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REVISIONS/REPORTS

Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience, Part II

B. Ruby Rich and Lourdes Arguelles

In Part I of this report (*Signs* 9, no. 4 [Summer 1984]: 683–99), we outlined the history and dynamics of prerevolutionary Cuban homosexuality and examined the parameters of daily life for lesbians and gay men in Cuba today. We paid particular attention to post-1959 homosexual migration from the island and the implicitly anticommunist rhetoric of liberation that accompanied it—rhetoric that depicted the United States as a utopian alternative to Cuban sexual restrictions. In Part II we inquire into the equally complex and less-liberatory-than-expected outcome of homosexual resettlement and the everyday life of lesbians and gays in the Cuban émigré enclaves. We examine as well the United States' political manipulation of the gay experience in Cuba. This treatment of a particular émigré experience we feel can advance the discussion of sexuality within immigrant, minority, and émigré communities in general; at the same time, however, it must be emphasized from the outset that the Cuban experience is marked by specific factors of race, class, and ideology, in historical conjunction, that set it apart from many other U.S. ethno-national experiences.

Cuban Miami

The vast majority of the one million émigrés from Cuba settled in the Miami area after 1959. The executive and security branches of the U. S.

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government provided massive and direct assistance, frequently in conjunction with organized crime and such Latin American elites as Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua. During the 1960s and early 1970s, influential Cuban émigrés were thus able to replicate diverse elements of the prerevolutionary Havana economy (drug production, casino gambling, prostitution, and the like).¹ However, the émigré entrepreneurs gradually adjusted to a new time and place by deemphasizing these prerevolutionary activities in favor of more lucrative, more protected, and more narrowly targeted enterprises such as drug money laundering, numbers games, and counterinsurgency operations. During this period, Cuban-owned factories in the exploitive, labor-intensive garment industry also sprang up.²

During the 1970s, interests of the émigré enclave shifted even further toward bourgeois respectability and capital accumulation through real-estate speculation, import-export operations, and development of tax havens. The Miami garment industry declined, owing to well-known world trends. The 1980s brought further political and economic changes to the enclave under the Reagan administration. These shifts in the structures, functions, and character of the émigré enclave seem key to understanding the changing everyday life of Cuban homosexuals in the United States and equally key in analyzing their role in formulation and implementation of the propaganda war against the Cuban revolution.

The first period of Cuban gay resettlement in the United States (i.e., the early 1960s) was accompanied by a decline in the previous demand for an unskilled homosexual work force in Cuba. Business needs for homosexual workers had somewhat overruled the deep homophobia in prerevolutionary Cuba but were not present in the same degree in the émigré enclaves. Further, the U.S. consumer sex market that turned to Cuba before 1959 for both heterosexual and homosexual pleasures had already been redirected to other off-shore sites. The result of these economic changes was an increased restriction of gay social life and a narrowing of sexual tolerance in Cuban Miami. G.M., a lesbian now working in public relations, recalls: "The only place for gathering was Roberts, a pharmacy in the southwest section of Miami, and then eventually the Billy Lee Bar. These were raided often. And you also had to be careful people did not see you entering them."³ This last statement reflects not only the secrecy of 1960s gay life in the United States but also

1. See Lourdes Arguelles, "Cuban Miami: The Roots, Development and Everyday Life of an Emigré Enclave in the U.S. National Security State," *Contemporary Marxism*, no. 5 (1982), pp. 27–43.

2. Ibid. See also D. Walsh, "Rebozo Bank and Gambling in Bahamas Attract Investigators," *New York Times* (January 21, 1974); and Henrik Kruger, *The Great Heroin Coup: Drugs, Intelligence, and International Fascism* (Boston: South End Press, 1980).

3. Personal interview, Miami, November 23, 1984.

the integration of the vast majority of gay veterans of the Havana subculture into jobs in the enclave economy that demanded a strictly closeted work and social life. These jobs were, for the most part, low paying and clerical in nature. C., a lesbian secretarial trainee, adds: "We were concentrated in the southwest part of the city, which was the cheapest (with the exception of the Negro neighborhoods), so everyone knew you. You could encounter your supervisor on the street. You had to be really careful. More careful than in Havana."⁴ Indeed, during these years émigrés often paid the Cuban revolution a (mistaken) compliment that characterized the times: "The only good thing about Castro was that he got rid of homosexuals."⁵

The institutional autonomy of Cuban Miami reinforced for the majority of émigrés an isolation from mainstream U.S. society and from other ethnic minority peoples. At the same time, insecurity about status, both personal and collective, seems to have led to an increase in cultural conservatism. Together with the disappearance of economic mandates for tolerance, these factors tended to reify aspects of the traditional Cuban sexual ideology: patriarchal dominance and rigid gender definitions.⁶ Homophobia and misogyny remained more than ever the order of the day for the average Cuban émigré, while homosexuality in the enclave persisted as an illicit, closeted affair, frequently a catalyst to further "emigration" in search of a more anonymous, urban environment. This rigidity of gender categories had its parallels in rigorously hierarchical codes of class and color and in a national chauvinism that continue to characterize Cuban émigré life in the enclaves.

