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REVISIONS/REPORTS

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

Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich

Thousands of homosexual men and women have migrated to the United States and to other capitalist nations since the start of the socialist revolution in Cuba in 1959.¹ This exodus has been interpreted as stemming almost exclusively from the homophobic nature of the Castro regime and a set of repressive policies that have purportedly rendered gay and lesbian expression on the island virtually impossible.² At least, such has been the interpretation within North American gay academic and artistic circles and within segments of the Left.³

Conventionally accepted factors such as economic incentives and personal troubles, which migration theorists usually point to as powerful stimulators to individual migration, are seldom considered in evaluations

1. Note that the term "homosexual" and not "gay" is used when describing prerevolutionary Cuban society. Both words are used, along with "lesbian," in the discussion of Cuba after 1959. Whether the term "gay" should be applied to all to the style of homosexuality and homosexual identities common in Cuba is arguable, while the term "lesbian" seems less politically specific and hence applicable to different historical periods. But differentiation among these terms is necessarily imprecise, due to the lack of theoretical work on cross-cultural usage.

2. See, e.g., stories on the "gay" Mariel migration in the *Washington Post* (July 7, 1980); *Oakland Tribune* (August 3, 1980); and the *Advocate* (New York; August 21, 1980).

3. See, e.g., Allen Young, *Gays under the Cuban Revolution* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1981); Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualization of America, the Americanization of the Homosexual* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

of Cuban gays' migratory patterns since the revolution began. The more structuralist explanations for international population movements, which stress the role of capital and of capitalist states in organizing migratory flows from less developed to more developed economies, have yet to be invoked in the interpretation of gay migration from Cuba.⁴

Such reductive interpretation is consistent with the acritical nature of bourgeois thought and its well-known tendency to simplify motivations and homogenize differences among "lesser mortals": Third World peoples, ethnic minorities, the working class, and particularly the gay and female segments within them. It is also consistent with the easy way in which this style of thought validates suspect information; Cuban "refugee" testimony, for example, becomes its main source for evaluation of Cuban gay life, despite knowledge of the pressures on émigrés to testify to political persecution in their country of origin in order to attain the legal and economic advantages of refugee status in their new country.⁵

The success of this interpretation has served anti-Cuban interests, most notably the American state, rather well. First, credibility of the story has neutralized badly needed support for the Cuban revolution among its natural allies (North American progressive lobbies) and legitimated the presence in traditionally liberal circles of some of the more reactionary elements within the Cuban émigré population. Second, it has obscured the changing realities and subtleties of everyday gay life on the island as part of the ongoing revolutionary process itself. Third, it has made the historical legacy of prerevolutionary political economy and homophobia seem immaterial to an understanding of contemporary Cuban gay and lesbian issues. Fourth, it has helped to conceal the oppressive and exploitative features of life for gay men and women in the émigré enclaves. Fifth, it has distanced gay activists in capitalist mainstream culture from minority gays involved in the liberation movements of their respective countries and national communities. Finally, the continual scapegoating of Cuban revolutionary homophobia has made the growing number of progressive gay émigrés who criticize but also support the revolution into living contradictions: invisible to gay liberation forces but easy targets for the homophobic anti-Castro army in exile.

This report is based on research on lesbian and gay male experience conducted between 1979 and 1984 in Cuba and in Cuban émigré enclaves in the United States, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Spain. The object of the investigation was to begin apprehending the nature and dynamics of

4. See articles on Cuban gay migration in the *Boston Gay Community News* (October 25, 1980); and the *Advocate* (August 21, 1980).

5. For a discussion on the problems of bourgeois interpretations of "refugee" testimony, see Geoffrey Fox, *Working Class Emigres from Cuba* (Palo Alto, Calif.: R & E Associates, 1970), pp. 11–21.

Cuban gay experience so as to provide an adequate context in which contemporary Cuban gay life, migration, and resettlement could be understood. The research was also intended as a preliminary contribution to two areas of inquiry that remain grossly underdeveloped: description of gay and lesbian everyday life in Third World countries and communities and theory on the nature of the relationships between the structures of sexuality and the corresponding structures of socialist organization.⁶ The data were obtained through diverse systems of inquiry (historical analysis, along with survey, field, and experiential methods) and interpreted within a theoretical framework drawn from lesbian-feminist and critical gay scholarship and the politicoeconomic and phenomenological study of Cuban social life.

We are aware of the risks incurred by disseminating this study: giving ammunition to anti-Cuban lobbies and to strongly homophobic cliques on the island and risking the enmity of those Cuban émigrés who have long capitalized on this unexamined issue as a condemnation of the revolutionary process. Despite such risks, we and most of the collaborators of the study (the dozens of Cuban gays and lesbians who willingly shared their lives and analyses throughout the investigation) strongly believe that the benefits of initiating an informed discourse on Cuban homosexuality will far outweigh the potential costs—that there is an urgent need for it because of both the ongoing debates regarding sexuality and repression within capitalist and socialist countries and the complexities of gay and lesbian existence in Cuba and abroad.

