

# “Hay Muchísimo Poder en la Oscuridad”<sup>1</sup>: Black Cuir Cinema Clubs in Contemporary Havana



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(“Hay Muchísimo Poder en la Oscuridad”:  
*Clubes de Cine Black Cuir en La Habana Contemporánea*)

(“Hay Muchísimo Poder en la Oscuridad”:  
*Black Cuir Cinema Clubs na Havana Contemporânea*)

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**ABSTRACT:** Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo are itinerant cinematic events aimed at showing cuir, feminist, avant-garde, Afro-diasporic, and experimental media content in Havana. El paquete semanal is a widespread digital information product that Cubans use to access global media. I argue that Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo’s curatorial frameworks produce exploratory spaces of moving theory that rupture the revolutionary state’s nationalist discourse of colorblindness and racial democracy and the normative and white-washed depictions of queerness that circulate in el paquete. The cinema clubs, which elude state-sponsorship and are free of charge, create collective discursive spaces where participants interrogate the figure of the cuir racializado in sites that are not fully regulated by the state or Cuba’s commodified media markets. The emergence of such spaces in the past three years marks a break with the Cuban state’s post-revolutionary monopoly on cultural spaces but also a resistance to newer, more capitalist forms of media circulation such as el paquete. By projecting moving images of Black queer intimacy in alleyways, rooftops, and a multitude of other public and private spaces throughout Havana, Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo comprise a media infrastructure that is ephemeral, difficult to police, and that contravenes the colonial racial and spatial logics that organize the city.

**KEYWORDS:** Queer studies. Black studies. Cuba. Space. Media studies.

**Resumen:** Cineclub Cuir y Cine Alternativo son eventos cinemáticos itinerantes que proyectan contenido cuir, feminista, vanguardista y experimental en La Habana. El paquete semanal es un producto de información digital popular que los cubanos utilizan para acceder a medios de comunicación globales. Sostengo que los marcos curatoriales de Cineclub Cuir y Cine Alternativo producen espacios exploratorios de teoría itinerante que rompen con el discurso nacionalista del estado revolucionario de democracia racial y con las representaciones blanqueadas y normativas de lo cuir que circulan en el paquete semanal. Los cineclubes, que no tienen patrocinadores estatales ni cobran entrada, crean espacios colectivos discursivos donde los participantes indagan sobre la figura del cuir racializado en zonas que no son completamente reguladas por el estado o los mercados de medios de comunicación mercantilizados de Cuba. La aparición de estos espacios en los últimos tres años indica una ruptura del monopolio del estado postrevolucionario que domina los espacios culturales. También indica una resistencia contra la circulación de medios de comunicación más nuevos y capitalistas como el paquete. Cuando se proyectan imágenes itinerantes de una intimidad cuir y negra en los callejones, las terrazas, y una multitud de espacios públicos y privados en La Habana, Cineclub Cuir y Cine Alternativo constituyen una infraestructura de medios de comunicación que es efímera, difícil de vigilar, y que contraviene las lógicas coloniales, raciales, y espaciales que organizan la ciudad.

**Palabras clave:** Estudios queer. Estudios negros. Cuba. Geografía y espacio. Estudios de los medios de comunicación.

1 “There is a lot of power in darkness/obscurity”.

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**Resumo:** Cineclub Cuir e Cine Alternativo são eventos cinematográficos itinerantes que projetam conteúdo cuir, feminista, vanguardista e experimental em Havana. O pacote semanal é um produto de informação digital popular que os cubanos usam para acessar a mídia global. Afirmo que os quadros curatoriais do Cineclub Cuir e do Cine Alternativo produzem espaços exploratórios de teoria itinerante que rompem com o discurso nacionalista do estado revolucionário da democracia racial e com as representações branqueadas e normativas do cuir que circulam no pacote semanal. Os cineclubes, que não têm patrocinadores estatais nem cobram entradas, criam espaços discursivos coletivos onde os participantes indagam sobre a figura do cuir racializado em áreas não totalmente reguladas pelo Estado ou pelos mercados de mídia comercializados de Cuba. O surgimento desses espaços nos últimos três anos indica uma quebra do monopólio do Estado pós-revolucionário que domina os espaços culturais. Também indica uma resistência contra a circulação de mídias mais novas e mais capitalistas como o pacote. Quando se projetam imagens itinerantes de uma intimidade cuir e negra nas vielas, nos terraços e uma multitude de espaços públicos e privados em Havana, Cineclub Cuir y Cine Alternativo constituem uma infraestrutura de meios de comunicação que é efêmera, difícil de vigiar e que contraria as lógicas coloniais, raciais e espaciais que organizam a cidade.

**Palavras chave:** Estudos queer. Estudos negros. Cuba. Geografia e espaço. Estudos de mídia.



“Havana is a white city,” Cuban filmmaker Damián Sainz remarked to me as we sat at outdoor tables at Cuba’s International Film and TV School (EICTV) on a humid evening in October of 2019. I repeated it back to him as a question: “Havana is a white city?” He replied, “Havana is *castiza*, it is wannabe European.”<sup>3</sup> Sainz explained that though he is from Havana’s Nuevo Vedado neighborhood, he feels more connected to his Black Caribbean *cuir* identity in majority-Black cities like Santiago de Cuba and New Orleans. Sainz’s vision of what constitutes the Black Caribbean exists in tension with what he articulates as the white imaginary of Havana. His commentary is part of a longstanding debate among artists and intellectuals about the dominant racial imaginary of the city. While urban historian Mario Coyula understands Havana to be a place that has “always imagined itself as white,” historian Guadalupe García complicates this vision by showing how the colonial wall that separated Havana’s residents between those who lived *intramuros* (within the wall) and *extramuros* (outside of the wall) “constituted Havana’s whiteness and simultaneously produced Blackness” (García 2016, 5). She argues that even after the wall fell in 1863 and it no longer physically demarcated the boundaries of the white colonial city, its logic persisted in the imagination of Euro-descendant residents. If *extramuros* was once a literal place, it was now inscribed as race onto Black residents who were systematically excluded from the urban body politic. More than a century later, colonial imaginaries of Havana have been further entrenched by the city’s integration into global tourist economies, a development that includes its transformation into a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the 1980s and the dollarization of the Cuban economy in the 1990s (Hernandez-Reguant 2009).

