

Gays and the Cuban Revolution

The Case of Reinaldo Arenas

by
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Persecution of homosexuals has been, to a great extent, a war waged by the Castro government in efforts to destroy the most resistant kind of social bond in the nation: resistant, because for centuries it has been accustomed to survive under repressive circumstances, because its natural environment has been secrecy.

—Ana María Simó and Reinaldo García Ramos

Literature is queer stuff, and I am truly a queer.

—Virgilio Piñera

Historical documentation of the Cuban revolutionary experience has traditionally been extremely difficult for U.S. scholars because of political disagreements between Cuba and the United States. The communication gap and a heavy atmosphere of secrecy since the embargo in 1961 have led to conflicting points of view and contradictory reports of the Cuban sociopolitical project. The drastic political measures designed for the installation of Cuba's socialist order have caused further alienation. Opposition to the Cuban project has arisen from worldwide concerns about the methods used to achieve the proposed reforms. The charges cover a variety of areas, among them the lack of religious, political, and personal freedom, the elimination of private and artistic property, and the outlawing of intellectual opposition to the revolutionary manifesto.

One Cuban issue brought forward into the U.S. political arena is remarkable for the atmosphere of silence and bigotry that surrounds it: accusations of organized campaigns against gays since the early stages in the development of revolutionary ideology. This article highlights key incidents related to official policies against homosexuality and their impact on the national literary production, with special emphasis on the late Cuban novelist Reinaldo Arenas (1943-1990). Arenas's case has twofold importance. First, he suffered political persecution because of his homosexual-informed work, written at the peak of his Cuban-based counterrevolutionary literary production

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in the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. Second, after his arrival in the United States with the Mariel boat-lift in 1980, his campaign against Fidel Castro's regime included testimonial data about the revolution's record of systematic imprisonment of gays, and his posthumously published autobiography reveals intimate details of a strong underground gay world as he participated in it as a young man until his defection. Because of the scarcity of official statements from Cuba either on Arenas's case or on other individual accusations of gay persecution or harassment, the sources available are limited to testimonial data provided by Cuban exiles (gay and straight) and by foreign visitors (gay and straight) to the island, including my own observations while doing research in Havana in the summers of 1988, 1989, and 1997. It is understandable that the memoirs and testimonies of gay exiles are scarce and sketchy; this simply increases the need to collect and organize materials in order to begin a systematic historical analysis of the gay issue in revolutionary Cuba (see Leiner, 1994; Lumsden, 1996). Although lesbians were also affected by the restrictions imposed on gay men, their plight has been even less documented. This article will focus, however, on official policies against homosexuality and their impact on male gay intellectual circles and on Reinaldo Arenas in particular.

REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY AND HOMOSEXUALITY

The first known rumors about persecution of gays in Cuba date from 1961 with the disclosure that police were conducting organized street raids aimed at homosexual prostitutes. There was political significance in this event in that it addressed the sensitive social issue of prostitution. Innocent homosexuals became victims of police violence, however, and were arrested along with these so-called antisocial groups. The victims included well-known literary and artistic personalities. The novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante, today in exile, has published a description of one particular night of detention, the "Night of the Three P's," named for the criminal elements specifically sought in such police raids: prostitutes and pimps, along with *pájaros*, or "birds," Cuban slang for the effeminate homosexual (Cabrera Infante, 1980). A witness to such incidents, Cabrera Infante disclosed the involvement in homosexual activities of two important writers, José Lezama Lima and Virgilio Piñera, placing special emphasis on the latter's confrontation with police during the raids. A true testimonial narrative, this essay offers a rich source of information on pre- and postrevolutionary gay lifestyles.

Details of the Night of the Three P's are still scarce. Carlos Franqui, at the time director of the official news and culture publication *Revolución* and today in exile, has spoken about his version of the events. He claims that two raids took place: in one, certain Havana neighborhoods suspected of homosexual activities were raided; a second, *selectiva* (selective) one picked up at their homes (away from the above gay neighborhoods) men accused of engaging in homosexual activities by neighborhood watch groups (Franqui, 1981: 280). Among the "thousands detained" was Virgilio Piñera, arrested by the police at his home. The men detained were sent to hard-core prisons including the infamous El Príncipe, where, according to Franqui's testimony, they were "stripped [and then] dressed in the appropriate uniform: a striped suit with a P on the buttocks. Capital P: pederast, prostitute, pimp" (1981: 280). In prison Franqui met with Piñera, "thin, aged, with the stripes and the P," who was concerned, "trembling," in Franqui's words, that someone might recognize him as a writer and then he would be "accused of being a spy for *Revolución*, infiltrated to inform and to cover the news story" (1981: 283). Franqui goes on to describe his visit with Fidel Castro to intervene on behalf of Piñera. Castro promised Franqui that all cases would be examined in detail and that prostitutes would be assigned to *escuelas de reeducación*, rehabilitation and technical centers for arrested prostitutes (1981: 285). Castro added, however, that homosexuals would not be allowed to have an influence in the arts, cultural life, or education: "It is necessary to bring morality to the country. To create a strong revolutionary morality" (1981: 285).