This report is divided into two parts. Part I deals primarily with prerevolutionary Cuban homosexuality and with lesbian and gay experience in Cuba after the beginning of the revolution. It includes a succinct (given space limitations) analysis of different gay migratory waves. Part II (to be published in an upcoming issue of *Signs*) focuses on gay and lesbian life in the émigré enclaves and on the ways in which the American state and anti-Castro groups have used the Cuban gay issue.

Prerevolutionary Cuba

With the exception of bourgeois homosexuals who spent extended periods of time abroad, most Cubans engaged in homosexual relations (whatever their sexual identity) gravitated toward the capital city of Havana in search of work and a more liberated life-style before the revolution. Job opportunities in the interior of the island were severely limited

6. For more information on research method, see Lourdes Arguelles, "The Gay Issue in Cuban and Cuban-American Studies" (paper presented at the Cuban American Studies Conference, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, May 27, 1984).

due to the country's sharply uneven development pattern.⁷ Further, Cuba's Afro-Hispanic patriarchal culture, with its emphasis on compulsory heterosexuality, was strongest in rural areas.⁸ Also, the very smallness of prerevolutionary villages and cities made life intimate; sexual policing was thus an easy task and an effective deterrent against deviance from the norm. The openly homosexual man or woman who remained in the interior was often ostracized or cast in the role of village queer—the homosexual version of the village idiot.⁹

Even in the Havana of the 1950s, everyday life was not easy for the working-class or petty-bourgeois homosexual. Unemployment was high and had been steadily increasing throughout the decade. The scarcity of productive occupations demanded a strictly closeted occupational life. For all women, and especially for lesbians, employment almost invariably entailed continual sexual harassment. Aida, a lesbian seamstress now living in Miami, remembers: "At work, you had to pretend to have a boyfriend all the time . . . make up stories . . . even get someone to accompany you to work once or twice. . . . If not, you were in trouble. Because they'd be after you every day, every hour, every minute, caressing you, showing off their genitals. It was hell."¹⁰

The only occupational sector showing substantial growth was that connected to tourism, drug distribution, gambling, and prostitution. This sector was mostly controlled by American organized crime and members of an indigenous bourgeoisie directly linked to Batista's political apparatus.¹¹ It employed more than two hundred thousand workers as petty traders, casino operators, entertainers, servants, and prostitutes.¹²

During this period of severe sexual repression in advanced capitalist nations, homosexual desire was often channeled into illegal and lucrative offshore markets like the Havana underworld. Not surprisingly, then, Cuban homosexuals had preferential hiring treatment in the Havana tourist sector in order to meet the demands of American visitors and

7. Juan y Verena Martínez Alier, *Cuba: Economía y sociedad* (Paris: Ruedo Iberico, 1972), esp. pp. 26–57.

8. See Fernando Ortiz, *Los Negros Esclavos* (Havana: Revista Bimestre Cubana, 1916); Wyatt MacGaffey and Clifford R. Barnett, *Twentieth-Century Cuba: The Background of the Castro Revolution* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1965), p. 62.

9. For an analysis of the role of honor and shame in small villages, see J. G. Peristany, "Introduction," in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. G. Peristany (London: Penguin Books, 1965). See also M. T. Mulhare, "Sexual Ideology in Pre-Castro Cuba" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1969).

10. Personal interview, Miami, June 23, 1982.

11. Fulgencio Batista was the Cuban dictator who assumed power officially for the second time through a military coup on March 10, 1952, and ruled until his overthrow in 1959.

12. The best portraits of fifties Havana are found in the less inhibited guidebooks. See A. Roberts, *Havana: Portrait of a City* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1953).

servicemen for homoerotic experiences. Other buyers of homosexual desire were the fathers and sons of the Cuban bourgeoisie, who felt free to partake of homoerotic practices without being considered homosexual as long as they did not take the passive, so-called female role in sexual relations. Yet another common practice for Cuban heterosexual men was the procurement of a lesbian prostitute's favors for a night.¹³

Apart from employment realities, social pressures made thousands of prerevolutionary homosexuals part of this underworld. Even homosexuals such as students (who were differently placed) were integrated into this subculture through the bars that they frequented: the St. Michel, the Dirty Dick, El Gato Tuerto. Then (as is still today the case in the U.S.) most of these bars were owned and operated by organized crime. Given the sharply stratified nature of prerevolutionary Cuba, working-class heterosexual men in order to make a living were also drawn into this underworld or alternatively into a homosexual underground dominated by the Cuban homosexual bourgeoisie. The bourgeois male homosexual of this era tended out of guilt to avoid same-class liaisons with other homosexuals and was constantly on the lookout for the heterosexual macho from the lower strata of the population. Thus, in many ways prerevolutionary homosexual liaisons in themselves fostered sexual colonialism and exploitation.

