
Marginalisations and Redefinitions of Kinship in Contemporary Cuba

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Abstract

This article examines the marginalisations and redefinitions taking place in kinship relations and the resources that persons in a precarious social position draw on to cope with exclusions in the context of large-scale social, legal, political, and economic change. In situations of global and local transformation, people may become marginalised in their social relations for various reasons, but in the margins, they can also find resources to alleviate or redefine such experiences. Such processes are complexly shaped by intersectional differences and inequalities of gender, sexuality, race, and age. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research in Cuba, a country that is currently undergoing extensive structural changes, this article focuses on the marginalisations of kinship through the ethnographic story of an elderly woman and her kin encountering unexpected exclusions in their relationships. As Cuba transforms from a socialist, egalitarian society into a new social order increasingly guided by the privileges of money, social relations are redefined in terms of shifts in

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understandings of marginality. In the margins, we find new arrangements of both discrimination and support, but the political potential of such processes is ambiguous and culturally and historically contingent.

Keywords

kinship, marginalisation, Cuba, socialism, gender, age, sexuality, race

Introduction

While the margins are usually understood as a social site of weakness and dispossession, feminist researchers have argued that marginality can provide us with a socially and analytically fertile focus for understanding questions of power, exclusion, and agency. Anthropologist Anna Tsing argues that marginality creates a productive way to explore global and local hierarchies of identity and power because from the margins “we see the instability of social categories” (Tsing 1994: 279). She defines the margins as “zones of unpredictability at the edges of discursive stability, where contradictory discourses overlap, or where discrepant kinds of meaning-making converge” (Tsing 1994: 279). Tsing suggests that marginality creates experiences of discrimination, but also allows people to criticise, redefine and manipulate their exclusion in a creative way (Tsing 1993). Other scholars have also engaged with the margins as providing individuals with possibilities for agency and action. Judith Butler (2016) points out that marginalised persons can find embodied ways of political resistance by acting together. These perspectives show how marginalised persons may find creative ways to resist their exclusion and redefine their social and political position amidst discriminative structures.

This article expands these scholarly understandings of the margins and marginality as socially and analytically productive by focusing on marginalisations and redefinitions of kinship in the context of large-scale political, economic, social, and legal change. I will use the term ‘margins’, and its derivative, ‘marginalisation’, as an analytic lens through which to examine how people encounter varied forms of exclusion in their social relations, but also find new sources of support in the context of extensive structural developments.

In the scholarly discussions on gender and kinship, marginality is often understood to concern persons who are outside of the normative views of gender, sexuality, and (stable nuclear) family life (see Moring this issue; Avdeeva this issue; Zhabenko this issue; Härkönen this issue). Nevertheless, sometimes also other persons may come to experience marginalisation in their social relations. The reasons for such shifts may be historical changes in values and morality or structural developments creating new problems for individuals. The understanding of such changing experiences of marginality requires empirical research in specific historical and sociocultural contexts.

Drawing on long-term ethnographic research in Cuba, this article examines how during large-scale changes in state policies, some people come to experience new marginalisations in their relationships but also find novel sources of support. This article will focus on marginalisation in the context of kinship, a crucially significant relationship for my Cuban interlocutors (see Härkönen 2016a). I understand marginalisation in kinship relations as a historically and culturally contingent social process that defines and redefines relationships, not as a fixed category automatically defining some people, but rather as a shifting process of ambiguity and change (cf. Green 2005: 8). I argue that an analytical focus on the marginalisations and redefinitions of kinship allows us to

explore how large-scale changes may create shifts in individuals' experiences of exclusion, and the precarious forms of support and coping of persons who are faced with sudden rejections in their relationships.

Cuba forms a fascinating context for exploring shifting marginalisations because, during the last few years, it has undergone large-scale, political, economic, and legal transformations that have redefined social relations and created for individuals new experiences of exclusion. In Cuba, that for many years has relied on an official ideology of socialist egalitarianism and continues to be an officially socialist state which provides multiple forms of state services to the individuals, such new marginalisations are indicative of profound shifts in sociability in the context of increasing inequalities of wealth, race, gender, age, and sexuality. At first glance, my interlocutors may not appear to be marginalised in their relationships: they are for the most part heterosexual, low-income, racially mixed Havana residents. They are 'ordinary' in the sense that they are not, for example, political dissidents or sex workers, who have been the focus of the majority of recent research on Cuba (e.g. Cabezas 2009; Allen 2011; Stout 2014; Daigle 2015; Hodge 2001, 2005; Sierra Madero 2015). Nevertheless, in the context of Cuba's structural developments, also those who used to be 'ordinary' now encounter new troubles and exclusions in their relationships, redefining their social position in ways that resonate with wider social shifts. At the same time, these state-level changes have created possibilities for more cultural and social diversity, shifting the position of some institutions, understandings, and practices that were rejected during the more ideologically strict decades of the revolution. For example, Cuba has seen new openings towards the Catholic Church and sexual and gender diversity that have created for individuals, new possibilities to engage in previously marginalised practices, identities, and ideologies. Such large-scale changes create for

Cubans novel sources of support, but they may also generate new social tensions and marginalisations, profoundly affecting people's everyday lives and relationships.

As Cuba changes from a socialist society towards a new order increasingly shaped by market principles, many of the structural changes taking place in Cuba are reminiscent of the transformations that have occurred in European post-socialist societies since the 1990s. While Cuba is not post-socialist as such, it shares with European post-socialist countries a historical context whereby somewhat similar socialist logics shaped life for years (see Verdery 1996: 12, 19-38). This shared history makes it useful to explore the shifts in Cubans' experiences of marginalisation in comparison with some of the processes that have redefined social relations in post-socialist Europe, to better understand people's locally varied experiences of marginalisation.

In this article, I will first discuss post-socialist marginalisations of gender and kinship in a theoretical framework. I will then introduce the details of my ethnographic research. After this, I will discuss the general characteristics of everyday life in post-Soviet Cuba and move on to discuss the specific story of an Afro-Cuban, elderly woman who has come to experience sudden exclusions in her kin relations in the new Cuba. This story is followed by an analysis of her experiences in terms of wider questions of marginalisation, support, and redefinition. Finally, I conclude the article by arguing that in the margins, people find new sources of support, but the political potential of such support is often ambiguous.

Post-Socialist Marginalisations of Kinship, Gender, and Sexuality

In the context of large-scale political, economic, sociocultural, and legal developments, such as the change from socialism towards a more market-oriented society, individuals' kinship and gender relations often shift. Feminist anthropologists have shown how political, economic, and legal change may transform people's understandings and practices of kinship, intimacy, love, and sexuality (Ahearn 2001; Padilla et al. 2007; Rebhun 1999). Economic, political, and legal changes may create unforeseen conflicts and exclusions in gendered and generational power relations, but they may also allow individuals new forms of agency and emotional engagement (Ahearn 2001; Collier 1997; Hirsch 2003; Hirsch & Wardlow 2006; Wardlow 2006; Cole 2010; Bourdieu 2008). Such transformations may redefine kinship relations and create new marginalisations in various ways.