The next recorded major official confrontation with homosexual behavior took place in 1965 with a nationwide campaign for ethical policies leading to acceptable revolutionary behavior. In this movement, which centered around open trials described by eyewitnesses as "moral purges" (Almendros and Jiménez, 1984: 65), academic authorities aided by the Communist Youth Group claimed to have identified individuals suspected of engaging in homosexual behavior. The informants were family members, work associates, or friends organized into neighborhood watch groups or "Committees for the Defense of the Revolution." This process appears in narratives by university students dismissed from their academic institutions and subjected to public humiliation after being forced to make public confessions (quoted in Almendros and Jiménez, 1984: 30):

There were many people who left the university because of that; they got busy and went away. Others, however, couldn't do that, for one reason or another, and then they had to stay put, and they had to stand up and answer when people asked, "What do you think about John Doe?" Later John Doe was there, poor fellow, and somebody would come and accuse him, "Yes, because John looked

at me with a suspicious glance the other day," or "The other day when I shook hands with him, he held my hand longer than necessary."

Some students, unable to cope with the process, committed suicide (1984: 30).

Two incidents stand out from this period in 1965: the inauguration of the *Unidad Militar para el Aumento de la Producción* (Military Unit for the Increase of Production—UMAP), a system of work and rehabilitation camps for social misfits, including homosexuals (Johnson, 1993: 149), and a visit by the late U.S. poet Allen Ginsberg. Invited to Cuba as a judge for a national literary contest, Ginsberg, a committed gay activist, confronted official spokesmen with the reports he had heard from young writers he had met in Havana. He attempted to shock reporters by saying that Castro should not persecute homosexuals because "communism is a thing of the heart, and so is homosexuality, because when two men lie together they contribute to peace and solidarity, therefore being compatible with communism" (quoted in Mario, 1969: 49). Although Ginsberg obviously meant to move Cuban authorities to reconsider their position on gay and lesbian rights, this startling remark, which in the United States would only be disconcerting, got him into trouble in Cuba. Quick action by Cuban intelligence forces interrupted his stay and led to his expulsion from the country after other extreme declarations: "Well, the worst thing I said was that I'd heard by rumor that Raúl Castro was gay. And the second thing that I said was that Che Guevara was cute" (quoted in Young, 1981: 20). These comments never found their way into the Cuban media.

After Ginsberg's exit, several of the intellectuals associated with him found themselves involved in judicial processes. For instance, Editorial *El Puente*, under the direction of the young poet José Mario and one of the few independent publishing houses left in the nation, ceased to function. According to Mario's testimony, the accusation of ideological diversionism that led to its final collapse was the work of Fidel Castro, who in a student meeting at the University of Havana had promised to "blow it up personally" (quoted in Mario, 1969: 52). Mario's friendship with Ginsberg provoked his downfall; he was arrested and taken to a UMAP camp on charges of "looking gay" and "having foreign friends" (1969: 51). According to Mario's account of the events, the police confirmed their suspicions by ordering him to walk around a room and diagnosing him to be a homosexual because of his style of walking (Almendros and Jiménez, 1984: 33). On similar charges, the poet Manuel Ballagas had to serve four years in prison for "sending social information to yankee poet Ginsberg" (Young, 1981: 29).

World personalities publicly denounced these events. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, a former ally of the revolution, must have

taken Cuban officials by surprise with his seeming criticism of the persecution: "There are no Jews in Cuba, but there are homosexuals" (quoted in Almendros and Jiménez, 1984: 79). A Mattachine Society protest against the Cuban government at the United Nations building on Easter Sunday of 1965 alerted the international public about Cuba's campaigns "intended to round up Cuban homosexuals and put them in work camps" (Marotta, 1991: 32). Finally, in response to these charges, Castro took a clear position in 1965 during an interview with the U.S. journalist Lee Lockwood (quoted in Lockwood, 1967: 92):

Nothing prevents a homosexual from professing revolutionary ideology and, consequently, exhibiting a correct political position. In this case he should not be considered politically negative. And yet we would never come to believe that a homosexual could embody the conditions and requirements of conduct that would enable us to consider him a true Revolutionary, a true Communist militant. A deviation of that nature clashes with the concept we have of what a militant Communist should be.

Carlos Franqui, still director of *Revolución*, was cowriting a book with two Italian writers and Fidel Castro when the UMAP facilities opened. After the Chinese suggested that Cuba execute all the homosexuals it arrested, Franqui confronted Castro with the latter's own hero, Julius Caesar: "Would you shoot him, too?" (Almendros and Jiménez, 1984: 84). Castro's answer, Franqui remembers, was not "very brilliant"; Castro argued that "he was building a new country, that he needed strong men free of psychological flaws, who could not be blackmailed; the homosexual was a bad example for young people" (quoted in Almendros and Jiménez, 1984: 85). Although the book never appeared in print because of this dispute, Castro promised to stop the UMAP project, but Franqui says that the camp was not closed until 1968 (Almendros and Jiménez, 1984: 86). The exact dates of opening and closure of the UMAP centers are still a matter of controversy (see Bejel, 2001).

THE REINALDO ARENAS CASE

The early 1960s was a period of heavy socialist indoctrination; a series of literacy campaigns produced a substantial reading public. Young Reinaldo Arenas, born on an isolated farm near Holguín in the province of Oriente, became living proof of Revolutionary Cuba's success in bringing literacy and advanced education to the traditionally undereducated rural and lower classes. Barely 16 years old at the triumph of the revolution, this child from a

peasant background received a scholarship to study agricultural accounting and took part in the organizational changes related to the agrarian reforms beginning in 1959. Sent to Havana in 1960 to continue his studies in his chosen technical area, however, he was driven by his passion for literature to abandon his career and become a writer-in-training.