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3 All quotes have been translated from Spanish to English by author. Original Spanish transcripts available upon request.





Figure 1. Extramuros Magazine. 2014

It is with this history in mind that I wish to explore how contemporary Habaneros theorize Blackness and sexuality in the city. As many scholars have argued, it is impossible to understand constructions of gender and sexuality outside of the colonial architecture of race—and vice versa (Stoler 2001; Lowe 2015; Briggs 2002). We might therefore think of the *intramuros* not only as a racial imaginary, but also a sexual one. This *intramuros* space—while no longer fixed within the city—is set apart from a racialized, sexually deviant outside and the figure of the *cuir racializado* (racialized queer). Conversely, the *extramuros* space is marked by its distance from the white heterosexual family (Rubin 1982). In a 2014 issue of a Havana-based cultural studies magazine aptly titled *Extramuros*, a group of Cuban playwrights, professors, and literary critics produced what many of the authors identify as the first state-published queer theory issue in a Havana-based magazine. Though the title portrays the magazine as an intellectual space outside Havana’s colonial walls, the chiseled body of a shirtless white man on the magazine’s cover centers a Euro-descendant subject. The absence of theorizations of Blackness alongside queerness by the issue’s predominantly Euro-descendant intellectuals



reflects the white imaginary of the city invoked by Sainz. State-sponsored publications like *Extramuros* limit the potential emergence of either Black or Black queer political and cultural spaces by trafficking in a default white masculine gay subject who furthers the Cuban state’s “not Blacks, not whites, only Cubans” nationalist discourse (Spence Benson 2016).

If the intellectual milieu that produced the *Extramuros* queer theory issue is more tied to Havana’s *intramuros* social worlds, who in Havana is theorizing queerness in ways that center Blackness? In this article I highlight the queer theory-making practices of two film clubs that inhabit *extramuros* sites throughout Havana: Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo Afrodiaspórico de América Latina y el Caribe.<sup>4</sup> Cineclub Cuir is an itinerant cinema club and curatorial project that moves through Havana’s rooftops, cultural centers, tattoo shops, and alleyways without a fixed schedule. The project shows global films that center queer protagonists and engender a queer visuality that contests mainstream and heteropatriarchal ways of seeing. Since 2018, the project’s curator Damián Sainz has projected films such as *Looking for Langston*, *The Watermelon Woman*, *Born in Flames*, *Tatuagem*, *Réponse de femmes*, *Woubi Cheri*, and *Tiznao* (Dunye et al. 1996; Borden 1983; Varda 1975; Bocahut and Brooks 1998; Farías 2015; Lacerda 2013). The majority the films that Sainz screens—regardless of their country of origin—center stories of queer intimacy between Black protagonists.

Unlike Cineclub Cuir, Cine Alternativo screens films from a more circumscribed geographical scale. The club, which is curated by Havana’s Alianza Afro-Cubana, Afro-LGBTQI (the Afro-LGBTQI Afro-Cuban Alliance) only shows films from Latin America and the Caribbean that center Black protagonists. These protagonists, such as Gregory in the Trinidadian film *Play the Devil*, are sometimes but not always visibly engaged in same-sex liaisons (Govan 2016). Other screenings of films such as *Miriam Miente* and *Angélica* tackle themes of Black girlhood in the Hispanophone Caribbean (Gómez-Mouakad 2018; Cabral and Estrada 2018). Though Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo have different approaches to content curation, they are both itinerant and free to the public. Cine Alternativo has taken place everywhere from a cultural center beneath a water tower in Havana’s Marianao neighborhood to a closed-off street intersection in Cerro.

Through extensive interviews with Damián Sainz and Raúl Soublett Lopez—Black *cuir* men in their twenties and thirties who founded Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo—as well as a year of attendance at both cinema clubs in 2019—I contextualize Sainz’s and Lopez’s curatorial projects within Havana’s broader media landscapes. As a Euro-descendant, non-Latinx woman from the United States who first came to Cuba as an exchange student at Univesidad de las Artes

4 Alternative Afro-Diasporic Cinema of Latin America and the Caribbean.



(ISA) in 2007, my outward appearance as a U.S. tourist at film screenings was mediated by close connections with clubgoers and founders that I cultivated during previous visits to Havana over the past thirteen years. Beyond contrasting Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo with state-funded initiatives like *Extramuros* magazine, I also contextualize these cinema clubs in relation to Havana’s principal commercial media product: *el paquete semanal*. *El paquete*, which emerged in Cuban media markets in 2014, is a weekly one-terabyte packet of media that Habaneros copy to their hard drives or jump drives at small neighborhood shops for a small fee. Each week consumers choose from a variety of content folders that could contain anything from Korean soap operas to *Game of Thrones*. In building Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo, both Sainz and Soublett Lopez drew parallels between *el paquete* and their projects while also critiquing *el paquete* for its “colonial, normative, and visually hegemonic content” as well as its encouragement of commercialized and individualized media consumption.

