

The “Mula Ring”: Material Networks of Circulation Through the Cuban World

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R E S U M E N

Este artículo está basado en quince meses de trabajo de campo etnográfico en Cuba, los EE. UU., México, Panamá y Guyana para describir una red transnacional emergente de circulación de materiales que llamo el “circuito mula.” Muestro cómo los cubanos movilizan vastas redes transnacionales para realizar sus sistemas de circulación de materiales en la actualidad. Estas redes equivalen a una economía en sí misma que está redefiniendo lo que significa ser cubano dentro y fuera de la isla. Muestro cómo esta economía informal se basa en esferas de circulación e intercambio de género preexistentes, así como en nuevas modalidades de poder, cuyos efectos se pueden sentir lejos de la propia isla. De hecho, esta red, que surge de una escasez material histórica desde el socialismo, está conduciendo a la reificación de nuevas estructuras de clase, que la Revolución se había propuesto inicialmente dismantelar. [circulación, economía informal, Cuba, diáspora, redes transnacionales]

A B S T R A C T

In this article I draw on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Cuba, the United States, Mexico, Panama, and Guyana to describe a newly emerging transnational network of material circulation, which I call the “Mula ring.” I show how Cubans mobilize vast transnational networks to enable their systems of material circulation in the present day. These networks are tantamount to an economy unto itself that is redefining what it means to be Cuban both on and off the island. I show how this informal economy builds on preexisting gendered spheres of circulation and exchange as well as new modalities of power, the effects of which can be felt far from the island itself. Indeed, this network, which arises from a historical material scarcity under socialism, leads to the reification of new class structures, the likes of which the revolution had initially

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set out to dismantle. [circulation, informal economy, Cuba, diaspora, transnational networks]

What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.

(Certeau 1984, *The Practice of Everyday Life*)

Helman laughed for the umpteenth time that day after another outburst of impatience from me. “What you need to understand,” he said, “is that nothing in Cuba makes sense! It’s not a rational place (*no hay razón aquí*). Those paradoxes are what make it Cuba, otherwise we’d be in your world!”

He had a point; Cuba is indeed a country of paradoxes, where the lines between the legal and the illegal, between order and seeming chaos, are rhetorically reified through the machine of the state yet in everyday lived practice are fluid and negotiable. Anyone on the street will tell you, “todo aquí es por la izquierda,” [everything is illegal here], “pero también todo se hace!” [but we all do it anyway].¹ Perhaps the most strikingly visible of these paradoxes is that despite a decades-old embargo and an almost complete dearth of domestic production, Havana is full of *stuff*.² Not officially of course—the state-owned shops are so empty that a shop is sometimes recognizable more through its absence of items in this otherwise crowded and bustling city—but once you know where to look, and perhaps more importantly, *how* to look, there are material things being circulated absolutely everywhere.

The materiality of everyday life in Havana is in fact so all-encompassing, it is impossible to “un-see”: policemen hover on street corners looking at Chinese phones, hairdressers sell hair extensions made from real Russian hair, children play in school uniforms sewn in Hialeah, Florida, waitresses produce beers from fridges imported from Panama. In many other places such details might seem unremarkable, but in Cuba the acquisition of such items is the evidence of significant social or economic capital, both of which are likely to stem from “access” to the *fuera* (outside world) in some shape or form. With this in mind, the acquisition and circulation of material goods is arguably the most conspicuous feature of everyday life in Havana, pervading all aspects of life, affecting everything and everyone.

Scholars have considered debates around acquisition (*conseguir*), material culture, and consumption in Cuba before (Rosendahl 1997; Porter 2008; Real and Pertierra 2008; Pertierra 2011; Wilson 2014). Notably, these scholars have principally been women, perhaps because studies have typically focused on consumption in the household-as-economic-unit, which in Cuba is predominantly a gendered female-oriented space. The conspicuous question remains, however: How do these

things get to Cuba, where importing material items is heavily controlled and production is minimal, in the first place?

In this article, I briefly trace the historical and political contexts of material production, consumption, and circulation in Cuba before drawing on fifteen months of ethnographic research in Havana (Cuba), Miami and Tampa (United States), Mexico, Panama, and Guyana to explore how Cubans in fact mobilize vast transnational networks to enable their systems of material circulation in the present day. These networks, which I call the “Mula ring” (mule ring) due to some parallels to Bronisław Malinowski’s Trobriand “Kula ring,” are tantamount to an economy unto itself; an economy that, I argue, is redefining what it means to be “Cuban” in light of decades of economic and social rupture both on and off the island. I argue that this informal economy builds on preexisting gendered spheres of circulation and exchange as well as new modalities of power, the effects of which can be felt far from the island itself. Indeed, this informal economy, which arises from a historical material scarcity under socialism, is leading to the reification of new class structures, the likes of which the revolution had initially set out to dismantle.

While many economists have considered the informal economy in Cuba primarily as a system of pilfering internal supplies (Portes 1983; Rivera 1998; Henken 2005; Ritter 2017), or have looked to Cuba’s opening to world markets through formal international contracts (Feinberg 2017; LeoGrande 2017), less attention has been paid to the agency and power of regular Cubans in mobilizing transnational networks. Instead, I pursue what Alejandro Portes deems the most promising aspect of informal economies—namely, “the opportunity to understand how peripheral economies operate as single and unified systems” (Portes 1983:157), in this case not only as economic systems but also as evolving gendered systems of power, kinship, and morality.

The term *system* is perhaps problematic here in reifying a collection of informal practices and assimilating them into a single overarching model. Kula exchanges, for example, are carried out in a context of what is broadly recognized as an iconic culturally constituted “system,” and represent a metacultural phenomenon with a long-recognized lineage. Any attempt to describe the Mula ring in such a coherent and systematized manner, meanwhile, inevitably ends up messier and more chaotic, something that will be of little surprise to scholars of Cuba and its diaspora over recent decades. And so perhaps the ring of material flow that I outline in this article is better considered an *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guattari 2004) of informal practices, which is happening on such a large scale as to begin to echo the structures and systems we might associate with Kula networks. Considered in this light, Cuban conceptions of material circulation begin to challenge outsider views of Cuba as an isolated nation while also demonstrating the value of anthropological consideration of notions of flow and circulation of material things through

transnational contexts. Moreover, I describe an incipient hegemonic structure that is both shaping and shaped by expressions of “Cuban” identity that emerge and cement themselves in the face of historic socioeconomic rupture.

