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Proper Conduct: Reinaldo Arenas, Fidel Castro, and the Politics of Homosexuality

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Would you be able to forget the successive humiliations upon which you feed your future? Or do you still confide in the edifying stench of cadavers?
(REINALDO ARENAS, *El Central*)

HOMOSEXUALITY IS revolutionary in Cuba: not because it is at the vanguard of political thought and action, not because it embodies the ideals of the regime, but because it has become closely, all too closely, bound to the image, especially abroad, of the revolution itself.¹ This bond, or bind, renders any attempt to focus on the question of homosexuality in Cuba suspect, refracted by an intense dynamic of international politics and ideology, personalities and positions. Cast as a telling symptom or a diversionary detail, as a sign of communist oppression or capitalist exploitation, homosexuality comes into focus only to signify something forever beneath, beside, or beyond it. More than the deferral and difference of signification in general is here at work. For what is truly significant, fully and finally, is presumed to lie elsewhere, deceptively out

¹The work of Allen Young, *Gays under the Cuban Revolution* (San Francisco, 1981); and that of Ruby Rich and Lourdes Argüelles, "Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes Towards an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience, Part I," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York, 1989), and "Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes Toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Experience, Part II," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11 (1985): 120–36, is here important and constitutes the rather restrictive parameters within which the question of homosexuality slips into either an attack on (Young) or a defense of (Rich and Argüelles) the Cuban revolution. This tension is such that arguments ad hominem abound.

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of focus, in and as the revolution. Caught in the order of appearance, homosexuality may appear to be significant, but what matters, for both much of the Left and the Right, is the revolution.²

But if homosexuality merely appears to matter, if it is legitimized and delegitimized as that which raises questions about the legitimacy of the revolution, it is because in many respects it is already seen, even before the revolution, as a mere matter of appearance. Designating less a libidinal relationship between individuals of the same gender than a particular role, position, or style of behavior, homosexuality, male homosexuality that is, primarily designates those men who exhibit “feminine” traits or otherwise show that they assume so-called passive or receptive positions in sexual intercourse. The *maricón*, very much more than the “active,” “insertive,” “masculine-acting” *bugarrón* is here the subject in question.³ The latter indeed is a figure who, as Roger Lancaster puts it, is not, or not necessarily, “labeled” or “stigmatized” as homosexual, and who

²I will be limiting myself to the question of male homosexuality. Although lesbianism was also an “issue” for the revolutionary regime, it received considerably less attention (and active persecution) than male homosexuality. The fact that the revolutionary leadership was (and is) itself predominantly male is doubtless a factor, as are such things as militarization, machismo, and the conventions of sexual interaction. As Marvin Leiner puts it in *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality, and AIDS* (Boulder, CO, 1994), “The relegation of women as secondary, lesser ‘others’ is also apparent in the almost total absence of lesbianism from official and social concern over homosexuality” (p. 23).

³According to Leiner, “To have sex with another man is not what identifies one as homosexual [in Cuba]. For many Cubans, a man is homosexual only if he takes the passive receiving role. And a man is suspected of being homosexual only if his behavior is not macho: if he does not show interest in rough games, or is not physically strong and muscular” (p. 22). And according to Jorge Salessi, in “The Argentine Dissemination of Homosexuality, 1890–1914,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4 (1994): 337–68, those men “who did not invert the active, insertive role defined as correct for their biological sex . . . were not marked as anything other than men. . . . Whereas in Anglo-Saxon Europe and the United States sexual object choice (regardless of the sexual role adopted) was enough to define an identity, in the texts of Argentine sexual science at the turn of the century, primarily the sexual invert—the passive pederast—became the stigmatized category of male sexual deviance” (p. 367). The importance of visibility is also visible in Salessi’s article, especially in his reference (in relation to an early twentieth-century study by Francisco de Veyga) to “a subversive visibility during carnival” (p. 354) and to “public visibility, disorder, and scandal” (p. 358). For more on the roles and identities of (homo)sexuality, see Ian Lumsden’s *Homosexuality, Society and the State in Mexico* (Toronto, 1991), which, though focusing on Mexico City, refers to other Latin American nations (pp. 31–48). See also Roger N. Lancaster’s *Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley, 1992), and his “‘That We Should All Turn Queer?’: Homosexual Stigma in the Making of Manhood and the Breaking of a Revolution in Nicaragua,” in *Conceiving Sexuality: Approaches to Sex Research in a Postmodern World*, ed. Richard G. Parker and John H. Gagnon (New York, 1995).

may even find his masculinity reinforced by penetrating other men.⁴ This is a crucial point, pointing to a difference between homosexuality as generally understood and experienced in, on the one hand, North America and Western Europe and, on the other hand, Latin America and the Middle East.⁵ It also points to a difference between a homosexuality of identity, regardless of the positions therein assumed, and a homosexuality of performance and appearance, in which positionality is the dominant, or most visible, mark.

While performance and appearance might here be taken in a constructivist sense (i.e., the homosexual is not born, but made), it is important to keep in mind that a phallic principle remains firmly in place, centering, controlling, and all but reducing performance to a question of whether one “gives” or “receives” the “phallus” in anal intercourse (oral sex, as Lancaster remarks, is scarcely an issue).⁶ Furthermore, since the “nature” of the phallus is supposedly one of penetrative activity, any man who is penetrated is taken to assume an “unnatural” or “antinatural” position. This is the case when the penetration is forced (i.e., rape), but more particularly when the penetration is, in one way or another, volun-

⁴According to Lancaster, in *Life Is Hard*, “the dominant Anglo-American rule would read as follows. A man gains sexual status and honor among other men through and only through his sexual transactions with women. Homosexuals appear as the active refuseniks of that system. In Nicaragua, . . . [a] man gains sexual status and honor among other men through his active role in sexual intercourse (either with a woman or with other men). *Cochones* [the Nicaraguan term for the man who “receives” the phallus] are (passive) participants in that system” (p. 250).

⁵Lancaster, in *Life Is Hard*, claims the case of Nicaragua as the springboard for “generalizations” (his term). “Nicaragua’s sexual system, with its active-honor and passive-shame dichotomy, exemplifies rules governing male sexual relations not only for much of Latin America generally but also for cultures throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East” (p. 270). It is worth noting that the terms “active” and “passive” are ideologically marked and misleading: the receptive (i.e., passive) partner in intercourse is, or can be, no less active than the insertive. It is also worth noting, with respect to the Mediterranean sexual system, that dominant or general sexual norms, as Lancaster puts it, may vary quite significantly. Spain, France, and Italy, e.g., are hardly described (any longer) by the system that Lancaster describes for Nicaragua. In all three “Mediterranean” countries, now part of a vigorous “European Community,” homosexual activity is not understood in exclusively anal terms nor is the “insertive” partner left unmarked, generally speaking.