If the *paquete* is a colonial product, Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo are sites of decolonial practice and form experimental sites of queer Black theorization across Havana. The importance of these projects lies in both the queer and Afrodiasporic content they circulate and in their itinerant movements throughout the city. Without fixed locations or times, Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo challenge the colonial logics of *intramuros* and *extramuros* by projecting moving images of Black queer intimacy in alleyways, rooftops, and a multitude of other public and private spaces throughout Havana. They comprise a media infrastructure that is ephemeral, difficult to police, and that contravenes the racial and spatial organization of the city. A key aspect of both these clubs is their insistence on centering Blackness as the political and conceptual starting point for discussions about non-heteronormative sexual subjectivities. I argue that Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo’s curatorial frameworks produce exploratory spaces of moving theory that rupture the revolutionary state’s nationalist discourse of colorblindness and racial democracy and the normative and white-washed depictions of queerness that circulate in *el paquete*. The cinema clubs, which elude state-sponsorship and are free of charge, produce collective spaces of discourse where participants that interrogate the figure of the *cuir racializado* in sites that are not fully regulated by the state or Cuba’s commodified media markets. The emergence of such spaces in the past three years marks a break with the Cuban state’s post-revolutionary monopoly on cultural spaces but also a resistance to newer, more capitalist forms of media circulation such as *el paquete*. Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo’s membership emerge out of Havana’s post-Soviet Black queer milieus who have formed a number of intellectual, cultural, and activist spaces in the past thirty years (Saunders 2015; Leslie Santana 2018; Allen 2011). The clubs form part of Havana’s film scenes while they



simultaneously engage broader visions of Black queer diaspora across the Americas (Agard-Jones 2012; Allen 2012; Gill 2018; Humphreys 2019).

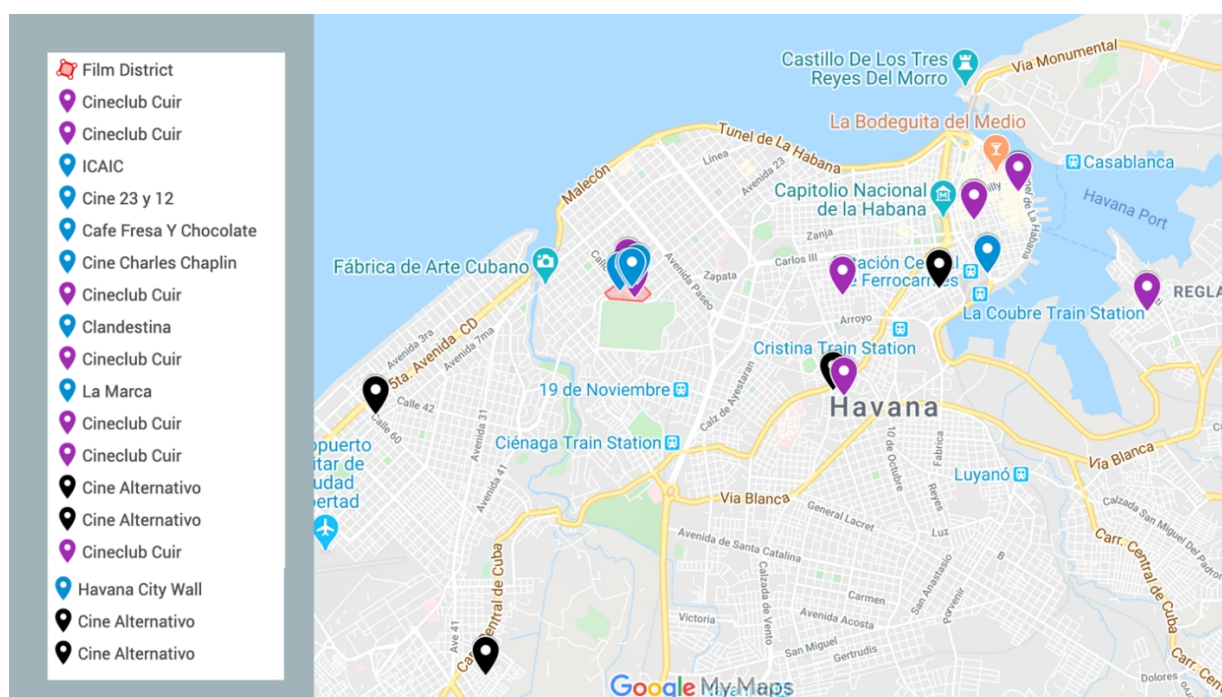


Figure 2. Author Generated Map. 2020.

### Blackness, Queerness, and Mobility in Havana’s Film Scenes

In January of 2019, six months before the Alianza Afro-Cubana brought Cine Alternativo into existence, I met many of its members at an installment of Cineclub Cuir in an alleyway in Havana’s Cerro neighborhood. I was running late that night and as I rushed to the event in a white Fiat Polski, the taxi driver mentioned that he didn’t know El Cerro well and that it was “*una zona muy peligrosa*.”<sup>5</sup> I shrugged my shoulders while quietly wondering how his ideas about race, class, and my position as a Euro-descendant woman from the U.S. might have led him to express this sentiment. As a light-skinned Cuban from Miramar—one of Havana’s more affluent neighborhoods—he may have been concerned about my movements within a space that he and many others in Havana consider to be *extramuros*. Though Cerro is not far from Havana’s city center, its status as a Black neighborhood with cheaper rents renders it as illegible and dangerous in Havana’s white imaginary. This imaginary is not only constructed by Habaneros, but also through an imperial imagination of Havana’s social geography. According to Naomi Larson, a journalist for *The Guardian*, Cerro is one of “Havana’s dirty truths” and a site of “anarchy where trash piles and broken sewage pipes define daily life” (Larsson 2016).

5 El Cerro is a “very dangerous zone.”



I walked from the taxi stop to the closed-off street intersection outside the home of El Chiqui, a Black gay man and anti-racist activist in his fifties, and encountered an audience of fifteen or so people sitting on chairs from nearby living rooms. The audience was almost exclusively Black and Cuban besides one mestizo Mexican filmmaker and one white Cuban with a mohawk who later gave a speech about anarchism. I would later learn that most audience members identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, *cuir*, and/or trans and many participated in independent Black activist organizations beyond La Alianza Afro-Cubana or Cineclub Cuir.