In post-socialist societies, political, economic, and legal changes may transform individual and collective understandings of social ideals, norms, and exclusions. Some of the tendencies characterising gender, sexual, and kin relations in contemporary Cuba, are reminiscent of the social processes taking place in post-socialist Europe, but there are also some differences.

In some parts of post-socialist Europe, the shifts in state and economic policies have been accompanied by the rise of conservative thinking. This includes the pursuit of "traditional family values" that involves discrimination against non-heterosexual families (Zhabenko 2019, this issue; Mizelińska & Stasińska 2014, 2019) and the narrowing of women's reproductive rights (Gal & Kligman 2000a, 2000b; Mishtal 2009, 2015). In some contexts, such situations, where the political, economic, and legal processes of the post-socialist state create gendered and sexualised marginalisations, an intensified emphasis on the heterosexual nuclear family as the kinship ideal has

been accompanied by calls for individual spiritual change instead of a feminist agenda for political transformation (Rivkin-Fish 2004; Perheentupa & Salmenniemi 2019; Avdeeva this issue).

However, nuclear family ideals are not obtainable or even desirable for everyone amidst shifting understandings of gender and kinship in post-socialist societies. New ideas and forms of kinship have gained ground amongst those pushed to the margins by changing state policies (Sorainen et al. 2017; Zhabenko 2019; this issue; Mizelińska & Stasińska 2014, 2019). In some parts of post-socialist Europe, single motherhood has increased, both in contexts that for a long time have had high divorce rates (Utrata 2015) and in those where marriage used to be the norm during the socialist era (Saar & Aavik 2022: 6). There has also been an increase in the feminisation of poverty as women are often the primary caregivers for children and the elderly in the context of diminished state contributions (Patino 2010: 17; Lapinske 2018). In some parts of post-socialist Europe, the international marriage market has become a viable way for young women to gain social, economic and geographical mobility (Patino 2009, 2010; Levchenko & Solheim 2013). These changes point to the gendered consequences of post-socialist transformations and how they create new gendered and sexualised inequalities of class, race, and age that redefine marginalisations in kin relations.

However, the question of how much any of these persons – LGBTIQ+¹ persons or single mothers – are marginalised in their kin relations, is complex. In some post-socialist contexts, lesbian women in particular, but also persons from other sexual or gender minorities, play an important role in their

¹ LGBTIQ+ here refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer and beyond (see also Moring this issue, FN 2). I am aware of the critique towards this conceptualisation for its failure to grasp the full diversity of various sexual practices and identifications (e.g. Warner 1999: 40) but use it here as a general term that is less context-specific and less politically charged than other possible terms (such as “queer”, see n 12 below).

personal kin networks (Zhabenko this issue; Zhabenko 2019; Mizielińska & Stasińska 2014, 2019; Hašková & Sloboda 2018), being central rather than marginalised in their kinship relations. The position of single mothers is also complicated since single motherhood is socially normalised in some contexts rather than problematized (Utrata 2015). Instead of women, it is rather men, who are seen to be in crisis in their kin, and at times, other relations in post-socialist Europe. Several researchers have pointed out the ‘crisis in masculinity’ characterised by male irresponsibility, violence, and alcoholism (Utrata 2015; Gabriel 2005; Patico 2010; Perheentupa & Salmenniemi 2019; Kay 2006; Tereškinas 2010). In some parts of post-socialist Europe, such ‘crisis’ is seen to be a legacy of the socialist gender regime that ‘emasculated’ men and distorted ‘natural’ gender relations with its call for equality (Patico 2010; Perheentupa & Salmenniemi 2019). However, such understandings are hostile to a politics of equality and shift the attention away from the fact that men continue to occupy many positions of power in post-socialist societies (e.g. Kolin 2010). At the same time, amidst hostile state politics, or men who fail their expectations in terms of family commitments, mothers of all kinds – single, married and lesbian – often find support in their own mothers (Zhabenko this issue; cf. Avdeeva this issue; Utrata 2012, 2015: 138). Grandmothers have historically been an important practical, emotional, and economic help in kin and care relations in post-socialist Europe, emphasising the central role of elderly women in kin relations (Utrata 2012, 2015: 138; Gabriel 2005).²

In Cuba, as well, relationships have shifted because of political, economic, and legal changes, but in a somewhat different way than in post-socialist Europe. In post-Soviet Cuba, inequalities have

² Of course, such relationships may have their own complications, as discussed by both Zhabenko and Avdeeva in this issue.

increased, when many earlier forms of state contributions have been dismantled. While some suffer from poverty, others have managed to reap the benefits of the new possibilities in the tourist economy (Martinez 2013; Bastian 2018). These large-scale shifts have had a profound influence on social relations creating new marginalisations. In the midst of rising inequalities, there has been a notable increase in sex work, and suspicions of commodification nowadays bother all kinds of relationships (Cabezas 2009; Stout 2014; Härkönen 2015, 2019). However, persons who may engage in sexual, monetary-affective relations with tourists or in other relationships often understood as sex work, who are in the margins of state law and politics, are not always marginalised in their kinship relations.³ Sexual and monetary-affective exchanges with foreign tourists are often channelled to support local kin members (Cabezas 2009) and sometimes such partners are incorporated into Cuban kinship networks as a way to create long-term engagements (Stout 2015). Persons engaging in relationships often understood as sex work may therefore be central in their kin relations, both when it comes to their native and later families (see also Padilla 2007).

LGBTIQ+ Cubans, on the other hand, are more at risk of becoming marginalised from their native kin relations (Saavedra Montes de Oca 2017) because of widespread heterosexism (see Lundgren 2011; Härkönen 2016a: 80-82, 86-88, Hamilton 2012: 37).⁴ In Cuban history, gender and sexually non-conforming persons have been strongly marginalised by revolutionary state policies. This has taken place via various means including the Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP) labour camps in the 1960s, policies that persecuted sexual minorities in the 1970s (e.g. prohibiting LGBTIQ+

³ See criticism towards the category of the sex worker (Cabezas 2009: 8; Daigle 2015: 15).

⁴ To my knowledge, at least in Havana, homophobic physical violence is extremely rare, but people may engage in verbally abusive statements, even though face-to-face relations are usually friendly and polite. There are also gendered, generational and other differences in this regard.

persons from the practice of some professions), and the isolation of HIV-positive homosexual men in the 1980s (Hamilton 2012: 41, 459; Murray 1999: 575-576; Lumsden 1996). Such state policies have since been strongly criticised (Leiner 1994; Murray 1999; Sierra Madero 2016; Allen 2011; Hamilton 2012), and even Fidel Castro himself admitted that such policies were a mistake (Castro & Ramonet 2007: 225; Anonymous 2010). In post-Soviet Cuba, those marginalised by heteronormative understandings of kinship have found new sources of support from friendship, kinship, and same-sex relations (Allen 2011; Stout 2014; Browne 2022), simultaneously as Cuba's state-level political, economic, and legal changes (Castro Espin 2011; Roque Guerra 2011) have opened up new social space and visibility for sexual and gender diversity (Browne 2018a, 2018b).