⁶The fact that homosexual activity in Latin America is understood in predominantly anal terms is important. As Lancaster points out, “Unlike oral intercourse, which may lend itself to reciprocal sexual practices, anal intercourse invariably produces an active partner and a passive partner. It already speaks the language of ‘activity’ and ‘passivity,’ as it were. If oral intercourse suggests the possibility of an equal sign between partners, anal intercourse in rigidly defined contexts most likely produces an unequal relationship” (*Life Is Hard*, p. 240). As we shall see, it is just such a possibility of reciprocity, or reversibility, that unsettles, and even disgusts, Arenas himself.

tary: when he who has the phallus “surrenders” the activity and power symbolically associated with it. Curiously, as I argue later on, while the Cuban revolution seeks a surrender of the individual to the collective, a sacrifice of the ego to the (ego) ideal, it refuses what it sees as a surrender, in the flesh as in the mind, of one man to another.⁷ While the former “surrender” is understood in terms of empowerment (I surrender the I to be stronger in and as the We), the latter is understood in terms of disempowerment, degradation, and abjection (I surrender the I to another, stronger I). Nor is such disempowering surrender necessarily understood as a temporary thing, a passing act. Instead, the man who “gives himself” to or “is taken” by another man is marked profoundly; he is identified as he is positioned: inferior, subordinate, negative, weak.

As a result, the act, position, or performance does not simply denote a constructivist potential but is here of the essence. Or rather, it may become an essential sign of sexual identity when the act is a surrender of standardized phallic activity and acting. It may become an essential sign, more exactly, when it becomes a sign among others; for while the act of intercourse may be discreet or private, it is only when it is made public that it gains its full significance. And its full significance, so to speak, is social and political. This curious dynamic of becoming and being, act and identity, is played out across a series of scenes whose limits are constantly shifting perhaps because they are under constant surveillance, particularly in the early years of the regime. The neighborhood defense committees are, as we too shall see, only the most popular manifestation of this preoccupation with seeing and revealing, detecting and denouncing. That what is detected and denounced includes particular sexual acts and identities reveals, in turn, the far from simple bonds between the Cuban revolution and (homo)sexuality. These bonds are especially tight and intricate with regard to the man who appears to contravene the conventions of masculinity.⁸ For although the acts and identities vary, it is the *maricón*, the *reina* (“queen”), or the *loca* (liter-

⁷Perhaps especially in the flesh: the fact that certain “well-known” homosexuals do occupy positions of relative influence in Castro’s Cuba (i.e., Alfredo Guevara, head of Cuba’s Film Institute) is a function of the fact that they are not “well-known” homosexuals, that they keep quiet about their sexuality or even that they deny it. What cannot be tolerated (and in this, needless to say, Cuba is by no means alone) is the nonapologetic, public assumption of one’s homosexuality.

⁸Lancaster describes the attainment of what might be called homosexual identity as follows: “Men do not ‘fall’ to the status of women when they fail to maintain their pre-defined masculinity; they become something else: not quite men, not quite women” (“‘That We Should All Turn Queer?’” p. 153).

ally, “the crazy woman”), the man who does not act “properly” phallic and who, in one way or another, shows it, that is the subject whose sexuality is, or has been, most “problematic” for the revolution.⁹

Briefly sketched, such is the politics of appearance, of performance, positionality, and identity, that will fleck my attempt to focus first on the status of homosexuality in revolutionary Cuba and then, more closely still, on the personalities, positions, and names of Fidel Castro and Reinaldo Arenas. I will be moving, accordingly, from social history to psychoanalysis and poetics, and thus deliberately courting a certain interpretative excess that is germane, I believe, to Arenas’s project. In so doing, I will be drawing from an array of texts: literary and autobiographical writings by Reinaldo Arenas; transcriptions of speeches by, and interviews with, Fidel Castro; works by Castro’s and Arenas’s supporters, detractors, and critics; sociopolitical histories of the Cuban revolution; and theoretical inquiries into group formation, (homo)sexuality, the production and performance of the body, and so on. Unlike the literary, political, and historical works, the theoretical materials I deploy are largely non-Cuban and must accordingly be understood as approximate rather than definitive (although something similar can be said for all of the works). Jorge Salessi, in his study of homosexuality in Argentina (1890–1914), refers to the scarcity of “research on the construction of homosexuality in Latin America” so as to justify his reliance on such theorists as Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and David Halperin.¹⁰ Like Salessi, I am faced with a relative scarcity of research and draw on theories that are not, properly speaking, Cuban or, for that matter, homosexual. This is, to be sure, not without risks. And yet, if there are risks involved in using materials from other national contexts to approach Cuba, there is a risk, all too often overlooked, in reifying or essentializing nationality so that only the materials that are produced within a certain national space and/or by certain national subjects are deemed adequate, appropriate, or proper.

Cuba is a nation shot through with other nationalities. An island, it is not utterly isolated, North American foreign policy notwithstanding.

⁹This is not to say that more “manly acting” homosexuals were left untouched by the sexual policies of the Castro regime, but that a certain style or “kind” of homosexual was taken as paradigmatic. The issue of appearance and visibility appears, by the way, in one of Reinaldo Arenas’s last works, *Viaje a la Habana* (Madrid, 1990). In the story titled “Que trine Eva,” the protagonist (designated in the feminine but presented in terms more readily associated with the drag queen) and her companion are obsessed with being seen by everyone, everywhere in Cuba. Indeed, in this poignantly comic tale, the greatest disaster that can (and does) befall Eva is to go unnoticed.

¹⁰Salessi, p. 337. The scarcity of theoretical research on and within a given national framework is overdetermined. Such factors as censorship, education, tradition, economy, and access to and availability of materials, among many others, are involved.

Indeed, the relation between Cuba and its most notorious “rival” is not simply oppositional, but dialectic. It is a complex dialectic, one that also entails the (inter)national realities and imaginings of the Soviet Union, Western Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and exile communities, themselves all far from uniform.¹¹ For Reinaldo Arenas, Cuba is, among so many other things, an imagined community: imagined also from outside Cuba and from inside the United States; imagined in accordance to “what is” and yet in contrast to “what is” (imagined nostalgically, utopically, dystopically); imagined as real, possible, and impossible; imagined indeed as imagined. Such imaginings hold not just for nationality, but for what are arguably Arenas’s two other principal concerns: (homo)sexuality and literature, both deeply marked by the imagination, fantasy, and desire, both imbricated in complex dialectical processes. The point is important. Art, sexuality, and nationality do not constitute discrete practices that entail discrete theories, as if only the artist could theorize about art, only the homosexual about homosexuality, only the Cuban about Cuba, only Reinaldo Arenas about Reinaldo Arenas. This is not to deny difference or the problem with moving across and between differences but, rather, to affirm it. For difference may run in such a way that notions of what is internal and external, domestic and foreign, proper and improper, even of what is particular and universal, are troubled.¹² Indeed, as we shall see, it is when such notions are troubled that trouble, in a variety of forms and for a variety of subjects, is most acutely apparent.