We watched *Mataperros*, a short from Puerto Rico about the charged relationship between a transgender woman and her street hustler boyfriend (Gonzalez 2018). As the film projected onto the walls of an abandoned building, other scenes were unfolding in Cerro’s nightly neighborhood life: a gang of cats jumped in and out of a nearby dumpster, elderly residents sat in front of their houses and enjoyed the breeze, teenagers occupied sidewalks as their faces lit up with the glow of their phones, and the hum of nearby conversations mingled with the film’s soundtrack. After *Mataperros* Sainz projected *Woubi Cheri*, a documentary about the lives of LGBT Ivorians, and then led a post-screening discussion. Viewers weighed their own experiences against those of Ivorian protagonists, debated some of the plot points in *Mataperros*, and many commented that it was hard to find films about places like the Ivory Coast or films with Black *cuir* characters in *el paquete*.

Cine Alternativo and Cineclub Cuir’s itinerant cinematic explorations of a raced queer subjectivity in Havana build upon a rich popular cinema tradition in post-revolutionary Cuba. Throughout the 1960s, the state’s Department of Film Dissemination and the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC) drew in millions of spectators by using a fleet of Soviet-manufactured cinema trucks to project 80 to 140 films per month in Cuba’s rural provinces (Falicov 2012). Neither Sainz nor Soublett-Lopez ever situated their projects within this legacy, but the itinerant form of these cinema clubs recalls the revolutionary state’s experimentation with *cine móvil* (mobile cinema). As depicted in the 1967 film *Por Primera Vez*, the mission of *cine móvil* in Cuba was to disseminate cultural literacy and bolster revolutionary ideology through popular cinema clubs in the countryside (Cortázar 1967). *Cine móvil* attempted to bridge the boundary between rural spaces and urban centers via the idea that cinema technologies could incorporate rural Cuba into the fold of the modern nation-state. Many decades later, in the ICAIC offices located in Havana’s Vedado neighborhood, Cuban film critic Frank Padrón Nodarse founded Cineclub Diferente to show films that portray “*diversidad sexual*” (sexual diversity). Since 2008, Cine Diferente has been running every Thursday at Cine 12 y 23 (Padrón 2014). Unlike Cine Alternativo and Cineclub Cuir, Cineclub Diferente is





sponsored by the The National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX) and its fixed geographic location has been published in tourist guides (Lema-Hincapié and Castillo 2015; Guides 2010, 171). Both Cine Diferente and ICAIC’s tradition of *cine móvil* were state-sponsored and state-funded. Additionally, both initiatives became known for screening Hollywood films: *cine móvil* screened *Modern Times*, while Cineclub Diferente screened *Brokeback Mountain*. Though ICAIC is an important center of Latin American cinema that has also produced films with gay protagonists such as *Fresa y Chocolate*, these projects, like *Brokeback Mountain*, have tended to glorify white gay masculinity (Lee 2005; Alea and Tabío 1994; Chaplin 1936).

The emergence of Cine Alternativo and Cineclub Cuir within Havana’s film scene marks a significant departure from Cuba’s popular cinema tradition, even as these groups have adopted a mobile or itinerant format that is clearly indebted to this history. Both cinema clubs are notably operated without state sponsorship. They are free of charge and spatially promiscuous like *cine móvil*, but unlike most ICAIC programming they are explicitly organized around Afrodiasporic content. Both Cine Alternativo and Cineclub Cuir highlight films that frame Blackness as a key political and conceptual space from which to theorize queerness. Set against the Cuban state’s myth of racial democracy, explicit organization around Blackness as a political identity challenges the terms of nationalist unity. For example, a 2005 CENESEX-sponsored group for lesbians called Grupo OREMI was abruptly cancelled after group members tried to organize around Blackness and lesbianism simultaneously. As Tanya Saunders argues, Cuba’s national discourse of racelessness and its three-tier racial system of Black/White/Mulato limit the potential for political organizing around Blackness. (Saunders 113). As cultural spaces that build upon the state’s own history of using popular cinema to reach political goals, Cine Alternativo and Cineclub Cuir chart a new path for Black political organizing in Havana.

Despite dominant discourses of Latin American racial democracy and a Caribbean history of racialization in which not only Blackness but gradations of color produce hierarchies of power between those who are considered *negro* versus *mulato*, a network of independent cultural and political organizations are devising new ways to organize around Blackness in Cuba. This network includes the itinerant cinema clubs, but also organizations such as Club Espandru, Regla Soul, Nosotrxs, and Casa Tomada Mirarte. Cuba’s dominant racial framework categorizes some cinema club members, including Raúl and Damián, as *mulato* rather than *negro*. However, Raúl and Damián each self-identify as Black, reflecting their understanding of Blackness as a political location that pushes back against the Cuban nationalist discourse of racelessness. While the audience of Cineclub Cuir tends to be more international and wealthier because some of its screenings take place in locations frequented by tourists and lighter-skinned Cubans that could



be characterized as *intramuros*, Cine Alternativo locates its screenings in *extramuros* spaces that draw a distinctively Afro-Cuban audience. Despite these differences, a core group of Black *habaneros* —most of whom identify as lesbian, *cuir*, gay, or trans and as activists and intellectuals—regularly attend both clubs.

### “El paquete es un producto colonial:<sup>6</sup> Reflections on commercial media circulation in Havana

The beginnings of Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo are rooted in the dissatisfaction of both club founders with the commercial offerings of *el paquete*. In my Vedado apartment in early 2019, Raúl Soublett Lopez said that he had qualms with the normative content on *el paquete*. “There are many distributors of *el paquete*. I get action movies, soap operas for my mom, horror, comedy, and drama. It is all very Hollywood. Very binary. Man woman, woman man. Nothing with LGBT content. Except maybe *Sense8* and the Mexican film *Cuatro Lunas*... there is nothing.” Soublett Lopez found almost all of the content that he copied onto his jump drive to be heteronormative and Hollywood-adjacent. He was pleased to attend Cineclub Cuir where he could view films with less binary storylines and complex LGBT protagonists.