Coming out of the closet was thus a painful, even violent, experience for the working-class homosexual. E., a lesbian secretary living today in New York, remembers the process well: "I made the mistake of telling my aunt. She told my father and he beat me. Then he had a kind of heart attack. I felt scared and guilty, so I got married to a man I had known in Cuba. Three years later, he found me with a woman and beat me up. I left, and I had to leave my kid behind; my parents told me that they would support my husband in court. I go back sometimes, but never stay with my family. I only go there to see my son."⁷ In another case, also occurring in the 1960s, but this time in a petty bourgeois family, relatives discovered the liaison of a lesbian couple. The young women were subjected to family

4. Personal interview, Miami, November 23, 1984.

5. Common in émigré tabloids of the 1960s, this phrase is still in use today.

6. Other aspects of sexual ideology were relaxed. See, e.g., the acritical but informative analysis in Marie L. Richmond, *Immigrant Adaptation and Family Structure among Cubans in Miami* (New York: Arno Press, 1980). For a more critical analysis, see Guillermo R. Bernal, "Cuban Families," in *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, ed. Monica McGoldryck, John K. Pearce, and Joseph Giordano (New York: Guilford, 1982), pp. 187–207.

7. Personal interview, New York, February 6, 1982.

tribunals aimed at forcing the termination of their relationship. The family tactics, which proved successful, included harassment, forced separation, emotional blackmail, and finally, banishment from Miami of the older, presumed corruptor in the pair.⁸

Homosexuals who managed to escape the antigay wrath of the community despite their “open” life-styles were generally those in command of considerable economic resources or political influence. Being “out” was (and still is to an extent) a class privilege. The gay son of a former Cuban dictator to this day periodically hosts lavish parties with his male lovers. A professional model and “clubman” (as the social pages of the Cuban-American dailies dub him), he lives an ostentatiously open gay life even while married to a Spanish marquise—who conveniently resides in Madrid.⁹ Economic shifts could also influence existing relationships, as in the case of the above-mentioned lesbian couple. Living together again in the 1970s, they were able to visit their families as a couple once their mothers, widowed and infirm, depended on their assistance for economic survival.

As difficult as conditions were for gay men in the Cuban émigré enclaves in this period, life for noncloseted lesbians has always been harder.¹⁰ V., a Cuban lesbian from New York who travels frequently to Miami, ascribes the problem to *machismo*: “They can laugh about a *maricon* [faggot]—but, with women, they just can’t face it. To be with another man is to invite ridicule or attack in Miami, but to be with another woman, that’s the lowest of the low.”¹¹

Only casual observers of the Miami enclave have depicted gay life there as tolerable. Most striking is the assessment of gay writer Edmund White, whose fascinating travel book includes the portrait of one eighteen-year-old Cuban gay man as prototypical: “Armando is by no means critical of Cuban mores. He and his lover practice complete monogamy and fidelity. Armando thinks of promiscuity as part of gay oppression. . . . He recognized his values resemble those of his parents.”¹²

Along with White’s misattribution of monogamy and fidelity to Cuban culture, the passage errs further in seeing Armando as typical. L., a lesbian librarian living a closeted life in Miami, comments: “I’ve never encountered anyone who has that kind of gay life here among Cubans . . . and to want to imitate your parents, that’s too much.”¹³ The

8. Key informant interviews, San Diego, California, March 7, 1983.

9. See, e.g., *Diario Las Americas* (Miami) (September 4, 1983), p. 6.

10. This is probably true for all Latin communities. See Hilda Hidalgo and Elia Hidalgo Christensen, “The Puerto Rican Cultural Response to Female Homosexuality,” in *The Puerto Rican Woman*, ed. Edna Acosta-Belen (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979), pp. 110–23.

11. Personal interview, New York, August 5, 1984.

12. Edmund White, *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 185.

13. Personal interview, Miami, January 19, 1983.

opinion of E., another closeted lesbian in Miami, is more explicit: "He made him up. Gays who live here do so because there is no alternative. Like myself, I have a sick mother."¹⁴ During the early 1970s, beach resorts such as Key West and Fort Lauderdale became free zones, where émigré gay men and lesbians sought refuge from the homophobia and life-style restrictions of Cuban Miami. In addition to such temporary excursions, many left Miami entirely. Lesbian and gay male artists and intellectuals headed for major European capitals, for San Francisco, or for New York. The affluent gay male bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie sometimes settled, for at least part of the year, in places where they could procure young boys inexpensively. S. G., a retired gay physician now living in Mexico City, explained: "Life here is closer to that of Havana before Fidel. You have beautiful boys here, and affordable."¹⁵

A younger generation of lesbian and gay male students also left Cuban Miami and other émigré enclaves during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many "came out" in colleges or universities and integrated themselves into the post-Stonewall gay subculture. A few members of this younger generation began to develop new, discrete, and comparatively more positive identities within the context of the antiwar movement and the countercultural climate of the times.

