

# 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~~

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 *jineteras*) 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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