The commodification of homosexual desire in the Havana underworld and in the bourgeois homosexual underground during the prerevolutionary era, however, did not produce a significant toleration of homosexual life-styles in the larger social arena. Attitudes in traditional workplaces and within the family involved a combination of ridicule and violence toward the *locas*, or queens, and shame toward the *maricones*, or faggots. *Tortilleras* (or dykes)—considerably less visible owing to the overall repression of female sexuality—were either ignored or made objects of ridicule. If legal sanctions and official harassment were rare, this tolerance was due less to social acceptance than to overriding considerations of profit and the economic interests of the underworld that dominated the Cuban political apparatus.¹⁴

The consumer structure of the Havana underworld never spawned a "gay culture" or "gay sensibility" even in strictly commercial terms, due to its isolation from the mainstream of social life and the degree of guilt and self-hatred afflicting its members. Homosexual expressions in literature and other arts were few and guarded when compared to the intellectual and artistic achievements of gays in other Latin American countries such

13. Key informant interviews, Havana and Miami, 1982. See also articles in *Bohemia* and *Carteles* magazines during 1957–59.

14. Key informant interviews, Havana, November 14, 1981. For details on the 1939 Cuban Penal Code's specifying of prison sentences for homosexual behavior, see Jose A. Martinez, *Código de defensa social* (Havana: Jesus Montero, 1939), esp. articles 384–85.

as Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina. Even sympathetic observers of the homosexual scene frequently derided those engaged in same-sex relationships. When misogyny was added to homophobia, the reactions to lesbians in particular could be vitriolic. The following passage from Guillermo Cabrera Infante's more recent writings is typical of those of the period: "Margarita was under and on top of her . . . as if swimming, indecently rubbing her . . . trying to create for herself the instrument that nature had denied her."¹⁵

Homosexual challenges to the sexual order of everyday life and its rigid gender identities tended to be private and frequently were projected onto religious practices such as *Santería*, an Afro-Cuban cult comprised of a syncretism of West African (primarily Yoruban) beliefs and rituals with those of Roman Catholicism. Because the *Santería* gods "mount" either sex arbitrarily during ceremonies of possession, *Santería* was and still is a favored form of gender transcendence for many Cuban homosexual men and lesbians.

Thus, in this prerevolutionary setting, discrete lesbian or gay male identities in the modern sense—identities that are based on self-definition and involve emotional as well as physical aspects of same sex relations—were rare.¹⁶ Erotic loyalty (and, in the case of women, subservience) to the opposite sex was assumed as normal even by homosexuals. Hence, for many Cubans of this era, homosexuality was a mere addendum to customary marital roles. Among others, it was just a profitable commodification of sexual fantasy. For the vast majority, homosexuality made life a shameful and guilt-ridden experience. Such was gay Havana in its fabled *avant la guerre* period.

The Revolutionary Era

The revolution of 1959 eradicated the Havana underworld and initiated the development of a productive economy. With the profit motive removed, the superficial tolerance of homosexuality by the strongly homophobic Cuban society quickly eroded. At the same time, the revolutionary leadership rallied against the evils of capitalist vice—which were often associated with homosexuality. The demands of a revolutionary puritanism left few heterosexual escape clauses and no homosexual leeway at all.

Emigration began immediately. The promoters and overlords of the

15. Guillermo Cabrera Infante, *La Habana para un infante difunto* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1981), p. 621; our translation.

16. On modern gay identities, see John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), esp. p. 104.

Havana underworld along with large numbers of their displaced workers (many of them homosexuals) headed for Miami. Many lesbians who had liaisons with members of the bourgeoisie followed their male protectorate to Miami, as did gay men who had worked for U.S. firms or had done domestic work for the native bourgeoisie. Bourgeois homosexuals, many of whom had lived largely abroad anyway, now moved out permanently.

The exodus and resettlement of so many homosexuals was made possible by an unprecedented legal accommodation: the United States never invoked the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952, which authorized the barring and expulsion of "sexually deviant" aliens, against these 1959 immigrants. The Florida Legislative Investigation Committee continued this official blindness when its 1964 report on homosexuality in the state omitted any reference to the influx from Cuba.¹⁷ Coming as it did at the end of a decade of McCarthyism, the Cuban gay immigration posed a difficult contradiction for the U.S. government, pitting its strong desire for a real advantage in the Cold War against its equally strong homophobia. Then, as now, anticommunism won out. Those fleeing the socialist revolution were welcomed despite their frequently open homosexuality.