For the men, the growth of a gay consumer market played a role in this development of identity. G. R., then a student in anthropology at Georgetown University, remembers: "I began to feel proud of being gay. I did not need the closet anymore. There were real neat bars I could go to. . . . There were gay newspapers, so I knew where to go. I could wear my hair long."¹⁶ For Cuban lesbians, liberation from the patriarchal dominance of the family combined with the cultural effects of feminism to produce a wider sphere of freedom than they had ever experienced in Cuba or the émigré enclaves.

All these freedoms, of course, were acquired at a price—the price of distancing themselves from their Cuban roots and from strong "enmeshment" in Cuban families.¹⁷ This partial movement out of the émigré world into the U.S. society has always characterized the integrationist development of a generation following emigration. However, for lesbians and gay men, disaffection from Cuban Miami in the late 1960s and early 1970s was accelerated—not only by cultural and economic considerations but also by a pressing need to construct and express a different kind of sexual

14. Personal interview, Miami, January 19, 1983.

15. Personal interview, Mexico City, June 20, 1984.

16. Personal interview, New York, February 14, 1979.

17. Dora R. Marina, "A Theoretical Discussion of What Changes and What Stays the Same in Cuban Immigrant Families," in *Cuban Americans: Acculturation, Adjustment, and the Family*, ed. Jose Szapocink and Maria Cristina Herrera (National Coalition of Hispanic Mental Health and Human Services, 1978), pp. 51–62.

identity. In this process, a total integration into the American gay (frequently racist, and classist) mainstream or into an all-Cuban émigré existence did not seem like adequate alternatives.

Some sought instead an integrated Cuban homosexual identity by pursuing older Cuban gays and the “old world” scene they had come to represent. G. R. explains his reasons for frequenting the Tijuana, a now-defunct bar in New York popular with older Cuban homosexuals: “It is like a part of the old Cuba, a part that is being lost . . . it’s Cuban folklore.”¹⁸ In places like the Tijuana, young émigrés found an alternative route to a culturally specific, gay Cuban identity which de-emphasized the realities of emigration. L., a lesbian physician, recalls her four-year liaison with S., a veteran of the Havana subculture: “It was an adventure into a world I had not known. Everything seemed surreal. It could have been S., or any one of those ‘personages’ from the old Havana.”¹⁹

Despite the range of partial solutions—the attraction of nostalgia, hunger for the firsthand experience of the legendary but extinct pre-revolutionary Havana, a thoroughly closeted enclave existence, or the allure of integration into the mainstream gay world—scores of lesbian and gay Cubans eventually began to move in a new direction, one that inevitably led them into the heart of political conflict. For as they sought to develop new identities as Cubans and as homosexuals in the late 1970s, the mood of the country conspired with changes in the émigré enclaves to make such a dual identity increasingly self-contradictory. In mainstream American society, the word “backlash” was used to describe the political dynamic of the time. In the émigré world, the situation, as always, was more complex.

1977: Anita Bryant and the Dialogo

The year 1977 was marked by two very different phenomena in the Cuban émigré world: one an attempt to block openness and the other an effort to open up a long-standing isolation. Both inaugurated changes in the ideological structures of the émigré communities as well as in their mobilization strategies. In that year, Anita Bryant mounted her antigay organizing campaign. Her base was Dade County, Florida, which includes Cuban Miami. During the 1960s and early 1970s, Cubans had shown little interest in social issues that originated outside the enclave; this time, however, Cubans responded feverishly in favor of the Bryant initiative. Community leaders organized demonstrations and registered new Cuban voters. C., a social worker, suggests reasons for the massive Cuban

18. Personal interview, New York, February 14, 1979.

19. Personal interview, San Diego, March 7, 1983.

mobilization: "They were seeing their kids getting lost in all the 'depravity.' They felt this was a way to stop it, to stop change."²⁰

But 1977 also initiated change. In that year, fifty-five young members of the all-émigré Antonio Maceo Brigade traveled to Cuba and began setting the foundations for the historic *Dialogo* (dialogue) that in late 1978 brought a large contingent of Cuban Americans (some of them lesbians and gay men) back to their homeland for the first time to meet officially with Fidel Castro and seek a route to normalized relations between their two countries.²¹ The event was not tranquil; participants feared for their lives in the wake of the intimidation and threats by anti-Castro émigré terrorists intent on blocking any such progress.²² Two movements, Bryant's and the *Dialogo*, with their very different goals, had been set in motion. Gay and lesbian émigrés were soon caught in the middle.