Nine months later, Soublett Lopez and I sat down again in the garden of one of Vedado’s cultural centers during a homage to Afro-Cuban filmmaker Gloria Rolando and revisited the usefulness of *el paquete* in light of the formation of Cine Alternativo. “*Paqueteros* will tell you a new release is good just to sell something to you. These films come from Hollywood, have no values, and are not going to teach a young girl how to defend herself from racism.” He then furthered his claim and said the *el paquete* is not only commercial, but also colonial:

The *paquete* is a colonial product. It is a colonial product because it makes the people who distribute the *paquete* rich and offers the public an entertainment that blinds the public with products that reproduce the same social scourge, that soap opera with the white millionaire, the Black servant, all those things. Movies in which the gay character or the Chinese guy is for peeing yourself with laughter because they use stereotypes that not even the film creators believe themselves.

In Soublett Lopez’s description, the commercial nature of *el paquete* and the colonialist tropes its content traffics in signal that it is not an anti-racist or anti-colonial media infrastructure. Through reproducing anti-Blackness, homophobia, Orientalism, and using marginalized subjects as comic relief, *el paquete*’s content is more about marketability than theorizing strategies to combat racial or heterosexist violence. As a commodified product that originates in private shops and circulates in the private homes of individuals, the infrastructure of *el paquete* limits public and collective theorization. Cineclub Alternativo and Cineclub Cuir form

6 “El paquete is a colonial product”.



counterpublics that theorize queerness and Blackness while *el paquete* circulates normative content in the enclosed homes of the city’s residents in ways that maintain or even further entrench the city’s colonial order (Warner 2005).

Damián Sainz also voiced concerns about the imported whiteness and masculinity of LGBT content in *el paquete*. “There’s a British film in there right now called *God’s Own Country* or something like that,” he quipped, “all in the *Brokeback Mountain*-style, men in the country being penetrated.” Sainz found other series in *el paquete* such as *Transparent*, *Looking*, and *Will and Grace* to be “too commercial” and expressed frustration at the mainstream visuality of its gay films:

I have friends, especially gay men that have told me ‘I know a super good movie in *el paquete*’ because *el paquete* supposedly has everything and it doesn’t. The films are very commercialized and visually mainstream—with a visual quality that is very HBO, Fox documentary. The themes are interesting but at the level of visual culture it is very dominant. It is a hegemonic visual culture. No artistic content, experimental content, or subversive experimental content.

To Sainz, *el paquete*’s is limited by its homonormative and racially homogenous content and by its hegemonic and linear visuality (Duggan 2002). In his archival practice, Sainz thus seeks to create a circulation of images that not only feature Afro-diasporic *cuir* protagonists but also have a queer visuality. Cineclub Cuir’s circulation of locally produced films, Caribbean and Latin American films, and globally circulated art house films creates new circulation patterns that rupture the hegemonic visuality of Hollywood and Netflix. Sainz’s practice queers Havana’s digital archives, not by enacting queer readings of *el paquete*, but by building and circulating a different media archive all together (Murphy, Tortorici, and Marshall 2014). This practice moves away from the temporal normativity and commercial viability of the “new release” Hollywood film and digs up experimental films from other social locations and eras to provoke collective theorization in the city. Sainz shows visually queer Black diasporic films such as Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues United* or Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames* to produce spaces of theorization and resonant affect that *el paquete* cannot.

In 2015 I learned that some Cuban intellectuals put their own queer film archives on *el paquete* by giving loaded jump drives to their local *paqueteros*. More recently, however, *paqueteros* have started charging patrons to include their own content in *el paquete* as the service is now used to circulate advertising for Havana’s emerging private businesses. The cost was one of many reasons that Damián Sainz opted not to put a Cineclub Cuir folder in *el paquete*:

Every week I was thinking I could upload a folder from Cineclub Cuir. I would add poetry, images, photos, a conference with Paul Preciado, bell hooks...But I was conflicted because I realized that the power of Cineclub Cuir as a tool isn’t just in the fact that there are movies people can’t access. It is in the dynamic of taking this type of programming and watching it together. You see *el paquete* individually in your house.



You watch it alone. There are fewer possibilities to create community, self-recognition, to share knowledge, to do subversive activist work. It is a more inoffensive strategy. Now 300 people in a movie theater... that could be dangerous.

Sainz’s hesitation to add a Cineclub Cuir folder to *el paquete* primarily stems from his understanding of Cineclub Cuir as a public and subversive project. To Sainz, the private home is often an *intramuros* space where individual viewers are not collectively or politically engaged in challenging dominant power structures. In my own reading of both Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo, I suggest that their most subversive quality is evading state and market capture. By staging Black *cuir* cinema in the city’s alleyways, rooftops, and abandoned buildings, Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo use the walls of the city to create ephemeral moments of collective political reflection. As the cinema clubs move between state-owned spaces, the street, private homes, and even commercial businesses, they enact a media practice that locates Black *cuir* freedom dreams somewhere beyond the state’s revolutionary nationalist project or the city’s emerging capitalist media markets. Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo evade a fixed spatial location, temporality, and linearity to assert the importance of Blackness as an analytical and political space. As these archives move through multiple sites in the city, they construct collective sites of resonant affect where viewers theorize and debate what *lo cuir* might mean from an *extramuros* social location.





Figure 3. Cineclub Cuir, October 2019. Photograph by Author

### Curating Moving Archives, Producing Moving Theory

If *el paquete* circulates Eurocentric, homonormative, and visually hegemonic content, what sort of counter archive might adequately provide the ground from which to theorize intersections of Blackness, histories of colonialism, and *lo cuir* in Havana? How might a different media practice and alternative media infrastructure better grapple with the boundaries of the city’s colonial walls? I first consider debates Sainz and Soublett Lopez had about what to screen at their respective cinema clubs and then think through how they decided to move their film archives throughout the city.

