete*, wearing a *paquete* tote bag, January 2018.



FIGURE 4. Paquete mugs for sale in the gift shop. The design was done by a private agency based in Havana. Photo: Hai Zhang, courtesy of Queen's Museum.

at the Bienal in 2019. In the process, they, like the *paqueteros* who redistribute digital media in Cuba, were able to curate their own package, or parallel internet, and through facilitating the flow of this content from one place to another (and in fact back again), they were also able to profit (or benefit) from the process. Moreover, precisely through exporting *el paquete* and then importing it into Cuba again, the artists were able to convert a phenomenon widely considered a sphere of “low” cultural production into an international recognized work of artistic merit.

Piratas del Caribe and eMules

While the consolidation of *el paquete* as the primary source of digital content in Cuba has, as discussed in the introduction to this dossier, fomented an increasing commodification of digital content associated with personal brand, it also simultaneously invokes parallel movements across Latin America, the Global South and beyond, toward decommmodification, as consumers find ways to share content among themselves. As Daniel Miller and Heather Horst (2012, 7) point out, “What does seem clear is that the digital is indeed a further twist to the dialectical screw.” Horst’s (2011) own ethnographic work has revealed how open-source software and “free culture” in Brazil is more broadly tied to a culture of resistance to hegemonic global culture and traditional patterns of production and ownership. In Brazil, pirated products are almost everywhere, while the hegemonic national politics of “mixture” or *mestiçagem* gives piracy a “particular urgency” as a critique of the injustice of the international market (Dent 2012, 32).



FIGURE 5. !Sección A R T E returns to Havana for exhibition at the 2019 Bienal, after being shown in the United States and China

The case of *el paquete* in Cuba has similarly opened up these forms of media piracy to a wider demographic, making digital products available to a broad swath of citizens while also, paradoxically, providing them with lucrative business opportunities that often simultaneously seek to deconstruct this “democratization” of assets. As in the case of media piracy flows across the border into Bolivia, Cuba’s own status as a digitally “poor” country might in fact be “seen to serve the interests of the many traders of contraband goods on both sides of the frontier . . . [who] might be seen as a symptom of Bolivia’s exceptionally informal economy, where money is to be made, even if in very small quantities, from the circulation of goods along trajectories shaped by national imaginaries” (Stobart 2010, 46). Most of the people gaining cultural prestige and financial profit from *el paquete* in Cuba are currently young men, often of Afro-Cuban (or nonwhite) descent, who traditionally have benefited far less from remittance flows or the expansion of the tourism sector in Havana (Eckstein 2010; de la Fuente 2016; Hansing 2018; see also Levine, this issue). In a sense, the status quo (i.e., a combination of the embargo and Cuba’s strict internet policies) has created opportunity for a whole subsection of society. Discussion of music piracy has often polarized characterizations as, on the one hand, insidious criminal activity that threatens musical creativity and musicians’ livelihoods alongside the production of culture, or, on the other, a legitimate and democratic struggle against hegemonizing corporatism and industry (Knopper 2009; Lessig 2004). In Cuba, *el paquete* seems to bridge this chasm, both in its capacity to foment public creative production and exchange, and in its disavowal of international notions of ownership and copyright. The complexity of lived social relations surrounding and flowing through such networks as *el paquete* defies the polarization of such debates, for in reality, actors have their own multiple agendas for participation, which at times can appear contradictory to outsiders.

When I asked Nestor, for example, if he saw the rise of *el paquete* as signaling a nascent American-style capitalism in Cuba, he responded:

The problem is, what is capitalism? I imagine it has to do with the idea of consumption. I live in a country where if I want to find a brand of perfume, or shampoo, it’s impossible to consume it, because six months can go by without being able to find it. Everything can disappear in Cuba . . . but if it’s about ownership, well then maybe we have it right after all. I can buy a paquete this week and gift it to my friends; that doesn’t happen in other places. If you bought a cell phone app or a song, your system is made so that you can’t share it with other people. That’s capitalism. It’s complete control, and an impossibility to share. In Cuba, the paquete is a business, and we mustn’t forget that, but it’s also a business that’s so open, not all the earnings are centralized. So talking about consumption in Cuba is a delicate thing.