Of the two movements, the *Dialogo* was the more unprecedented, for it shattered nearly twenty years of isolation and hostilities. For the first time since 1959, the concept of coexistence was advanced openly in the émigré world. Participants in the *Dialogo* discussed family reunification; the release of political prisoners; and tourist travel to Cuba for Cuban-born émigrés, which had been banned by both U.S. and Cuban prohibitions. For some of the younger Cubans, including lesbians and gay men, contact with Cuba introduced new sociopolitical realities and an alternative to the capitalist ideology and life-style of the enclaves. In the émigré communities, there emerged a mood of tolerance toward the newly developing relations with the island, even amid the usual rabid anticommunism that has traditionally dominated discourse among Cubans in the United States.

Terrorism, however, was on the rise. Right-wing anti-Castro organizations, afraid of losing their power base and threatened by their community's sudden willingness to defy their eighteen-year anticommunist siege, struck back by intimidating and even assassinating progressive Cuban Americans. In Puerto Rico, a member of the Brigade and travel agent who sold tickets to Cuba was gunned down in the street; in New Jersey, a member of the *Dialogo* group was killed in front of his twelve-year-old son.²³ Bombs, threats, and denunciations followed. At

20. Telephone interview, Miami, June 5, 1984.

21. Unfortunately, the most in-depth analyses of the *Dialogo* have not been translated into English. See Max Azicri, "Un analisis pragmatico del dialogo entre la Cuba del interior y la del exterior," *Areito* 5, nos. 19–20 (1979): 4–7. The Antonio Maceo Brigade, which still functions today, organizes trips of young Cubans, all of whom left Cuba under the age of eighteen, back to their homeland. See the film *55 Hermanos*, by Jesus Diaz (available in 35 mm from Cinema Guild, 1697 Broadway, New York, New York 10019).

22. Jeff Stein, "Inside Omega 7," *Village Voice* (New York) (March 10, 1980).

23. Carlos Muniz and Eulalio Negrin were murdered in 1979; both cases remain "unsolved."

least one émigré activist was forced to seek refuge in Havana. Determined to discredit the progressives and to stop the *Dialogo*, the anti-Castro forces discovered that homophobia, too, could be a useful weapon.

Overall, it was a good year and a promising context for homophobia. Anita Bryant was by now victorious; leaders in the Cuban community had not flexed their muscles in vain when they supported her. Gay rights laws were being rolled back in city after city; the Briggs initiative would soon be proposed in “heathen” California; and fundamentalist Christianity was increasingly popular. One gay activist, Ovidio Ramos, committed suicide when his Bryant-spurred community turned against him. Another émigré activist, Manolo Gomez, tried to organize against the Bryant campaign. He was promptly fired from his job on the monthly *Vanidades* and severely beaten by unknown assailants. Scared, he left Miami.

The anti-Castro right wing moved to use similar, if less violent, tactics against the enclaves’ pro-*Dialogo* forces, which included a number of Cuban émigré lesbians and gay men.²⁴ The dozens of right-wing tabloids that proliferate in Cuban enclaves began to make it a standard practice to discredit progressives by labeling them homosexuals. A convicted terrorist, Antonio de la Cova, prepared dossiers from his Atlanta federal prison cell on the “unnatural sexual practices” of the *Dialogistas* for the *Cronica*, a Puerto Rico-based tabloid. One target was the president of a major Miami bank, whom de la Cova smeared because of his alleged business deals with Cuba. Others who were similarly gay-baited included both gay and heterosexual members of the Antonio Maceo Brigade and the Cuban-American journal *Areito*.²⁵

Threats also abounded. Few progressives who lived in the enclaves or who had kin there were spared. Families were warned that their *tortillera* (dyke) or *maricon* (faggot) offspring should stay out of Cuba or suffer future reprisals. A participant in the *Dialogo* once joked to a friend, “I’ve had to give up my sexuality for the revolution,” referring to the restricted life-style she had adopted to prevent right-wing tabloids from using her lesbianism to discredit the *Dialogo*.²⁶

Certainly, homosexuals of all ethno-national origins have experienced dyke- and faggot-baiting as an ongoing reality of gay life in the United States. It should be noted, however, that these attacks are rather different in scale, intent, and consequence for Cuban émigrés. Verbal attack in the tabloid press, for instance, has frequently triggered physical attack. Further, physical harassment has been such a key element of

24. Details drawn from key informant interviews, Miami, 1979–80, as well as from an ad in *Mariel* 2, no. 5 (Spring 1984): 15.

25. One of the most scathingly anti-gay and antiprogressive articles by de la Cova focuses on a member of the Antonio Maceo Brigade. See “Las locas mandan” (The queens govern), *Cronica* (San Juan, Puerto Rico) (1982).

26. Personal interview, La Habana, August 1980.

political repression within the enclaves as to constitute, itself, a threat of imminent mortality to be taken very seriously. It is important, then, to understand the extent to which progressive émigrés have experienced verbal attacks as possible death threats.