PROPERTIES AND PROPRIETIES OF APPEARANCE: SEXUAL POLITICS IN CUBA

The significance of homosexuality in revolutionary Cuba is the work of history. After years of guerilla fighting and increasing popular support, Fidel Castro’s “Movement of the 26th of July” issues, on December 31, 1958, in the flight of the dictator Fulgencio Batista, in power since

¹¹ It is along these lines that the notion of a transnational specificity, while legitimate, needs to be understood as the residue of a process of idealization and abstraction in which the considerable social, economic, racial, political, and historical differences between, say, Cuba and Argentina, or Spain and Sweden, are diluted so as to signal differences between, say, Latin America and Western Europe. Then again, a similar process of idealization and abstraction is at work in the notion of national (or sexual, or racial, or class) specificity as well. The specific is, in some nagging sense, the general.

¹² These caveats, virtually *de rigueur* in contemporary cultural criticism, by which I attempt to justify my use of “foreign” material cannot but be ironic in the light of the questions of proper nationality, proper sexuality, and proper ideology that are, in part, the focus of my article.

March 10, 1952. Castro and his supporters (most prominently his brother Raúl and Ernesto “Che” Guevara) essentially assume control of Cuba from the beginning of 1959. Readers of Martí, Bolívar, Marx, Lenin, Sartre, and Freud, among others, Castro and his companions do not at first profess adherence to any particular ideology but soon come to embrace Communism.¹³ Ties with the Soviet Union become increasingly strong and with the United States increasingly hostile. As Castro’s regime makes impressive advances in the areas of public health, education, and economic equality, in the early 1960s the alliance with the Soviet Union and the affirmation of Marxist-Leninist principles have a profound effect not only on concepts of citizenship, work, and nationality but also on concepts of sexuality, style, pleasure, play, and desire.¹⁴ One of the most notable effects is the move on the part of the revolutionary government to remedy long-standing gender inequality. The effort to integrate women more fully and effectively into the workforce gives rise to the “Family Code” of 1975, which seeks, against the conventions of machismo, nothing less than the “collectivization” of household chores.¹⁵ Yet if machismo has long been bandied about as a salient feature, and problem, of Cuban society, Marxism-Leninism provides a compelling refiguration of sexuality, gender, and power that, for all the attempted reforms, is not without problems of its own. I have referred to Marx and Lenin, but perhaps the crucial and eminently polemical figure here is Stalin.

As Allen Young and David Greenberg have studied, sexual politics in the Soviet Union leave their mark on Cuba. After the initial postrevolutionary decriminalization of homosexuality under Lenin, in March of 1934, under the direction of Stalin, consensual male homosexuality in

¹³As Young (n. 1 above) notes, the fact that the Partido Socialista Popular had criticized the guerrilleros as *aventureros* and had not been beyond collaborating with Batista was overlooked, as was Castro’s own relative unfamiliarity with Marxism-Leninism (p. 15).

¹⁴By play, here and elsewhere in my article, I do not mean the absence of seriousness or the evasion of responsibility, but rather the questioning and critique, implicit or explicit, of principles of mimetic correspondence and social utility. Arenas’s fictional works do not entirely abandon these principles (reality is folded into the text, an ethicopolitical impetus accompanies an aesthetic one), but they do not subscribe to the social realism advocated and endorsed by the state. Rather than a question of absolutes (absolute textual autonomy, absolute reflection of reality), it is one of degree. The same holds for the concept of pleasure, which should not be understood as the absolute absence of pain or suffering. Pleasure, as Arenas repeatedly indicates in his writing, is intensely imbricated in pain.

¹⁵For the situation of women in Cuba, see Max Azicri, “Women’s Development through Revolutionary Mobilization,” in *The Cuba Reader: The Making of a Revolutionary Society*, ed. Philip Brenner et al. (New York, 1989); Margaret Randall, *Cuban Women Now* (Toronto, 1974); and Julie Marie Bunck, *Fidel Castro and the Quest for a Revolutionary Culture in Cuba* (University Park, PA, 1994).

the Soviet Union is recriminalized and punished with up to five years of imprisonment.¹⁶ Homosexuality is expressly limited to men and framed in terms of national security: it is, in other words, a crime against both masculinity and the state (or in Guillermo Cabrera Infante's phrase, a crime of "lèse authority").¹⁷ Maxim Gorky, in an article titled "Proletarian Humanism" (1934), presents fascism as fostering not just anti-Semitism but homosexuality and goes so far as to cite approvingly the phrase: "Destroy homosexuality and fascism will disappear."¹⁸ The perverse irony of such a claim, at the very time that the Nazis were beginning their campaign against Jews and homosexuals in earnest, is only too obvious. What is less obvious, or at least more ethically and politically pressing, is the way in which revolutionary rhetoric, be it from the Left or the Right, has historically conserved certain sexual values as fundamental to the success of the nation: the Family Code, with its implicit refusal to let the family "wither away," is a case in point.

By 1936, Stalin had abolished abortion and had formally erected heterosexuality and the family as the ideals of the new Soviet citizenry. Embracing Soviet ideology, Castro embraces, as he repeatedly acknowledges, its putatively more "scientific" and "revolutionary" view of sexuality. Homosexuals, long denigrated as less than men, are instead seen as the victims of capitalism, as the detritus of bourgeois decadence. Never mind that such assertions may seem more in tune with social Darwinism and Victorian morality than with historical materialism, official communist ideology represents homosexuality as a perverse detour in the history of sexuality itself. True, many aspects of this view of (homo)sexuality predate both Castro and Communism and attest more to the continuity of tradition than to radical change; as Cabrera Infante puts it, "the call to order before the disorder of sex is not new in Cuba."¹⁹ But as Cabrera Infante and so many others know, the revolution brings with it a particularly forceful lexicon and morale. With the truth of history supposedly on its side, institutionalized Communism asserts that homosexuality, along with capitalism, will "wither away." Of course, if "withering" is too slow in coming, it can always be assisted, that is to say revolutionized, through conscious, concerted political intervention.

The connections between capitalism and homosexuality are, from the communist perspective, not merely the result of moral conditioning or

¹⁶David Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago, 1988); and Young provide crucial overviews of (homo)sexual politics in Cuba.

¹⁷Guillermo Cabrera Infante, *Mea Cuba*, trans. Kenneth Hall (New York, 1994), p. 415.

¹⁸Maxim Gorky, "Proletarian Humanism," in his *Articles and Pamphlets* (Moscow, 1951), p. 374.

