Gómez, Amanda María

Cuban Heritage Collection Undergraduate Scholar Report

It is clear the Cuban revolution gave birth to the ideal of “the New Cuban Man”—a socialist, a nationalist and a revolutionary—but what became of his female counterpart? Was there a “New Cuban Woman,” and if so, what was her place in the new society? More specifically, what became of the minority within this minority, the group whose compounded otherness is often enough to render the individuality of its members just short of nonexistent? In short, what became of Cuba’s lesbian community?

This question, despite lying at the crux of my research this summer, is a difficult one to answer, as it perhaps incorrectly presupposes the existence of such a community in the first place. The word [lesbian] itself is contentious; simultaneously alienating and at the heart of self-identification, its use (or, as I will suggest, its apparent lack thereof) alone speaks volumes. Nevertheless, despite the enormous effort to expel both queer bodies and language, the specter of homosexuality appears to haunt the question of Cuban identity. By closely examining the literature that has emerged from this relationship, I have worked to comprehend how the queer Cuban experience is interpreted and understood by the women who are, or once were a part of it, and how the queer experience is translated to literary expression in Cuban culture, and Cuban nationhood. Owing to its rejection from the very definition of Cubanness, it seems to become, in the words of Emilio Bejel, “necessary in delineating the limits of that discourse.”

BACKGROUND

Before proceeding, it is therefore important to note the heavily marginalized space historically assigned to members of Cuba’s queer community, both male and female. Implicitly or explicitly, the queer body has been considered a threat to the vigor of the body of the nation, whether by Jose Martí in the late 1880s, or throughout what may have been Cuba’s most homophobic period, in the mid 1960s and 70s, characterized by the UMAPs and the policies of the First Congress of Education and Culture. As in the case of other communist nations, the homosexual was initially suspect because of his ties with “capitalist decadence,” arguably stemming from the prominence of gay men in Havana’s sexual underworld which was notorious for servicing wealthy Americans escaping the Puritanism of the lavender scare. Perhaps most famously documented by Reinaldo Arenas in his novel *Before Night Falls*, harsh prison sentences and sexual harassment presented a ubiquitous threat. In Sonja de Vries’ 1996 documentary *Gay Cuba*, interview subjects touch upon similar issues, ranging from the transgendered drag queen and hairdresser, Gustavo de la A. Ortero, who was expelled from university despite being among the top students in the class, or the unnamed lesbian who recounts serving six months in jail after being arrested at a bar, solely on the basis of her sexuality.

Times, however, have changed. Cuba is simply not an LGBTQ human rights emergency any longer, especially when compared to other Latin American countries such as Nicaragua and Mexico. Cuba’s public ostentation law, which prohibited public expressions of same-sex love, was repealed in 1988, and a directive sent to police officers to stop discrimination in ‘87. There are no sodomy laws in place, and in a statement dating back to 1992, Fidel Castro asserts he is “absolutely opposed to any form of repression, scorn or discrimination with regard to homosexuals,” expanding that homosexuality is “a natural tendency... that must simply be
respected.” Due largely to the efforts of Mariela Castro, Director of the National Center for Sex Education in Cuba, there has even been a measure to allow trans Cubans to undergo sex-change surgery without charge, which became law in June of 2008. There is no denying that policy regarding the queer community is, in fact, quite progressive. Nevertheless, while policies and laws regarding the queer community in Cuba have changed drastically since the revolution’s early days, it is difficult to shake the feeling homophobia is still deeply entrenched, on a personal if not political level.

CUBA TODAY

Mariela Castro points to the “Capitalist past” as the most prominent source of prejudice against same-sex love, attributing current intolerance to old, oppressive economic organizations. Both gay men and transvestites, however, appear to have nevertheless achieved a level of visibility unknown to their female counterparts. The 1994 film Fresa y Chocolate, which went on to become a social phenomenon of sorts is certainly responsible, in part, for opening dialogue regarding homosexuality. More importantly though, there are “gay spaces” in Havana where men can find a sense of community, shared identity and love. Despite being more tolerated than truly accepted, public areas such as the Parque Central, La Rampa, and most famously the Malecon, provide a relatively safe forum for sexual expression — and by utilizing these public spaces, men have asserted their right to participate in public society. Prints from Eduardo Hernadez Santos’ photo journalistic project El Muro = The Wall, illustrate the queer bodies implicated in this complex cultural construction. Their body language is confident, almost arrogant — they quietly speak a very literal rejection of Havana’s hegemonic and socially exclusionist nature. The term el mundo bajo or “the underworld,” most likely a carry-over from Havana’s days as a Mecca of male prostitution, is used by all members of the population, both homo and heterosexual, to refer to these gay spaces. To the gay men photographed in El Muro, and to the others who were not, however, it refers to a temporarily appropriated space where, to a degree, they are allowed to be themselves.

Women, denied or unwilling to seek out these spaces, face a rather different set of issues. There is no refuting that the climate of revolutionary Cuba was, at least on the political level, was certainly a progressive one. In her essay “Gender Equality in Transition Politics: Comparative Perspectives on Cuba,” Mala Htun enumerates the liberal policy changes of revolutionary Cuba that benefit women. She lists:

“Women and men enjoy equal rights; abortion is free legal and safe; divorce is easy to obtain; the family code requires that men and women share in childbearing and other domestic tasks; maternity leave is generous; and the state sponsors a network of affordable day care facilities for working mothers.”