Lesbian and gay émigrés reacted in a variety of ways. Many remained in the closet from which they had never emerged; a few went back in. Among others, political work within the enclaves became more important by the day and thus created a de facto separation between them and the American gay community, just as their gayness continued to endanger their roles and efficacy in Cuban-American community work.²⁷ Some found relief by choosing partners on the island itself, which they now visited frequently and where they could escape the tension of the émigré community. Hence, the traditional difficulties lesbians and gay males faced in the Cuban enclaves became nearly intolerable for more progressive homosexual émigrés. At the same time, their near total focus on Cuban issues rendered them invisible to U.S. lesbian and gay male communities.

1980: The Marielito Influx

In spring 1980, the U.S. Immigration Service once again suspended laws prohibiting admission of homosexual aliens in order to receive all of the over one hundred thousand Cubans who had left Cuba via the port of Mariel and arrived on the Florida coast after the United States relaxed immigration quotas and Cuba opened its borders. As in the past, the U.S. government prioritized anticommunism over homophobia, recognizing the realities of refugee politics. In order to secure refugee status, émigrés had to prove they had suffered political persecution in Cuba.

Among the thousands of arriving Cubans was a proportionate number of homosexuals, generally male.²⁸ Their gayness and its lack of acceptance in Cuba seemed to provide the necessary claim for refugee classification, and the news media, in particular the gay male press, was quick in publicizing dramatic stories about the political repression of homosexuals on the island. Unfortunately, these accounts relied solely on refugee testimony with little regard for the essential differences between such testimony and “coming-out” stories: refugee testimony, which begins with personal experience and fashions it into an officially accepted

27. Hidalgo and Christensen (n. 10 above), p. 117.

28. For a different interpretation of the Mariel emigration, see Robert Bach, “Socialist Construction and Cuban Emigration: Explorations into Mariel” (paper delivered at the Conference on Cuban American Studies: Status and Future, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, May 1984). So far there are no studies that indicate that the percentage of gay men and lesbians in the Mariel exodus exceeded that of previous emigrations.

version of history that is sure to secure refugee status, has a different purpose from the coming-out story, which shatters an official falsification of history through the facts of personal experience recognized by any gay peers.²⁹

The trip from the island to the promised land of freedom, however, was not a smooth one for the latest wave of emigrants from the Cuban socialist revolution—whether gay or straight. A contraction phase in the business cycle was hurting the American economy. The U.S. working class was also hard pressed, which contributed to the kind of resentment and scapegoating expressed in one Wisconsin bar, where a flyer for a “turkey shoot” had been redesigned to announce a “Cuban shoot” that offered prizes for specific targets. State assistance for refugees could not be dispensed openly and with the largesse of the 1960s that had helped to make the Cuban-American “economic miracle” of that era possible. Instead, once on American soil, over 50 percent of the *Marielitos* (Mariel émigrés) found themselves interned in “reception” camps, jails, and mental hospitals. Violence and intimidation were common. Gay *Marielitos* suffered abuse, both from fellow *Marielitos* and from their custodians.

P., a twenty-five-year-old male nurse, provides details of his experience: “I was at Fort McCoy. I attempted suicide twice after being raped and they sent me to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital. I was there eight months, drugged most of the time, with this Dominican psychiatrist trying to psychoanalyze me and this Cuban social worker giving me dirty looks. I learned to cry. They relocated me after much trouble. Most agencies who were willing to take *Marielitos* didn’t want me because I looked too feminine.”³⁰

Relocation from institutions and resettlement into the émigré communities did not make life much easier for the gay *Marielitos*. Homophobia in the enclaves—compounded with racial and class discrimination, unemployment, and underemployment—conflicted with the expectations for freedom that had brought these Cubans to the United States. P., the male nurse, gives his assessment: “They [other Cubans] don’t like those of us who came through Mariel, because they feel we are communists, and from the poor classes. They think they are whiter. And if, in addition to being from Mariel, you are a homosexual, then you are dead.”³¹

For many *Marielitos*, survival involved a greater degree of accommodation to the host society than they had anticipated. In Cuban Miami,

29. See Lee Aitken and Pat Aufderheide, “The Anti-Castro Welcome Wagon,” *In These Times* (Chicago) (June 18–July 1, 1980), pp. 6–8.

30. Personal interview, Miami, January 6, 1982. Fort McCoy was a reception camp in Wisconsin; St. Elizabeth’s was the mental hospital in Washington, D. C., where one of the authors initially interviewed this subject.