¹⁹Cabrera Infante, p. 412.

aesthetic bias, of the teachings of Saint Paul and the trials of Oscar Wilde. They are also the result of an interplay of appearance and profit, of seeing and selling, of an entire economy of the visible. For under Castro as under Batista homosexuality is seen as lying hot in the market of pleasure.²⁰ It is seen in the guise of prostitution, in burlesque shows and cabarets, cozy with the underworld and tight with the mob. As critics have pointed out, and as Cuban authorities have affirmed, many Cubans associate homosexuality with pedophilia and prostitution and, more damningly, prostitution to North Americans. Popular imaginings, even in a purportedly progressive revolutionary state, are not necessarily free from past prejudices. And in Cuba, the prerevolutionary past has frequently been adduced as “evidence” against prostitutes and homosexuals alike. According to this script, not only were the men who were seen as seducing, vampirizing, and corrupting innocent young boys older (hence the tendency to charge homosexual men with the corruption of minors), but they were foreign, and far and away North American. Capitalists, in other words, were not only behind the alienation of the workers but also the homosexualization, the perversion, of the youth. It is with this in mind that the revolutionary government’s moves to eradicate prostitution and “rehabilitate” prostitutes, often framed in compelling feminist terms, cannot be read apart from the (con)fusion of capitalism, prostitution, and homosexuality. This is not to deny the reality of sexual commodification and exploitation but to indicate, rather, that reality is itself imagined, and produced, ideologically.

The images of corrupt, old capitalists sucking the lifeblood from Cuba’s youth are not, however, without their counterparts in the United States. This is an important point, because homophobia and heterosexism are historical markers of capitalism as well as communism.²¹ Lee

²⁰A review of Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s *Mea Cuba* by Alma Guillermoprieto, “Cuba’s Exquisite Martyrs: An Exile Recalls Havana’s Lost Romantic Visionaries,” *New York Times Book Review* (November 27, 1994), p. 9, reiterates some of the more problematic stereotypes of homosexuality before Castro: “Gay intellectual life in Cuba was once not a simple matter of attraction to the same sex, or of creating paintings, or of reading books and writing them, but an elaborate routine that encompassed orchestrated social encounters; devout attention to fashion or willful sartorial neglect; intricate, passionately literary conversations; defiant crossing of class boundaries, and extravagant, or extravagantly frustrated, sex. In 1959, gay intellectual Havana was perhaps one of the last great holdouts of the romantic vision. Then Fidel Castro came to power” (p. 9). Positioned as a positive, or sympathetic, reading of gays and gay life in Cuba, this article not only takes for granted the validity of the concept “gay” in prerevolutionary Cuba but also glosses over both the differences between gay people (even gay “intellectuals”) and the difficulties that preceded Castro. Guillermoprieto’s “romantic vision” is partly her own.

²¹According to Lancaster, in *Life Is Hard* (n. 3 above), “the word *homophobia*, meaning a fear of homosexuals or homosexual intercourse, is quite inappropriate in a milieu where

Edelman, in an excellent reading of the conflation of homosexuality and communism in the nationalistic discourse of the United States, underscores the significance of seeing homosexuality as a national menace. Drawing from police records and newspaper reports from after the McCarthy period, Edelman addresses the prevalence of such notions as “disorderly conduct (pervert)” and such assertions as the following from the *New York Times*: “There can be no place on the White House staff or in the upper echelons of government . . . for a person of markedly deviant behavior.”²² What is remarkable is the fact that North American political anxiety is expressed in virtually the same sociosexual terms as Cuban political anxiety. Edelman writes of the “widespread perception of gay sexuality as an alien infestation, an unnatural because un-American practice, resulting from the entanglement with foreign countries—and foreign nationals—during the war.”²³ But an equally widespread perception of gay sexuality holds for Cuba: there too it is scripted as an alien infestation, as the result of entanglement with foreigners, as a matter of national security. Castro himself identifies it as a “problem” of discipline, struggle, work, and the defense of the coun-

unlabeled men desire and actively seek intercourse with labeled men” (p. 269). This is no doubt true, particularly for what Lancaster presents as the “popular” or “peasant-based” understanding of same-sex relations in Nicaragua: “The dominant logic of the sexual system remains traditional, native, and popular” (p. 254). And yet, in Cuba, the fear and anxiety aroused by what is called homosexuality—not just by Anglo-Americans but also by many Cubans, and especially many Cuban political and cultural officials—is a historical fact. And it is a fact despite the fact that in much of Cuba as well the so-called insertive partner is not marked, labeled, or stigmatized with the identificatory force with which the so-called receptive partner is marked, labeled, or stigmatized. It is just this double bind that must not be lost in the search for differences between cultures presumed, almost aprioristically, to be whole and self-same. Or rather, the differences considered should also be those between, say, Nicaragua and Cuba or within Nicaragua and Cuba, not just those between Latin and Anglo America. Moreover, “homophobia” may indeed be an “inappropriate” word in a milieu where “unlabeled” men desire and seek intercourse with “labeled” men, but like so much else, it is a word whose “inappropriateness” or “impropriety” does not preclude the existence of that to which it so fitfully refers (i.e., fear and anxiety toward the individual marked or labeled as unmanly). This double bind is not lost on Arenas as a man desired by the very men who imprison and guard him, as a man who at once desires and fears to be so desired. If Lancaster holds that “desire—like gender, color, or class—exists not *within* us, but *between* us” (p. 270; emphasis in original), he seems to forget that it can be marked by fear and hatred, ambivalence and contradiction. It is with such contradiction in mind that I will use the word “homophobia” in relation to Cuba: as an (in)appropriate sign of a double bind.

²²Lee Edelman, “Tearooms and Sympathy, or, the Epistemology of the Water Closet,” in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger (New York, 1992), p. 264.

²³Ibid., p. 269.

try.²⁴ What Edelman signals as “the national political identification of homosexuality with domestic subversion” is true, it seems, for a number of nations: for the United States as for Cuba, homosexuality is the political other.²⁵

Most of Edelman’s material dates from 1964, with anticommunism, paternalism, and puritan morality continuing to mark sexual politics in the United States. By 1965, traditional machismo, Stalinist-inflected Marxism, anti-Americanism, and revolutionary morality had issued in a consciously antigay politics in Cuba as well. This is the year that the UMAP or Military Units to Assist Production (Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción) were constituted.²⁶ The interns in the UMAP included, among others, militant Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and homosexuals, self-identified or not, all of whom were identified by the regime as contrary to its proper functioning. Essentially forced labor camps, the UMAP were justified on the grounds of social production (prisoners were put to work, e.g., in the production of sugarcane). In this, homosexuals held a special significance. Inasmuch as homosexuals have historically been viewed as denying the value of biological reproduction, they have been viewed as unproductive, inclined more to waste and dissipation than to socially relevant creation and generation. They have also been viewed as locked in a logic of sameness, incapable of appreciating difference and hence incapable of effecting the productive objectification and transcendence (or, in more simple terms, of “contributing to society” through “hard work”) that Marxism-Leninism and capitalism both, for all their differences, valorize. Within this terrible

²⁴In his interview with Lee Lockwood, *Castro’s Cuba, Cuba’s Fidel* (New York, 1967), Castro declares, “I will be frank and say that homosexuals should not be allowed in positions where they are able to exert influence upon young people. In the conditions under which we live, because of the problems which our country is facing, we must inculcate our youth with the spirit of discipline, of struggle, of work. In my opinion, everything that tends to promote in our youth the strongest possible spirit, activities related in some way with the defense of the country, such as sports, must be promoted” (p. 124).