In 1963 the National Library announced a children's literature contest for short stories that could be told in exactly five minutes. Not knowing one that fit those specifications, Arenas composed his own, "The Empty Shoes" (Santí, 1984: 228). Although he did not win a prize, the story impressed the jury, and the next day he received from the writer Eliseo Diego an invitation to work in the National Library. Two years later, in 1965, he published his first short stories in *Unión*, the prestigious literary journal of the National Writers' Guild. For a fairly uncultured apprentice writer from the provinces this was an honor. It would seem that Arenas was on his way to achieving a reputation as an up-and-coming revolutionary writer.

Arenas's literary potential was obvious in his first novel, *Celestino antes del alba*, written when he was 22. In 1965 he received a prize for it in a literary competition sponsored by the Writers' Guild. It later became the script for a play (Alomá, 1965: 37), but it was not until 1967 that it appeared in print in a limited edition of 2,000 copies. Its cool reception by the press clearly showed the critics' displeasure with it. In fact, even though the well-respected reviewer José Rodríguez Feo referred to it as "one of the most poetic and best-wrought novels in Cuban literature" (1967: 136), Arenas felt compelled to write an essay, "Celestino y yo" (1967), that foreshadowed his future confrontation with conservative cultural institutions by refusing to make excuses for not having written a revolutionary novel. *Celestino*, although its tropical setting appears to be Cuba, subverts the literary practices of Cuba's official socialist realism. In addition, its lack of "morally strong" characters, the presence of a protagonist of a hinted homosexual orientation, and the novel's clear evasion of revolutionary values would have been sufficient grounds for a counterrevolutionary label.

It can be argued that the disguised homosexual nature of *Celestino*, Arenas's main character, may have branded the author as gay. In fact, in 1965 Arenas was expelled from the University of Havana for "dubious morality and political ideology" (Arenas, 1986: 15). Many of his friends disappeared from their residences because of their "'deviations,' either sexual or ideological" (1986: 15), and became inmates of rehabilitation centers or UMAP labor camps. As Arenas recounted in *Necesidad de libertad* and in his autobiography, *Antes que anochezca* (*Before Night Falls*), he escaped imprisonment in one of those units by repeatedly changing residences and jobs (he

claims some 11 times) in order to avoid contact with the authorities (1986: 15). In the meantime, as he picaresquely related in his autobiography, he continued to pursue gay sexual escapades in spite of the dangers involved.

Arenas kept up his literary production, which by now included short stories, few of them published in respected literary journals. In 1966 he entered the Writers' Guild literary contest with his second novel, *El mundo alucinante* (*Hallucinations*), which won second prize and the right to publication. The printing never happened; the novel was censored because of its erotic passages (Santí, 1980: 20), mostly homosexual in nature. For Arenas, not everything was gloomy after his failing to win first prize in this contest, which was left unawarded. He met Virgilio Piñera, who had served as judge in the contest, and became his protégé. Piñera, who was still working for official intellectual groups, helped Arenas edit the last version of *El mundo alucinante*, and according to Arenas they remained good friends until Piñera's death in 1979.

In the meantime, charges of an officially sanctioned campaign of persecution of homosexuals, directed especially against well-known intellectuals, continued throughout the 1960s. For instance, after 1965 foreign visitors concentrated on rumors that the UMAP camps, now disguised as institutions intended for ideological reformation through forced labor, were still in service, in spite of the official reports of their closure. On this subject, three observers, the Cuban-American writer José Yglesias, the Spanish novelist Juan Goytisolo, and the American activist Allen Young, described their experiences during visits to Cuba. Yglesias's travel book, *In the Fist of the Revolution*, written after a 1967 visit to Cuba, stressed that many of those forced into the camps bore official designations as victims of an imported "disease" of effeminate male behavior and, as Castro himself had pointed out, of a condition inconsistent with the model of Cuba's new socialist man (Yglesias, 1968: 202). Goytisolo, also during a visit to Havana in 1967, met Virgilio Piñera and through him heard about the UMAP and the fate of their 60,000 felons (Almendros and Jiménez, 1984: 85). Young, during a 1969 visit to Cuba, met a number of gays who spoke of police actions against homosexuals. The authorities admitted that physical force was instrumental in the "conversion" of "antisocial" elements, but they denied the continued existence of any reform camp. One source in particular, a high-ranking official involved in a case in which ten homosexuals were relocated to less "sensitive" jobs, insisted that the transfers were "carried out with delicacy" and denied that the official position was not "fair" (quoted in Young, 1981: 28). During a second trip to Cuba in 1970 Young, by then a declared homosexual, resented the official cold shoulder he received, in dramatic contrast to the warm reception of his first visit. He became aware of Cuba's persecution of homosexuals as he

met a number of gay people who trusted him with anecdotes. They informed him that many were still losing jobs, educational opportunities, and public offices because of their sexual orientation (Young, 1981: 22):

In most cases, without the benefit of any sort of judicial process, individuals judged to be in need of rehabilitation because of their improper revolutionary attitudes were taken to camps, put to work, and offered indoctrination. The camps were set up to deal with every variety of "delinquency," i.e. with people who did not go along with the authorities in the matter of job assignment, pace of work, style of clothing, and so on. . . . The people carted off to UMAP included youths who showed "too much concern" with their personal appearance (long hair, colorful clothing, etc.); they were said to be victims of "la enfermedad" (the disease) or of "cultural imperialism." And homosexuals were high on the list of those requiring rehabilitation. Other victims were neighborhood people with "bad reputation" in the eyes of local block committees, which were euphemistically called Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR). . . . Homosexuals became their victims. Indeed, for gay people, and probably for dissidents and nonconformists of many stripes, the CDR's became a hated institution, a kind of secret backyard police.