In so doing, he highlighted two parallel conceptualizations of materiality that coexist in present-day Cuba. On the one hand, private ownership is now

officially recognized, yet other items are considered *bienes en común* (goods in common ownership), drawing on socialist notions of public utility and creative commons. Some of my friends viewed *el paquete* as a daring domestic “up yours” to American corporate hegemony; one even proudly called himself the digital “pirate of the Caribbean” for plundering lucrative channels of material flow monopolized by colonializing powers, invoking a Hobsbawmian notion of social banditry (Hobsbawm 2000) in so doing. Yet in other instances, friends seemed quick to condense circulation networks and prevent flows in an attempt to profit personally. Nestor had also embraced the term *pirate*, and in fact, as part of his exhibition in Queen’s Museum, he placed a publicly browsable copy of *The Pirate Book*, which itself contains an essay about *el paquete* (Maigret and Roszowska 2015), in the exhibition guide.

Video piracy has undoubtedly enabled people across the Global South to participate in accelerated circuits of global media flows from which they might otherwise have largely been excluded. Examples abound across Latin America, Asia, and Africa, allowing Nigerian audiences, for example, to watch films contemporaneously with audiences in Bogotá or Bombay (Mattelart 2009). Felicitously, the name of one of the main sites from which international digital content is downloaded in Cuba is “eMule,” a peer-to-peer file-sharing site dating to 2003. The “portable homelands,” to borrow a phrase from the Cuban journalist Luís Ortega (1998, 11), of *el paquete* thus echo the material packages carried back and forth in the nascent networks of material circulation between Cuba and its diasporas that I have elsewhere called the “Mula ring,” providing a means of sourcing and perpetually re-creating *cubanidad* from and through another place (Cearns 2020). The Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (1947, 103) sees his neologism *transculturation* as “fundamental and indispensable for an understanding of Cuba,” where transculturation describes the process of transition from one culture to another as necessarily involving uprooting and loss (as opposed to *acculturation*, which would signify acquiring a culture). It is possible to see both the material flows facilitated by the Mula ring and the digital or material flows of *el paquete* as a continuation of this transcultural practice, which posits *cubanidad* in the creative process of identity formation that stems from constant encounters with “the other.” Participation in such networks becomes a part of participating in “Cuba,” or a shared project of inventiveness (*inventar*) and resolution (*resolver*) that is seen as a defining mutual feature of this shared community.

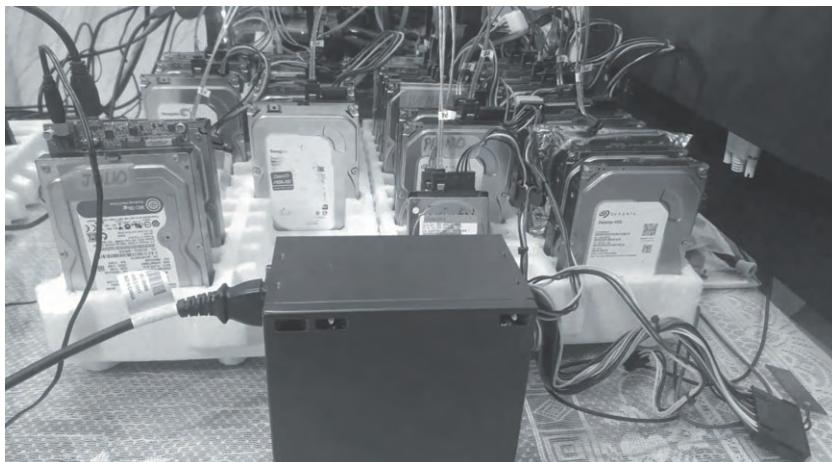
In his ethnography of media piracy in Nigeria, Brain Larkin (2004, 308) points out that while piracy has connected Nigerians to “the globalized world, it does so by emphasizing [their] marginalization at the same time.” Similarly in Cuba, *el paquete* is more than “just a bunch of bootleg stuff from outside Cuba. It’s a media ecosystem unto itself” (Parish 2018), but by participating in this ecosystem of flow, Cubans are at once both connected to a public font of

cubanidad and reminded of their own liminality in this network, which operates through those who have the facility of travelling abroad (either in person or online) to procure such content. Nonetheless, a study of the informal economy of digital media reveals the (often underground) channels through which cultural globalization actually operates. The routes taken by pirated cultural products are those of “globalization from below” (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton 1994; Portes 1999), and in this regard, everyday Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits arguably mobilize more agency than might first be thought in shaping transnational circuits of digital media.