²⁵Edelman, p. 269. John D’Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York, 1992), also studies the effects of McCarthyism on homosexuality and notes an “unintended consequence” of all of the scapegoating and persecution: “In marshaling the resources of the state and the media against the more extensive gay subcultures of midcentury, political and moral conservatives unwittingly helped weld that subculture together. The penalties directed at gay men and lesbians grew so intense that they fostered a collective consciousness of oppression” (pp. 68–69).

²⁶There seems to be a certain amount of confusion regarding the precise meaning of the UMAP. According to Carlos Alberto Montaner, *Informe secreto sobre la revolución cubana* (Madrid, 1976), UMAP means Unidades Militares de Apoyo a la Producción (p. 174), while for Young (n. 1 above), it means Unidades Militares para el Aumento de la Producción (pp. 21–22). *Apoyo* means “support” and *aumento* means “increase.”

logic, it is little wonder that homosexuals have been viewed as viewing only themselves, touching only themselves, as consummate narcissists and onanists (both figured into the “etiology” of the hypersexual predator). The body that they love, if they love, so the story goes, is a mere reflection of their own. Against such psychosocial speculation, or perhaps as part of it, Castro’s regime instituted programs of re-education and reorientation, of militarization and masculinization. The slogan written over the entrance to the camps was, according to some witnesses, “Work will make you men.”²⁷

Although the camps, under national and international pressure (the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists, Allen Ginsberg, Graham Greene, Jean-Paul Sartre, and others), were soon dismantled, the ideology that instituted them has been more resistant to alteration.²⁸ The *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución*, or neighborhood defense committees, are a prime example of surveillance and control on an ostensibly softer, popular level. On a more official level, homosexuals, at least those who were “out of the closet,” were not accepted, and are still not easily accepted, as members of the Communist Party. As Castro himself put it in an interview with Lee Lockwood, “a deviation of that nature clashes with the concept we have of what a militant Communist must be.”²⁹ This deviation or deviance (*desviación*) assumes, in the eyes of many, some rather extravagant guises.

For amid all the concern and commitment, all the passion and paranoia, it appears, as I have indicated, that homosexuality is largely a matter of appearance, a problem of public visibility, a highly politicized question of style. The way we walk, the way we talk, the way we gesture, the way we stand; our hair, our clothing, our complexion; the music we listen to, the books we read, the shows that entertain us; all this and more, bound to the ways we make love, determine whether we are or are not right for the revolution: acceptable, reliable, proper.³⁰ If property has been

²⁷This is expressed in the film *Improper Conduct*, where we are also reminded, tendentially it is true, that the slogan written over the entrance to Auschwitz was “Work will set you free.”

²⁸Ginsberg is also one of the supporters of Arenas’s call in 1988 for a Plebiscite in Cuba. Others include Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, José Donoso, Federico Fellini, Juan Goytisolo, Louis Malle, Czeslaw Milozs, Octavio Paz, Manuel Puig, Claude Simon, William Styron, and Elie Wiesel. See Arenas and Jorge Camacho, *Un plebiscito a Fidel Castro* (Madrid, 1990).

²⁹Lockwood, p. 124. Castro speaks of deviation and clash immediately after stating that “nothing prevents a homosexual from professing revolutionary ideology and, consequently, exhibiting a correct political position” (p. 124). Profession and exhibition, however correct they may be, are apparently not correct enough.

³⁰For Cabrera Infante (n. 17 above), “the leadership of the 26th of July Movement . . . was, like the whole Revolution, ostentatiously *machista*: you only had to see Fidel Castro or Che Guevara walk” (p. 341).

collectivized and undone, propriety has not merely persisted but has returned in the validation of a body that is itself the symbolic property of the state. Discretion, dissimulation, and denial become the paradoxical signs of homosexuals who would be “faithful” to the revolution.³¹ For them, as for others, the revolution becomes a struggle over signs, and against a codification whereby any play of difference, any arbitrariness, ambivalence, or ambiguity must be rigorously reworked: a man is a man is a man. There is not, or at least there should not be, any confusing play between or across or through surface and depth, content and form. In the logic of symmetry and correspondence, homosexuals may desire the same, but men, real men, are the same: one after another after another.

What is so surprising, and yet so predictable, so common, is the way style, surface, appearance, and form are made to mean according to a truth or reality contained inside, deep down and forever. The appearance and disappearance of truth, its revelation and concealment, have long been spatialized in terms of surface and depth, of body and soul, spirit, or mind (the communist identification of ideology with false consciousness is similarly implicated).³² What is new is the concerted effort on the part of the revolutionary government to act on and institutionalize the interplay of appearance and truth. For instance, the surface of the body, its material appearance, may itself be refashioned. Such refashioning was one of the most ostensible objectives of the UMAP: a deep voice, a controlled gait, a firm handshake were seen and felt as proof of manliness. As Carlos Montaner rather sardonically put it, “The government did not seek—it never seeks—realities, but only appearances. It wanted virile men, with short hair, loose pants and a straight-looking jacket (‘guayabera’), even though this getup may hide an effeminate creature. The important thing is the damned image of the revolution.”³³ And yet, refashioning implies that the body is not fashioned once and forever; or, rather, it implies that the body is itself an effect, if not a statement, of fashion, that its very nature, or reality, lies in trends and traditions.

³¹The “case” of Alfredo Guevara is here exemplary. Repeatedly designated as the highest “known homosexual” in an official position, Guevara is not recognized as such by the powers that be. Castro himself, in an interview with Ann Louise Bardach, “Conversations with Castro,” *Vanity Fair* 57 (1994): 128–135, 166–170, denies that Guevara is homosexual (p. 166).

³²Ernesto Laclau, in *New Reflections on the Revolutions of Our Time* (London, 1990), explores the problems of identifying ideology with false consciousness: “The notion of false consciousness only makes sense if the identity of the social agent can be fixed” (p. 91). And fixed to this fixity is, as Laclau points out, the notion of an underlying social totality: “The status of this totality was that of an essence of social order which had to be *recognized* behind the empirical variations expressed at the surface of social life” (p. 90; emphasis original).

³³Montaner, p. 176.

Refashioning implies, in fine, a powerfully destabilizing movement by which the surface becomes the depth of another surface, just as the signifier becomes the signified of another signifier. Seeing the surface as a transparency of the fullness of the psyche, as a window to the soul, the Cuban leaders end up seeing nothing but the surface, thereby rendering truth—even as it is posited as lying deep down—strangely superficial. One is, or rather always becomes, what one appears to be.³⁴ Confronting this binding of being and appearance, another homosexual writer from Cuba, Severo Sarduy, devotes an impressive body of writing to makeup, tattoos, transvestism, ornamentation, and simulation, to the various modes of writing (on) the body.³⁵ For Sarduy, inscription and incorporation are inseparable, so much so that the body is scripted in terms of play and performance. Of course, play, performance, and bodily scripts are not always, if indeed ever, left to the individual. Social and historical scripts invariably collect, and very often entrap, the individual body. What results is an insoluble tension between freedom and coercion, autonomy and automation, between the scripting and the scripted of the body.