In the same period the Cuban literary scene became involved in similar controversies with regard to the definition of proper revolutionary behavior. One result was the publication of *Paradiso* by José Lezama Lima in 1966. This novel, a beautiful example of Lezama Lima's neobaroque poetic technique, shocked Cuba with its graphic (albeit highly symbolic) references to gay sex. It is possible that Cuba's primary reason for allowing the distribution of *Paradiso* was to silence international opposition to its human rights record with regard to the gay population. Only 4,000 thousand copies of *Paradiso* came off the press, an insignificant edition, in view of the author's high international and national reputation, when Cuba was reproducing world classics by the hundreds of thousands. Cuba's dogmatic sectors condemned *Paradiso* as amoral and counterrevolutionary, and the publishing authorities promoted it as an eyewitness account of the former dictator Fulgencio Batista's sexually corrupt republican regime. There were rumors that Fidel Castro had read *Paradiso* before permitting publication of what he considered a portrayal of capitalist sexual aberrations (Sutherland, 1968: 9). This "revolutionary" reading of *Paradiso* denounced the abhorrent "foreign" vice of homosexuality, opposed by Cuban socialists.

Arenas also encountered official backlash against homosexuality after the *Paradiso* controversy. Lezama Lima's novel had had a strong impact on Arenas; he characterized it as "so explicitly homosexual; so extraordinarily complex and rich in imagery, so idiosyncratically Cuban, so Latin American, and at the same time, so unique" (1993: 84). Unable to publish his *Mundo*

alucinante in Cuba, Arenas smuggled his second novel into France, breaking Cuban regulations about the state's ownership of intellectual property and becoming one of the first writers to do so. The book came out in France in 1968. It became an immediate success and received a literary prize as the best foreign novel of the year. The Spanish version appeared in Mexico the following year. This was the beginning of Arenas's international fame and of his fall from grace with the Cuban intellectual community.

By 1969 Arenas was writing another novel, *Otra vez el mar*, under constant surveillance by national security agents. In 1969 and 1971 the police confiscated the manuscript and several revisions. He was still working, however, for official journals. His last article was published in 1970, and that same year he found himself obliged to join the 10-million-ton sugarcane harvest campaign, a project designed to provide the sugar agreed on by Cuban and Soviet treaties. Like thousands of other workers removed from their regular nonagricultural jobs, Arenas was forced to work at hard labor in a sugarcane mill, along with Reynaldo González, Miguel Barnet, and Belkis Cuza Male, members of the editorial board of the literary journal *La Gaceta de Cuba*. Despite six months of intense manual labor he managed to produce a short poetic novel, *El central*, written on 87 pieces of scrap paper that he smuggled out when he left the facilities. Eventually that text also left Cuba by illegal means.

During the two years following the *Paradiso* crisis there was a high degree of government censorship on moral grounds. In 1967 Cabrera Infante published in Spain a censored version of his *Tres tristes tigres*, a novel originally entitled *Vista del amanecer de un trópico* that received in 1964 the Premio Biblioteca Breve, also in Spain. Cabrera Infante was living in Belgium in 1964 as a cultural attaché for the revolutionary government. The liberal view of sex in his novel may have led to his loss of that job in 1965 and to his eventual defection. Even after he had broken off all political ties with Cuba, the cultural authorities there denounced the 1967 *Tres tristes tigres* as vigorously as they had criticized the 1964 edition. The following year two prizewinning works, Heberto Padilla's poetry collection *Fuera del juego* and Antón Arrufat's play *Los siete contra Tebas*, were condemned as counterrevolutionary for their lack of clear commitment to the revolutionary cause. In 1968 there was a police raid against homosexuals in Havana. As in the past, the men arrested were sent to work camps (Almendros and Jiménez, 1984: 143-146).

A Congress on Education and Culture held in Havana on April 23-30, 1971, finally spoke directly about the official proscription of homosexual activities (Primer Congreso, 1971: 10): "In regard to homosexual deviations, their character was determined to be socially pathological. There remained, indisputable, the militant principle of rejecting and of not permitting in any

form these manifestations or their propagation.” As an outlaw, the gay or lesbian artist was banned from having any influence on the development of young people (as a teacher, for instance) and prohibited from representing the Cuban Revolution abroad (1971: 10). In the same paragraph the Congress demanded more severe legal punishment for “child molesters, perverted recidivists, and antisocial incorrigibles” (1971: 10). Castro’s strongest statement during the Congress warned the intellectual, as guardian of proper revolutionary behavior, against “snobbishness, extravagance, and sexual aberrations” (quoted in Arias, 1979: 24).

The next year a declaration by the pro-Castro U.S. volunteer group Venceremos Brigade expressed its policy toward homosexuality in Cuba (quoted in Young, 1981: 98): “The Cuban people, as a whole, do not accept homosexuality. There is no material base for the oppression of homosexuals in Cuba. They are not repressed in work camps or anything of the sort. But it should be clear that Cuba does not encourage homosexuality.” In 1973 homosexuality became a crime against the “normal development of sexual relations,” punishable by imprisonment for 3-12 months or a fine of 100-300 hundred “quotas” or both, for people who “engage in homosexual acts, make public such orientation, or solicit sex from another party” (quoted in Cabrera Infante, 1984: 8).