31. Personal interview, Miami, January 6, 1982.

some of the *locas* (queens) who had emigrated to “make it” in show business still were silently awaiting stardom in the homophobic enclaves.³² In Chicago, social workers in Casa Libertad, a temporary resettlement house for gay *Marielitos*, stressed the importance of learning the rules of the game: “Staying out of trouble means, for example, that you don’t walk around the neighborhood in drag,” a disappointing lesson for the *locas* who had expected to do just that once out of Cuba. The advice was not without basis, since the community service organizers who opened Casa Libertad in 1981 had met with opposition from Cuban émigré leaders who called the group “degenerate.”³³

Other *Marielitos* did not manage to survive at all. Rigoberto Cuellar Prieto met official violence when he was gunned down by the Minneapolis police during a misunderstanding at a party. After Prieto’s death, a friend, Jose Hernandez Menendez, summed up his feelings about the status of émigrés in the United States: “A Cuban here is nothing.” The newspaper exposé of Prieto’s life and death added: “Here, it is true, gays have freedom. They can go to gay bars, have gay entertainment. But with freedom there is also helplessness—[Prieto], for example, had to turn tricks for money.”³⁴ Even government sponsorship of assistance and resettlement projects for gay *Marielitos* in cooperation with U.S. gay groups was soon seen by many as limited in its potential to help, burdened as the projects were by cultural and class barriers and charges of sexual exploitation.³⁵

Some *Marielitos* turned to a second emigration as a solution to the problems inherent in the first. Interviewed one year after the exodus, a Chicago-based *Marielito* shared his dream: “I plan to learn the laws here and follow them, even though Chicago doesn’t seem so open toward homosexuals. I’d like to eventually go to California, where gays are really free.”³⁶ The experiences of the *Marielitos* in the United States reveal the pathos of equating freedom with emigration. Insofar as emigration can assure anonymity, then perhaps it can also facilitate sexual freedom. Such freedom, however, clearly depended on a separation of the individual from community and family—in the case of the *Marielitos*, from the very families and ethnic enclaves from which they had expected the necessary moral and economic support to effect the transition from Cuba to the U.S. Thus, for certain gay *Marielitos*, the failure of the freedom myth

32. Audiotaped interviews by Martha Wallner, Miami, April 1982.

33. Debbie Nathan, “The Land of the Free, the Home of the Gay,” *Chicago Reader* (June 12, 1981), p. 27.

34. Philip Weiss, “Here We Are Nothing,” *City Pages* (Minneapolis) (February 1, 1984), p. 7.

35. On these programs, see R. Adam De Baugh, “Lesbian and Gay Cuban Relief,” *CCSA: Meeting Human Needs* (Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, Commission on Christian Social Action, July 1980); Weiss.

36. Nathan.

engendered a rejection of emigration as the route to liberation and a consequent if impossible desire to undo the choice and return to the island.

Meanwhile, true to its promise of continuing to stimulate migration from the island, the U.S. persists in receiving Cubans into its anticommunist safety net by making exceptions to smooth their way. Most recently, all *Marielitos*, with the exception of those confined in institutions, have been given the option of converting their status to permanent residency even though legal grounds for their exclusion exist.³⁷

Homophobia and the New Cuban Right

Certain figures within the gay Mariel community—particularly those belonging to the artistic and intellectual intelligentsia—have managed to effect an advantageous accommodation to the new society, in contrast to the vast majority of their peers. Residing in New York City or other major urban centers in the United States or Western Europe, these privileged gay *Marielitos* integrated themselves into a remarkable constellation of social circles, organizations, and publications that purported to represent a new Cuban dissident culture.

One of the more interesting of these organizations is the Committee of Intellectuals for the Freedom of Cuba, an international lobbying group designed to affect attitudes in U.S. and European liberal, artistic, and academic circles. Its ranks include traditional conservative émigré interest groups—including members of the prerevolutionary Cuban land-owning and commercial bourgeoisie, the Batista political apparatus, and veterans of *Playa Giron* (the Bay of Pigs)—along with a handful of gay and nongay *Marielito* artists and intellectuals. This mixture of elements was clearly in evidence at the committee's third annual congress held in Washington, D.C., during February 1982. In one session, the purpose of which was to claim a legitimately "Cuban" émigré culture modeled on that of Eastern European dissident intellectuals in this country, Reinaldo Arenas (a writer of the Mariel generation who identifies as gay) spoke to the audience along with novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante (whose homophobia we have detailed in part I of this report). Their panel was immediately preceded by one featuring the staffs of Senators Jesse Helms and John East and the just-formed House Committee on Intelligence. The conference was led by a veteran of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Still another coordinator was the scion of one of prerevolutionary Cuba's wealthiest families.³⁸

37. *Miami-Herald* (November 19, 1984).

38. All names are taken from the program book, "Global Terrorism," of the Third Congress of Cuban Dissident Intellectuals, Washington, D. C., February 1982.