Socialist Consumption in Cuba

After the economic hardship suffered in Cuba through the 1990s, the Cuban state turned toward what it euphemistically called “reform socialism” (Gonzalez-Corzo and Justo 2017), allowing a restricted degree of private enterprise to operate in Cuba for the first time in almost four decades. This trend has since continued: between 2009 and 2019 the number of self-employed Cubans rose from 2.8 percent (Desilver 2015) to 13 percent (Ilymedio 2019).

It broadly remains illegal, however, for Cubans to (re)sell something not made by them or their immediate family unit, unless their business falls within the remit of a set number of licenses. In reality, such restrictions have long been difficult to maintain, and a strong informal market has flourished in Cuba for decades (Pérez-López 1995; Rosendahl 2001; Cabezas 2004; Centeno and Portes 2006). This informal market is difficult to quantify, and several key studies of the informal sector across Latin America and the Caribbean have simply left the case of Cuba unconsidered (Vuletin 2008; Peters 2017). It also frequently interacts with formal or official markets, to the extent that illegality or informality is a widely recognized but often overlooked fact of everyday life in Cuba. Since the demise in 1991 of its only significant economic ally (the Soviet Union), Cuba’s production ratings have dwindled, to the extent that, in 2013, 95 percent of all manufactured goods were imported (Desilver 2015), primarily from Venezuela (37 percent), whose economy has also subsequently crashed. Thus with very little officially coming in, and limited materials for production, many Cubans are opting to covertly (re)sell items from abroad or that they have made from materials acquired abroad.

The traditional Marxist focus on production to understand the social(ized) meaning of material things is therefore arguably unhelpful in the context of contemporary Cuba. Several anthropologists have already considered the consumption of material culture in Cuba, including the various forms of sociality that develop as by-products of, for example, waiting in long queues, swapping information on which shop holds stock, and the growing importance of brand culture (Porter 2008; Pertierra 2011; Scarpaci 2014; Ryer 2017). Until now, however, the circulation of material items through informal networks in and out of Cuba have largely only been examined by economists, who for the most part have neglected the social paradigms that create and are in turn reinforced by these processes (Rivera 1998), or by sociologists focused more specifically on remittance giving, which constitutes only one aspect of this larger network I describe (Eckstein, 2003, 2010).

Thus, in the case of Cuba I find Carrier's argument particularly resonant: that circulation "pervades production in a way that production does not pervade circulation, for when production takes place in groups it necessarily involves the transaction of objects and labor among group members" (1995:viii). These social relations of circulation within Cuba are critical in mapping how Cubans negotiate decades of economic change and social rupture. Just as some scholars have considered informality "a useful conceptual tool in moving beyond a 'varieties of capitalism' approach to transitional societies" (Morris and Polese 2014:7), I argue that a focus on informal networks of circulation allows us to see more clearly how varying hues of both capitalisms and socialisms are conceived of and enacted in their own ways, while navigating the fluid boundaries between legality and illegality and various moral "systems" (Wirtz 2004; Torres 2012; Wilson 2014; Holbraad 2017) that arise from Cuba's very particular socioeconomic and political setting.³

A Return Ticket to McDonald's

Yohan is in his early thirties and works at a hotel just east of Havana. He prides himself on his appearance and takes meticulous care of his stubble ("it has to be the right length"), his phone ("you have to have the right apps") and, most importantly, his clothing (on this day in particular he was sporting an orange t-shirt saying Live Your Life, which had come from a friend in Spain). He hopes one day to own his own hotel, but for that, he needs a sizable sum of money, and for Yohan, the road to that money was the Mula ring. He had never left Cuba before, and had no family abroad to provide help with a trip. Fortunately, however, he had someone *de confianza* (trusted) in Havana who was willing to vouch for him. For those with more limited capital, expertise, or other resources, "strong kinship ties can substitute, providing greater entrepreneurial or informal work opportunities" in informal (post)socialist economies (Karjanen 2014:109).

A friend of Yohan's boss, the hiring *negociante* (businessman), had moved to Moscow a few years previously to set up a hostel targeting Cuban mules, and this was to be Yohan's destination. There are similar businesses to be found in all the sites of the Mula ring, most notably in Guyana, Panama, Russia, and Mexico. A dozen or so rooms, each with six bunk beds, serve as temporary homes for mules who travel abroad in *equipas* (teams) along with their *negociante*, who is financially responsible for the whole trip. Teams can vary in size from two or three people to a few dozen, although for security purposes it is best to try to limit to one buying team per room. Theft between rival teams is not unheard of; in Georgetown (Guyana) I observed fist fights break out between different groups on more than one occasion. These are often provoked by accusations of theft.

And so Yohan set off to Moscow on Christmas Eve with five others wearing only a t-shirt. For most mulas, this work provides the first opportunity to see the outside world, learn from their negociante how this world works, and to hope that, if they save up a bit, they too can return one day with their own pack of mules. For professional mules who are being employed by someone else, space and weight are crucial factors; thus, they take absolutely nothing with them. The negociante buys all necessary items for his team on arrival (including, mercifully, a jacket to protect against the Russian winter), all of which is left behind at the end of the trip in order to maximize space for bringing stuff back to Cuba. Some Cuban mula hostels rent out clothing and toiletries to teams to make the most of the discarded items (Abu, the Guyanese owner of a Cuban hostel in Georgetown, took this one step further, providing Cuban chefs in the canteen, free translators and security guards to escort buyers around the dangerous streets, and a guaranteed “fast track” through exit customs, courtesy of a few friends he had at the airport).