Back in Cuba, life for homosexuals changed. Some veterans of the old underworld enclave joined counterrevolutionary activities or were pushed into them by the CIA. Other homosexuals, especially those from working-class backgrounds or students from petty-bourgeois families, worked to integrate themselves into the revolution. For the majority this meant going into a more guarded and, it was hoped, temporary closet. For these homosexuals, class and class interests were perceived as more elemental aspects of their identity than homosexual behavior. And the revolution spoke to these interests and this identity.

The limited social outlets still available for homosexuals, however, prolonged the relationship between the declining underworld and more progressive homosexuals, locking the two groups together for sheer companionship and sexual pleasure. Again, given the differences between male and female behavior and sexual rituals, this merging was much truer for homosexual men than for lesbians of the period. Not a few of the progressive homosexuals became implicated by default in counterrevolutionary activities and were even jailed. Young homosexuals seeking contact with "the community" in the bars and famous cruising areas of La Rampa were thus introduced to counterrevolutionary ideology and practice. One example of such a dynamic is the case of Rolando Cubela, a homosexual student leader who fought in the revolutionary army but was later enlisted by the CIA to assassinate Fidel Castro.¹⁸

17. Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, *Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida* (Tallahassee: Florida State Legislature, 1964).

18. See Anthony Summers, *Conspiracy* (Paris: Gallancz, 1980), esp. pp. 349–52; Warren Hinckle and William Turner, *The Fish Is Red: The Story of the Secret War against Castro* (New

At the same time, homosexual perspectives on the revolution could shift according to class interests. Petty-bourgeois homosexuals joined the remaining veterans of the underworld in opposing the revolution when their privileges were threatened by the laws of agrarian and urban reform. Pressures escalated. Propaganda campaigns directed by the CIA urging the Cuban people to emigrate were taking their toll on the island's population. The agency saw the potential migration of thousands of Cubans to the United States as an event that would discredit the Cuban revolution internationally, remove its much-needed technical personnel, and score an American Cold War victory. Therefore it used a number of campaigns tailored to appeal to different groups that felt threatened by the revolution.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the 1961 invasion of Giron (called the Bay of Pigs by the U.S.), systematic commando attacks from Florida bases, and internal CIA-sponsored subversion created in Cuba an increase in militarization, surveillance, and concern over national security. Realistic fears and objective dangers gave rise to paranoia, and (as in the McCarthy years here) anyone who was "different" fell under suspicion. Homosexual bars and La Rampa cruising areas were perceived, in some cases correctly, as centers of counterrevolutionary activities and began to be systematically treated as such.

In keeping with this narrowing of tolerance in the early 1960s, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), established just after the revolution, took on a new significance as watchdogs.²⁰ Created to meet the internal security needs of the island, the CDRs now expanded into social regulators, policing personal and public life in their neighborhoods with obviously negative implications for lesbians and male homosexuals. In this climate of postinvasion paranoia, private space was invaded as never before. Not surprisingly, deep suspicion came to dominate the everyday life of Cuban lesbians and male homosexuals—a feeling exacerbated by the fact that legal migration to the United States had been halted by new American immigration limitations and quotas. There was no longer any route out, except for risky escape on a small vessel or the

York: Harper & Row, 1981), esp. pp. 191–92. Cubela was apparently distraught because he felt that his homosexuality had precluded his receiving a high-level post in the revolutionary government; his thoughts of this period were obtained through interviews with his friends, Madrid, August 1980.

19. For a historical chronology of CIA anti-Cuba campaigns, see Lourdes Arguelles, "The U.S. National Security State: The CIA and Cuban Emigre Terrorism," *Race and Class* 23, no. 4 (Spring 1982): 287–304.

20. See Richard Fagen, "Mass Mobilization in Cuba: The Symbolism of the Struggle," *Journal of International Affairs* 20, no. 2 (1966): 254–71. By 1963, there were already 102,500 Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, with a membership of 1.5 million; it was later calculated that one out of every two adults in Cuba actively participated in a CDR.

long wait for legal migration through a third country (many of which formally or informally excluded homosexuals).