Copyright, Copyleft

A striking characteristic of the digital age is the almost-effortless capability to create multiple identical copies, which in turn has fundamental implications for notions of ownership, copyright, and what it means to copy. Scholars have cited the ontological distinction between *original* and *copy* as needing ethnographic development in terms of local conceptions of piracy and originality (Aguiar 2013; Vann 2006). *El paquete* provides just such an instance where media is copied on a massive scale (see Figures 6 and 7), yet also reauthored in the process, with the individual attributions of the *matriz* or *paquetero* attaching themselves palimpsestically to the product through the insertion of branded watermarks, advertising, and subtitles. In this way, many of my Cuban interlocutors advertised *un producto original* (an original product), despite the fact the vast majority was copied from someone else, who copied it from someone else, who copied it from the internet.

The very word *piracy* suggests an illegal act, yet work by Ana Ochoa (2003), Hsiao-hung Chang (2004), Tanja Bosch (2010), and Jade Miller (2012) has thematized resistance, subversion, and the creation of nonhegemonic circuits for the circulation and flow of culture through the infringement of copyright restrictions. This becomes all the more resonant in the case of Cuba, where copyright as a concept is not granted the same weight as in many other parts of the world, and piracy has long been a “necessary practice” (Farrell 2019, 409–10). If “to oppose copyright is to oppose capitalism” (Söderberg 2002), then Cuba has a long trajectory of either denying copyright as a concept, or not enforcing it in a bid to undermine nearby capitalizing (and possibly colonializing) projects in the United States and beyond. Artistic production has long been fundamental to the revolutionary project in Cuba, and as such it was long considered a communal effort as opposed to an expression of individualism or the sole property of an author. With the advent of electronic and digital technologies of reproduction, “the global reach of the mass media, and the transnational circulation of mass culture, the culture industries—which rely on creative labor and a general respect for intellectual property rights—have become export industries



Volume{90/10b59-90bf-42d6-85f9-d6
Abner (NTFS) ? Volume{5206743e-0d2c-44ec-a25c-82
Pueblo Grifo (NTFS) ? Volume{a5edb86f-0000-0000-100000000000
Cienfuegos chino (NTFS) ? Volume{a2856228-4db8-449f-8d89-cd6f604a
2PAQUET_V_HDD (NTFS) ? Volume{d9cf5e09-0000-0000-0000-100
ERISLEY_1 (NTFS) ? Volume{edeeb602-0000-0000-0000-100
Julio Juncosur (NTFS A:) Libre 291,36 Gb 131,03 Mb/Seg. Termina
Cinefuegos* (NTFS B:) Libre 1,08 Gb 99,97 Mb/Seg. Termina 10:21
Disco local (NTFS D:) Libre 797,58 Gb 141,39 Mb/Seg. Termina 10:1
ADATA OYK (NTFS E:) Libre 773,84 Gb 52,85 Mb/Seg. Termina 10:3
Noel Paquete (NTFS F:) Libre 848,62 Gb 96,78 Mb/Seg. Termina 10:2
CARELIS RL (NTFS G:) Faltan 7,89 Gb 127,98 Mb/Seg. Termina 10:19
MityMadrugada (NTFS H:) Libre 1,30 Tb 51,58 Mb/Seg. Termina 10:33
HCC USB3_4 (NTFS I:) Libre 170,32 Gb 49,67 Mb/Seg. Termina 10:33
HDD Arian (NTFS J:) Libre 864,59 Gb 108,50 Mb/Seg. Termina 10:21 ar
Luis Miguel HDD (NTFS K:) Libre 864,44 Gb 103,79 Mb/Seg. Termina 10
INFO PC-2TB EXT (NTFS L:) Libre 897,39 Gb 48,76 Mb/Seg. Termina 10
ANITA EL RIS 2TB (NTFS M:) Libre 864,44 Gb 103,79 Mb/Seg. Termina 10

FIGURES 6 AND 7. El Paquete being copied onto multiple hard drives in a submatrix in Cienfuegos, Photo Credit: Nestor Siré, March 2018.