The work is hard on arrival. A typical day might be 5 a.m. to 1 a.m. the following morning; there is no free time to explore, no time for tourist pursuits. Each hostel room has its own dedicated car and (Cuban) driver to take the teams to the various warehouses that sell pirated and fake merchandise by the dozen. While the teams are away, another (Cuban) security guard monitors the hostel to ensure teams do not steal from one another. The work is extremely competitive as each team tries to arrive at the warehouse before the others to get the best deals. The mula’s role is to physically carry all of the things the negociante decides to buy over the course of the day. Whether on the streets of Colón (Panama), Georgetown (Guyana), Moscow (Russia), or Cancún (Mexico), Cuban mulas are easily discernible as they huddle in groups, dragging black bags of merchandise along behind them. They stand out in airports across the region, wearing many layers of clothing, up to ten sombreros, with sunglasses perched on top and buttons sewn onto those, all to maximize space and therefore profit. “Part of being a good mula is knowing how to make the most of all that, so you put the tightest layers on first and build them up, then walk around like you’re constipated!” (Fig. 1).

Merchants in Russia, in turn, need a supply of mint-condition dollars to trade with Chinese and Indian buyers. These are typically carried from Miami to Cuba by tour guides who have easy and frequent access in and out, and then traded in Cuba by levying a long-reaching network of contacts, before being carried to Russia for exchange there. All in all, each mula will bring back around US\$3,000 of merchandise, and with the cost of flights and boarding, the negociante will likely pay around US\$5,000 per mula in his team. As a rule: “The golden rule is any price you pay in Russia you have to be able to sell for at least triple here in Cuba for it to be worth it. So a sweater worth US\$1 there must sell for at least CUC\$3 here . . . Often you can sell it for CUC\$10 here though, which is why it’s worth it.” The work is also highly gendered;⁴ most negociantes will not



Figure 1 A taxi/hostel service solo Cubano (only for Cubans) in Guyana (photo credit: Author, July 2018). [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

employ women as they are perceived as lacking the physical strength to carry 120 lbs (the Cuban import limit) on their backs, and can be subject to security issues.⁵

At the end of the day, the team is collected by the Cuban guide and goes back to the hostel room, where hours are spent removing anything that could add unnecessary weight. Yohan was adamant that of 120 lbs of clothing, up to 10 lbs could be considered as “unnecessary extras”; the resulting litter ended up knee-high across the room. The items are usually slept on through the course of the week (for added security) until the space between bunks is filled and the teams turn to packing up the suitcases. Anything with an edge, like shoes, goes in the middle (to make it less identifiable by airport security), shoe laces are removed to squeeze other shoes inside, and underwear is stashed inside that. The packers work in concentric circles, “like a little nest,” filling from the outside in to create perfectly spherical bundles that can be rolled rather than lifted; clothing must be screwed up into little balls rather than folded or rolled, which prevents airport staff from counting the number of items on scanned images. The entire package is then wrapped in tight blue plastic “like a little bomb ready to explode.”



Figure 2 *Mulas about to start packing the goods in Guyana (photo credit: Author, July 2018). [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

Different locations offer different incentives for mule teams (Figs. 2 and 3). In Russia, the major profit is to be made from knockoff branded clothing and handbags. Various mules insist the quality of fake brands in Russia to be far higher than in Guyana, and less regulated than in Panama, and thus could fetch a higher price back in Cuba. In this regard, there is also a “pecking order” of destinations; those with less money to invest or who have already used up their annual 120 lb import allowance travel to Guyana to buy clothing to be sold off at lower rates back in Cuba. To be able to take a whole team to Russia requires significant financial investment of anywhere upward of US\$20,000, which in turn requires substantial social capital, or *confianza*. Meanwhile, smaller teams or individuals are able to



Figure 3 Clothing layered up to maximize space in Guyana (photo credit: Author, July 2018). [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

travel to places like Guyana or Panama more easily, requiring an investment starting at around US\$1,000 per person.

In 2017 almost one thousand Cubans travelled to Guyana each week, with a buying power that is now worth an estimated GYD\$400 million (US\$2 million) annually in the Guyanese part of the trade network alone (Semple 2016). Meanwhile Yani, who runs a store in Hialeah (United States) that targets Cuban mulas, comfortably takes in US\$10,000–\$15,000 a month; her store is one of 129 I counted there that specifically caters to this clientele. “And then of course you have the agencies, the flights, the shipping companies, all the people working as mules, the people who sort out [*resuelven*] visas . . . It’s a whole system [*economía completa*].” All these places have Cubans and locals alike running satellite businesses that depend on this movement of people, which is something that struck Yani as impressive evidence of Cubans’ economic agency in the wider world: “As an international network it must be worth billions of dollars, embargo or no embargo!”

Meanwhile, Yohan was certainly learning from the best; his negociante, a slightly tubby and balding man in his late thirties with a penchant for thick, golden chains and sugary drinks, had started out when he inherited a Havana apartment worth US\$25,000 from his grandmother (Fig. 4).⁶ He sold the apartment to produce the money for the first trip. In order to sell everything as quickly as possible when he got back to Cuba, he passed it to his wife, who in turn sold it all to a friend (who would then sell it off piece by piece for a further small profit). He reinvested



Figure 4 Store targeting Cuban mules in Colón, Panama, with a play on the words “Cuba” and barato (cheap) (photo credit: Author, June 2018). [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

the money and loaned \$4,000 to a “brother-friend.” After a few years of working their way around, he and his “brother-friend” bought an *almendrón* (a vintage car selling for up to US\$40,000 in Cuba) to work as a taxi driver and assistant for tourists in Havana.

As for Yohan, he saved the US\$200 he earned from his week as a mula (equivalent to a year’s official state-paid salary for many Cubans). He sees his hard-won trip out of Cuba as a way to improve his life on the island, not, as might be expected, as a way to leave “poverty” behind him. Of his first and only trip abroad, his main memory is of his final evening in Moscow, when he was allowed twenty minutes to visit the fabled McDonald’s he had grown up hearing so much about. “I was so excited about it, and it was so awful, it didn’t taste of anything! I took my bite of your capitalism and longed for my rice and beans (*añoraba mis moros y cristianos*).” For Yohan, the Mula ring offered the opportunity to gain a reputation for himself as the person who could procure much-needed items, and also gave him greater access to the visible tropes of a society increasingly infatuated with brand culture and material consumption. The clothing he brought back gave him a new image that might get him access to places reserved typically for visiting tourists, where he hoped to have his upcoming wedding photo shoot with his fiancée (Figs. 5 and 6).