In 1974 Arenas was accused of corrupting a minor and publishing abroad without official permission. While awaiting trial he escaped from jail and for 45 days tried to leave the island via the U.S. base at Guantánamo. Prior to his eventual capture he made his case by writing letters to international peace groups such as the United Nations, UNESCO, and the Red Cross and smuggling documents out of the country (reproduced in Arenas, 1986). He claimed that after his capture the Cuban authorities forced him to write letters to his foreign editors expressing his satisfaction with the system (Arenas, 1993: 215). By 1971 *Hallucinations* was in print in the United States, and a French translation of *Celestino* appeared in France in 1973, increasing his international reputation as a apostate of the Cuban Revolution.

The details of the alleged seduction of a minor has been an obvious point of contention among Arenas’s critics. In fact, during my 1988 trip to Havana, a writer of Arenas’s generation, a woman who claimed to have been his friend, told me that Arenas did in fact seduce a minor. She spoke in detail of having witnessed the rage of the minor’s father, who wanted to find Arenas in order to “blow his brains out.” It is not surprising, therefore, that in his autobiography Arenas sets out to offer the ultimate version of this incident. His version points to a police setup. The plan, carried out by two young men, included their stealing Arenas’s beach bag (which contained other manuscripts of *Otra vez el mar*) and reporting that they had engaged in oral sex

with him. At the trial both young men, whom Arenas characterized as “not minors. They were strong, and over six feet tall” (1993: 209), denied having had a sexual encounter with the novelist, even when the judge questioned them in the most graphic terms: “Well, did he suck your cock or didn’t he?” (1993: 210). Their continual denial of the events led to a mistrial, but the court sentenced Arenas to two years in prison, where he would remain until 1976.

Arenas’s multiple experiences in several penal institutions and his rehabilitation program are graphically traced in *Before Night Falls*. Among the most important autobiographical revelations is his disclosure of his attempt to commit suicide with an overdose of hallucinogenic drugs while incarcerated in El Morro prison (a Spanish colonial fort overlooking Havana harbor, turned into a high-security penal facility). His descriptions of his experiences while imprisoned in El Morro are perhaps his most graphic attacks against the violation of the human rights of prisoners in Cuban jails and the inhuman mistreatment of gays in particular (Arenas, 1993: 180-181):

Homosexuals were confined to the two worst wards of El Morro: these wards were below ground at the lowest level, and water seeped into the cells at high tide. It was a sweltering place without a bathroom. Gays were not treated like human beings, they were treated like beasts. They were the last ones to come out for meals, so we saw them walk by, and the most insignificant incident was an excuse to beat them mercilessly. The soldiers guarding us, who called themselves *combatientes*, were army recruits sent here as a sort of punishment; they found some release for their rage by taking it out on the homosexuals. Of course, nobody called them homosexuals; they were called fairies, faggots, queers, or at best, gays. The wards for fairies were really the last circle of hell.

Although, as foreign visitors had pointed out, large numbers of gays and lesbians had suffered constant harassment, arrest, and confinement in a variety of reformatory institutions, no systematic historical account of this was available until 1984, with the release of the motion picture *Improper Conduct* by the exiled filmmakers Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez. *Improper Conduct* was possible because of the testimony of the most recent Cuban exiles to the United States, the 120,000 individuals who entered the country via the Mariel boat-lift in 1980. Castro’s quick explanation for such a massive exodus was that the group consisted of Cuba’s lowest antisocials: prostitutes, criminals, the mentally disturbed, and homosexuals. Against those labels, the so-called Marielitos have fought for a place in American society. Gay and lesbian Marielitos, among them writers, artists, and professionals in various disciplines, disclosed in *Improper Conduct* information that was meant to settle past arguments about the existence of sophisticated campaigns against

Cuba's gay and lesbian populations (quoted in Almendros and Jiménez, 1984: 137):

Work in the fields was quite exhausting. We had to get up before dawn and habitually we returned to the camp at nightfall. That is to say that we worked outside the camp. Planting tobacco was one job; cutting cane was another. But one of the most exhausting jobs that we carried out later was when they took us to a farm called Zenea, and it consisted of cutting down aromatic bushes covered with thorns. There were enormous fields full of those bushes, which we had to cut down to the roots. I recall that when we would get back to the camp, I had to keep picking thorns out of my heels and feet. Here are some sketches that, to my best of my memory, show a view of the camp. Here we see the barbed-wire fences that surrounded the whole camp. Here we see some towers with guards, the posts. This is the entrance. Here we see the barracks that served for sleeping quarters. These are the punishment cells; when somebody would do something considered incorrect, he was confined in these cells, which were small . . . there were about twenty of them. In these cells you didn't have a bed; you had to sleep on the floor.

The testimony of gays and lesbians presented in *Improper Conduct* was to reopen old arguments about the systematic project of various revolutionary organisms for dealing with the issue of homosexuality. These arguments took opposite points of view. The Cuban exile group, composed of gays and lesbians of various ages, social classes, and professions, confronted the pro-Castro factions. The exile group's emphasis, based on the experience of continual persecution, challenged the leftists' perception of ideological transformation by insisting on the systematic homophobia inherent in the revolutionary ideology.