Unlike the conservative turn taking place in many European post-socialist countries, in Cuba, the government is officially supportive of both women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights (Castro Espin 2011) and still embraces egalitarianism as an official policy (Augustin 2019a). In addition, the role of institutionalised churches has for a long time been different in Cuba from the religiously conservative post-socialist European countries in the sense that, for example, the Catholic Church has not been able to narrow women's reproductive rights in Cuba and access to abortion has remained a crucial human right (Castro Espin 2011). Nevertheless, recently, institutionalised churches have gained more influence in creating conservative effects in Cuban society. In 2017, Christian denominations were vocal in public anti-abortion discourses (Gonzalez 2017), and in 2018, the plans to have same-sex marriage included in Cuba's new constitution were revoked because of pressure from the Catholic and Protestant Churches (Anonymous 2018; Augustin 2019b; Campbell Romero 2021). This suggests that conservative influences are gaining more ground, with the potential to weaken or prevent women's and LGBTQI+ rights in the future. Such processes are

reminiscent of the clash between conservative influences and more liberal influences in some parts of post-socialist Europe (cf. Mishtal 2009, 2015).

Another recent shift in Cuban intimate relations is that legal marriage has gained more ground as an ideal especially amongst wealthy, privileged Cubans (Härkönen 2017) in a context that has a long-term historical tradition of matrifocal kin relations and consensual unions among the majority of the population (Martinez-Alier 1974).⁵ In Caribbean matrifocal kinship, women have traditionally occupied a central position as mothers, while men have been seen as marginalised in their position as husband/fathers (e.g. Clarke [1957] 1974; Smith 1996). However, later research has shown that Caribbean men are in various ways integrated into matrifocal kin networks as fathers, brothers, partners, uncles, and sons, refuting claims about Caribbean male marginality (Barrow 1998; Härkönen 2016a; Philogene Heron 2016, 2018, 2019). Therefore, although the views about Caribbean 'male marginality' resemble the discussion on post-socialist 'crisis in masculinity', the Cuban historical context differs from European post-socialist societies by its specific post-colonial historical legacies, even though they share the socialist influence. Moreover, in practice, relationships are often more diverse than such a language of crisis suggests.

Based on this discussion, the post-socialist axis of marginalisation seems to be characterised by LGBTIQ+ persons, persons engaged in sex work, single mothers on the brink of poverty, and men

⁵ Matrifocality refers to the tradition of Afro-Caribbean mother-centred kin relations, whereby the role of men as husbands/fathers has often been conceptualised as weak while relationships focus on links between female kin (see e.g. Clarke [1957] 1974; Smith 1996). Matrifocal kinship and the low popularity of legal marriage amongst my interlocutors, draws on historical, colonial hierarchies of gender, sexuality, race, and class in Cuba (see Martinez-Alier 1974; for other parts of the Caribbean, see Smith 1996).

suffering from a supposed masculinity crisis. However, little attention has been paid to how those persons who do not fit into any of these categories of marginalisation, may still experience exclusion in their kinship relations. Such marginalisations are not reducible to any single aspect of people's lives, but are rather the result of complex, intertwined, and transforming social, political, economic, and legal factors. Therefore, understanding people's experiences of marginalisation in their kin relations in contemporary Cuba requires paying close attention to the multiple shifts in relationships during the post-Soviet era that have created new marginalisations, but also redefined some older forms of exclusion. Detailed ethnographic research provides a productive way to understand such processes.

Studying Kinship in Havana

This article draws on a total of 24 months of ethnographic research in Havana since 2003.⁶ I have continuously worked with the same community of people who are low-income, racially mixed (for the most part, Afro-Cuban) Havana residents linked to each other by ties of kinship, love, sexuality, friendship, or as neighbours (see Härkönen 2016a). Over the years, I have focused on various topics but maintained a continuous interest in issues of gender, kinship, love, care, and sexuality. Marginalisations or margins were thereby not the initial focus of my field research but rather something that emerged as a significant issue in the analysis of my ethnographic material (see Angrosino 2007). In this article, marginalisation functions as an analytical focus through which I seek to understand the contemporary transformations taking place in my interlocutors' social relations.

⁶ I first conducted fieldwork in Cuba in 2003-2004 for my Master's Thesis (Härkönen 2005), then in 2007-2008 for my Doctoral Thesis (Härkönen 2014) and in 2017 and in 2019 for my Academy of Finland-funded post-doctoral research project 'Wellbeing and Social Change: Body, Personhood and Care in Post-Soviet Cuba' (grant number: 294662).

For my Cuban interlocutors, their kin relations are of primary importance both affectively and pragmatically in terms of day-to-day survival: kin members are considered one's most trustworthy relationships that will always provide help if required (Härkönen 2016a). In practice, many of my interlocutors' kinship relations were matrifocal (Härkönen 2016a). People strongly valued the connection between a mother and a child and saw the relationship between a father and a child as secondary. At the same time, my Cuban interlocutors placed strong value on relations of 'blood' (*sangre*) and less value on relations by marriage. Some of my interlocutors lived in classical matrifocal households where many generations of mothers and their daughters, sometimes also sons, live together. Elderly women were often in a central position in their kin relations, gathering people around them and gaining respect for the more children and grandchildren they had around them.

To understand everyday life in Havana, I rely on participant observation, interviews, media analysis, and archival research. Participant observation provides an in-depth, micro-level account of everyday life in a community to generate an understanding of macro-phenomena (Howell 2018): large-scale political and economic developments shape the lives of ordinary people in various ways at the local level (e.g. Besnier 2009: 2). Participant observation has allowed me to explore such day-to-day practices that are rarely verbalised in interviews (cf. Bourdieu 1990; Wolcott 1995), as for example, everyday caring practices amongst individuals. While formal interviews often tend to provide answers that follow social norms (Wolcott 1995: 104; Briggs 1986), it is important to let people talk about their lives in their own words. I found media analysis a useful way to approach state discourses because Cuban media is state-controlled (see RSF 2022), and used archival research to gain more information on historical issues.

Since ethnographic research greatly depends on lucky encounters, improvisation, and the kindness of our interlocutors, I did not actually 'choose' these people as my research participants (cf. Cerwonka & Malkki 2007; Bell 2019). After an initial random encounter with one of my closest interlocutors in Havana in 2003, I developed relations with his wider community and introduced them to my research project. My research thereby describes relationships amongst these particular persons, and I do not seek to generalise my findings to all Cubans. At the same time, my interlocutors' experiences provide a particular empirical perspective on the larger sociocultural, political, economic, and legal tendencies that shape people's lives also in other contexts.

Structural Changes and New Inequalities in Post-Soviet Cuba

Cuba is an interesting place to explore marginalisations and redefinitions of kinship because of its ongoing structural developments that are drastically reshaping individuals' everyday lives. Since the 1990s, Cuba has increasingly liberalised its economy and opened to global capitalism and influences. During Raúl Castro's presidency (2008-2018), many consumption items, professions, and forms of private commerce were liberalised from their earlier state regulation simultaneously as new products and foreign investors entered Cuba. Under the current, Miguel Diaz Canel's presidency, the Cuban government has re-installed the island's official commitment to socialism via the new constitution of 2019. Nevertheless, the new constitution has simultaneously expanded the privatisation of the Cuban economy (Semple 2018; Augustin 2019a).