Major ideological changes also were taking place. The influential Popular Socialist Party (PSP) moved to fill an analytical vacuum on homosexuality by lending "scientific" credibility to the antihomosexual harangues of the revolutionary leadership and to the homophobia of the Cuban people. The leaders of the PSP, with an attitude resembling that of Soviet society in the thirties and forties, saw homosexuality as a product of bourgeois decadence. Further, the PSP leaders considered expression of sexuality not a private affair or a personal freedom but a fulfillment of obligation to society.²¹

The lesbian and homosexual male intelligentsia, now concentrated in the Cuban Writers' and Artists' Union (UNEAC), made no public countercritique on the issue of homosexuality. The homosexual resistance and survival strategies of the time were largely private, individual in nature, and lacked effective oppositional qualities. As a result, the silence permitted the PSP analysis to assume undisputed hegemony even in intellectual circles. Among many reasons for the absence of any such public gay countercritique and resistance in this period, three stand out. Foremost was the lack of a tradition of feminist discourse and, thus, of any liberatory and substantive base for discussions of sexual order and gender politics. Another reason lay in the contemporary conception of homosexuality: as a legacy of the prerevolutionary period, homosexuality was still seen, by both the Cuban gay and straight worlds, as something performed in the dark with little or no nonsexual implications. Self-interest dictated the third reason: many closeted intellectuals who were bringing Cuba international recognition feared the loss of their personal privilege—especially the loss of their ability to travel abroad, which allowed so much latitude in their own sexual expression—if they spoke out against the official stand on homosexuality.

The sixties became increasingly difficult for homosexuals (particularly those at the vanguard of intellectual and artistic life). Their sexual practices began to be detailed in public and were invariably linked with bourgeois decadence or counterrevolutionary predispositions.²² The growing crescendo of antihomosexual rhetoric culminated in 1965 in the establishment of UMAP camps (Military Units for the Aid of Production) aimed at safeguarding the revolution and guaranteeing the public good. Male homosexuals were among those drafted into the camps, while les-

21. See, e.g., Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, *La revolución rusa y sus consecuencias* (Havana: Fundamentos, 1955), and *Lo que es esencial en las diferencias entre capitalismo y comunismo* (Havana: Fundamentos, 1956).

22. Key informant interviews, Havana, July 1982. See Lisandro Otero, "Para una definición mejor de Jose Lezama Lima," *Boletín del Círculo de cultura Cubana* (New York; August 9, 1983).

bians, due to their comparative invisibility and the sexism that mandated different treatment for women, were spared. After much international protest and internal denunciation, the camps were closed at the end of the sugar harvest in 1967. Described at length in other sources, the UMAP camps have become permanent symbols of Cuban homophobia. While short-lived and denounced extensively within and outside Cuba ever since their abolition, the camps remain a damnable episode in revolutionary history.²³

The UMAP years had seen as well such forms of persecution as the forced disbanding of the El Puente Literary Group on the grounds that some of its members were homosexual. In the post-UMAP period, persecution continued in a less overt form. In the absence of a developed gay liberatory consciousness, some Cuban homosexuals retreated further into *Santería* and various forms of Eastern mysticism. Some migrated to the United States via a third country. Those who remained in Spain or in Mexico for years awaiting the American visa carved out small gay Cuban enclaves there. Homosexuals who chose to stay in Cuba became even more guarded yet continued to believe that the substantial material and emotional benefits they were deriving from the revolution outweighed the pain of repressing or concealing their sexuality.

It was only in the late sixties that a certain relaxation in the parameters of permissible sexual behavior in the international communist world began to filter into official circles in Cuba. In 1968, for instance, East Germany legalized homosexual acts between adults.²⁴ Cuba's need to relate to progressive political forces emerging in the United States and Western Europe also modified the official rhetoric, which began to describe homosexuals as sexual deviates (not criminals) to be cured (not condemned). While such changes in perspective were slowly occurring in official Cuban circles, everyday life for gays and lesbians began to improve.²⁵

Three additional events marked the gradual but continual improvement in life conditions of gay men and lesbians in Cuba during the seventies: the First National Congress on Education and Culture, the promulgation of the Family Code, and the creation of a national group on sexual education. In 1971, the First National Congress delivered a mixed message to gays and the population at large. On the one hand, the customary denunciations of homosexuals as decadent were gone;

23. For a thorough discussion of the camps, the critical literature on them, and persecution of homosexuals in this period, see Jorge Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1978), esp. pp. 357, 393.

24. Armando Fluvia, "La represión legal," in *El homosexual ante la sociedad enferma*, ed. Jose R. Enriquez (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1978), pp. 72–93.

25. For an account of lesbian life in this period, see Barbara Coro, "A Cuban Lesbian's Story," *Chicago Gay Life* (March 13, 1981), pp. 17–19.

homosexuality was no longer seen by the revolutionary leadership as a fundamental problem in Cuban society but, rather, viewed as a form of sexual behavior requiring study. And for the first time in an official document, homosexuality was referred to in medical and psychological rather than criminal terms. On the other hand, declarations from the same congress called for the removal of homosexuals from the field of education, thus continuing the view of homosexuality as a contamination of the body politic.²⁶ Mayra, a lesbian photographer still living in Cuba, described these years: "You were not totally accepted by the revolution and there were positions you could not get if you were open about [being gay] unless you were in the arts. Still . . . there was no persecution unless you were involved in counterrevolutionary activities. Then you were in trouble, and usually it was blamed on the weakness of being a homosexual."²⁷

Then in 1976, the celebrated Family Code began to make advances in eradicating sexism and, at least in principle, offered to Cubans for the first time a vision of more fluid gender definitions.²⁸ However, the code's focus on the nuclear family and its failure to address the compulsory nature of heterosexuality eventually made it less effective than anticipated in obtaining its goals and in reducing the popular homophobia of Cuban society.