fundamental to the expansion of capitalism and related hegemonic projects" (Hernández-Reguant 2004, 10). This confronts the Cuban socialist project with new challenges regarding recognition of individual property. Moreover, the rise of *el paquete* has proved problematic, insofar as creative work can generate surplus value through further input by additional parties:

In the case of music, this value is created through its reinterpretation, in “sampling,” “versions,” and “remixes”; through its circulation in broadcasting and advertising; and in some cases, through its mere consumptive use, via a jukebox or Internet downloads. This is all crucial for understanding the intersections of Cuban late socialist structures and capitalist practices, for under neoliberal capitalism, capital is created not only through productive labor, but also through the circulation, use, and consumption of products as well as through speculation—in this case, with mass-cultural products that are also copyrights. (*Ibid.*, 11).

Nonetheless, networks like *el paquete* also present some advantages to the Cuban state project. On the one hand, they facilitate the marketing of Cuban cultural production, both across the island and abroad (see next section) through transnational commercial networks. Moreover, the consumption and circulation of digital content through new public spaces arguably undermines the hegemonic status of international and capitalizing “intellectual property”; in this regard, the flow of digital products as *bienes en común* (to borrow Nestor’s earlier phrase), is arguably entirely in line with the revolutionary project, which seeks to disrupt the progression of capitalist power structures (Cearns 2021). Finally, as long as *el paquete* doesn’t circulate antigovernment content (something that is strictly enforced), its espousal of relatively inoffensive *telenovelas* and reggaeton ultimately serves as a sort of digital “opiate to the masses,” with the potential to encumber larger-scale collective or disruptive action (see Henken’s discussion of independent media and *el paquete*, this issue).

Ariana Hernández-Reguant (2004, 2) has seen the Cuban culture industries as “a sort of ‘border zone’ (Sassen 2000), ‘zone of contact’ (Lomnitz 2001), or ‘zone of graduated citizenship’ (Ong 1999) structured by the interests of a new array of stakeholders, both state and corporate.” *El paquete*, as the latest iteration of a “Cuban culture industry,” can be and has been mobilized in multiple directions: both as a litmus test of imported neoliberal capitalist practices and as evidence of resistance to global hegemonic patterns of top-down ownership. If *el paquete* is a border zone of contact, then it is a contact zone not only between international and domestic, capitalist and socialist, but also between confronting conceptualizations of what it is to be Cuban.

The e-Mula Ring

Elsewhere I have described how, through what I call the Mula ring, circuits of material flow both mirror and actively shape formulations of Cuban identity (Cearns 2020). These flows connect Cubans on the island with the diaspora, but these flows also move in both directions. Paradoxically, Cubans on the island perform their *cubanidad* by accessing material items that originate abroad, evincing their social connectedness in networks of kinship and reciprocity, yet Cubans in the diaspora evoke much the same thing in the opposite way: many

source items from the island itself to feel a connection their homeland and the Cuban “essence.” Digital media are no exception to this rule. While Benedict Anderson’s (1983, 7) work showed how the invention of print media allowed people to imagine themselves into a modern nation-state through “deep, horizontal comradeship,” this mobilization of media continues through digital practices. The media in *el paquete* contribute to the imagining of a nation as a shared community through the production of homogeneous discourses of identity and culture, yet in the case of Cuba, the locus of this identity is poised between the island itself and the diaspora. Transnational media “reach a borderless audience of nationals and non-nationals and disrupt that romantic notion of . . . one national media for each national culture” (Alonso & Oiarzabal 2010, 8), exposing a globalizing cultural landscape.

Charles Tilly (1990) makes a strong case that it is not people who migrate, but networks, so it is perhaps hardly surprising that more recent Cuban immigrants to Miami (and especially to Hialeah—a working-class district north of Miami with a large population of recently arrived Cuban immigrants) should continue to have a desire to partake of *el paquete*, which I have here described as the largest current social network on the island. While this is by no means a widespread practice, a few recent arrivals (from circa 2015 to the present) are doing just that, and there are now video stores in Hialeah that mirror the *paquetero* shops in Havana even down to the aesthetic, with laminated menus of content by genre.