Figure 5 Cubans waiting to board a flight back home from Georgetown, Guyana, with their spherical “nests” of goods (photo credit: Author, July 2018). [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

The Kula Ring

In his foundational ethnographic account *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski (1922) describes a network of exchange—the Kula ring—spanning eighteen island communities across the Massim Archipelago in Papua New Guinea. Participants travelled at times hundreds of miles by canoe in order to exchange Kula valuables, which Malinowski established were clearly linked to political authority and systems of hierarchy. In his reanalysis of Malinowski’s data, Marcel Mauss further demonstrates how every aspect of social life in the Trobriand Islands is touched by these economic exchanges:



Figure 6 Shop sign in Miami advertising merchandise made in Peru to be sold in Cuba. The store is owned by Chinese immigrants who import goods from Latin America and China, and employ recently arrived Cubans in Miami to speak to the (mostly Cuban) customers (photo credit: Author, December 2017). [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

It is indeed as if all these tribes, these maritime expeditions, these valuables and objects for use, these foods and festivals, these services of all kinds, ritual and sexual, these men and women, were bound into a circle, following a regular motion around it, both in time and in space. (Mauss 1954:90)

He continues, “numerous things are solicited, requested, and exchanged, and all manner of relationships are formed in addition to the kula” (Mauss 1954:90); in short, the circulation of these items is a central way of forming and accessing social meaning as well as an opportunity for an individual to achieve local prestige by journeying beyond the local.

I argue that the Kula ring can help us view Cuba in turn as an island best considered in terms of its circulation with other places that surround it, whereby, through material circulation, Cubans gain access to and cocreate emerging systems of cultural value. The parallels certainly have their limitations; indeed, rather than follow a Maussian approach by distinguishing the Kula ring's social networks of gift exchange from the Mula circulation of commodities (cf. Gregory 1982), I seek instead to dissolve this distinction by seeing how objects can circulate through different social "regimes of value" (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). Moreover, I argue such dialectics are blurred by the informal spheres of exchange so common to (post)socialist societies, where kinship-based commodity circulation blends such distinctions. The fame, personhood, and stories of the individuals who circulate Kula objects (Munn 1987) do not attach themselves (necessarily) to Cuban material goods or bestow differentiating symbolic values in the same inalienable way. Yet as a lens onto strategies of creating personhood and expanding social worlds through transnational circulation networks of material items, the comparison between Kula and Mula is, I argue, a fruitful one.

Both Kula and Mula rings are essentially social (as opposed to individual) achievements; both are forces that have created new circuits of flow within a broader regional economic and cultural system. Both result in new areas in which cultural forces can develop (such as an ability to create one's reputation, and access new forms of value or excitement), and thus both networks ultimately enable an expansion of social worlds; being Cuban (or a Trobriander) becomes an expression of a flow of identity as much as a flow of objects. It is in this way that both Kula and Mula rings as analytical lenses challenge the particular views of nations and peoples as "isolated" in time and space, which scholars of Cuba have long rejected (Fernández 2005; Herrera 2007; Krull 2014).

The Mula Ring

Cuba is popularly portrayed in the media as economically and politically isolated from twentieth and twenty-first century processes of "globalization" in the wider world, yet the island is part of informal networks of circulation spanning at least twelve countries, with participants undertaking at times treacherous journeys of many thousands of miles in order to acquire and bring back material items to be exchanged domestically. Meanwhile, other items are taken from Cuba to various destinations, resulting in a network where certain items regularly travel in one direction, while others move in the opposite direction (Fig. 3). The result is a network that expands what Cuba "is," as in Munn's (1987) interpretation of Kula networks, allowing new flows of not only people and things but also culture and social horizons. While this is by no means a coherent "system" like the Kula ring, it



Figure 7 The “Mula ring” connecting Cuba with various other countries in the region. Blue destinations are where ethnographic research was carried out, while red are other destinations in the network that I was unable to visit. As the arrows show, many of these flows go in both directions, not only into Cuba.
[This figure appears in color in the online issue]

is arguably a nascent one, as Cubans respond to the economic and social ruptures of recent decades by seeking new avenues to expand their material, economic, and social horizons (Figs. 7–9).

It is this Mula ring network that enables the material consumption so notable in Cuba in the dearth of domestic production. Certain destinations provide specific items, and there is a large economy devoted to the acquisition and circulation of these items, which in turn draws heavily on local kinship structures. The network relies on strong blood ties with diasporic Cuban communities who can either access material items themselves, or aid mulas in obtaining a visa to travel. Key loci for the network outside of Cuba are Miami, Tampa, and New York (United States), Russia, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, all of which have substantial Cuban populations as a result of the dispersal of Cubans after the 1959 revolution. Guyana is also a key destination, as it is one of the few places where Cubans can travel with no visa restrictions. Similarly, Latin American countries (Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, Panama) are crucial due to both proximity and travel rights for anyone holding a Spanish passport, which is easier to acquire for Cubans of Spanish descent than many others. Meanwhile, Haiti and Martinique also feature prominently for their (relative) ease of access and low prices.