When reflecting on the process of curating Cineclub Cuir, Sainz identified two key conflicts that continually emerged as he decided what to share from his archive. The first tension he grappled with is related to a figure he called the “*negro fino*” or the refined Black man. As a filmmaker and someone who has been able to travel outside of Cuba, Sainz has heard many Euro-descendant Hispanophones in Cuba and abroad say anti-Black things to him and then quickly qualify that he is not “really Black” because he is a “*negro fino*.” Sainz’s ability to travel between *intramuros* and *extramuros* worlds creates a constant tension as people try to locate



him. At the heart of this tension are racist and classist ideas that construct the figure of the “*negro fino*” as a foil to the “*negro bruto*,” or savage Black to justify anti-Blackness. Even as Sainz identified the absurdity and racism of the figure of the *negro fino*, he simultaneously expressed concerns about his connections to the film festival and art house worlds due to their whiteness, exclusivity, and their distance from local, less-resourced, and less mobile Black *cuir* networks in Havana. He worried that no matter how radical the content of his screenings, there would still be “*un punto de elitismo*” or a bit of elitism in the project.

The second tension in Sainz’s curatorial work was around how to create a Black *cuir* space that didn’t center the United States. Damián Sainz created Cineclub Cuir after visits to the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. He noted that the visits provoked him to think about how his afro-Caribbean identity intersected with his queerness. At the Puerto Rican Queer Film Festival, Sainz found expressions of a “Black *mariquismo* (queerness) from a racialized, queer, Caribbean, migrant position” and his experience there and in the Dominican Republic provoked him to think about whether there is a unique poetic or narrative to afro-*cuir* artistic production coming out of the Hispanophone Caribbean. These experiences constitute what Sainz calls his search for “Afro things and *cuir* things” that resonate with the Afro-*cuir* place he speaks from. Sainz grapples with how Black cultural production and liberation struggles from the United States fit into this vision:

I have been looking for my Afro place. I don’t want to be part of an African American colony or in a situation where my only discourse on Blackness is rooted in U.S. liberation movements. They are important references but at the same time they are far away because our history and the way we were colonized was totally different. I am trying to find my own narrative of *negritud* far from Angela Davis and Marlon Riggs. Well, actually, for me, Marlon Riggs is the most important filmmaker in the world.

Here Sainz’s contends with the complex history of U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean, the relationship between Afro-Cuban political struggles and Black liberation struggles in the U.S., and the global circulation of U.S. media. Sainz sets the history of Spanish colonialism apart from British colonialism to distance himself from figures like Angela Davis and Marlon Riggs. However, he switches directions to call Riggs “the most important filmmaker in the world.” Riggs’s *Tongues United* was the first film that Sainz screened at Cineclub Cuir alongside his own film *Batería*, a documentary about gay cruising in one of Havana’s abandoned buildings (Sainz 2016). Sainz’s curatorial practice is informed by conflicting desire to produce a space that accounts for the specificity of an afro-caribeño *cuir* social location while also holding space for the resonances that Black diasporic works like *Tongues Untied* can have in Havana. As he



decides how to move between more localized and more hemispheric archives, Sainz actively engages with larger theoretical quandaries about diasporic Blackness and queerness.

In a separate interview about the *Tongues Untied*, a 1989 documentary about the lives of U.S. Black men who love other Black men, Sainz reiterated that he “didn’t care about *Casablanca* or *Gone with the Wind* because only *Tongues Untied* mattered.” He explained that the film catalyzed self-recognition in him and that screening it would allow Black intellectual milieus who read broader debates about these kinds of films to see the primary source. Cuban race theorist Roberto Zurbano, for example, told Sainz that he was thrilled to come to the screening because he had read so much about the film but it had never been screened in Cuba. Zurbano’s encounter with the film is in line with Sainz’s vision of what Cineclub Cuir is supposed to accomplish. Sainz reflects, “Cineclub Cuir is a place to find new images that make us create new images, new narratives, and new ways of living. It is a personal project, a performance one does all the time, and a utopia.” In Sainz’s rendering, Cineclub Cuir is a utopic performance that takes place on a moving stage where audiences find self-recognition (Muñoz 2009, 97). Though he recognizes the potential contradictions of theorizing Blackness and queerness using global images, his screenings of films from multiple continents points towards his Black diasporic utopian ethos, which that sees Afrodiasporic queer images as capable of transcending distances of geography, culture, and time.

Though Sainz started with content that emerged from his own experience and positionality to premiere Cineclub Cuir, he did not confine his curatorial practice to films that portray the lives of Black *cuir* men. In a conversation about who Cineclub Cuir’s intended audience is, he mentioned the importance of the Black lesbian themes in Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* (1996):

The audience of Cineclub Cuir is...who? Above all my primary audience is *cuir* people in Havana. The mission is not to educate straight people. What interests me most is that *cuir* people in Cuba recognize themselves and are empowered by seeing images that are close to them. For example, when I put on *The Watermelon Woman* with Nosotrxxs, it was like a *sanación* (healing). It constructs a history that doesn’t exist. Something that you can identify with despite the absences in history. It was a dialogue. Many Black lesbian women started to talk.