Jaynir is originally from Pinar del Río in western Cuba, but he had emigrated to Hialeah eleven years earlier. He runs a small video-rental store in a strip mall next to a Cuban clothing store (of the variety that sells cheap *ropa china*, or China-made clothing, to *mulas*), a Cuban coffee *ventanita*, a shipping (to Cuba) agency, and opposite a *botánica* selling religious items for *santos*. His store closely mirrors the aesthetics of *paquete* stores in Cuba, with products placed in homemade paper jackets with subtitles or dubbing in explicitly Cuban Spanish (“I used to download the standard Spanish ones, but I got complaints about all the ‘th-th-ths’”).⁶ On the back wall he has a large display of current Cuban shows, including a TV screen playing a recent episode of *Vivir del cuento*, Cuba’s most popular comedy show, which airs every Monday night on the island. When I asked him how he kept his stock up to date, he replied, “I have trustworthy friends [*amigos de confianza*] who go back and forth a lot, and they load up hard drives for me so I can copy the stuff here.” At that moment a nurse came in on her lunch break; she was looking for something to take home for her mother to watch: “Do you have any more of those Cuban talk shows? She loved those, she said it made her feel like she was back home again.” It is in this way that some migrants “take advantage of digital technologies to follow the ‘pulse’ of their countries in some cases more closely than many of those who remained at home” (Mejía Estévez 2009).



FIGURES 8 AND 9. Jaynir's store in Hialeah, with shelves of recent Cuban cinema and TV shows, as well as price lists and menus based on the *el paquete* model. Visitors can also pay to copy shows to their hard drives. Author's photo, July 2018.

It wasn't only nostalgia for Cuba that brought in customers seeking content imported from the island, however. My filmmaker friends Ana and Rafael, who also lived in Hialeah, had been accustomed to a rich variety of international media content through *el paquete* back when they lived in Havana. They hadn't even had to pay very often, as their friends at the prestigious art school Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) had circulated content among themselves, meaning that they in fact had ample access to both domestic and international artistic content. Ana in particular absorbed everything, from BBC documentaries to "Scandi noir" and thought-provoking French cinema. That kind of content was hard to come by in the United States, but also expensive to access; in reality, it required a cable connection, which was out of their budget, given they were on less-than-minimum-wage jobs while they awaited green-card paperwork, or it required a fast Wi-Fi connection at home, whereas both had access to only small amounts of data through their cell phones. Once Ana's paperwork came through, she was considering applying for a postgraduate course in documentary film, and so she took to sourcing international content as study material (including, to my surprise, a lot of British content, which explained why she liked my accent) through Hialeah stores and friends who could sell or share the



content through flash drives, imported from Cuba, where copyright restrictions went unobserved.

The gradually emerging import-export business of *el paquete* between Havana and Miami is only the latest in a chain of events revealing the media landscapes of the two places to be inextricably linked. Albert Laguna (2017,

135) has shown how Cubans newly arrived in Miami follow Luis Silva's (aka Pánfilo) comedy so as not to miss out on what's going on back home. Indeed, the cultural importance of Pánfilo's show *Vivir del cuento* is such that in 2016, Obama chose it as his platform to speak directly to the Cuban people, arguably as much in the Hialeah diaspora as on the island itself.

In the show, Obama plays dominoes with the main characters, with various tongue-in-cheek jokes aimed both at Cuba and the United States. For example, one character shows him how to mix the dominoes, or *darles agua*, but not too much water, as you can't always find it, alluding to the material shortages on the island. But then he discovers he's been "blocked" in by a bigger player and the "game has reached an impasse," alluding to the embargo, or *bloqueo*, that the United States imposes on Cuba. Pánfilo excitedly says that it's good that relations are being fixed (as are the streets through which Obama is to be taken to the baseball stadium, he coyly points out). With the help of Obama, the impasse is broken and Pánfilo wins the game, while Obama takes the opportunity to ask him to tell all the Cuban people *and their relatives* how grateful he is to have been given the opportunity to visit the island—the first American president to do so in sixty years (see Figure 10).