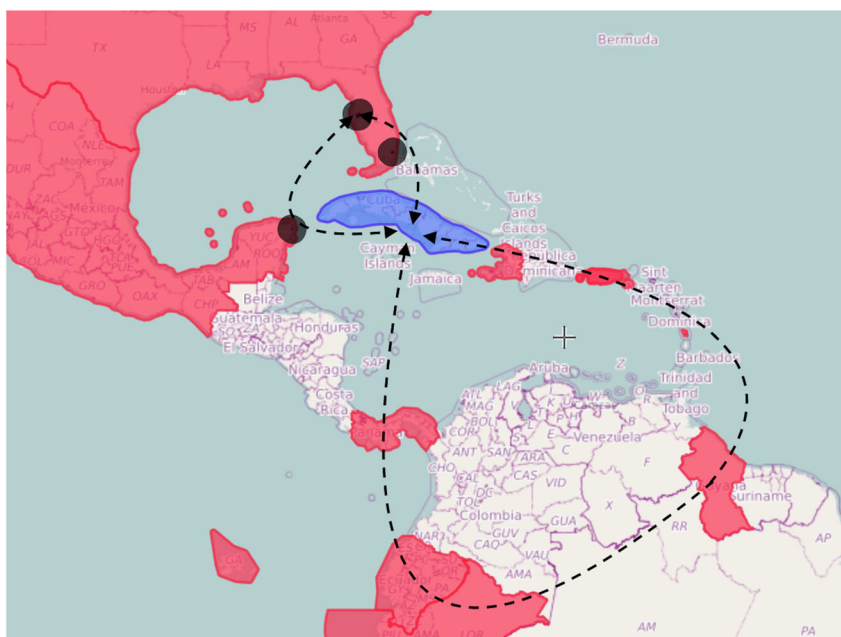


Figure 8 The circulation of items in different directions, with Cuba at the network's center. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

The word *mula* (literally, mule) can be a pejorative term in Cuban Spanish, with similar overtones to the “drug mule” we might imagine in English. My participants frequently argued about what exactly it means; most agreed that they did not count as a *mula*, as this term was typically reserved for those whose entire professional earnings came from the activity of bringing and taking items in and out of Cuba. Most people dabble in the trade as a way to occasionally make money while travelling abroad or returning to visit family. Many of the items that circulate within this Mula ring do so through family visitors, friends, one-off *mulas*, etc. As such, it is important to note that when I speak of a Mula ring, I am generalizing what in itself is a complex network of different family stories and motivations for taking things back and forth. Many people who participate in these networks of circulation (which I here synthesize as all being part of the “Mula ring” for the sake of perspicuity) would not refer to themselves as *mulas*. I should add, the felicitous pun between *mula* and “moolah” (i.e., “money” in American English) is both apposite and coincidental.

It is important to note that this network is not indicative of power flows originating solely in the diaspora. Many scholars of remittances have shown how these flows can create new hierarchies, making the recipient country highly dependent



Figure 9 Flows of different items around the Mula ring, where pink items move from Cuba into the diaspora, and yellow items are imported to the island. Different items move in different directions, in some cases at specific times of the year. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

on its diaspora (Olwig 1993; Duany 2007; Eckstein 2010; Morales 2017). While this is certainly true in familial contexts in Cuba and its diaspora, the Mula ring originates in Cuba itself, and Cubans on the island exert considerable agency in mobilizing networks both on and off the island to source (consequir) items. Indeed, this network not only imports vast quantities of items into Cuba but also exports material items to its diaspora abroad, especially in Miami. Vials of Cuban soil (to be scattered with burial), Cuban-grown herbs, beads and horsehair (for *santería* religious purposes), as well as foodstuffs, rum and tobacco, and antique furniture are all among the items much prized in the diaspora for their inherent “Cubanness,” and constitute an emerging objectified identity that is both imported and exported. For the purposes of demonstrating the social effects of the Mula ring as currently experienced in Cuba, in this article I limit myself primarily to discussing items imported to the island and the strategies and structures employed to facilitate this.⁷

The importance of this informal network to Cubans both on and off the island cannot be overstated. It is the primary (indeed often the only) source of material things, from kitchen pots and pans to clothing, from cell phones and laptops to fridges (unlike the Kula ring, which typically circulates nonuse items). It is also a formidable force within an unregulated space in an emerging aspect of the Cuban economy. The items circulated through this network are of such a high volume

and so difficult to acquire through any other means that on the streets of Cuba, material goods brought in by mulas are omnipresent, in all strata and classes of society.⁸ Indeed, various other aspects of Cuba's formal economy rely on the very presence of this network; hotels and restaurants rely on mulas to obtain bed linen and ingredients, manicurists source acrylic nails, bars and cafés need light bulbs and signs.

This network in its current form is the by-product of a fortuitous combination of events: a reduction of travel restrictions between the United States and Cuba under President Obama (2016); a small relaxation in some economic restrictions in Cuba after the death of Fidel Castro (November 2016); an increase in tourism to Cuba and therefore a greater availability in flights; a growing new generation of Cuban diaspora that maintains ties to the island; and the rise of (limited) private enterprise on the island. Furthermore, the economic collapse of long-term partner Venezuela (2012–present) has also required Cubans to mobilize networks further afield. In 2012, the government eliminated the *tarjeta blanca* (exit permit) required whenever a Cuban wanted to travel abroad.

The acquisition of items from abroad in and of itself is nothing particularly new. Cuban consumers, whether under socialism or capitalism, have long “incorporated foreign goods as essentially ‘local’ components of everyday life, and are thoroughly used to inclusion in global circuits of cross-cultural production and consumption” (Pertierra 2011:29). Indeed, a “huge repertoire of strategies for obtaining consumer goods and services” has consistently characterized socialist societies (Verdery 1996:27). In the case of Cuba, while illegal, these have long been normalized to the extent that even many state officials directly participate, or accept “remuneration” at key points of exit and entry (see also note 5). What is noteworthy is the sheer scale and regularity of this emerging network within the last decade, which both cements older social forms from the “Special Period” as well as new emerging hierarchies of power.⁹

This nascent system combines the norms of reciprocity and solidarity described in Cuba throughout the socialist period and the considerable hardship of the 1990s “Special Period” (Rosendahl 1997; Pertierra 2008) with the formation of a growing “elite” who exert a new economic, and therefore political authority (in the sense of local prestige rather than state-level engagement) (cf. Munn 1987). Older forms of sociality are crucial to the circulation of material items as well as information regarding the availability and arrival of new material items. Perhaps the most common form of reciprocity, in which everyone still takes part, is the giving, receiving, and repaying of information. Similarly, “the key to procuring anything in the informal or ‘second’ economies that tend to emerge under socialism is to establish some kind of private relationship with the seller”; with the absence of an efficient legal framework to ensure that the right goods are sold at the right price,