For Sainz, this screening of *The Watermelon Woman* at the headquarters of the Havana-based collective Nosotrxxs, an organization of “*personas negras y queer*,” was an example of what can happen when Cineclub Cuir goes well (“Nosotrxxs - Home” 2019). *The Watermelon Woman* is set in Philadelphia in the 1990s and depicts the life of a Black lesbian video rental store worker who films herself as she searches for more information about a 1930s-era actress credited in films as “The Watermelon Woman.” The storyline highlights the erasure of Black



lesbian women in film archives and the way in which the movie industry relegated Black women to roles like “Domestic Worker 2.” The film also explores the tensions and complications of interracial lesbian relationships as both the protagonist and the historical character she researches have sex with white women. Though *Watermelon Woman* is set in a very context than contemporary Havana, Sainz feels that its portrayal of Black lesbian intimacy has resonances in Havana. The rich dialogue that this film generated among participants that night exemplified the potential of Cineclub Cuir as a space where Habanero participants can theorize diaspora, coloniality, Blackness, and *lo cuir*. By screening this film from Philadelphia, Sainz leveraged his access to global media networks to redress what he calls the “absences of history” that obscure the presence of Black lesbian subjects in both cities. Through this practice, as he did with *Tongues Untied*, Sainz suspends his concerns about *lo afro-caribeño* not being the same as *lo afro-norteamericano* to create a circulation of images between two hemispheric locations where histories of slavery and coloniality have demonized and erased the figure of the Black lesbian.

Cine Alternativo approaches the questions of geography and coloniality differently than Cineclub Cuir by setting geographical parameters on the content it screens. When I asked Raul Soublett Lopez about the “Latin American and Caribbean” part of Cine Alternativo’s full title, he reflected: “A film club in Havana for the *afrolatino*, the *afrocaribeño* doesn’t exist. This is our terrain; it is our place of study and work and how we move in this world. This came out of necessity, to have a space of reflection and debate about social themes that affect us. Not only racism but homophobia, transphobia, patriarchy.” In this explanation, Soublett Lopez uses the spatial metaphors of one’s “terrain” to make the case that Afro-Latino and Afro-Caribbean subjectivity and geographical location is the place from which to theorize larger questions of homophobia, transphobia, and patriarchy. This theoretical location invites discussions around films like Maria Govan’s *Play the Devil* (Govan 2016), which portrays the complex and intimate power dynamics between a young Trinidadian Afro-descendant man and his wealthy East Indian male pursuer. A central symbolic figure in *Play the Devil* is the *jab molassie*, or a character that Trinidadians dress up as during carnival who adorns dark paint and often wears shackles. The *jab molassie* evokes the moment when plantation owners would send enslaved people to put out sugar cane fires on the land. The dark paint, which is often now blue, used to be molasses to represent burnt sugar cane. In the mid nineteenth century, Afro-Trinidadians adopted this performance on the anniversary of emancipation to remind spectators of the conditions under slavery. The screening of *Play the Devil* in Cuba, a site where carnival, sugar production, and histories of plantation slavery have resonance in the present, creates a direct line between the Anglophone Caribbean and the Hispanophone Caribbean without any reference or circulation





through Europe or the U.S. However, these images would certainly have relevance in relation to U.S. sites like New Orleans. In other words, geographical boundaries create both productive south-south spaces of theorization but also may use arbitrary limits that preclude other types of hemispheric solidarities or connections. Ultimately, these curatorial decisions provoke questions about where the Caribbean begins and ends and how depictions of certain temporalities, relationships, and geographies might have resonance in Havana’s *extramuros* spaces and vice versa.

What kind of work does Sainz’s showing of Marlon Rigg’s *Tongues Untied* in Havana do as opposed to the Alianza’s showing of *Play the Devil*? Though the curatorial limits of each film club produce different kinds of conversations, solidarities, and outcomes, I argue that the theoretical labor of making decisions about these boundaries is productive itself of grounded theories of sexuality that engage directly with Blackness as a political and conceptual space. Through creating media infrastructures that engage with the politics of what constitutes Blackness, diaspora, and queerness, Sainz and Soublett Lopez open spaces for theorization that directly engage histories of colonial race-making and that push past the conceptual limits of *el paquete* or state subsidized cinema projects.

### When Utopia Fails: Conflicts at Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo Screenings

On a cobblestone street in the UNESCO World Heritage Site part of Havana, inside the *intramuros* zone, thirty or forty people spilled out into the street outside of La Marca tattoo studio before Cineclub Cuir’s Valentine’s day film screening. A group of young tourists from London passed by the scene with an English-speaking tour guide, undergraduates from the U.S. clustered around their professor outside the shop door, and young light-skinned Cubans with many tattoos filtered inside. From the periphery of the event, I didn’t recognize a single returning attendee from the Cerro screening a month before. Eventually, I went inside and found familiar faces from January’s installment of Cineclub Cuir. I squeezed in next to Raúl Soublett Lopez as Sainz dimmed the lights and loaded the Spanish subtitles for *Tatuagem*, a film that portrays a bohemian queer performance space in a 1970s Recife targeted by the military dictatorship. Before pressing play, Sainz greeted the crowd and encouraged us to “laugh, cry, and argue about the film together.”

How did Cineclub Cuir’s screening in an *intramuros* private business where U.S. celebrities stopped by for tattoos and tourists regularly circulate differ from its screening in an



alleyway in Cerro a month earlier? What kinds of theories, conversations, and ideas emerge out of either location based on their divergent relationships to Havana’s colonial histories? As for Cine Alternativo, which has avoided screening in private or more touristic spaces, what sort of conflicts might be generated in the geographically peripheral, state-run spaces where the Alianza Afro-Cubana often screens films?

For Cine Alternativo, the most notable conflict that happened during a screening involved a state worker who had concerns about connections she made between homosexuality, U.S. imperialism, and anti-revolutionary sentiment. This conflict happened in a state-run cultural center under a giant water tank in Havana’s Marianao neighborhood. After the Alianza Afro-Cubana screened Puerto Rican film *Angélica*, an older woman who worked at the space commented on the rainbow flag with Black-and-brown stripes that Alianza members had hung in the room earlier in the evening. Her reservations about the temporary decoration stemmed from her notion that it was a symbol of “diversionism” from the United States. Using Raúl Castro’s language of “ideological diversionism,” worker implied that the flag represented bourgeois and anti-revolutionary values. The discourse of ideological diversionism was part of a larger set of strategies used by the Cuban state in the 1960s and 1970s to isolate and marginalize social groups they deemed a threat to the Revolution, including the figure of the homosexual intellectual. As scholars inside and outside of Cuba have noted, the separating of religious practitioners, artists, homosexuals, and intellectuals who were deemed anti-social into Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción (UMAP) was one of the state’s early strategies to consolidate power (Fowler 2014, 4). In response to the audience member’s provocation, members of the Alianza reassured filmgoers that the flag was in support of Afro-LGBTQI Cubans and did not represent an ideological threat from the United States.