The same is true the other way around: many Cubans on the island avidly follow comedy sketches produced by Miami-based Cubans such as Los Pichy Boys (Laguna 2017, 188)—which often draw on social tropes that only those most connected with the cultural landscapes in both places could understand—through *el paquete*. The humor of Los Pichy Boys depends on intimate and

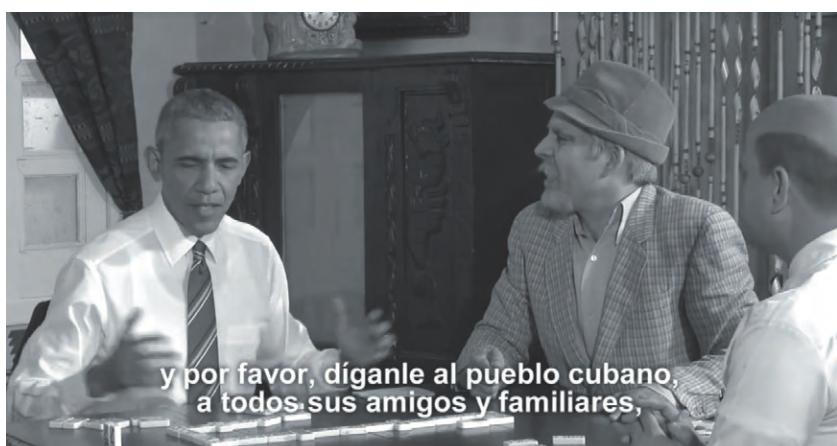


FIGURE 10. President Obama participating on the Cuban national comedy sketch show *Vivir del cuento* (2016). It was seen by audiences across the island, but also across the diaspora, thanks to YouTube and peer-to-peer media sharing.

ongoing ties to the island; one video (“Los Piratas del Caribe”) reenacts Disney character Captain Jack Sparrow stealing a Cuban Caribe-brand television and presenting it to his girlfriend as an expensive plasma TV (Laguna 2017). Another video deals with the experiences of recent Cuban arrivals to Miami, such as the video “iPhone Cubano: asiri” (Laguna 2017, 196), which plays on confusion regarding Apple’s “Siri” feature, and a pun with Cuban (contemporary) slang *asere* (buddy), alluding to how internet-enabled smartphones might resolve problems in Miami, but in Cuba, one turns to social networks of friends for up-to-date information. In another video Miami Cubans attempt to send their grandmother’s body back to Cuba for burial wrapped up in plastic via a *mula*, spoofing the volume of *mulas* carrying goods back and forth and the oft-heard desire to be buried in one’s home soil.

Increasingly, content producers on both sides of the Florida Straits are aware of a dual audience, as their diasporic content is downloaded from YouTube or Miami television channels for consumption via *el paquete*, and Cuban shows on the island are imported into Miami for consumption by recent arrivals. In large part, this is a way of staying connected with friends and relatives “on the other side”; all around the world, relatives phone one another to say, “Did you see the latest episode of . . . ?” and Cubans are no different in this respect. Some Cuban media producers have even started to make a good living from this interaction between island and diaspora; Cuban comedian Robertico has a comedy club in Vedado (Havana) that is beyond the financial means of

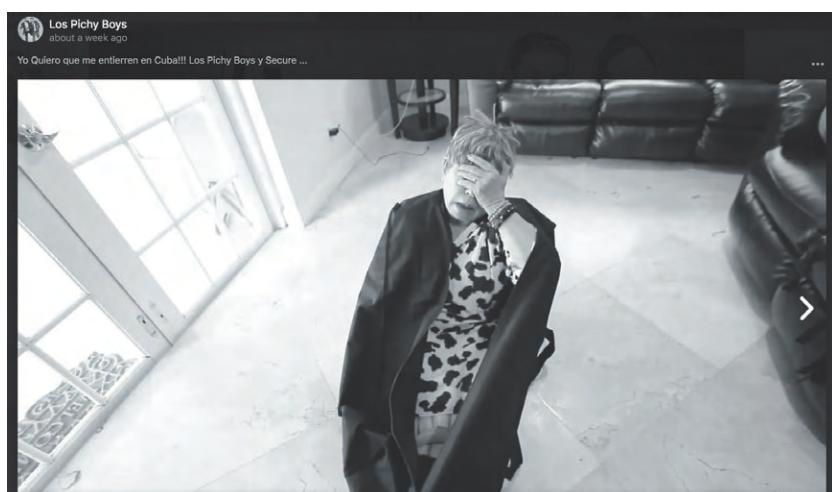


FIGURE 11. Los Pichy Boys’ video comedy sketch (sponsored by “Secure Plastic Wrap”) about sending their grandmother’s body for burial in Cuba with a *mula* (2017)

