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HOMOSEXUALITY AND INVISIBILITY  
IN REVOLUTIONARY CUBA

REINALDO ARENAS AND TOMÁS GUTIÉRREZ ALEA

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## Introduction

It is difficult to determine the origin of homophobia in Cuba. Homophobic attitudes had been entrenched in Cuban political life for decades before the departure of the Spanish and were a central part of the morality of the Cuban Revolution. For Cuban homosexuals, defending their identity has been a challenge that has led to censorship, exile and invisibility, especially during the first three decades of the revolutionary government. Fear and stereotyping were essential in turning this group into a social problem in the eyes of the population. Using social constructionism as a methodology, the authorities dictated that homosexuality was a social problem and developed the idea that homosexuals were marginals with a pathology that could be ‘solved’/‘treated’ (Sedgwick 1990: 61; Almendros and Jiménez-Leal 1984a: 176).<sup>1</sup>

This study is divided into two parts. First, the narrative of homophobic ethos in Cuba is traced from the departure of the Spanish in 1898 up to the beginning of the Cuban Revolution using data present in political texts, films, documentaries and literature before and throughout Fidel Castro’s regime. Second, I focus on the way in which homosexuals survived the repressive period after Castro came to power. The essence of the conflict between supporters of the revolution and dissidents in Cuba is embedded in alternative insights into the life and work of Reinaldo Arenas and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea.

As Arenas was one of the fiercest representatives of Cuban dissidence in exile, his feelings reveal the difficulties of preserving identity and social cohesion in a marginal context (i.e. censorship in Cuba first and in exile later). Ultimately, Arenas managed to give a voice back to those individuals who were not allowed to talk during the first three decades of the revolutionary government.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed narrative of the social problem and the marginal from a sociological point of view, see Isaacs et al. (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Years later, connecting with a contemporary and younger generation of readers, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez also referred to those individuals in similar terms, within the literary context of *realismo sucio*: ‘Esta es la voz de los sin voz. Los que tienen que arañar la tierra cada día para buscar algo de comer, no tienen tiempo ni energía para nada más. Su objetivo único es sobrevivir. Como sea. De cualquier modo. Ni ellos mismos saben por qué ni para qué. Se empecinan en sobrevivir un día más. Sólo eso’ (Gutiérrez 1998).

A close reading of Arenas's private letters, interviews with him and the manuscripts of his novels, most of which are held in the Arenas Collection at the Firestone Library in Princeton, allows an alternative view of Arenas as a writer and activist to be constructed. The material offers evidence that Arenas was a much more complex character than might be expected, as a result of his determination, ambition, sadness, disappointment and ultimately nostalgia. This is evidenced by the fact that he devoted a considerable amount of his time in exile to reflecting compulsively on Cuba, its past, its present and its lack of a future.

As for Gutiérrez Alea, a new reading is offered of his most celebrated film on Cuban homophobia and dissidence in revolutionary Cuba: *Fresa y chocolate* (1994). This is done on the basis of the unpublished testimony of the Cuban writer Roger Salas, who inspired the plot of the film. This had been long suspected by critics, but he had hitherto refused to confirm it. In view of Salas's testimony, his own account of events in 'Helados de pasión: el cordero, la lluvia y el hombre desnudo' (1998) gains unusual relevance. This short story has received little scholarly attention, but here it becomes essential to determining Gutiérrez Alea's real ideology in reference to the issues of homophobia, homosexuality and intellectual dissidence in revolutionary Cuba.

*Fresa y chocolate* is identified as having a quite different message from conciliation. In light of the new evidence, it is shown to aim ultimately at justifying the ideological intolerance that operated in Cuba before the 1990s, as it responds to the plan to clean up the image of the regime abroad.

The resistance of Cuban homosexuals, in order to preserve their voice and identity, is therefore explored in this book against a wide theoretical background (i.e. national identity, sexual identity, social cohesion, visibility/invisibility, citizenship, visualisation, censorship and silence). These concepts provide a broader conceptual basis that indicates the central role played by the issue of homosexuality in the definition of Cubanhood after independence from Spain.

However, one cannot talk about culture in Cuba without talking about politics. This explains, for instance, the restrictions imposed on artistic creation in order to preserve the virile element in the (re)definition of the Cuban male (i.e. the 'new man') as essential in the debate on national identity. This also explains the motives that led the Cuban authorities to demand the collaboration of the intelligentsia. Their support was needed to provide a positive image abroad of the new system. Their talent, so to speak, had to meet the interest of the revolutionary cause. The situation reached a peak during the years when Stalinism marked the *tempos* in Cuba, mainly during the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Many assumed their propagandistic role and supported a rejection of ideological and sexual alternatives. Overall, homosexuals were seen as a

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of Stalinism in Cuba, see Stubbs (1989); Bergmann and Smith (1995); and Bunck (1994).

destabilising threat to the system, so the government launched an institutionalised homophobic system whose purpose was to keep them under control.