“people rely on knowing each other personally, or knowing people in common, to minimise the risk involved in informal sales and exchanges” (Pertierra 2011:133).¹⁰

This exchange of information not only creates these kinship ties but also accelerates them. As with a gift requiring timely reciprocity, these “tip-offs” create a debt, which no sooner repaid is returned, perhaps even within the same conversation, comparable to *blat* systems of favor/exchange in Russia (Ledeneva 2017). In this way, the practices developing within the Mula ring speak to long-standing anthropological debates exploring fissures between gift and commodity exchange (Appadurai 1986; Carrier 1995; Foster 2006; Addo and Besnier 2008) and their awkward relationship in cultural practice and material flows (hearkening back to Malinowski’s etic characterization of Kula exchange as in some way “irrational”).

Modes of circulation through the Mula ring also provide a mirror onto local kinship structures in Cuba and beyond. It is worth noting that kinship terms in Cuban Spanish do not mark only sanguine relations; it is common to describe a friend as *mi hermano-amigo* (my brother-friend), for example. The two can sometimes be considered of equal status.¹¹ Such kinship ties are crucial for accessing this new emerging economy as a participant. The Mula ring is in the process of forming a sort of new “career ladder” for young Cubans, and social relation is the most important feature in getting in on the action. To become a mula, one must at the very least have *confianza* (a trusting relationship) with someone who is hiring. This *confianza* is always spoken of in terms of blood, whether imagined or “real,” and as such maps onto these kinship networks cemented through older Cuban sociality.

The mobilization of kinship ties in this network is also important as such exchange networks lie on the periphery of legal and moral frameworks in Cuba and are otherwise entirely unregulated. As with familial clans within the mafia, there is a strong reliance on the “unbreakable” ties of kinship as a bond of trust, minimizing risk in a world at the edge of government (Blok 2001). Fulfilling one’s material duties of provision to close relations has long been an important expression of kinship in Cuba, and the failure to do so can cause significant rupture; Härkönen (2011) provides the example of a daughter’s attendance at her own father’s funeral being less socially mandated if he did not financially provide for her fifteenth birthday party. While I never observed a violation of *confianza* in the Mula ring firsthand, it was certainly more than a manner of speaking, and I was often warned that rupture of *confianza* or acting in its absence could have severe repercussions. Observable in other parts of the Caribbean, *confianza* invokes an irreversible kinship, unlike mere ties of friendship that can be more easily broken (Wilson 1995:141). Indeed, as an unplanned ethnographic method, my own participation as a mula later became a key way of gaining *confianza* and being invited into various family homes, typically to share food or drink as a confirmation of my newfound trusted status.¹²

Mobilizing New and Old Networks and Hierarchies

Part of the social richness and complexity of the Mula ring is that different groups of people can interact with it in different ways. There is a complex hierarchy determining who can travel as a mula to where, much of which also maps onto older hierarchies of class and ethnicity in Cuba. Those with grandparents who came from the Canary Islands in the 1920s–40s, for example, can often apply for Spanish citizenship. This, in turn, opens doors to other countries. Until January 2017, those with family in the United States (where the diaspora has also historically been of white and upper-middle class origins) could try to leave through that avenue. Consequently, Cubans of white or European ethnicity are more likely to have the opportunity to obtain a visa to travel abroad, and to have sources of money from abroad to fund these trips. Those with five-year U.S. visas are a privileged subgroup, as they can cross the border as many times as they like, and are uniquely positioned to provide some items (such as hard currency) that cannot be procured elsewhere.¹³

The one location in the Mula ring that provides an exception to this rule is Guyana, which currently does not require a visa for Cubans. It is also much closer and therefore cheaper to visit than the only other unrestricted option (Russia). Therefore, for some Cubans of mixed ethnic origins who want to get into the Mula ring circuit, Guyana is currently the most viable option, albeit a relatively perilous one. In Guyana, white Cubans typically “stand out” as ethnically distinct, and are known to carry large sums of cash on their person, and therefore are frequent targets of theft and violence (while Afro-Cubans are perhaps less visibly distinctive to the local population). Likewise, mulas who travel to Panama must cross gang-controlled areas in Colón to make it to the tax-free Zona Libre shopping area, to the backdrop of occasional crackles of gunfire.¹⁴

Regardless of the various power structures that enable or limit different trajectories of Cubans abroad, the most crucial aspect of the circulation network in fact relies on social capital in Cuba. Once the items have been obtained, they must be sold by employing a lengthy network of contacts and mediated by the moral code of *confianza*. This is also the moment at which the ring crosses over from what is largely a male-dominated domain to a female-controlled space, as these items are almost always sold and bought by women in private households. Even when not conducted in a private dwelling, such exchange always happens in enclosed spaces. I have vivid memories of spending a hot and airless day sitting with a female friend in her stifling office at a major government building in Havana; during the course of the day, various female friends visited her. I assumed they were there to carry out some bureaucratic function of daily life. Each would visit the bathroom before leaving the office, which introduced a welcome breeze into the corridor. After an hour or two, I realized that my friend in fact had a plastic bin bag of clothing under



Figure 10 Female government employee selling items from the Mula ring in a government office in Havana (photo credit: Author, February 2018). [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

her desk; she was selling the clothes to the public from inside her office, and they were visiting the bathroom to try the garments on (Fig. 10).