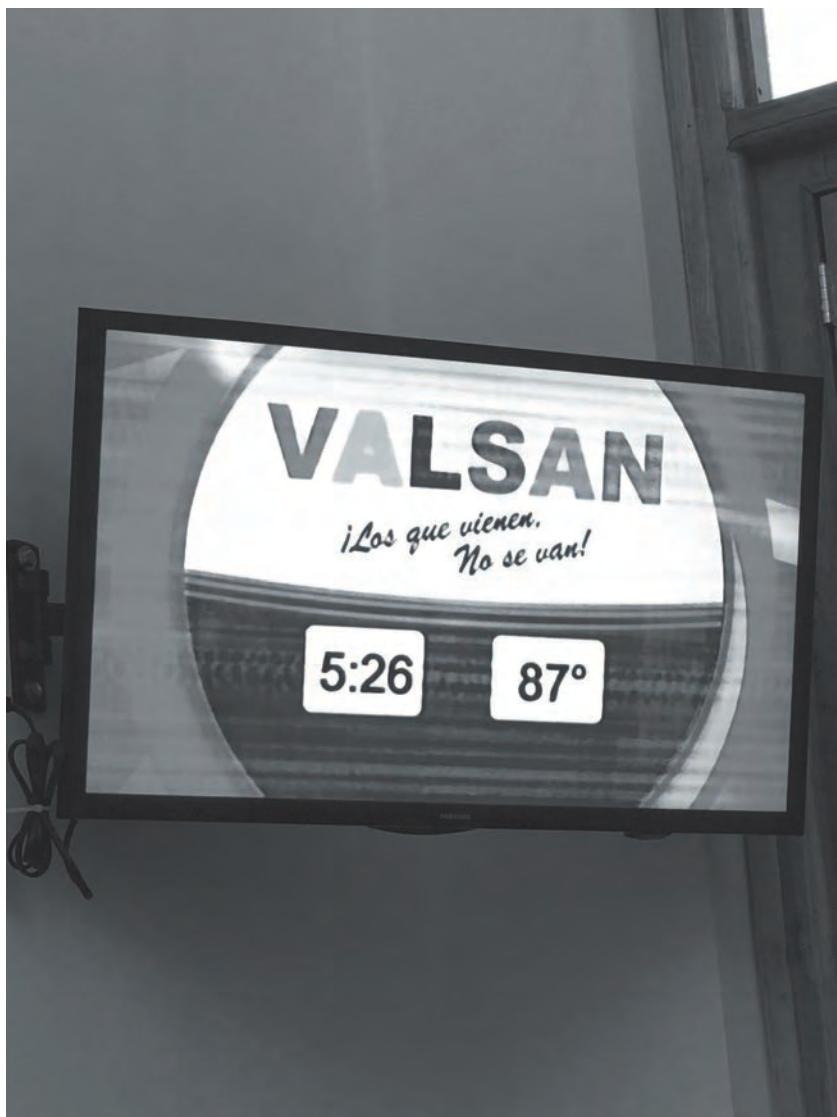


FIGURE 12. Valsan advert inserted into a show on el paquete, being played on a TV screen in Havana. Author's photo, September 2018.

most locals but attracts a steady clientele visiting from Miami due to his material circulating both on YouTube and through *el paquete* (downloaded again in Havana from YouTube). Subsequently he is regularly invited to present shows to sell-out audiences in Miami (Laguna 2017, 149). Others have started targeting their advertising to dual audiences, aware that while the diaspora might spend the money in Cuban stores in Miami, it is often on behalf or in support of relatives on the island. Both Valsan and Ño que barato! (stores in Hialeah specializing in selling cheap items for Cubans in the diaspora to send to relatives on the island) place promotions on *el paquete* in Cuba, and their adverts air on programs that also circulate on the island, to the extent that the owner of the latter store, Serafín, once told me he now regularly has Miami customers coming in saying they received a phone call from a relative in Cuba to let them know there was a special offer on.