In my approach to 'sexual deviance' in Cuba, special attention is paid to the mechanisms created to control sexual and intellectual dissidence in the years following the success of the Cuban Revolution. Measures such as the setting up of the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución*, the UMAPs (*Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción*, 1965–8) and the law against *vagancia* (1971) demonstrate the homophobic creed of the regime. These laws ultimately show evidence of the campaign to control the perception of the revolutionary project abroad. Time has proved the failure of governmental tactics that tried to present a portrait of a new and revolutionary Cuba with no trace of homosexuals within it. On the contrary they sparked a debate on repression in revolutionary Cuba, a repression which irritated the dissident community abroad. Homosexuality and dissidence in Cuba ultimately turned into powerful weapons against the stability of the island.

The struggle of homosexuals to preserve their sexual identity therefore melds, in this study, with that of the intellectual community to preserve a voice, the latter being the one to articulate the anti-homophobic discourse. Although not well organised, the dissident community abroad – the critical intelligentsia and the homosexual community – managed to articulate a credible counter-revolutionary discourse that testified to the repressive measures taken against homosexuals and intellectual critics of the regime during the first three decades of the revolutionary government. The perspectives provided by Arenas and the character Diego in *Fresa y chocolate* are essential to understanding this point: they gave a voice to Cuban homosexuals in spite of efforts to silence them.

The terms 'visibility' and 'invisibility' are central concepts in the approach of this book to the struggle of homosexuals to recover their place in the design for contemporary Cuba. The issue of the visibility/invisibility of homosexual literature relates to the impact of their message among the cultural elite and the great efforts to make homosexuals disappear (for example by censoring their work and, in some cases, imprisoning homosexual writers). The term 'visibility/invisibility' is used to refer to the dual status of artists when they achieved popularity abroad but continued to suffer the stigma of invisibility and censorship in Cuba. The invisibility of the homosexual intelligentsia (for example Arenas and Diego in *Fresa y chocolate*) is therefore indicative of their status as *personae non gratae*. In a wider context, the invisibility of homosexuals and dissidents in revolutionary Cuba is also linked to the concepts of censorship and ostracism, which often marked the lives of those who failed to respond to the initial expectations of the revolution.

However, the question of visibility/invisibility is a complex issue that needs to be explored from different perspectives. To paraphrase Epps in his article

'Proper Conduct: Reinaldo Arenas, Fidel Castro and the Politics of Homosexuality', discussing the issue of homophobia in revolutionary Cuba is to discuss visibility in the public sphere as related to the concept of physical appearance.<sup>4</sup> Epps goes straight to the point when he says that social response to homosexuality varies according to the appearance of the individual (Epps 1995: 242). Epps is suggesting here that, in order to survive institutionalised invisibility, the Cuban system invited the homosexual to hide his sexual tendency and pretend to have adapted to the demands of the revolutionary project. When referring to the appearance of the homosexual, we are talking about the stigma associated with homosexuals in Cuba. Here, Goffman's theories on spoiled identity and stigma are essential to understanding that, in order to be accepted, homosexuals are driven to pretend that they have adjusted to the norm and to hide their 'imperfection' from public view (Goffman 1990).

During the 1990s, it was obvious that the repressive mechanisms for sexual behaviour in Cuba had had the opposite effect: that of calling attention to the existence of an alternative discourse on sexuality. Within a complex ideological context, the idea of stigma associated with homosexuals arguably resulted in a code of implicit meanings and silences that included the (surreptitious) presence of homosexuals in the portrait of the nation. It was then that, despite the many efforts of Cuban institutions to silence their voice, homosexuals in Cuba started to claim their right to 'come out of the closet'.

The 'closet' is another key element. It is not, though, used as a catch-all phrase. To summarise Sedgwick, being 'out of the closet' means entering another closet that implies further cultural and social clichés that serve to isolate the individual (Sedgwick 1990: 71). Regarding the issue in Cuba, from the mid-1960s until the first half of the 1980s, coming out of the closet made the stigma of homosexuality visible and paradoxically catapulted individuals into the most recondite levels of invisibility. In this sense, to suffer invisibility in Cuba was to suffer double invisibility. Once the individual is labelled, the invisibility also becomes physical, as the person is isolated and ignored by former colleagues who deny his existence. Arenas's testimony in this regard is crucial. In the same vein the opening scenes of Almendros and Jiménez-Leal's documentary *Conducta impropia* (1984) may be recalled. It is not by

<sup>4</sup> I rely here on Arenas's testimony when describing his invisible status in Cuba: 'Yo utilizo la palabra invisible. Porque yo paso y no me ven. Me volví invisible, era un hombre invisible' (Hasson 1985: 54). See also Estévez's testimony, this time framed in the context of fiction, on the issue of the physical invisibility of homosexuals and dissidents in Cuba: 'Victorio trata de pasar inadvertido, que es lo más cerca que puede encontrarse de la invisibilidad. Descubre el modo eficaz de lograrlo y consta de dos pasos; primero: hablar solo si le preguntan, de ser posible con monosílabos; segundo: nunca mirar a los ojos del prójimo. Boca cerrada y mirada baja' (Estévez 2002: 63).