In this regard, the emergence of the Mula ring aligns with the *casa/calle* (home/street, public/private) division in Cuba, which has long been considered a legacy of Spanish colonialism in Latin America (Rosendahl 1997:58–62; Härkönen 2014:18). Indeed, Pertierra has described the

gendered process of re-localisation which took place during and after the Special Period, in which the household was re-signified for Cuban women. The daily lives of women in post-Soviet Cuba centre upon the household in terms of activities, income and social status, to a degree that might seem surprising given the socialist revolution's promotion of equality of the sexes and more than four decades of provision of extensive state services. (2008:744)

In the Mula ring, the men are typically sent out into the public domain to acquire material items before returning to the private domain where the women distribute and exchange the items of value, leveraging their own considerable social capital in the interest of the family economic unit. Both men and women mobilize kinship networks in various guises to fulfill these roles. While both work in strongly gendered spheres, there is arguably more female agency and power at play here than Pertierra allows for; the circulation of material items from privately run household “shops” is certainly akin to gendered (female) roles of family care, nutrition, provision, and social “gossip,” but these roles are also actively employed by women to assert control over the economic regulation of the household. As the vehicles for the circulation of items, women capitalize their social and kin relations to economically support themselves and their families, and in so doing wield real economic power, albeit within a highly gendered context (Sutton 1992).

Helman’s mother, Mislei, and his sister Lisette are just one example. Lisette earns the equivalent of US\$14 a month in her state job, but her friend regularly travels as a mula. Roughly once a month, Lisette buys the contents of his most recent trip, and takes it home to her mother. They sort through everything on the floor of the family apartment; if it is bulk-bought and low-quality clothing, Lisette may simply sell everything in one go to an old school friend. If the items are decent fakes, with brand names, she spaces them out around the room, and messages a few friends. Over the next day or so, various people pay short visits to try on clothes and hold up handbags to the cracked mirror balanced on a worn sofa. Some cannot afford the price that Lisette has set, and for the special few who have a long-standing relationship of *confianza*, they are allowed to buy at a slightly higher price on credit, with an agreement to pay in installments (*pagar a plazo*) over the coming months.¹⁵

Meanwhile Mislei, who is in her late sixties and knows little of the latest fashions, is an excellent seamstress. For a small fee, Mislei will alter clothing or sew on (fake) branded logos, the materials for which also come from abroad. She keeps all the scraps to make accessories like children’s *pionero* bandanas and socks, which she can also sell to mothers in neighboring apartments.¹⁶ Even here, in a legal example of self-employed private entrepreneurship (i.e., the sale of a product produced by one’s own labor), the tools and materials for this labor must be acquired illegally: *por la izquierda* (Concepción 2016). From time to time Lisette also manages to source various dog treats and shampoos, which she can resell to her next-door neighbor who runs a veterinary practice from his front room. Any jewelry is also set aside to be given to a cousin who later resells it for a profit to tourists in Martinique. All in all, Lisette and Mislei supplement their monthly income by up to US\$400 a month.

Notions of kinship are frequently invoked in these arrangements of exchange (visiting buyers would frequently call Mislei *mamá*). For the most part, male and

female realms remain separate. Crossing over into a different gendered space can be a dangerous process, as Lisette was quick to warn me, given the number of solicitations I received (with my privileged non-Cuban non-American passport status) for working as a mula myself. Lisette's (Cuban) friend, for example, was working as a mula in Mexico when she was asked by an unknown man to deliver a birthday card to Cuba. The envelope in fact contained a forged seal for falsifying official documents, and Lisette's friend was sent to a Cuban prison for three years. This can perhaps be interpreted as a deliberately dishonest invocation of kinship and *confianza* within a gendered space where, because of her status as unprotected by her own "kin," Lisette's friend fell victim to the unregulated illegal activity that can also prosper in these informal networks.

Although manifested and mobilized in different ways according to gender, what is clear is that the *confianza* that enables and is reinforced by this Mula ring is itself aiding the emergence of new class structures within Cuba. Those who can leverage their social networks to succeed in this emerging economy can gain economic status and political prestige, which in turn can lead to better education, better jobs, or even better marriage prospects. In short, a *nouveau riche* is emerging alongside these networks, accompanied by new regimes of symbolic meaning as aesthetic choices (overtly valuing items acquired abroad) demarcate these emerging classes of prestige in new forms of cultural hegemony (Bourdieu 1984).

Conclusion

In this article I outlined a newly emerging informal network of transnational circulation, which I call the "Mula ring." This network is the primary way in which Cubans from all sections of society acquire material items, either directly or indirectly, and as such is a substantial economic force both on the island and within its diasporas. Many of those embedded in these networks mobilize these relations to exert considerable economic power as well as sociopolitical prestige, which in turn forges new socialities while a new hegemonic cultural order becomes increasingly conspicuous (Eckstein 2003). While these networks by no means (yet) represent one coherent culturally recognized "system," as in Malinowski's classic example of the Kula ring, a focus on them nonetheless reveals how Cubans have long operated on a transnational and globalized economic stage. While there are certainly new power dialectics that emerge from increased remittance flows from the diaspora, these flows in fact operate in multiple directions, not just from the diaspora. Defying the expectations of many, some Cubans on the island are able to exert considerable agency both on and off the island due to the ways in which they leverage social capital to navigate this network.

The Mula ring in turn draws on more traditional modalities of social life in Cuba, many of which are highly gendered. Traditional Cuban and Caribbean binaries of public and private come to the fore once again, although not necessarily always to the detriment of female agency as might be presumed. My research reveals how women are key to the success of these informal networks of circulation, and indeed, the traditionally “female” sphere of *chisme* (gossip) and information exchange is of crucial importance to its success, as has been found in other Caribbean and postsocialist contexts (Smith 2005; Cieřlewska 2014; Sasunkevich 2016). Moreover, the need for such networks to operate in private spaces due to state restrictions ensures that women like Lisette and Mislei have access to some considerable economic power and cultural capital.

The emergence and consolidation of these networks over the past five years, drawing on trajectories from the past two decades, in turn fosters the rise of a new socioeconomic class in Cuba, and perhaps even an increasing focus on aesthetics of individualism, arguably in defiance of the very ideals of the socialist revolution under which Cuba still formally operates. Although impossible to quantify, this nouveau riche exerts considerable influence in many aspects of social life, from education opportunities and local politics to family, fashion, and home ownership, and thus participation in such networks can lead to fame, prestige, and expanding spheres of personhood, as with Kula exchange (Munn 1987). Yohan’s negociante, for example, had successfully navigated the ring to create a new life for him and his family, as well as enhance his role and influence in his community.