The roots of Cuba's contemporary economic and political situation are in the island's socialist history. When Cuba started to nationalise foreign companies and declared as openly socialist, the

United States government placed on Cuba an embargo that started in 1960. Cuba's economy became heavily dependent on the European socialist block. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, Cuba fell into a severe political and economic crisis, losing 70% of its foreign trade (Eckstein 1994: 88-91). Heightened monetisation, increased economic liberalism, and intensified globalisation started to shape life on the island, at the same time as local people suffered from hunger, electricity cuts, and deficiencies in all areas of life (Azicri 2000; Eckstein 1994). The country was opened to international tourism and private commerce, black market deals were widespread and foreign remittances became an important source of support for those privileged Cubans who had kin abroad (Eckstein 2004).

These changes eroded the previous socialist egalitarianism and intensified inequalities of race and class that have their roots in pre-revolutionary times (de la Fuente 2001a, 2001b; Martinez 2013; Bastian 2018). In pre-revolutionary Cuba, racialised inequalities were severe because of a legacy of Spanish colonialism, plantation slavery, and the United States governed republican period (Martinez-Alier 1974). The Afro-Cuban population suffered many forms of discrimination and poverty at the same time as material wealth was concentrated in the hands of a white minority (Lewis et al. 1977a, 1977b; Butterworth 1980; de la Fuente 2001c). In the name of social justice, the 1959 Cuban revolution sought to equalise such differences and improve the living conditions of the poorest parts of the population, with many of the early revolutionary policies benefiting especially them (Eckstein 1994: 149-157). In contemporary Cuba, however, inequalities have again intensified.

It is against these historical, economic, legal, and political processes that I conducted my recent research on wellbeing, care, and social change in Havana residents' everyday life. In contemporary

Cuba, as the state continues to dismantle its contributions in many areas of life, there has been a shift from the earlier socialist ideology emphasising state nurture from cradle to grave, towards more monetised and individualised demands for everyday survival. As is typical for socialist countries (Ledeneva 1998), Cuba continues to have a sizeable informal economy. Constant economic shortages, low official salaries, and deficiencies in state services lead to corruption (Bak 2019) and economic activities outside of the state legislation, both because of basic survival and new desires for consumption and luxury (Daigle 2015; Hodge 2005).

Since Cuba's opening to international tourism in the 1990s, sex work has grown significantly. While Cuban women are probably the most visible practitioners, there are also male sex workers, and such engagements take place amongst both heterosexual and LGBTBIQ+ persons (Hodge 2005; Cabezas 2009; Stout 2014). However, to my knowledge, none of my interlocutors were engaged in sex work, although two women had been engaged in relatively long-term relationships with foreigners, one resulting in marriage and migration to Europe. During the post-Soviet era, the ubiquity of pragmatic considerations shaping intimate relations has blurred the boundaries between different kinds of relationships, often intertwining affective and material concerns (Cabezas 2009; Stout 2014; Härkönen 2015, 2019; see also Andaya 2013). Since many aspects of Cuba's new economy rely on sexual-affective engagements, the importance of youth, beauty, and racialised ideas of attractiveness have become increasingly important for providing avenues for social mobility (Cabezas 2009; Daigle 2015; Härkönen 2016a: 17-19, 74). These changes create tensions in intergenerational relationships. Many older people felt that the 1990s had brought a general 'loss of values' that materialised in unruly sexuality amongst younger people, aggressive materialism, and rising crime rates (see also Andaya 2013). These changes point to how Cuba's large-scale

transformations create gendered and sexualised inequalities of class, race, and age that sometimes result in new social problems. Such shifts crucially shaped the lives of my interlocutors, as I will show below.

In some ways, elderly habaneros seem to be correct in their view of Havana's growing crime rates during the last few years (cf. Grant 2016). It is difficult to gain exact information on crime rates because Cuba does not publish official information or statistics on crime, and it is not discussed in the local media. For this, information about crimes spreads mostly through gossip (Härkönen 2021). However, in the 1980s, some Cuban crimes gained international publicity because the island experienced major drug and corruption scandals that lead to severe punishments amongst high-level officials. To counter such tendencies, in 1986, Fidel Castro began the 'rectification' (*rectificación*) process that aimed to get rid of social problems such as excessive materialism, corruption, economic inefficiency, and a lack of work morality (Azicri 2000: 53-54). Nevertheless, in the 1990s, these problems only grew, when the socialist world around Cuba crumbled. There was a general increase in all crime and theft in particular (Eckstein 1994: 59, 122-125). The Cuban government tried to abolish both corruption and theft from state workplaces and took means to prevent international crime and money laundering, but both corruption and theft were widespread (Azicri 2000: 96-99). In the 1990s, Cuba's main newspaper *Granma* defined criminal and other illegal actions as being "against the essence of the socialist system" (Azicri 2000: 96-97). Cuban punishments are typically harsh, and many crimes may lead to long incarcerations. However, many Cubans are constantly involved in minor illegalities in their everyday life, because it is practically impossible to get by without, for example, sometimes engaging in black market deals.

In general, since the 1990s, the loosened relationship between the state and individuals (Fernández 2000) has created in Cuban society intensified inequalities and structural and social shifts, which have led to new marginalisations, but also to new openings towards a socially and culturally more diverse society (e.g. Allen 2011). I will now explore such social shifts through a focus on an ethnographic case from the life of a low-income, elderly woman whom I call Regla.⁷

Regla: Becoming Socially Marginalised in Contemporary Havana

Regla is a 75-year-old Afro-Cuban woman who has three children. She lives in a poor, mostly Afro-Cuban neighbourhood in a deteriorating, two-room apartment with her 40-year-old son and 27-year-old grandson. One of Regla's daughters migrated to Miami in the 1990s and occasionally sends her mother remittances. The other daughter, whose son Regla has cared for since childhood, has little contact with Regla.⁸ Earlier in life, Regla enjoyed a privileged position in socialist Cuba as an official for the Cuban Communist Party. However, in contemporary Cuba, the relevance of such socialist hierarchies has eroded, and Regla no longer enjoys the prestige and practical advantages that her position used to bring her. Instead, she is dependent on the island's new economy through her daughter's remittances and through small monetary contributions from her son, who works in the tourism industry, a privileged sector of the economy where employees are paid a higher-than-normal salary.

Although Regla seems to have both kin members and economic support around her, there are factors that make her situation precarious and threaten to marginalise her in her relationships.

⁷ All the names of my interlocutors are pseudonyms.

⁸ I never met this daughter and Regla never talked about her. One of Regla's neighbours told me that the daughter is 'crazy' but I did not manage to find out why this neighbour thinks so.

Regla's neighbours pointed out to me that her apartment is in such a state of deterioration that they suspected her migrant daughter to be neglecting her: "Her house is so bad and small; I wonder whether her daughter is sending her money to fix the house." Regla's son Miguel also often fails to contribute money to his mother. On the contrary, Regla often needs to give him money when he spends all his salary in search of his own pleasure.