Arenas, however, was not there to talk about homosexuality or the plight of his peers in the émigré enclaves. Rather, in speaking out only against Cuba, he solidified his connections to this strongly anticommunist organization. But most important, the presence of Arenas at this congress marked the beginning of an unprecedented manipulation of the gay issue by those engaged in the U.S.-financed war against the Cuban revolution. In this context, a new formula was posited—one that portrayed socialism and homophobia as inextricably linked. This strategy seemed to be designed especially for U.S. gay and liberal consumption. Emigrés from the 1960s, like playwright Ana Maria Simo, and *Marielito* newcomers, like UPI translator Reinaldo Garcia Ramos, neither of whom had been known in the United States or Cuba for advocacy of gay causes, shortly thereafter joined Arenas in a campaign of pro-gay articles and letters-to-the-editor.³⁹ In 1984, the same group coedited a special section on homosexuality in *Mariel*, the anti-Castro émigré literary magazine.

Behind-the-scenes collaboration between segments of the gay émigré intelligentsia and the anti-Castro right wing (both émigré and U.S.) helped to develop further the notion of a Cuban “dissident” gay culture. The most notable manifestation of this so-called dissidence to date has been the documentary film *Improper Conduct*, directed by two Cuban émigrés, the Oscar-winning, Spanish-born cinematographer Nestor Almendros and his codirector Orlando Jimenez-Leal. *Improper Conduct* received universal praise from the mainstream press in the United States, and those who dared to criticize the film were subjected to harassment and threats.⁴⁰

By focusing on individuals and presenting a mixture of factual evidence and lies or half-truths, *Improper Conduct* creates a myth of Cuban homosexuality very much in keeping with that under attack in part I of this report. The film’s witnesses are overwhelmingly male, white, and upper middle class identified. Susan Sontag, continuing with her championship of the gay “dissident” cause, makes a cameo appearance to denounce Cuban militarism. An extremely brief period—the UMAP

39. Reinaldo Arenas, “The Closest Attention: Gays in Cuba,” and Rene Cifuentes, “The Parameters of ‘Paradise,’” *New York Native* (October 10–23, 1983), pp. 35–37. See also Ana Maria Simo, “Airing Cuba’s Gay Gulag,” and Reinaldo Garcia Ramos, “Before and after Castro,” *New York Native* (November 21–December 4, 1983), p. 4.

40. Space prohibits a full critique of the film here. See B. Ruby Rich, “Bay of Pix,” *American Film* 9, no. 9 (July–August 1984): 57–59. See also J. Hoberman, “Macho Men,” *Village Voice* (New York) (April 17, 1984), p. 52; and Ed Sikov, “On Gays and Families,” *New York Native* (April 23–May 6, 1984), p. 32. For further debates, see *American Film* 9, nos. 10, 12 (September and November 1984); and *Village Voice* (New York) (July 24 and August 14, 1984). See also Laura Gotkowitz and Richard Turits, “Liberation Little by Little: Sex and Ideology in Cuba,” and “Screenwriter Ambrosio Fornet on UMAP and Improper Conduct: Fiction or Documentary,” *Gay Community News* (Boston) (September 29, 1984).

years—is taken to represent all Cuban history.⁴¹ Blacks (only two appear) and lesbians (none who is self-identified appears) are marginalized. Important issues of gay male and lesbian life-styles and Latin American attitudes toward sexuality are resolutely decontextualized in favor of a diatribe against Fidel Castro and comparisons of Cuba to Nazi Germany. The film's inherent problems were exemplified at its New York premiere, when one viewer asked why no mention had been made of the status of homosexuality under the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship, only to be answered by a voice shouting, "It was fabulous!" to the applause of the heavily émigré crowd.

Despite its strategic and overt alliance with gay anti-Castro interests, the Cuban émigré Right has continued its covert faggot- and dyke-baiting against progressives, visitors from the island, and émigré gays in general. In 1982, when an acclaimed *nueva trova* singer from Cuba came to the United States for a concert tour, more than a hundred anti-Castro Cuban émigrés turned out to picket her Chicago appearance and pass out flyers with a caricature picturing the woman singer in male attire. When a renowned Cuban elocutionist made his first U.S. appearance in New York in 1983, a column in the Spanish-language daily paper, *Noticias del mundo* (owned by the Unification Church and operated by Cuban émigrés), pointedly referred to "su estilo especial" (his special style) to elicit a homophobic reaction. Also in 1983, *Union City Thanksgiving*, a Cuban-American play dealing with homosexuality in an émigré enclave setting, premiered in New York. A reporter described an émigré audience leaving the theater offended, complaining that "no such things happen in a Cuban family."⁴² In 1984, when a well-known Cuban writer came to lecture at the University of Gainesville in Florida, he was greeted in the hallway by hostile anti-Castro protesters screaming "maricon sagrado" (sacred faggot) at him.

Meanwhile another link was being formed. Enrique Rueda, a veteran of *Playa Giron* and a priest, together with his largely émigré staff, was busily collecting information on the U.S. gay community. Commissioned by the Free Congress Research and Educational Foundation, a right-wing think tank, Rueda has assembled a sort of field guide to this community. Titled *The Homosexual Network*, the volume provides an identification of principals and clearly has potential for being used in campaigns for social control.⁴³

41. On the establishment of UMAP camps (Military Units for the Aid of Production), into which male homosexuals were drafted between 1965 and 1967, see Part I of this report (*Signs* 9, no. 4 [Summer 1984]: 683–99, esp. 691–92).