What she describes is, essentially, the paradise of the second wave feminist. Still, in an interview in Gay Cuba, a group of law students admit to perceiving a larger presence of gay males than females. “Las mujeres se cuidan mas,” one female student explains. Of what, however, are they being careful? The statement translates fairly obviously into a statement about the closet — but why is one necessary? Unlike many Western feminist movements which have been led by lesbian coalitions, as B. Ruby Rich states in her essay “Homosexuality, Homophobia and Revolution,” Cuban lesbians are still existing in an ambiguous sort of pre-Stonewall state. Although they now have more space to exist as women, they are still unable to acknowledge their identity. This speaks to a fundamental fear surrounding the subversion of gender roles and
The upheaval of the male hegemony, which is deep-rooted, despite revolutionary Cuba's progressive laws (Rich 450). We can note that in the 1980 Mariel boatlifts, few lesbians left the country; with the fuller integration of women into Cuban society and the increased freedom and status enjoyed by lesbians, as women, under the revolution, many undoubtedly felt there was no need. We must also note, however, that said freedom was imparted to them in the name of gender equality, and did not carry with it any recognition of their sexual orientation, or their identity as lesbians. Rather than responding to the problem at hand, I find it safe to say a new “closet” has been created instead.

Early on, Jose Martí created the concept of the hombre natural, or “natural man.” According to Emilio Bejel’s Gay Cuban Nation, it is the ideological basis for the rejection of what Martí once referred to as the “manly woman,” and which can now be understood as a very primitive construct of the lesbian identity. The tie to unnaturalness, however, is not nearly as archaic. In her novel Dear First Love, Cuban author Zoe Valdes plays on this idea quite literally; set in the Cuban countryside, she introduces a family of interbred campesinos that can only be described as queer. “They belonged to a large family of blood-only relations,” writes Valdes, “and so their offspring were fated to be born as freaks.”

“Their oldest son had been born with twelve fingers and twelve toes, three eyes and two navels... Then came Silvina Reina who possessed the same number of digits, but no ears, just holes on either side of her head. Their third child was Tierra Fortuna Munda. In addition to her six nipples and six fingers on each hand, she had one further remarkable feature: from her navel oozed a liquid with the smell and taste of guava jam.”

It is this last member of the family whom the protagonist, Danae, falls in love with during her mandatory stay in the countryside in her teenage years. Though it would be thoughtless to isolate their queer relationship from the elements of magical realism that define the novel, it is equally impossible to look past the very literal connection Valdes forges between the unnatural and same-sex love between women.

In the last section of the novel, we see a reunion of the two women, now adults, and their meeting is as sexually charged as ever before. Valdes does not hesitate to lavishly describe how Danae “licked and sucked at [Tierra’s] corolla, [how] her mount of Venus became a red, open temptation, glorious with black seeds and oozing fresh papaya liquor.” As if to ensure nothing was lost in the metaphor, she also adds that “and thus, making love to each other, they spent two weeks.” Despite the vivid description of their love, however, Valdes makes a conscious effort to separate their desire from any sort of subsequent queer identity. In fact, the word “lesbian” is not mentioned once. While this hardly hurts, and perhaps actually enhances the text, it simultaneously speaks to the potential of the double-closet. In fact, in what can be read as a societal effort to “normalize” the inherently unnatural relationship between Tierra and Danae, upon their second meeting we find that Tierra has involuntarily undergone surgery, and that her six nipples and six fingers have now been reduced to the standard two and five. In a move that is still relatively uncharacteristic of “lesbian” fiction the lives of the two women do not end tragically, but the fundamental hesitancy to use the word lesbian is evident of a peculiar social phenomenon in and of itself.

Not only has the “capitalist past” past has done a remarkable job of following us to the literary present, but also of following Cuban exiles to foreign shores. Mayra Lazara Dole, a Cuban-born lesbian and the author of Down to the Bone, expounds on this linguistic anomaly in her novel, set in present day Miami. Following the life of a Laura, a high school senior cut off
from her Cuban family after being “outed,” there is an ongoing resistance against the self-
identification that comes with the word “lesbian.” Laura initially rejects all ties to queerness,
and later moves on to toy with the idea of bisexuality, but the novel’s resolution and Laura’s
subsequent self-acceptance only comes with the appropriation of the words she and her family
once found hateful. In a moment of ecstasy, she announces, “I’m a homo, dyko, lesbo!” I’m a
tortilera!” According to Dole, however, this is a vision of what should be, rather than what is.
In an email interview this May, she furthered:
“Usually, [Cuban] Miami Latina/o LGBT’s can’t relate to being called ‘queer,’
‘lesbian,’ or ‘tortilera’ words created by a political gay movement to help us
form a community... Latino LGBT’s loathe being branded or labeled due to
ingrained homophobia and so they try to blend in with straight folks by looking
and acting het (muscle-bound macho guys and lesbians wearing globs of
makeup, heels and jewelry).”

While there are, of course, exceptions, this trend seems to have become fairly ubiquitous among
lesbian Cuban fiction. As Carmelita Tropicana writes in her short autobiographical story “Out
Takes in Cuba” set in 1993 Havana, “The ‘L’ word made [Cubans] gulp hard.” If we are to take
the literature of this period not only as a powerful mode of self-expression but also as an equally
powerful primary source, documenting the experiences and emotions felt by first-hand witnesses,
we begin to approach the answer to our initial question: while there are certainly lesbians in
Cuba, the lesbian community is neither visible nor represented. In fact, it fringes on the non-
existent. It is considerably more difficult to study something that isn’t rather than something that
is, but nevertheless, through the documents and resources available at the Cuban Heritage
Collection, I feel I’ve come to a clearer understanding of what it means to be a queer Cuban
woman, whether strictly lesbian-identified or otherwise. Like the queer narratives of any other
country it is a complex one, but the cultural climate that influenced its formation makes it both
fascinating and unique.