In a void of state regulation, these new networks self-govern using a long-standing moral regime, *confianza*, which likely predates the revolution but took hold within society during Cuba’s Special Period of economic hardship, and offers an alternate social code to that provided by the official state. This *confianza* mobilizes kinship ties, invoked either through blood relation or equivalent, and can be leveraged within the network as social capital, both for good and ill. This nascent system still draws on older forms of Cuban sociality, including notions of reciprocity, yet has adapted over recent decades to material scarcity and economic hardship. In this light, the Mula ring can arguably be seen as a dynamic and creative indigenous approach to combat the political and economic isolationist course officially taken by Cuba over the past three decades. By no means merely a Caribbean “version” of the famous Kula ring, the Cuban Mula ring instead vividly demonstrates the deeply imbricated connection of economic processes (of all kinds) with culture in multiple and complex ways, addressing longstanding debates that have been at the heart of the discipline for a century, and mapping the informal material flows that constitute Cuba’s extensive transnational presence at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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Notes

¹ Literally “by the left [hand],” this is a common idiom in Cuban Spanish, which suggests money changing hands “under the table” or “behind closed doors.” As far as I know, it has no correlation to any (coincidental) association of Cuban socialism with “leftism.”

² The United States has imposed an economic, commercial, and financial embargo on Cuba since 1962, resulting in long-standing and considerable difficulty in procuring most material goods on the island.

³ As will be presented later in the article, many Cubans are successfully operating in more “capitalist” markets of buying and selling while also adhering to other norms of circulation and redistribution that might be more equated with “socialism,” thus any claim that Cuba is simply “becoming capitalist” misses the nuances of how Cubans are negotiating different systems in parallel, adapting and adopting various practices at once.

⁴ One female *mula* friend of mine had certainly had difficulties with this, as the hostels are not segregated by gender and she shared a room with several unknown men. Thereafter she decided only to travel in groups with several other women and never stay on her own, but she was unusual in this regard, and most of the *mulas* who travel very regularly (as opposed to on one-off trips) are young men hoping to make a name for themselves.

⁵ Cuban nationals are permitted to import 120 lb of merchandise each, per calendar year, on which they pay import tax in Cuban pesos (CUP). Thereafter their allowance lowers to 30 lb per year, and taxes must be paid in Cuban convertible pesos (CUC)—that is, it is much more expensive. Larger items (such as fridges) must usually be brought in openly and declared, or officials must be bribed to allow onward passage, while smaller items are typically easier to hide in luggage.

⁶ Property sales have been permitted in Cuba since 2011, and the new Cuban Constitution (2019) has introduced further recognition of private ownership.

⁷ Space does not allow for a comprehensive consideration of such rich topics here, thus I intend to discuss the significance of specific items exported through the network—in particular, flows of Cuban soil and seeds—elsewhere.

⁸ I should also note that these items then continue to circulate through society by way of “normal” networks of exchange on the island. Thus, while not all Cubans have procured items directly from the “Mula ring,” the vast majority of material commodities will have originally entered the island this way.

⁹ The euphemistically dubbed *Período Especial* or “Special Period” refers to the period of economic hardship experienced by Cuba after the dissolution of its main economic ally, the Soviet Union, in 1991. Throughout the 1990s, Cubans struggled to obtain material goods and food, and the period is still regularly cited by Cubans as a time when the rules of moral and social order changed, and questions of *sobreviver* (survival) and *luchar* (struggle) became paramount (Hernández-Reguant 2009; Powell 2008; Rosendahl 2001).

¹⁰ Consider also the Cuban pun on “socio-lismo” and “socialismo”—that is, a dependence on *sócios* or friends to survive socialism.

¹¹I generally found that my Cuban friends referred to other friends as *sócios*, *amigos*, or if they were more distant friends, as *compañeros*, and when they referred to someone as a *hermano/hermano-amigo* (brother), it would be to correct me in my assumption that they were “merely friends.” *Pero es como mi hermano, sabes?* [But he’s like a brother, you know?] was a way of telling me a friend was so close the relationship was unbreakable, and demanded a higher degree of reciprocal care than mere friendship.

¹²As an anthropologist conducting transnational fieldwork, I was well placed to carry goods back and forth to Cuba, which was quickly recognized by various friends and acquaintances both in Miami and Havana. In most cases I refused, but I did carry items (mostly clothing, medicine, letters, photos, and work supplies) on behalf of people I knew well and trusted to their relatives on the other side (whereas many *mulas* carry items for people they do not know). While I accompanied other *mulas* (professional) and observed them carrying larger quantities of items, I restricted my own participation to small loads that could easily be explained as (legal) gifts. The only time I was pressured to accept money for my services, I donated the sum to a local community group in Havana.

¹³Obama’s termination of the Wet Feet, Dry Feet policy in January 2017 put an end to this option. Subsequently, Trump’s closure of the U.S. Embassy in Havana in 2018 has caused great anxiety. This will likely have significant implications for many *negociantes* and *mulas* as their old five-year visas expire in the coming years and will not be easily renewed.

¹⁴Both Panama and Guyana represent particularly dangerous options for Cuban *mulas*, and those that I observed there travelled around in large groups, tight-lipped and tense. However, for some, this has provided new opportunities, such as for Abu who employed “security guards” to accompany shoppers on their trips.

¹⁵This is akin to my understanding of how the “loans” business works in Cuba’s informal sector. As this is illegal, it is a world that operates on similar moral codes of “trust” and “honor,” but given the obvious risks of moving in this world, my participants strongly advised me against seeking it out.

¹⁶The José Martí Pioneer Organization (Organización de Pioneros José Martí) is a Cuban youth organization created in 1961 as a replacement for the banned Scouts Association. The initiation takes place with a traditional act of giving a neckerchief, blue or red, depending on the student’s level. From that moment it forms a part of the scholastic uniform. Its motto is “Pioneers for communism: Let us be like Che [Guevara]!”

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