Evidently, then, migrating in a “space of flows” in fact supposes a “much more continuous reality where the meanings of ‘origin’ and ‘destination’ are blurred” (Ros 2010, 26), and while Cubans on the island may enhance their prestige through obtaining audiovisual materials from overseas, so too do immigrants to the Cuban diaspora evidence ongoing ties to their homeland through consumption of audiovisual materials. Social capital becomes a transnational process, where encounters become a form of reverse ethnography, insofar as information circulates through “immigrant social networks, along with videos and photos” (Knauer 2009, 160–63). A focus on diaspora and digital flows reveals nations and identities as dynamic forms that not only are “increasingly difficult to map as bounded communities” but also operate through various networks (Bernal 2014, 1; Brinkerhoff 2009). Such exchanges take place in all walks of Cuban life, and they are mirrored in a Cuban digital sphere: digital flows are even now being documented as processual in the transnational practice of Santería across the diaspora (Beliso-De Jesús 2015).

Conclusion

James Clifford’s (1994) apt simile constituting diaspora of both roots and routes calls to mind here the term *router*, a wired or wireless point of reciprocal connection and digital flow. In the case of digital media in and between Cuba and its Miami diaspora, the two-way flow of information further reveals the mutual formation of Cuban subjectivities also found in the material Mula ring. The digital, as all material culture, “is more than a substrate; it is becoming a constitutive part of what makes us human” (Miller & Horst 2012, 4), a large part of which, for Cubans on and off the island, requires mutual consumption of and participation in social networks of digital circulation.

This article has shown how nascent digital networks in Cuba are providing an emerging public space, which both encourages social participation and

yet is centralizing itself into an increasingly commoditized platform of fewer voices. This reveals a potential clash between the emerging neoliberal capitalist practices and latent socialist ideologies that coexist in Cuban society, something that, to most Cubans nowadays, is not problematic but a matter of mundane life. On the one hand, privatization in the face of austerity is increasing in Cuba, and *el paquete* fits into this emerging ecosystem well as increasing numbers of entrepreneurs seek new channels to prosperity. On the other, Cuba's history of media consumption is positioned within a socialist tradition that has promoted international media and the arts, as well as a conceptualization of art as a public utility held in common by the people.

It is important to stress here that such theoretical gulfs between a neoliberal capitalism and a centralized state socialism are not necessarily conceived of as incompatibly contradictory on the ground. Notions of ownership in this new landscape of *el paquete* flex according to context, and indeed, these informal networks of digital circulation build on long-standing pragmatism and flexibility when it comes to acquisition through participation in social networks. This is not to say, therefore, that with the “arrival” of digital content, Cuba is morphing into a pseudo-American model of media consumption. Cuba's *paquete* in some ways points to a parallel model for what the internet could have looked like, emerging from its own particular socioeconomic context. This model arguably forces us to reexamine our own notions of the internet and where the boundary lies between public and private, state (or corporation) and citizen (consumer), authorship and authenticity or originality.

Moreover, *el paquete* does not merely signal the absorption of hegemonic or colonializing digital or visual cultural forms from the Global North into Cuban praxis; it is also generating new domestic content (Farrell 2019), and it arguably provides consumers with greater variety than its equivalent in the nearby Miami diaspora. Upon closer inspection, this digital network in fact incorporates the Cuban diaspora in a reciprocal flow of “horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 1983), and indeed, much of the digital content consumed on both sides of the Florida Straits reveals a highly self-conscious awareness of its dual audiences. If “the discussion of national (and diasporic) identity needs to embrace multiple *cubanidades*” (Knauer 2009, 166), it is surely the examination of reciprocal material and digital flows such as those presented here that provides us with a lens onto the processes of this identity formation.

NOTES

1. Willy Chirino (born 1947) is a Grammy-winning Cuban American singer who left Cuba as a child and has had numerous hits in the Miami diaspora, including “Yo no coopero con la dictadura” (“I Don't Cooperate with the Dictatorship”).

2. Interview with author, Hialeah, FL, November 2017.

3. Interview with author, Havana, March 2018.
4. The use of the punctuation at the beginning is a common naming device in *el paquete*, as it moves folders to the top of a hard drive when ordered alphabetically.
5. Michelle Leigh Farrell's article in this issue considers the possibilities of *el paquete* as an archiving system.
6. Spanish from Spain pronounces *c* and *z* as in the English "th" sound, unlike most Latin American variants, and it is the target of mockery from some Cubans.

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