In 1977 the Cuban National Group for Sexual Education was established, headed by a Cuban physician, Celestino Lajonchere, and an East German sexologist, Monika Krause. Working primarily with those involved in health and education, the group helped publicize the latest findings on the nature of sexuality and made some progress, despite the resistance Krause credited to Cuba's "cultural heritage," in updating sexual attitudes, including those pertaining to homosexuality.²⁹ Because of the many gains in conditions for women during the seventies, life for lesbians improved markedly. Ada, a lesbian rural nurse, acknowledged that things were not "perfect" but stated nevertheless, "I remember how it was before [the revolution] and for the first time, I feel I'm a human being."³⁰

26. Proceedings of the First National Congress on Education and Culture (Havana, 1972). For documents on the conference, the aftermath, and the relevance of the well-known Heberto Padilla case to issues of homosexuality and intellectual formalism, see Lourdes Casal, *El caso Padilla—literatura y revolución en Cuba: Documentos* (New York: Ediciones Nueva Atlantida, 1971), and "Homosexuality in Cuba," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Cinema* 19 (December 1978): 38–39.

27. Personal interview, Havana, August 16, 1981.

28. See *Granma Review*, English ed. (March 3, 1975), pp. 3–5; also Margaret Randall, "La mujer cubana en 1974," *Casa* 15 (March–April 1975): 67–75.

29. Personal interview with Monika Krause, Havana, October 13, 1983.

30. Personal interview, Pinar del Rio, Cuba, July 1, 1982.

Gains and setbacks merge throughout this period. The 1979 Penal Code, for example, was a disappointment to gays because it failed to legalize manifestations of homosexual behavior in the public sphere and left intact antigay laws dating to the Cuban Social Defense Code of 1939. By leaving in place legislation against “public scandal” or “extravagance,” the Penal Code continued to provide a rationale for gay paranoia.³¹

Throughout the late sixties and early seventies, Cuban gay men and lesbians continued to migrate in small numbers to the United States via a third country, as direct migration was still prohibited. Class interests and economic incentives were the main influences on their migration. In particular, the promise of unlimited consumption—the most effective propaganda of the capitalist society—remained as important an impetus for gays as for other emigrants. Family reunification was another shared goal. There was, however, a uniquely gay reason for leaving: the age-old, prerevolutionary tradition in which families encouraged gay offspring to emigrate in order to avoid family stigma. Since Havana no longer absorbed the sons and daughters into a homosexual occupational sector, emigration abroad took the place of the journey to the city.

The Mariel Exodus and Present Gay Life in Cuba

The year 1979 was an unsettled one. Even though living conditions were better than in any previous period and compared favorably with those in the rest of the Caribbean, there were serious problems. The economy still suffered from the U.S. blockade; suspicious epidemics afflicting the island’s cash-crop harvests raised the specter of biological sabotage; and a productivity drive aimed at reducing *sociolismo* (slacking off) put workers under greater disciplinary pressure. Most critically, there was considerable frustration and unrest sparked by visits (the first since the revolution) of thousands of émigrés who brought gifts as well as tales of comfortable lives in the United States. These visits of “the American cousins” increased consumer envy and added to the effectiveness of counterrevolutionary propaganda.

Lesbians and gay men were particularly vulnerable. The CIA targeted the homosexual intelligentsia and worked to persuade its members to defect, promising generous academic grants and publishing contracts. The more cost-effective ploy of blackmail was also used, especially against those gays less willing to leave, in the hope that political anxiety would force victims into exile. Carlos Alberto Montaner, a Madrid-based anti-Castro writer, for example, published two full pages listing names of

31. Código Penal de la República de Cuba, Havana, March 1, 1979, esp. articles 354, 359, 367.

homosexuals inside Cuba in an attempt to discredit them and to encourage them to migrate.³² Such cynical “assistance” in coming out continues to be a favored weapon against lesbians and gay men who are well integrated into the revolution.