HOMOSEXUALITY AND EXILE POLITICS

Improper Conduct's attempt to record the testimony of gay and straight Cuban exiles on the antigay campaign in Cuba provoked heated controversy among the socialist intelligentsia both in Cuba and in the United States. Among the most significant spokespersons for the revolutionary government, the renowned Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, in an article in *The Village Voice*, recognized that the UMAP project had been a "mistake and a scandal that fortunately concluded with its abolition, followed by a policy of rectification" (1984: 30). But Gutiérrez Alea also accused the documentary of serious historical errors, such as designating 1964-1969 as the period of the UMAP, instead of 1965-1967. Arenas's autobiography places

the UMAP facilities two years earlier, in 1963, insisting that by that year many of his young gay acquaintances in cultural circles had been imprisoned in those camps (1992: 94). Significantly, Gutiérrez Alea's article also appeared in *Granma*, the official communist journal; his view of Almendros and Jiménez as dissenters from the Cuban regime took on the infantile patterns of a name-calling discourse common in both the defenders and the detractors of Cuban socialism: "*Improper Conduct* tries to be a document through which one can obtain an 'authentic' image of our reality *here* and *now*. But its lack of historical sense, the absence of social context, not only determines its shallowness, but converts the film into a documentary revealing the authors' essential inhumanity" (1984: 30). It should be pointed out that *Granma's* readership had not seen the documentary, since the film had not been shown in Cuba. During my own conversations with Cuban writers, especially with young people in their late 20s and 30s, in Havana in 1988, 1989, 1997, I found that only a handful had heard of *Improper Conduct*, and no one claimed to have seen it.

Similar controversy surrounded *Improper Conduct* in the United States among groups traditionally aligned with socialist Cuba. For instance, Debra Evanson accused the documentary of using a "manipulative technique . . . namely to confuse time frames so as to confuse the reader that incidents of the 1960's reoccur in the 1980's" (1986: 1). Judy Ornstein, after a visit to Cuba in 1985, although expressing her "wish that the revolution could move faster against homophobia" (1986), also had strong words against *Improper Conduct*: "It is also wrong to imply (as did the film 'Improper Conduct') that Cuban homophobia began in 1959 and that no progress has been made in changing attitudes about homosexuality." Other critics, Lourdes Argüelles and B. Ruby Rich, made no use of the data presented by *Improper Conduct* in their various papers dealing with gay and lesbian history in revolutionary Cuba. Three years after its opening, David Thorstad, after a visit to Cuba in 1987, commented on his experiences on the island: "Life is not easy there, especially if you're gay. But it is far from joyless. Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez Leal's film *Improper Conduct* added some details to what was known about the persecution of gays in Cuba in the 1960s and '70s, but it cannot be taken as an accurate statement about gay life today" (1987: 21). Most recently, Marvin Leiner (1994: 52), in his *Sexual Politics in Cuba*, has also denied the film's credibility: "It focuses on an aspect of human rights in which significant improvement has taken place, yet the film tells us nothing of these changes and implies that conditions of twenty to twenty-five years ago are the conditions of today."

A 1983 article by Argüelles and Rich titled "The Easy Convenience of Cuban Homophobia" elicited a defensive reaction among some Marielito

writers, including Reinaldo Arenas, who had arrived in the United States on May 5, 1980, in one of the boats from Mariel. Almost at once, Arenas established himself as one of the most prestigious Cuban writers in exile, along with the novelists Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Severo Sarduy and the poet Heberto Padilla. In 1983 several of the newly arrived Marielito writers joined forces to print the works of talented young writers in their self-financed journal *Mariel*, the brainchild of Arenas. Although their approach to literature was not entirely political, their underlying contention that Marielito writers had failed to attract the attention of publishing houses because of their political stands against the Castro regime certainly informed the critical articles written by the editorial board members, among them Arenas, who had become a fairly active guest speaker for anti-Castro groups. *Mariel* also attempted to combat the negative image of the Mariel emigrants, who were thought to be of a lower class, uneducated and unskilled, by reproducing mostly unpublished literary works, poetry, narrative, and graphics by Marielito and other Cuban and Latino intellectuals.

Joining the controversy about the violation of gay and lesbian rights in Cuba, in 1984 *Mariel* published a special issue on the subject, "Cubans and Homosexuality," originally meant as an introduction to the soon-to-be-released *Improper Conduct*. The series of essays was also intended to refute the "tendentious analysis" by Argüelles and Rich, who had refused to have their article translated into Spanish and published in *Mariel* (Simó and García Ramos, 1984: 9). "Hablemos claro," an article cowritten by the exiled Cuban writers Ana María Simó and Reinaldo García Ramos, provided data to refute Argüelles and Rich's analysis of the gay and lesbian issue in Cuba, which the *Mariel* editorial board considered "clichés to be argued" (1984: 9). A short note signed by the editorial board expressed the hope that the Simó and García Ramos article would "air among us aspects of our mentality and of our culture that must evolve" (1984: 8), a direct reference to the persistence of homophobic attitudes in the Cuban community in the United States. That homophobia, set within the critical framework of the ideological restrictions on homosexuality in Cuba, was identified as "traditional forms of expression and of prejudice that still continue manifest in the heart of the Cuban community that has managed to escape" (1984: 8).