The scripted of the body is akin to what Pierre Bourdieu describes as bodily *hexis*: the relatively durable condition, state, or habit (hence *hexis*) of the body and its relations to other bodies. “Bodily hexis is,” Bourdieu writes, “political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking.”³⁶ The political mythology of Castro’s regime is embodied in a quite literal fashion, one in which permanence and durability are stated objectives of the revolution. “The opposition between male and female,” Bourdieu goes on to write, “is realized in posture, in the gestures and movements of the body, in the form of the opposition between straight and bent, between firmness, uprightness, and directness . . . and restraint, reserve, and flexibility.”³⁷ Taking this opposition to be firm, upright, and direct, taking it as a man would take it, Castro appears to take whatever is flexible and bent as feminine, weak, and suspicious.

As Susan Sontag remarks in the controversial film, *Improper Conduct* (1984), the militarization of revolutionary society seems inseparable from the devaluation and suspicion of any and all ideas of weakness, in-

³⁴In the dynamics of espionage and paranoia, the “spy,” “informant,” or “counterrevolutionary” appear to be other than they are. And yet, once discovered, the history of their appearance, so to speak, is rewritten as having always corresponded to their treacherous truth.

³⁵Severo Sarduy, *La simulación* (Caracas, 1982).

³⁶Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA, 1990), pp. 69–70.

³⁷Bourdieu, p. 70.

cluding, of course, femininity and feminine-fashioned homosexuality.³⁸ Sontag no doubt overstates the case, for nonrevolutionary and antirevolutionary (i.e., anti-Communist) societies such as the United States are also profoundly, if less blatantly, dependent on military power and also, if again less blatantly, disparage femininity and homosexuality. But she does point to the significance of long-standing sexual scripts in the organization of national identity. The scripted of the sexual body is thus the settling, or setting, the hypostasization if you will, of play and performance in terms of what is proper. Of course, what is proper is also by and large what is practical, what is useful and productive. Bourdieu himself associates bodily hexis with the logic of practice, with practical sense, and explores why it is practical to conduct oneself in a prescribed, pre-played, and proper way. After all, when visibly bent behavior, when improper conduct, can lead to incarceration and persecution, the practical thing would seem to be to perform as power deems proper, to stay or return to the closet.³⁹

But then again, practicality, or rather impracticality, is one of the primary measures of homosexual impropriety. Flighty, frivolous, and wild, homosexuals supposedly make a mockery of stability, seriousness, and sociability itself. Self-hating and masochistic, they have what Freud calls a low appreciation of the reality principle, a proclivity toward fantasies and daydreams.⁴⁰ Reinaldo Arenas places this proclivity, this impractical, improper conduct, at the center of his celebration of beauty and fiction. He does so with a great deal of ambivalence, however, perhaps because what he celebrates as the self-scripting of the body is contingent on the scripted. This is a problem that is itself scripted beyond Arenas, a problem, perhaps indeed the problem, of oppositionality. What I mean is that Arenas scripts as his own a number of qualities that have already been scripted for him. Excess, extravagance, fantasy, ornamentation, and so on, all signs of a sexual scripted, are what Arenas incorporates into his own scripting. Sarduy speaks of parody and mimicry, as do Homi Bhabha and Luce Irigaray for postcolonials and women, but parody and mimicry are

³⁸ Regarding this film, see Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez Leal, "Improper Conduct," *American Film* 9 (1984): 18, 70–71; and B. Ruby Rich, "Bay of Pix," *American Film* 9 (1984): 57–59.

³⁹ For Eve Sedgwick, in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990), "the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (p. 71). But it is also, as she recognizes, a problematic space of creativity. She understands that any study that claims that the closet is central to gay identity and experience "will risk glamorizing the closet itself, if only by default; will risk presenting as inevitable or somehow valuable its exactions, its deformations, its disempowerment and sheer pain" (p. 68).

⁴⁰ See Freud's "On Narcissism: An Introduction," trans. Cecil M. Baines, in *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York, 1963).

likewise the scripted of homosexuality. A similar reversibility underlies, for example, the word “queer” (and to a lesser extent, *maricón*), a word whose fate has become inseparable from its subjective context. Opposition of this sort is of necessity strategic and partial, prone to contradiction and further opposition, but that is precisely why it is an active process, a scripting.

Arenas, like so many others, struggles to script his singularity, his individuality, through and against and within what is already scripted; or perhaps it might be better to say that he struggles, through a sort of ironic inflation, to break the script altogether. At any rate, it is a struggle not only with heterosexuals but also with homosexuals; for they too affect his individuality; they too script and are scripted: practically, impractically, properly, improperly. Arenas’s work is, in short, cut by a number of conflicting scripts. If it rages against Castro’s Cuba and homophobia, it is not, for all that, at home in the United States and the Western gay community, where it remains, there too, curiously “improper.” Arenas’s work challenges the neatness of oppositionality and victimization by pushing at their limits; it eschews easy recuperation in terms that are politically or ethically correct (or proper) by reiterating, often without ironic subversion, some of the most troubling stereotypes of women and gay men. It disturbs, in short, the properties and proprieties of virtually all comers.

But even as I raise the specter of another impropriety, I want to withhold and defer concrete reference to Arenas’s texts. In the case of Reinaldo Arenas, deferral and withholding are in fact the stuff of artistic endeavor, for Arenas’s manuscripts are repeatedly suppressed and stolen from him, their publication deferred and withheld. To Arenas’s eyes this is, directly or indirectly, the work of Castro. The Cuban leader—or, as Arenas insists, the dictator—is thus the enemy of writing, the consummate orator whose power is bound up in his auratic presence. But if Castro may be read as the enemy of writing, he may also be read as its strongest supporter. In other words, Arenas’s writing is so suffused with the struggle against suppression, and for publication, that suppression becomes the condition of possibility of Arenas’s writing itself. Castro is thus the phantasmatic coauthor of Arenas’s writing, the authority who by striving to disauthorize Arenas ultimately only authorizes him all the more. This, at any rate, is what Arenas makes of Castro; what Castro makes of Arenas is, given the imbalance of power, a more oblique story. In the absence of published remarks by Castro on Arenas, the most that I can do is read this absence as a kind of phantasmic text, simultaneously adumbrated and withheld by its sociohistorical context. The author of this text, the authority most (in)visibly behind it, is Fidel Castro.⁴¹

⁴¹ Arenas ends his autobiography, *Before Night Falls*, trans. Dolores M. Koch (New York, 1993), with his suicide note. In it, close to the end, he writes, “Persons near me are in

BODIES, IMAGES, NAMES, AND OTHER STRANGE THINGS:
OR, CASTRO'S CASTLE

Between Castro and Arenas there is little doubt as to who is the more visible figure. Fidel Castro, in power for over three decades, continues to be both controversial and charismatic, alternately characterized as a man of the people, a man of the revolution, and a man for himself.⁴² Tomás Borge, one of the founders of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) and an active participant in the Nicaraguan revolution, touches on the cult of personality and calls Castro a “global archetype” (*arquetipo mundial*).⁴³ To Régis Debray’s portrayal of Castro as “Trotsky, Lenin, and Stalin all rolled up into a single *caudillo*,” Borge responds, quite simply, that “Fidel is Fidel.”⁴⁴ For Borge, this self-defining man is a member of an impressive body of Latin American heroes: “Túpac Amaru, Bolívar, San Martín, Hidalgo, Martí, Morazán and Sandino.”⁴⁵ And yet, even here, the Cuban leader is special, called not by a patronym but by a relatively more intimate proper name, called in a way reserved for certain saints and prophets, kings and queens, poets and pop stars.