While Cine Alternativo occasionally had small tensions in state-run spaces, the biggest conflicts at Cineclub Cuir happened in *intramuros* spaces where the screenings were much more likely to be attended by majority Euro-descendant audiences. Sainz screening of Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames* at the Cuban fashion design shop Clandestina, a commercial and touristic space owned by white lesbian women from Cuba and Spain, exemplifies what can happen when Cineclub Cuir does not go as planned. Not only is Clandestina a site of *cuentapropismo*, or private business, it is also Havana’s first fashion brand, a company that has collaborated with tech giants like Airbnb and Cuba, and an entrepreneurial space that the *New York Times* has labeled “one of the best places to shop in Cuba” (Vora 2018). Clandestina, like La Marca where Sainz screened *Tatuagem*, is an *intramuros* space. As an *intramuros* space, Clandestina was a provocative place for Sainz to screen Borden’s lesbian feminist thriller is about gangs of women



who combat racism and sexism in a fictional post-socialist United States. In a 2019 conversation in my Vedado apartment Sainz reflected on the screening:

I was thinking *Born in Flames* would work super well in a space like Clandestina where empowered lesbian women have a project. But I quickly realized that there was a super significant distance of accessibility that was determined by money and access to visibility between the few lower class Black lesbian women in the crowd and the rest of the audience. I realized that putting on *Born in Flames* in Clandestina was really a violent thing on my part. Above all for the Black lesbian women that were there. No one talked.

After Sainz told me that no one talked during the discussion after *Born in Flames*, he clarified that people eventually filled the silence, but they were all white viewers. Sainz characterized the audience as “majority heterosexual and upper middle class, white gays, white *cuirs*, and foreigners.” Clandestina’s trendy design shop and its ability to summon a network that is likely more interested in fashion, brand loyalty, and engaging in new entrepreneurial scenes in Cuba than it is in Black queer films with anti-capitalist messages, contributed to Sainz’s characterization of his screening location choice as “violent.”

The overwhelming silence of Black viewers at Clandestina was ruptured by an outpouring of conversation that took place at a private home where he and other Black *cuir* attendees gathered after the movie’s screening. It was there during a more intimate discussion that Sainz learned more about the silences that sat heavy at the initial talk-back: “It was very intense because I hadn’t realized that the relationship between the movie, the space, and the audience could be so full of conflict. It could be that tense. It could bring that much violence to some people. No. It was very revelatory. It was like ‘wow’ and this was thanks to the after session.” During the after party, where Sainz’s friends could speak to him in confidence, he learned that holding the screening at Clandestina was what created the conditions for Black *cuir* silence. For example, the Clandestina fan base who did speak characterized *Born in Flames* as “extreme” and “radical,” which in turn provoked those who identified with the radical critique of the film to refrain from talking. Additionally, the screening of *Born in Flames* at Clandestina drew more foreign, Euro-descendant, upper-middle-class, and heterosexual attendees than screenings at other venues, which foreclosed the possibility of the kinds of resonances Sainz aims for. The company’s ties to Google and Airbnb also render it a space with more commercial significations and affects than an alleyway with a make-shift projector in Cerro. The close relationship between Clandestina and multinational technology corporations, as well as the silence of Black *cuirs* following Sainz’s screening of *Born in Flames*, provokes questions about how the role of informational capital in contributes to growing race and class divisions in Havana. The conflict at Clandestina also reveals the limits of Cineclub Cuir’s fluid movement



between *intramuros* and *extramuros* spaces in Havana. Not all colonial walls move and the screening of a film that radically critiques the racism, sexism, and heterosexism of a post-socialist revolutionary society may not have resonance in a predominantly Euro-descendant commercial and touristic space in the Old City.

Even in the conflicts they produce, Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo’s circulations generate key moments of reflection about how Habaneros maintain, re-create, and re-imagine the city’s colonial walls. They also open new spaces for critiquing the Cuban state. A vital example of this is when Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo’s membership mobilized to participate in Havana’s first unauthorized gay rights demonstration on May 11, 2019 after the Cuban state abruptly cancelled its annual *Conga contra la Homofobia* (*Conga Against Homophobia*) (Reuters 2019). The central role of club members in catalyzing this event illustrates how the groups’ media infrastructures produce counterpublics that move dynamically between spaces of media consumption and spaces of protest (Warner 2005; Fraser 1990). Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo’s own disruptions of Havana’s spatial codes through projections of experimental, *cuir*, and Afrodiasporic media on the city’s *extramuros* and *intramuros* walls, streets, and spaces inform this protest practice. The insistence of both cinema clubs on centering Blackness pushes past the state’s discourse of revolutionary racial democracy and opens up critical spaces that are not limited by institutional sponsorship. As Damián Sainz remarked to me at EICTV, Cineclub Cuir is a non-institutional, elusive cinema club that thrives in obscurity. “*Hay muchísimo poder en la oscuridad,*” he said as he related darkness to both a movement towards Blackness and away from state legibility. Sainz’s ethos also encapsulates the original promises of queerness as site of sexual subversion that resists fixed definitions and state cooptation. By avoiding state-sponsorship but also commodification within emerging commercial media markers such as *el paquete*, Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo chart a third space by offering a more dynamic and capacious media infrastructure for exploratory theorizations of a racialized *cuir* subjectivities in contemporary Havana. For those that live *extramuros*, Cineclub Cuir and Cine Alternativo’s movements open collective spaces of reflection, theorization, and self-making beyond the colonial walls of the city.

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