Miguel was also failing Regla's expectations in other ways: he did not have a partner or a child.⁹ On local standards, only as a parent do both men and women reach proper, gendered adulthood (Härkönen 2016a). Already during my fieldwork in 2008, Caridad, another neighbour of Regla's, commented: "Miguel is older, he is already 30. [...] Regla is crazy for Miguel to have a child and it seems that he is also thinking about it." Caridad's daughter Yadira, however, was pessimistic about Miguel's chances of finding a partner: "I've never seen Miguel with a woman; it's been two years that he hasn't had any girlfriends, because he is shy, and he can't dance." Miguel was also disadvantaged by his dark skin colour. Due to the historical privileges of light skin, many of my female interlocutors preferred lighter-skinned men especially when they contemplated on having children (Härkönen 2016a: 46; Fernandez 2010; Martinez-Alier 1974; Yelvington 2001: 242-247).

In contrast, Regla's grandson Yosuel had always been his grandmother's pride and joy due to his good looks, light skin colour, bright mind, and gentle manners.¹⁰ Nevertheless, a few years before my 2017 fieldwork, Yosuel had become his grandmother's biggest source of sorrow. Yadira told me

⁹ Miguel wanted to have a partner and children but he had not been successful in his relationships.

¹⁰ Yosuel is significantly lighter than Miguel. Cuban ideas of race are complexly organised hierarchically along a continuum of fine-tuned differences. Racism surges in many instances (see de la Fuente 2001a, 2001b, 200c1) although Cubans' definitions of race are contextual and depend on multiple factors drawing on a person's behaviour, manners, clothing etc. (his or her habitus in Bourdieu's terms). See Fernandez 2010; Roland 2011.

that some years before, Yosuel and two other men had robbed their mutual friend of his DVD player in a violent manner. They had threatened their friend with a knife and tied him to a chair at his home. Everybody in the neighbourhood was shocked at how Yosuel, who had always been a polite young man, was able to commit such a violent act, particularly against a friend. Yosuel went to prison for six years and, according to the neighbourhood gossip, came out as openly bisexual, engaging in relationships with men and neglecting his girlfriend and child, who had been born while he was in prison. According to Regla's neighbours, Yosuel's behaviour caused intense shame and suffering to his grandmother:

Regla is like this [shows her finger to connote being skinny like a stick], she hasn't gained any more weight.¹¹ [...] He was in prison and there he became *maricon* [an offensive term for a homosexual]. And now he has separated from his wife, for sure, if he goes around doing these things, in the *mariconada* [an offensive term referring to 'queer enclaves'].¹²

In contemporary Cuba, where only the privileged few have access to desired commodities, inequalities corrode trust and friendship, turning friends into violent enemies. In such an environment, there are shifts in understandings of sexuality, creating simultaneously more room for diversity, but also new problems in kin relations. The fact that Yosuel not only went to prison but also expanded his sexuality into new directions, created a conflict with his grandmother. Regla and her kin members became a target for their neighbours' malevolent gossip because Yosuel's

¹¹ My interlocutors saw a person's weight as an indication of their well-being (Härkönen 2016b).

¹² In Havana, certain locations, such as parts of the beachside avenue *Malecón*, are considered to be 'queer enclaves' (see Browne 2022). There are also private parties and other gatherings (Morad 2014). As this neighbour knows little about such issues, she makes only a vague referral to the '*mariconada*'. I use the word 'queer' here to translate my Cuban interlocutors' statement to avoid the offensive tone of the Spanish original term. Queer conveys the double meaning of the word as something possibly tainted but also as "opening epistemologies and ambiguous (re)contextualisations of experiencing outside of heteronormative analytical assumptions" (Boyce, Gonzalez-Polledo & Posocco 2019: 8).

behaviour clashed against long-standing views of sexual and gendered respectability in the neighbourhood.

Amongst my Cuban interlocutors, ideas of gender were to a degree shaped by local notions of sexuality in such a way that a man had to display a strong sexual interest in women to be seen as a properly masculine, macho man (Härkönen 2016a; Lundgren 2011). If a man is not seen with women and does not bring girlfriends home, his position as an assertive, heterosexual man is quickly questioned. Caridad explained this idea to me:

Caridad: "Norma's son Wilber is gay."

HH: How do you know that?

Caridad: "Everybody knows it."

HH: Does Norma know it?

Caridad: "No, I don't think they know it at home. But how can you have a son who is already over 30 years old and has never had a woman?"

Engaging in same-sex relations was seen as compromising a man's masculinity. Caridad stated: "Here now there are many men of whom you think that they are men (*hombres*), but then they go around with men. They go around with [both] men and women, and you think that they are interested in you, but then they are *maricones* [homosexuals], here that has gotten fashionable; bisexualism." While in practice, many Cubans' sexual engagements are more flexible than what Caridad presents in this statement (e.g. Allen 2011), Yosuel's relationships with men still compromised his masculinity in the community. The emergence of more public forms of sexual diversity in Cuba seemed to not have alleviated my interlocutors' rejection of such practices and relationships.

Because of Yosuel's actions, Regla suffered shame and ridicule by her neighbours in ways that increasingly marginalised her in the community. As factors that may both bring shame to a person and their kin, non-heteronormative sexuality and a prison sentence differ from each other, although they may at times work complexly together, as happens in this case. Law as an active regime of punishment, through the imposition of prison sentences, was a relatively common occurrence amongst my male interlocutors – I personally know at least seven *Habanero* (Havana resident) men who have been in prison (in contrast to one woman) and have heard stories of many more from my interlocutors. While such individuals were in general somewhat frowned upon, having been in prison did not appear to form any permanent stigma on a person. However, at other times, a prison sentence cast a more severe shadow on a person. This was the case, for example, of a man who had killed another man in a fight. My interlocutors often referred to him as 'that criminal' (*este criminal*). However, the role played by sexuality is more complex. When people suspected a man of having engaged in non-normative sexual practices in prison, this seemed to automatically stigmatise him in no easy proportion to the crime that he had committed.¹³ In this sense, the shame that both Regla and Yosuel experienced because of his sexual behaviour was more severe than the mere social disobedience signalled by his prison sentence, as it was tarnished by a specific flavour of the loss of his position as a masculine man. Caridad said:

He, who always was a pretty boy, in jail he became like that. [...] It is one thing that he [Yosuel] went to jail, but it is a whole other thing how he came back; he returned

¹³ Cf. Warner (1999: 19, 27-28), who argues that sexual stigma taints a person permanently, regardless of the acts that they have committed.

transformed. Now [...] he goes around with the *maricones*. They transformed him in the prison.

In this statement, prison emerges as a marginal place that has transformative potential since it allows new and more diverse understandings and experiences of sexuality and identity to resurface.