A sense of familiarity and accessibility, of friendly collegiality, surrounds the name “Fidel,” just as it surrounds “Che,” and helps to assuage the rather difficult tension between leadership and comradeship, ascendancy and equality. As Fernando Martínez Heredia puts it, “People see in [Fidel] the dialectic of their own power and the power of the revolution. . . . As trustee of the spiritual unity of the country, naturally it

no way responsible for my decision [to commit suicide]. 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” (p. 317). Although Arenas claims this to be a message not “of defeat but of continued struggle and of hope,” the fact remains that, so styled, Fidel Castro remains “responsible” for Arenas’s final act of “freedom.”

⁴² Enrique Baloyra, in “Socialist Transitions and Prospects for Change in Cuba,” in *Conflict and Change in Cuba*, ed. Enrique A. Baloyra and James A. Morris (Albuquerque, NM, 1993), describes Castro’s power as a type of “charismatic hegemony.” In his opinion, “it would be erroneous to look for hegemonic institutions in Cuba. What is hegemonic is the leader and his core group, or ‘executive committee of the Revolution’” (p. 39).

⁴³ Tomás Borge, *Un grano de maíz: Conversación con Fidel Castro* (Mexico City, 1992), p. 60. All translations of this interview with Castro are mine. The Sandinistas’ policies toward homosexuality, coming after the Cuban “experiment,” were far less polemical. As Lancaster notes in *Life Is Hard* (n. 3 above), “the Sandinista revolution never systematically obstructed political participation on the basis of sexual preference and . . . the Sandinista revolution was the first social revolution of the twentieth century *not* to persecute or scapegoat a sexual minority defined as deviant in its society” (p. 263; emphasis original).

⁴⁴ Borge, p. 59.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

would be Fidel who would denounce contradictions, criticize past mistakes the most harshly, give direction to the rectifying course, and ensure the fraternal relations of all who support the revolutionary cause.”⁴⁶ Fidel, then, appears to be the ostensible embodiment of revolutionary dialectic, the site where conflict and contradiction are confronted and overcome, the figure of fraternal unity. I will have more to say about the nature of this fraternity, what it supports and sees as supportive as well as what it does not, but for the moment I want to note that the focus on Fidel, the individual, is a tactic of many supporters of the revolution, not just of its opponents.⁴⁷ Inasmuch as the focus on the individual (and by implication, individualism) is a problem that conditions revolutionary policies regarding (homo)sexuality, Fidel Castro is, by virtue of his visibility, a problematic individual.

Part of the problem centers on the role of the individual in the constitution and maintenance of the group. Shadowed in such concepts as alienation, class consciousness, and solidarity, it is a problem crucial to Marxism-Leninism and yet, I might add, crucial to psychoanalysis as well. Inasmuch as psychoanalytic discourse is implicated, however quietly or negatively, in the Marxist-Leninist discourse on sexuality, we might do well to revisit one of the more influential psychoanalytic studies of sociopolitical formation. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), a work of considerable importance for Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud finds the group on three interacting mechanisms: the limitation of narcissism, the strengthening of libidinal ties through sublimation, and identification. Concentrating on “artificial groups” such as the church and the army rather than on more spontaneous or “natural” crowds, Freud extends his argument to include society as a whole, both in its quasi-mythical origins as the primal horde and in its projects for the future. Freud refers specifically to socialism, declaring that it seems to be taking the place of long-standing religious ties and cautioning that it will bring about “the same intolerance towards outsiders as in the age

⁴⁶Fernando Martínez Heredia, “Cuban Socialism: Prospects and Challenges,” trans. Janell Pierce, in *The Cuban Revolution into the 1990s: Cuban Perspectives*, ed. Centro de Estudios Sobre América (Boulder, CO, 1992), p. 71.

⁴⁷If Castro is taken as the embodiment of revolutionary dialectic, it might seem that Arenas could be a homosexual “within the regime” if he centered his desire on Castro himself. This could of course only be so if homosexuality is taken in its most sublimated, asexual, virtual form, if Castro is taken as an object to be seen but not touched, an object with which sexual contact is renounced in favor of a certain contemplative longing. In a related vein, whether Castro is aware of his presumably erotic power not only over women but over men as well is a matter of speculation, as is, for that matter, not merely the efficacy but also the reality of such power. At any rate, it should be clear that, for all the oppositional rhetoric, homosexuality and heterosexuality, no less than Arenas and Castro, are not related in a matter of mere opposition.

of the Wars of Religion.”⁴⁸ Here, Freud curiously anticipates Castro’s much-cited declaration from his 1961 speech to Cuban intellectuals: “Dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución, nada” (Within the revolution, everything; against the revolution, nothing).⁴⁹

Of course, Castro’s formulation of totality and nothingness, inclusion and exclusion, is presented as eminently tolerant, as eager to embrace all who are eager to embrace it. In this it recalls the rhetoric of religious (in)tolerance, but Castro drives home the relation by speaking of the revolution in terms of belief, sacrifice, and redemption. If the revolutionary aims for the transformation of reality and the redemption of man, Castro says, “the revolutionary artist would be the one willing to sacrifice even his own artistic vocation for the Revolution.”⁵⁰ Some twenty-five years later, Castro reiterates the affinity between political and religious ties in an interview with Italian journalist Gianni Minà. Referring to Che Guevara’s ideal of the “new man” (“el hombre nuevo”), Castro declares, “We postulate something to which the Christian doctrine also subscribes: the brotherhood of all people, solidarity, selflessness and generosity, to which we add a high education, advanced technical training, national dignity, and an internationalist approach.”⁵¹ The brotherhood of man, spiritual and scientific, is articulated in terms of sacrifice, solidarity, and selflessness, terms hardly out of place in Freud’s reading of group or social psychology. For even as a progressive social ethic is invoked, the shape of this fraternity, of this new man, is not quite as new, or as generous, as it claims.

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1959), p. 39.

⁴⁹ From Castro’s “Palabras a los intelectuales,” in *Obras escogidas* (Madrid, 1976), 1:146. This and all subsequent translations of this speech are mine.