The visits also provided a context in which Cuban lesbians and gay men could hear of the more open and affluent gay life-styles available in the United States as a benefit of consumer capitalism. Other common reasons for wanting to emigrate included the lack of career mobility in a still underdeveloped economy and, for men, a traditional desire for the adventure of travel that had to focus on emigration since the United States and other capitalist nations deny tourist visas to Cubans. For some Cuban gays (especially for the men), emigration also provided wider sexual parameters than they felt could ever be possible in Cuba. Other Cuban lesbians and gay men, however, steadfastly refused to fulfill their gay identity at the cost of their national and political identities.

In the spring of 1980, through the instigation of the U.S. government, a series of events inside and outside of Cuba culminated in Fidel Castro's opening of the port of Mariel to allow a massive migration, thereby forcing the United States to accept an immigration far in excess of its own quotas. The boats leaving Mariel carried many who had waited years for a visa from the United States: many former political prisoners suffering social ostracism; young men bent on adventure, many with wives and children left behind; and gays, mostly male, opting for the comparatively more open gay life promised in the United States.³³

Significantly, there were few lesbians in the Mariel exodus. Their small number by comparison with that of gay men points, again, to the fuller integration of women into Cuban society and the increased status and freedom enjoyed by lesbians, as women, under the revolution. For all the gay men and the few lesbians who left, there were many more who chose to stay. Their lives had been constantly improving. The revolution might not yet speak to the homosexual in them, but it continued to address other vital aspects of their being. They, in response, put the revolution—and Cuba—first, and put off sexual politics until later.

Today, life for lesbians and gay men in Cuba is similar, in some senses, to life for gay people in the United States pre-Stonewall, prior to the development of the gay liberation and lesbian-feminist movements and modern identities they produced. In this, its style is not very different from that customary throughout most of Latin America and the Caribbean, where *se dice nada, se hace todo* (say nothing, do every-

32. Carlos Alberto Montaner, *Informes secretos sobre la revolucion cubana* (Madrid: Playor, 1978).

33. See “The Refugee Dilemma,” a special issue of *In These Times*, vol. 4, no. 28 (June 18–July 1, 1980), esp. Lee Aitken and Pat Aufderheide, “The Anti-Castro Welcome Wagon,” pp. 6–8.

thing) is the rule. It is a closeted life but by no means a secret one. While the homosexuality of many men and women is a matter of common knowledge, it is never a matter of public record. Indeed, it is the complete absence of a public sphere that most clearly distinguishes the life of homosexuals in Cuba from any corresponding life-style in the United States or Western European urban centers.

Most commentary on homosexuality in revolutionary Cuba has concerned itself strictly with legal or occupational prohibitions. However, within the private sphere, there are a clear latitude and range of possibilities for lesbians and gay men that surprise the critical observer. The seeming contradictions in Cuba between homosexual expression and homosexual repression correspond quite clearly to the distinction made between private (expressive) and public (repressive) space. As delineated in a Latin American socialist setting, private space is far wider than in the United States, encompassing virtually all behavior outside the purview of official sanction or attention, while approved policy, published texts, and official stances compose the public sphere.

In the context of this dichotomy, there are two areas of particular concern to any critic of Cuban homophobia. One is the use of the laws governing public display to authorize "street sweeps" of obvious queens or lumpen gay males prior to major public events. Many informants explain that those arrested are gays engaged in black-market activities; others contend that they are engaged in sexual cruising or solicitation; yet others deny that the roundup of gays qua gays even occurs. Given the nature of the public sphere in Cuba, though, the actuality of these sweeps seems likely.³⁴

A second area of concern is the effect of material conditions on the latitude of homosexual expression in the seemingly most private of private spheres: the bedroom. Havana's longstanding housing shortage reflects both the limited resources of an underdeveloped nation and the punitive effect of the U.S. blockade. An affliction to the entire urban population, the housing crisis has a special impact on Cuban homosexuals.

Due to the high divorce rate, Havana's housing shortage has forced many no-longer-married people into prolonged cohabitation or a return to the family home during the long wait for a new apartment. One temporary Cuban solution to the housing crisis has been the creation of a new institution, the *posada*—a legitimization of the well-known room-by-the-hour system formerly used by the commercial sex industry, now transformed into respectable rooms for hire for the couple in search of sexual privacy. By necessitating the transfer of the bedroom from the private into the public sphere, the housing crisis has created a situation

34. Key informant interviews, Miami-Havana, June 1982. Denials taken from a personal interview with Dr. J. Vega Vega, vice-president of the Cuban National Association of Jurists, Havana, October 13, 1983.

particularly crippling to lesbian or gay male couples. By all accounts, lesbians and gay men do use the *posadas*. However, the homophobia of the society must make such an option more available to the couple with some special "in" or good connections than to the ordinary pair. The admission to *posadas*, like the ability to book hotel rooms and tables in the most select restaurants, rests on the individual manager's interpretation of official policy and thus frequently entails long waiting periods. The move, then, from private to public space is almost inevitably a movement from freer expression to greater repression for the Cuban homosexual.