The fact that my Cuban interlocutors spoke of people who engage in non-heteronormative sexual practices as somewhat morally suspicious (even though they could be totally friendly in their face-to-face dealings with them), suggests that non-heteronormative sexualities are more generally marginalised amongst my interlocutors, not only when such practices are connected with a prison sentence. For example, one interlocutor stated of her bisexual neighbour: “She is very bad, she is bisexual, they are the worst there is, she doesn’t care for her child, what is a woman who doesn’t care for her child?” Here this interlocutor represents her neighbour’s sexuality as marginalising her in the neighbourhood because, in her view, it intertwines with her failure to live up to the ideals of good motherhood.¹⁴

Indeed, understandings of gender, kinship, and sexuality play a central role in these social processes of marginalisation. Regla is marginalised in her neighbourhood due to her grandson’s legal violations and his unconventional sexuality. One of Regla’s neighbours stated: “They are all horrible... I don’t like those people at all, the mother is an unbearable oldie and [...] [they are] all weird creatures!” Regla’s position was further marginalised by her son Miguel’s failure to have a partner or a child, which would have allowed her to enhance her social position as a mother and a grandmother. The fact that she had two grandchildren somewhat alleviated her position, but they as well were in a

¹⁴ Cf. Browne (2022), who shows how committed kin relations many lesbian and bisexual women have.

way absent: her granddaughter was away in Miami and Yosuel was in prison and not fitting into the social conventions of neighbourhood respectability.

Despite her difficult situation, Regla has found new forms of support. During my fieldwork in 2017, she started to visit a local, state-run elderly care home, where she was able to socialise and have lunch. However, she was not happy with the facilities at the care home: she said that the food was bad, the facilities deficient and the staff rude. While I am unaware of how Regla thought that elderly care should be organised while she still had a strong belief in socialism, it seems likely that her opinion reflects the more general shift amongst Cubans from trust in state institutions into trust in personal relationships (cf. Fernández 2000), simultaneously signalling a disillusionment with the contemporary socialist state.

However, even though she was displeased with the forms of care she received from the Cuban state, Regla had some sources of comfort. She told me that once a week, officials from the Catholic Church visit the state care home and take good care of the elderly:

Maria [a Catholic Church employee] takes care of us, Maria organises good activities. [...] She comes to see us, she teaches us catechism, [...] she takes us on excursions, and sometimes she takes us out for lunch, to eat in good restaurants. [...] On birthdays, they give gifts. [...] Every Thursday, the Church comes to us. [...] There is a lady who comes to see the elderly and she is very friendly, very affectionate.

Because of this attentive treatment from Catholic officials, Regla started to visit her local church regularly.

Regla is someone who during the previous socialist order, to a large degree, followed the social and political norms for achieving a respectable position: she had gained a politically significant placement in her work as a Party official, and she was a mother and a grandmother to three children and two grandchildren. However, she becomes marginalised in her kin relations and Cuban society more generally, when her kin members fail to conform to local notions of gendered, sexualised, and, in the case of Yosuel, legal respectability in the community, causing her to experience a new form of exclusion in her relationships.

Marginalisations of Kinship, Structural Inequalities and New Forms of Support

The social processes, through which Regla came to experience unexpected marginalisation from her previous social world, are complexly shaped by Cuba's contemporary large-scale political, economic, legal, and sociocultural changes. In particular, they are intertwined with the intensifying inequalities of race and class in contemporary Cuba and with shifts in understandings of sexuality.

In post-Soviet Cuba, heightened inequalities combined with novel possibilities for consumption, erase older values of egalitarianism and challenge what is perceived as traditional understandings of morality. These political, economic, legal, and sociocultural shifts have simultaneously introduced to Cuba more crime, conflicts, and problems, but also opened up new opportunities for sexual and social diversity. Regla's story shows how such large-scale transformations shape individuals' intimate kin relations.

Both popular and media discourses conceptualise the neighbourhood where Regla lives, as a problematic area with an especially high rate of crime and poverty (see de la Fuente 2001c). The

remittances that Regla receives from her daughter and the earnings that her son can make in the tourist industry, are both significantly smaller than those of many white, historically privileged Cubans (Hansing & Hoffman 2019). Unlike Regla and her kin, many white Cubans can draw on well-established relatives in the United States to provide them with money and goods to start new business ventures (cf. Härkönen 2017). These racialised inequalities negatively affect Regla's and her relatives' lives and lead to new social problems when disadvantaged young Cubans yearn to have equal possibilities of consumption as their wealthier counterparts.

Still, in the margins, people find new sources of support. Regla is comforted by the Catholic Church; an institution that itself has been historically marginalised in Cuba but has for a long time been a source of spiritual support to Latin American women (Wolf 1958; Safa 1990; Rodriguez 1994). Regla's grandson, on the other hand, lands himself in prison by following traditional norms of male camaraderie and machismo, but ends up breaking them through his transgressive sexuality. At the same time, it is likely that Yosuel finds new sources of support in his sexual relations, on the margins of heterosexist understandings of masculinity (cf. Allen 2011). However, the fact that I was unable to talk with Yosuel directly during my last two research trips, further exemplifies his marginalised position. Yosuel did not spend his time in the domestic space of his home and the neighbourhood, where most local kin relations gather but rather elsewhere, in the margins of social respectability and sometimes also of the law, in the 'mystical' 'queer enclaves', which my other interlocutors tended to avoid. As my interlocutors saw prison as the site that had created a significant shift in Yosuel's sexual preferences, the prison emerges as a site characterised by both of these contradictory aspects of marginality. On the one hand, it is an instrument of state repression and

retribution, on the other, it is a site that allows for new kinds of male camaraderie and sexualities to arise.

As the case of Regla and Yosuel shows, such shifts in understandings and practices of gender and sexuality may create wider changes in social relations that go beyond the individual engaging in new experiences. As scholars have noted in other contexts (Patino 2010; Utrata 2015; Perheentupa & Salmenniemi 2019), the post-socialist shifts and ‘crises of masculinity’ often seem to create problems for women, who end up suffering the effects of men’s actions in their everyday lives and blame men for failing to live up to their expectations. At the same time, the Cuban case differs from these accounts from post-socialist Europe because Regla does not directly blame the men in her life for her marginalisation (even though her neighbours see Regla’s masculine kin as the major cause of her misery), nor does she see them as the solution for changing her life (cf. *ibid.*). This suggests that she has a different kind of understanding of structural injustices than the one described in the studies (*ibid.*) of post-socialist Europe. However, this sense of structural injustices does not automatically expand my interlocutors’ understandings of gender and sexuality, as is shown by the fact that many habaneros’ views are strongly heterosexist. At the same time, the political climate in Cuba is a world away from the neoconservative turn in parts of post-socialist Europe, although it is open for debate, the extent to which ordinary people like my interlocutors embrace the official discourses of feminist and LGBTIQ+ rights (Castro Espin 2011; Roque Guerra 2011; Hamilton 2012: 49; Browne 2018a, 2018b). Still, the official political opening towards sexual diversity has to a degree shifted the logics of marginalisation in kinship and sexuality, allowing more diverse practices, relationships, and understandings of identity to develop.