"Hablemos claro" stands out because of a testimonial dichotomy inherent in the treatment of the persecution of gays and lesbians in Cuba who, unlike Argüelles and Rich or any other leftist visitor to Cuba, speak from an experiential vantage point. In fact, the points discussed in "Hablemos claro," for instance, the extent of homophobia in a Cuban cultural, religious, and political setting, can only be understood by those who have suffered and escaped from it. Refuting Argüelles and Rich's assertion that Cuba had never had a

real gay culture, Simó and García Ramos offer a list of “openly or discreetly homosexual lifestyles” (1984: 10) in prerevolutionary literature and other arts. They also present the “feeling” in the music of the 1950s and 1960s as an example of “an evident homosexual sensibility” (1984: 10). Simó and García Ramos seem to indicate that Argüelles and Rich may have had difficulty in perceiving the subtleties of Cuban gay lifestyles. This fact was also stressed as the reason for Argüelles and Rich’s refusal to have their article published by *Mariel* in a Spanish translation: “It is symptomatic that these writers feel obligated to speak *of* Cubans, but not *to* Cubans” (1984: 9).

Argüelles and Rich’s statement that gay people in Cuba are not imprisoned just for being homosexuals is not addressed by Simó and García Ramos despite their article’s strong testimonial background. Simó was to speak freely about her own experiences in an interview published in the gay journal *The Advocate* (Dace, 1984). In the same *Advocate* issue, Arenas refrained from revealing the details of his incarceration in 1974 even though the purpose of the interview was to discuss the controversy surrounding *Improper Conduct* (Ellis, 1984).

Subsequent articles by Argüelles and Rich appeared to answer point by point the accusations made in “Hablemos claro.” These articles labeled the intellectuals associated with *Mariel* as a “new Cuban right” with a “new Cuban dissident culture” (1985: 131). Among the charges against this “new Cuban right” was its denunciation of Guillermo Cabrera Infante for homophobia (1985: 131). Argüelles and Rich succinctly summarized their rejection of the testimony of the newly arrived gay and lesbian Mariel émigrés, claiming that their decision to emigrate had been based solely on economic needs (1984: 695):

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.

A more direct attack was launched against Arenas, whose anti-Castro gay campaign Argüelles and Rich personalized as “the beginning of an unprecedented manipulation of the gay issue by those engaged in the U.S.-financed war against the Cuban revolution” (1985: 132). They also pointed to data on the progress of the revolution with regard to gay- and lesbian-related issues and theorized about the complicated intersection of ideological zeal for social advancement and nationalist homophobic tendencies. Among the points that they stressed in particular were (1) that the UMAP period, “a dam-

nable episode in revolutionary history,” had already been well documented, with the implication that *Improper Conduct* was unnecessary (1984: 692), and (2) that ever since 1967, when the UMAP camps were shut down, the Cuban government had attempted to deal openly with homosexuality in the context of revolutionary ideology. Argüelles and Rich state that official efforts to reduce the oppression of homosexuals have been evident to varying degrees since the early days of the Castro regime. Their opinion that *Improper Conduct* attempted to present the UMAP, “an extremely brief period” (1985: 132), as “represent[ing] all Cuban history” (1985: 133) made them search for examples of official tolerance of homosexuality. By 1983, they claimed, there were clear indicators of a certain relaxation of the government’s position in regard to homosexuality. For example, although a U.S. gay documentary, *Word Is Out*, was censored by the organizers of the 1983 International Film Festival in Havana, a symposium paper dealing with American gay cinema did appear in Spanish and was available to those attending the festival (1984: 698).

Allen Young questioned the reactions of these Castro-aligned scholars on the basis of his firsthand experience in confronting official homophobic attitudes during his 1971 trip to Cuba. In defense of *Improper Conduct*, and speaking in particular about the message conveyed by Almendros, Simó, and Arenas, Young said, “The issue is not only Cuba’s homophobia: It is the fact that the Castro government is oppressive, militaristic and undemocratic—and that its economic and social advances are much overrated” (1984: 35).

It can be argued that Arenas’s gay activism was an integral part of his political campaign against Cuba’s socialism. It also made him Latin America’s most aggressive gay writer and critic of Latino homophobic-based sexual cultures. As a gay activist, for instance, Arenas never made a secret of his sexual orientation (the main reason for his prison record in Cuba and for his seeking political asylum in the United States). His open references to gay subjects in his own work during early interviews in the United States made him one of the first “out-of-the-closet” gay writers from a Latin American country. In two interviews in 1981 he spoke openly of his homosexuality (Giesbert, 1981: 64) and stated that his novel *El mundo alucinante* contained “explicit allusions to the homosexual world” (Rozencaig, 1981: 44). He further revealed his gay commitment in a 1984 interview in *The Advocate* (Ellis, 1984), in “The End of a Story,” a short story published in *My Deep Pain Is Love* (1983), a collection of gay Latin American narratives, and in his appearance as a politically committed gay writer in *Improper Conduct*. His personal attack on the Cuban authorities came in 1986 in his *Necesidad de libertad*, an account of his experiences with the Cuban legal and penal systems, and in his

autobiography *Before Night Falls*. Both works contain a collection of official documents, intimate disclosures, and supporting material revealing the systematic, officially sanctioned oppression of gays in Cuba.