42. Lola Perez, "Hispanic Theatre: Coming Out of the Armario," *New York Native* (March 26–April 8, 1983), p. 29.

43. Enrique Rueda, *The Homosexual Network* (Washington, D.C.: Free Congress and Education Research Foundation, 1982).

Given the virulent homophobia of the Cuban enclaves and the right wing in the United States, it is clear that the construction of an anti-Castro campaign predicated on Cuba's repression of homosexual rights is a remarkable achievement. Success has turned on two seemingly contradictory strategies: attacks from within the Cuban community on progressive Cuban lesbians and gay men, both émigrés and visitors from the island; and attacks from the non-Cuban U.S. intellectual mainstream on Cuba's oppression of homosexuals. (In this regard, the support of William Buckley, *Commentary* magazine, and other such anticommunist elements for *Improper Conduct* has been particularly significant.) Given the segregated nature of U.S. society and the relative isolation of Cuban communities, this dual strategy has worked.

At the same time as, but independent of, the Cuban Right's manipulation of homosexuality, the gay situation in Cuban Miami was changing. Recent visits indicate that the enclave is becoming slowly more open toward homosexuality. As in the past, these changes can be traced to the transformations of the economic bases of the enclave itself—in particular, an exponential growth of the consumer sector. This growth has included the development of a large gay market to compete with the earlier “free zones” of Key West and Fort Lauderdale.

The reactions of émigré lesbians and gays to the new tolerance are varied and provisional. One Cuban émigré lesbian is cynical: “In Miami, it doesn't matter what people *become*, only what they *have*. . . . If gays can be more open, it's only because someone is making money.”⁴⁴ Others, more optimistic, welcome the changes. G. M. reports: “There is an explosion of gay bars, and that's good. There are nice elegant places where you can go . . . like the Waterfront. Miami is changing, even Miami gay life. It will now be easier to come out here.”⁴⁵ Still others mourn the passing of an era. A. B., a gay guitar teacher, comments: “Yes, of course there are more places to go now. And to a certain extent—but only to a certain extent—less repression. But feeling is being lost . . . as if we were all rushing to consume more experience, more goods, all the time. And if you are unemployed, that is tough.”⁴⁶

The testimony of other lesbians and gay men living in Cuban Miami supports these ambiguous evaluations of the current transitions and underlines the fragility, and exploitative nature, of tolerance that is solely based on the profit motive. Furthermore, there is considerable evidence that intense homophobia in families persists despite a greater tolerance for homosexuality in other spheres. Alex Oyanguren, a young Cuban-

44. Personal interview, New York, August 5, 1984.

45. Personal interview, Miami, November 23, 1984.

46. Personal interview, Miami, November 21, 1984.

American gay, describes his estrangement from his family as so total that his mother now ignores him when she drives past him in her car and tells her friends that he has moved away.⁴⁷ Lesbians too find that little has changed in their immediate environments of family, workplace, and neighborhood. One *Marielita* agreed to an interview with the anti-Castro magazine, *Mariel*, only to call back with pleas that the interview not be published because she feared the consequences of criticizing Cuban Miami—even though she was guaranteed anonymity.⁴⁸

Conclusions

The lesbian and gay émigré experience is complex and contradictory, grounded as it is in particular circumstances of ethno-national origin, class, and political ideology. Hence, a historical consideration of the Cuban experience is necessary in order to understand the changing nature of sexual identity and everyday life among gay men and lesbians. At this point, such study requires at a minimum an analysis of the interactions between the politicoeconomic matrices of the enclaves, the processes of transculturation, and the manipulation of the Cuban gay issue by anti-Castro organizations and the U.S. government.

The interaction between personal sexual identity and a changing political and cultural collective identity links the Cuban émigré experience to that of other groups. Hence, analysis of attitudes toward homosexuality and of the material conditions impinging on the expression of homosexuality (and sexuality in general) within a wide variety of émigré, minority, and immigrant communities would be an important contribution, as would inquiry into U.S. use of émigré communities in foreign policy and domestic control initiatives. Such work could contextualize this debate and help to free it from the ethnocentrism that marks current discussions.

By recognizing the complexities of Cuban gay émigré life and apprehending both its dangers and its possibilities, progressive non-Cuban lesbians and gay men can begin to cross the boundaries that have set them apart from this ethno-national experience. And, conversely, through the support derived from this type of informed contact with progressive U.S. gay men and lesbians, gay Cuban émigrés can begin to break through the barriers of isolation and parochialism which the histor-

47. *Mariel* 2, no. 5 (Spring 1984): 14.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

ical conjunctions within and between their two countries have systematically built around them. This work is intended as a first step in that direction.

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