However, if the Catholic Church emerges as a significant source of support for persons like Regla, who are disillusioned with both the socialist state and their kin relations, it may in the future open a way toward more conservative and narrower views of kinship, gender and sexual relations. During the post-Soviet era, the Catholic Church stepped in as an important provider of social services in Cuba as a way to assist the deficient state services (Anonymous 2021). As the Catholic Church and other institutionalised churches may gain more ground in Cuba in the future (cf. Cambell Romero 2021; Anonymous 2021), it is possible that, like has happened in post-socialist Europe, they will bring along a more conservative understanding of gender, kinship, and sexuality, counteracting the revolution's earlier policies emphasising the importance of sexual diversity and intensifying both old and new forms of marginalisation.

This brings us back to the question about the political potential of the marginalised to challenge and redefine the normative structures of power that discriminate against them, discussed at the beginning of this article. While Regla and her male kin all find some sources of support in the margins, Regla's experiences do not suggest that the margins would allow her structural agency to redefine the terms of her marginalisation. Regla's situation calls for us to rethink the premises under which being in the margins allows the excluded persons to challenge normative structures and criticise dominant social categories. My ethnography suggests that the possibilities for a more direct political agency are complexly shaped by intersecting hierarchies and meanings of gender, sexuality, age, race, and class. While Regla becomes marginalised largely because of the actions of her male kin, they seem to be able to get by, (however precariously), whereas she appears to have fallen into a void of social neglect and shame, with few forms of support.

Shifting Experiences of Marginalisation

If we think about Regla's and her kin's experiences in terms of wider questions of marginality, they show that large-scale changes carry the potential to transform individuals' intimate experiences of exclusion. In post-socialist societies, such changes are often particularly poignant, as they undergo profound practical and ideological changes with mixed legacies of socialism and new capitalist and globalised influences (Verdery 1996; Burawoy & Verdery 1999).

The studies from post-socialist Europe suggest that people's experiences of marginality have shifted in terms of gender, kinship, and sexuality. On the one hand, previously marginalised groups have gained a more socially and culturally accepted position in society, creating space for new forms of visibility, identity, and relationships for those who do not conform to traditional understandings of gender and sexuality (Béres-Deák 2021; Mizielińska & Stasińska 2014, 2019; Szulc 2012; Binnie & Klesse 2011; Lambevski 2011; Hašková & Sloboda 2018). On the other hand, the rise of conservative politics and a lack of full legal rights for LGBTIQ+ persons have perpetuated forms of gendered and sexualised marginalisation, although people have also invented ways to sidestep such regulations (Béres-Deák 2021; Mizielińska & Stasińska 2014, 2019; Zhabenko this issue). These dynamics between conservative and new, more liberal tendencies in shaping marginalisations are complicated by how economic inequalities may mitigate (Mizielińska & Stasińska 2019: 7-8) or intensify (O'Neill 2014) people's experiences of marginalisation. This highlights the need for an intersectional analysis to understand how various structural and social factors shape individuals' experiences of marginality.

In post-Soviet Cuba, large-scale changes have in a similar way, changed intimate relations, and created for individuals both new opportunities and new experiences of marginalisation. Many scholars note, how the “widespread commodification of sex and intimacy” (Stout 2014: 173) has redefined Cubans’ experiences of both heterosexual (Cabezas 2009; Daigle 2015) and LGBTIQ+ (Stout 2014) sexuality, resonating with wider changes in social relations. On the one hand, those involved in the sex trade have emerged as new targets of marginalisation (Cabezas 2009: 14; Daigle 2015: 10-11; Stout 2014: 52, 178-179). On the other hand, new economic and social possibilities enabled by foreign tourism and the newly intensified globalization have offered traditionally marginalized people new avenues for social, economic, and geographical mobility and new ways of gaining recognition (Cabezas 2009; Daigle 2015; Allen 2011). However, such possibilities are not equally divided; it is particularly young Cubans who are able to reap the benefits of Cuba’s changing sexual economy, at the same time as global capitalism has mixed old forms of oppression with new opportunities (Cabezas 2009: 2-3, 6; Daigle 2015: 24; see also Allen 2011). Several scholars see such practices as enabling Cubans’ new forms of subjectivity and a way to resist state policies (Cabezas 2009: 17; Daigle 2015: 11, 21-11; Allen 2011: 3, 193-194, 2012). Cuba’s new opening towards sexual diversity has also created more room and visibility for transgender and other non-gender-conforming Cubans at the official political level (Anonymous 2015; Castro Espin 2011). Nevertheless, in practice, many still face severe social discrimination and limited job opportunities (Saavedra Montes de Oca 2017; Stout 2014: 77-79; see also Allen 2012). Thereby, while there have been shifts in state policy towards previously marginalised people, in practice, some older forms of social marginalisation persist.

Legal changes have played a part in these shifts in Cubans' experiences of marginality during the post-Soviet era. After many years of state persecution and illegality (Murray 1999: 575-576; Leiner 1994; Lumsden 1996), during the post-Soviet era, legal changes have created more room for sexual diversity, for example, through such processes as the legalisation of sex-reassignment surgeries as a part of the public health care system in 2007 (Allen 2011: 191-192; Gorry 2010). However, there are still significant deficiencies in legal rights for LGBTIQ+ Cubans, such as the non-existence of same-sex marriage and the lack of possibilities for assisted reproduction (Browne 2018a). Importantly, law has an active presence as a punitive factor and it plays a role in defining the official parameters of morality, contributing to the emergence of new marginalisations (cf. Stout 2014: 52-53, 173-174; Daigle 2015: 119-120).

In the case of my interlocutors, Cuba's legal changes have opened for them new possibilities of sexual diversity and of seeking support from non-state actors, when previously criminalised or rejected practices, institutions, and ideas have become more accepted in Cuban society. In this sense, legal changes have the power to not only create new marginalisations but also revoke earlier exclusions. At the same time, some such practices, identities, and understandings remain socially ambiguous and even rejected, as exemplified by Regla's neighbours' negative attitudes toward sexual diversity. Legal change alone is thus not capable of fully changing attitudes, although it may encourage people to embrace previously marginalised understandings, as is exemplified by both Regla's and Yosuel's experiences. At the same time, the role of law in creating marginalisations is ambiguous, as amongst my interlocutors, many illegal things and practices were socially accepted and even a prison sentence is not an automatic reason for social exclusion. This highlights the role of sexuality as a marginalising factor, and the intertwining of lawlessness and non-conforming

sexuality as creating social marginalisations (cf. Stout 2014: 52-53, 173-174) that are so powerful that they extend from one person to their kin.

My ethnography further shows, how legal, economic, and social factors converge in shaping individuals' experiences of marginalisation. Poverty and living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood bring to Regla's life crime and social problems. My interlocutors' experiences show how new inequalities have come to shape people's intimate experiences of the kinds of social bonds that matter the most to them, creating unexpected marginalisations in kin relations. My findings resonate with those of Noelle Stout (2014: 172), who argues that instead of highlighting new possibilities for LGBTIQ+ visibility, her 'queer' Cuban interlocutors emphasised how the island's economic restructuring had made them vulnerable to new social inequalities that "threatened to undercut the things that one had always taken for granted – sex, love, family, and social bonds." In a similar way, Cuba's intensified inequalities have caused my interlocutors to experience exclusion in such relationships that were supposed to be secure and redefined their taken-for-granted kin relations.