Despite such restrictions and despite the fact that Party membership is an impossibility for known gays, homosexuals are nonetheless a visible feature of the Cuban social landscape. They appear at every level of the hierarchy in Cuban society, in government, and of course in the arts. They are no longer confined to an underworld economy or alienated from the mainstream of social life as they were in the prerevolutionary era. Particular individuals are well known and pointed to with pride as evidence of revolutionary nondiscrimination. They may not be "out" in the U.S. sense, in that prominent lesbians and gay men in the worlds of music, poetry, art, film, or literature never make their sexuality the subject of their work. Similarly, the absence of a gay public space means that there are no lesbian or gay bars; yet there is a flourishing homosexual social scene centered around private parties and particular homes. This rich "salon" society, a feature of Havana life in general, is particularly well suited to the expansive private sphere required by homosexuals. Beach resorts, where the zones of tolerance are much wider, offer other escapes from restriction.

While their sexuality may be an open secret inside Cuba, many lesbians and gay males who participate in cultural and academic exchanges with the United States become more guarded when abroad, fearful of how homosexual issues are utilized in the war against the Cuban revolution. But many still take the opportunity to visit lesbian and gay bars and bath houses in New York or San Francisco. Ironically, their own adjustment to a greater social integration in Cuba causes them increasingly to feel out of place in these sites, viewing their sexual consumerism as bizarre. Some, like Jorge, an artist, contend that, "for all the repression, there is more true sexuality for gays in Cuba."³⁵

Conclusions

Lacking the necessary understandings or factual bases for their judgments, even progressive gay men and lesbians in the United States assist in perpetuating a dangerously misguided set of criteria by which Cuban

35. Personal interview, New York, 1983.

homosexual issues—and the Cuban revolution, for that matter—are judged and found wanting. Similarly, inside Cuba the lives of homosexuals, in spite of some dramatic improvements, continue to be circumscribed by antiquated conceptions of homosexuality out of place in a modern and humane socialist society in transition.

The need for a distinctively Cuban socialist countercritique on behalf of homosexuality is increasingly evident. It must reconcile lesbian and gay male experiences with the island's realities and offer the international gay community critical insights into the immensely complex, rich, expressive, and problematic nature of those experiences. Until such a countercritique exists, the manipulation of the Cuban gay issue by anti-Cuban interests will remain largely unchallenged, and homosexual experience will continue to be marginalized within Cuban society.

It is obvious, however, that this countercritique is at present inhibited on at least three levels. First, the context today for any work on homosexuality in Cuba is inescapably that of a renewed Cold War, and few people—capable or not—are willing to undertake such a challenge, given the increasing manipulation from abroad to which Cuban gays can be exposed. Second, among gay men and lesbians in Cuba, the traumatic memories of the UMAP are a continued deterrent to public demand or support for such a countercritique. Third, the Cuban leadership has demonstrated a persistent reluctance to test the Cuban people's capacity for change on this subject. Other campaigns on unpopular topics—for example, the Family Code's professed mandate for equality between the sexes within the home—have been initiated, but no such effort has been directed against homophobia.

Recently, however, there are slight changes in official policy, intimations that progay elements inside and outside Cuba are putting moderate pressure on those in positions of influence on the island to consider the human and political costs of homophobia. For example, ICAIC (the Cuban Film Institute) opposed the screening of a gay documentary, *Word Is Out*, in a U.S. section of its 1983 international film festival. At the same festival, however, after an internal debate, ICAIC supported the presentation of a symposium paper—which was subsequently translated into Spanish and distributed to all festival delegates—detailing the politics and aesthetics of U.S. gay cinema.³⁶ Also significant were both the recent report in a major Cuban newspaper, *Juventud Rebelde*, urging tolerance for homosexuality, and the interested and nonantagonistic reception this article received from Cuban social researchers and university teachers at a conference held in Havana in the autumn of 1983.

36. See B. Ruby Rich, "The Aesthetics of Self-Determination" (paper presented at the Fifth International Film Festival of Latin American Cinema, ICAIC, Havana, 1983). Information drawn from author's meetings with ICAIC, August and December, 1983.

Part II of this report, by focusing on everyday gay life in the émigré enclaves and on the specifics of the contradictory uses of Cuban homophobia by anti-Cuban elements in the United States, is an attempt to develop a countercritique on Cuban homosexuality that will add to and in turn be enriched by that beginning to emerge from our gay male and lesbian *compañeros* in Cuba. To them, the *entendidos*,³⁷ this part of our report is dedicated in solidarity.

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37. *Entendido* is the Cuban subcultural term for "gay."