Before Night Falls includes historical data on the large gay communities of revolutionary cultural and artistic centers. It also contains Arenas's controversial "outings" of gay people in positions of power, whose names, fictionalized by the Spanish and American publishing houses, are recognizable to scholars familiar with Cuban literary history, and his accounts of a systematic official persecution of gay activists and gay intellectuals. Clearly inspired by the political "outing" practices of U.S. gay activists, it is a highly transgressive text, for it ventures beyond the limits of morality for both Cuban and U.S. society. It has graphic descriptions of his sexual practices, including instances of sexual acts with farm animals during his childhood, and boasts of insatiable sexual appetite displayed in his claim of having had sex with some 5,000 men by age 25. This strong gay alter ego is visible in his writing, as he comments in an unpublished letter to me postmarked December 28, 1989 (my translation):

I believe that all my books form a harmonious totality. In this whole there is a central character who is the poet—the creator of the image, the creator of the books that form him, the one who knows that his mission is to write until his last hour. He is an autobiographical character; his condition as a homosexual is linked to my own condition, to the condition of one expelled, of one touched by a curse, linked to the accursed condition of my work, to its irreverence, and to its tragic and disconsolate vision of the world.

Arenas made his death his ultimate political statement. After his suicide on December 7, 1990, on account of his imminent death from AIDS, several of his closest friends received a note that read in part as follows (Arenas, 1993: 317):

During the past few years, even though I felt very ill, I have been able to finish my literary work. . . . You are the heirs of all my terrors, but also of my hope that Cuba will soon be free. . . . There is only one person I hold accountable: Fidel Castro. The sufferings of exile, the pain of being banished from my country, the loneliness, and the diseases contracted in exile would probably never have happened if I had been able to enjoy freedom in my country. . . . Cuba will be free. I already am.

In this last written political statement, he made Castro metaphorically and directly responsible for his death, for his having contracted AIDS in a foreign country that had never fully welcomed him as part of an ideologically charged immigration movement. In his introduction to the autobiography,

written shortly before his suicide, Arenas equated Castro's government with homophobic governments elsewhere: "That reactionary class always in power, and the powerful within any system, must feel grateful to AIDS because a good part of the marginal population, whose only aspiration is to live and who therefore oppose all dogma and political hypocrisy, will be wiped out" (1993: xvii). What follows is a truly uncensored personal self-analysis devoid of the hypocrisy of social or political restrictions on achieving the full expression of sexual desire.

The political implications of Arenas's autobiography are apparent. Two, however, stand out. First, it emphasizes the homophobic oppression experienced by gays in Cuba. Second, it seems to be directed against the fairly traditional and sober secondhand testimonials of gays and lesbians currently living in Cuba as recounted by leftist visitors to Cuba. Since much of it deals with his years in Cuba, Arenas needed to infer that the homophobia he suffered in Cuba had not changed (in contrast to the claim of his detractors) on the basis of his experiences as an exile activist confronting homophobic revolutionary opposition via the U.S. left. In the end it is up to the reader to assess the views of the opposing ideological factions and complete the picture on this controversial issue.

CONCLUSIONS

Cuban governmental harassment because of sexual orientation is not on the agenda of either diplomatic or human rights institutions (although Amnesty International has elsewhere defended incarcerated gays and lesbians). It can be argued that despite Cuba's success in isolating HIV patients in special hospices (Leiner, 1994: 117-157), this radical practice reflects a homophobic stand. Changes in antihomosexual sentiment, however, are also evident. The highly successful 1994 film *Fresa y chocolate*, based on a short story by the revolutionary writer Senel Paz, offers a candid and campy view of the homophobia faced by gay artists in contemporary Cuba. Although the UMAP camps are mentioned in passing, the film addresses the role of the homosexual in Cuban society, particularly in the arts. Most of the people I spoke with in Cuba in the summer of 1997 had liked the film but felt that there was no opportunity at the national level to discuss it. One person, a tour guide, added that it merely intended to describe "a period of softening of policies within the system" and was not necessarily "an analysis of the gay theme." He went on to say that he felt comfortable dealing openly with the "gay issue" because as a tour guide he had more contact with "out-of-the-closet" gay people, not because the government encouraged his observations on that subject.

Other foreign observers, such as Ian Lumsden, seem to agree that changes in dealing with gay issues at the national level are apparent. Lumsden points specifically to the Manifesto of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Cuba, drafted in July 28, 1994, as an attempt by an unofficial gay and lesbian organization to achieve a “cultural and intellectual apertura” (1996: 199).

Changes will not, however, be easy. Recent disclosures have exposed police raids against predominantly gay nightclubs. To the international embarrassment of the Cuban government, in a raid on August 23, 1997, one of several hundred people detained was the renowned Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, who was taken away for an official document check. The official reason for the raid was to arrest prostitutes. This justification is in my opinion suspect, since I witnessed how readily available and affordable prostitutes (the so-called *jinetas*) are for hotel guests throughout Cuba.

How much change had occurred since the departure of a considerable number of gays and lesbians with the Mariel boat-lift was my own pressing question while in Cuba in 1997. Not to my surprise, I still encountered personal accounts that contradicted Reinaldo Arenas's. His autobiography, available not in Cuban bookstores but as gifts from foreign visitors such as I, may in time initiate a national debate on the Cuban public's view of homosexuality. As more gay and lesbian exiles reveal their personal experiences with governmental oppression, Cuban political institutions may be forced to disclose official data, and another chapter of the history of the Cuban Revolution may become available.

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