At the same time, Regla's experiences of marginalisation differ from the other persons that have suffered legal, political, and social marginalisation in Cuba – such as LGBTIQ+ persons and sex workers – whose experiences draw on more long-term historical exclusions. LGBTIQ+ Cubans were discriminated against in many ways during the earlier revolutionary years (Leiner 1994; Lumsden 1996; Hamilton 2012). Sex workers were marginalised in pre-revolutionary Cuba, and in post-Soviet Cuba, have represented a profession that was officially eliminated during the revolutionary process (Lewis et al. 2003), with the revolution promising to abolish such (and other) forms of

marginalisation (Eckstein 1994: 130, 135-136, 149-155). In the case of such persons, the contemporary forms of marginalisation, therefore, draw upon historical antecedents. Regla's experiences are different because earlier in life, she was exemplifying idealised socialist normativity. As a heterosexual mother of three children and a grandmother and an official of the Cuban communist party, she could expect to lead a safe, 'normal life' during her old age. Therefore, Regla's experiences of exclusion represent something new; even those who were accustomed to a position of normality may face sudden social exclusions in the post-Soviet era transformations, highlighting the unpredictability of life in contemporary Cuba.

My ethnographic research material shows that large-scale changes create shifts in people's experiences of marginalisation and redefine social relations. Such changes are produced by the intertwined effect of political, economic, social, and legal transformations that cause individuals to experience changes in their intimate, and social relations, creating new tensions and problems, but also new opportunities for relationships, understandings of identity, and sources of support. Such marginalisations may create unlikely alliances, as when a former communist official comes to embrace the Catholic Church. Through such unexpected associations, large-scale changes carry the potential to create shifts in the categories that define individuals' understandings of identity. In this way, marginality offers us a view on the "instability of social categories", as Tsing suggests (Tsing 1994: 279). Regla is marginal because she is in a "zone of unpredictability" (Tsing 1994: 279) when her life has not followed the normative models she had been pursuing, making her marginality unpredictable and unusual. However, for Regla, the power of such shifts to create new forms of identity and agency (cf. Tsing 1993; Butler 2016) is ambiguous: while she may eventually come to embrace a new identity because of her positive experiences of the Catholic Church, at the time of

my fieldwork, her engagement with the church was rather pragmatic. Most importantly, even though she is unhappy with contemporary state policies, she has little power to change her situation or create structural change in the community. This suggests that not all category-crossings lead to a position of agency and a new identity. Being elderly, poor, and living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood limits a person's options, and in the absence of supporting kin members, people turn to the only source of support available to them, which in this case, is the Catholic Church. In this sense, such marginalisations of kinship may contribute to the rising popularity of the Catholic Church in Cuba (Campbell Romero 2021; Anonymous 2021) as they may offer persons in a precarious position much-needed sources of support, care, and pleasure in a difficult situation. At the same time, such social and kinship marginalisation may drive people towards conservative understandings, in contradiction with political efforts to enhance the acceptance of sexual and gender diversity in the name of social justice. This may lead to profound new inequalities, marginalisations, and redefinitions in the fields of gender, kinship, and sexuality.

Conclusion

My ethnographic research suggests that large-scale political, economic, and sociocultural changes create redefinitions and shifts in social relations, marginalising some people in their kin relations. New desires, openings and exclusions create tensions in kin and gender relations. Sometimes such kinship anxieties resonate with wider social stigmatisations, for example when new understandings of sexuality clash with normative definitions of masculinity or femininity. In such cases, persons are at times marginalised not only in terms of kinship but also of the law, the state, and wider understandings of sociability. At the same time, such changes also open new opportunities and sources of support for individuals: in Cuba, people have experimented with sexual diversity and

found comfort in the Catholic Church, both of which were officially rejected as corruptive to socialist morality during Cuba's revolutionary past.

The re-emergence of the Catholic Church as a provider of support and comfort to the marginalised relates ambiguously to wider ideas of kinship, gender, and the state and wider understandings of social justice. In Cuba, the Catholic Church appears as a provider of care for those persons who are failed by both their kin relations and the state. Nevertheless, this revived position of the Cuban Catholic Church may bring along conservative ideas of gender, kinship, and sexuality, as has been the case in other post-socialist contexts (cf. Mishtal 2009, 2015).¹⁵ However, greater room for sexual diversity has emerged at the same time, although the still in many ways discriminative stand towards LGBTIQ+ lives amongst many Cubans, contributes to marginalising the former from kinship. Sometimes, like in the case of Regla, such stigmatisation extends from one individual to their kin members, marginalising the entire family and leaving especially its elderly members feeling lonely and neglected. This, therefore, suggests there are contradictory processes going on, as understandings of gender, kinship, and morality diversify and gain new global influences in Cuba: on the one hand, offering space for more conservative thinking, and on the other, new space for non-conforming sexual and gender relations, experiences, and subjectivities.

In contemporary Cuba, among structural developments, the social margins are being redefined. Those who used to be at the centre may become marginalised and those who have been excluded earlier may find new, shared experiences, simultaneously as all of those in the margins may encounter unexpected sources of support. However, it is ambiguous whether people's experiences

¹⁵ The rapidly expanding Protestant congregations present an even greater risk in this regard.

in the margins necessarily allow them opportunities for political action, as Tsing (1993) and Butler (2016) suggest in other contexts. In their article on post-socialist Russian self-help groups, Perheentupa and Salmenniemi (2019) argue that in post-socialist contexts, where political agency is often limited, in their search for better lives, people focus on individual transformation instead of direct political action. My Cuban interlocutors' sources of support – the Catholic Church for Regla and most likely, the LGBTIQ+ community for Yosuel – could be seen as such forms that primarily promote personal transformation rather than direct political change. While the Catholic Church seeks spiritual commitment from its members, participation in LGBTIQ+ communities may create shifts in a person's sexual subjectivity (cf. Zhabenko, forthcoming). However, the degree to which individuals embrace such new messages of selfhood is ambiguous; sometimes people may have a relatively pragmatic relationship with the various sources of support that allow them to alleviate their marginalised position. The margins may thereby create space for manipulation and contradictory understandings at various levels coming across as a social space where new forms of support, identity and alliance become available.

My ethnographic material thus shows a different relationship amongst the margins, agency, state power, and structural hierarchies than the one discussed at the beginning of this article, whereby the margins create a social space from which to redefine normative categorisations, understandings, and structures of power. Rather, my ethnography shows that not everyone in the margins is capable of finding alternative forms of political and social agency and questioning normative views but rather that people's possibilities for agency are intersectionally shaped. In Regla's case, gender, age, race, and material wealth all intertwine to constrict the power, energy,

and even desires that she would have to manipulate the dominant structures.¹⁶ Instead, it shows the fragile possibilities for subjective glimpses of agency and her very limited possibilities for creating structural change, burdened by the materialities of day-to-day survival.

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¹⁶ However, Yosuel seems to be more inclined towards questioning normative understandings of gender and sexuality but since I did not get a chance to meet him during my last two fieldwork periods, my focus is on Regla's experiences.

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