⁵⁰ Castro, “Palabras a los intelectuales,” p. 142. The willful sacrifice of art, raised to the level of national doctrine, enunciated from without rather than from within the artist, is precisely what Reinaldo Arenas resists, willfully and to the point of self-sacrifice. Arenas’s self-sacrifice, however, does not accord with Castro’s notion of self-sacrifice and in fact becomes the mark of self-interest and self-absorption, of narcissism unlimited.

⁵¹ Gianni Minà, *An Encounter with Fidel*, trans. Mary Todd (Melbourne, 1991), p. 143. For more on the “New Man,” see Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York, 1971), pp. 1445–52. Lancaster also refers to the sexual implications of the idea and ideal of the “new man” in the context of the Nicaraguan revolution. “The ‘New Man’ and the ‘New Society’ are envisioned as hardworking, diligent, and studious, pure and without corruption. The aspect of machismo that the New Man embodies is the ascetic side, not the hedonistic one. The cult of the New Man, then, produced a cultural atmosphere in which homosexual practice (and sexual transgression in general) was at least publicly regarded as more suspect than before, tainted with the image of indulgence or corruption, and was perhaps even somewhat less readily available” (*Life Is Hard*, p. 253). It is along these lines that Lancaster refers to the “gaze of the community” as being particularly strong in the revolutionary effort to attain the ideals of the New Man.

According to Freud, “Love alone acts as the civilizing factor in the sense that it brings a change from egoism to altruism.”⁵² Love—or, as Freud more frequently puts it, libidinal energy—marks a partial passage from the I to the other, a passage that is also a binding. Economically speaking, the ego renounces part of itself, its power, in favor of an-other power, higher and more resilient. Renunciation is by no means an act of the ego alone, for it is already a function of external forces, the pressure of other egos (and the social scripted), which, at least in part, precede and exceed it. It is in this sense that Freud writes of a limitation of narcissism, a process of psychosocial circumscription and constraint whereby the ego is confronted with its contingency and partiality.⁵³ “Love for oneself knows only one barrier—love for others, love for objects.”⁵⁴ The barring of self-love is hence the condition of possibility for love as “we” know it, the plural being here the ironic effect of a singular limitation. The love for others and for objects, for other objects, is not, however, beyond limitation itself. The civilizing move from egoism to altruism involves a certain removal of desire. “And this is true,” Freud remarks, “both of the sexual love for women, with all the obligations which it involves of not harming the things that are dear to women, and also of desexualized, sublimated homosexual love for other men, which springs from work in common.”⁵⁵

The preceding remark reveals that Freud’s implied reader is male and heterosexual for the simple reason that it does not address sexual love for men, be it from the position of women or of other men (lesbian desire, the love for women by women, is implied only by reading against the Freudian grain). In the same stroke, it reveals that the conventions of civilization are very much in practice, that the “work in common” in which Freud himself participates (I am thinking of his references to a larger psychoanalytic community as well as his collaborations with other men) desexualizes and sublimates homosexual love even as it evokes it. Freud’s work, no less than Lacan’s, is thus hardly without problems and pitfalls, particularly where a nonnormative understanding of homosexuality is concerned. It does not provide a corrective key to sexual politics under Castro, and its interpretative potential must be understood as a

⁵² Freud, *Group Psychology*, p. 44.

⁵³ By contingency I mean both a lack of necessity and necessary connectedness. The ego (constituted as it is broken) encounters itself as both radically unnecessary and profoundly connected, as anxiously free and bound to symbolic law. In a different, though related, sociopolitical context, Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture* (New York, 1994), sounds out the double sense of contingency as contiguity and indeterminacy, connectedness and chance; see esp. pp. 188–92.

⁵⁴ Freud, *Group Psychology*, p. 43.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

problematic supplement, if not alternative, to the regime's own problematic understanding of (homo)sexuality. And yet, as conventional as Freud can be, he also states that "homosexual love is far more compatible with group ties, even when it takes the shape of uninhibited sexual impulses—a remarkable fact, the explanation of which might carry us far."⁵⁶ Freud himself does not, however, carry us very far in such an explanation, and indeed it is unclear what kind of group, consolidated through uninhibited sexual impulses, he has in mind.

Clearly, it matters quite a bit whether the group ties are, for example, those of the so-called gay subculture (e.g., the Argentine *cofradías* as studied by Salessi) or of the military establishment.⁵⁷ With respect to the latter, at least in modern times, it is more legitimate to speak of a principle of *homosociality* than of homosexuality, that is to say, of inhibited sexual impulses, often subtly generated, wittingly and unwittingly, and forcefully denied.⁵⁸ And as with the military, the putative guardian and defender of the nation, so goes the nation itself: the surrender and sacrifice must be of a sublime rather than a carnal sort, a surrender not of one man to another or to others, but of man to an ideal of man. According to this quite conventional story, the group ties of the nation, duly led and defended, are those of ideal men, men who come together ideally. And if these men should come together in a form more literal, more

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵⁷ Salessi (n. 3 above), pp. 362–63. The *cofradía* or "confraternity" was "a community of class-diverse homosexuals . . . that not only reflected the ordering of the social classes of the time but also disorganized it, cut it vertically, and created a group in which sexual identities were as important or more important than social class" (p. 363). The idea that homosexual love, "even when it takes the shape of uninhibited sexual impulses," can be compatible with group ties is frequently asserted—and to a variety of ends—in relation to the classical period. The concept of "subculture" is used here only as a form of shorthand. Lancaster, for instance, while referring to an Anglo-American homosexual subculture that he understands as a "politically conscious" organization, maintains that the *cochones* ("passive" or anal-receptive men) in Nicaragua do not constitute a subculture (*Life Is Hard* [n. 3 above], p. 251). Lancaster's understanding of subculture is debatable, overestimating the importance of political organization and underestimating that of erotic practice, pleasure, and performance in the "internal" constitution of relatively distinct "groups" (i.e., the *cochones* themselves). Salessi is, on this conceptual count, more convincing.

⁵⁸ To speak of inhibited sexual impulses is not, to be sure, the same as to speak of no sexual impulses. The by now well-known distinction between homosexuality and homosociality is formulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985). According to Sedgwick, homosociality is not "homosexual" but homophobic, violently denying the difference of both women and homosexual men. Against the idea that male homosexuality is, like fascism (the specter of a supposedly Nazi homosexual brotherhood is a typical problem here), misogynistic, Sedgwick states that "homophobia directed by men against men is misogynistic," that it is not only "oppressive of the so-called feminine in men, but that it is oppressive of women" (p. 20).

physical, it must be clear that one of them retains, even as he puts it problematically into practice, an ideal of masculinity: assertive, insertive, invasive. This possibility distinguishes the Cuban and Latin American ideal from its North American and, yes, Soviet counterparts, where men lose, rather than acquire, masculinity by penetrating other men.⁵⁹ And yet, Castro does not address this distinction; or rather, he publicizes an ideal that does not allow for the curious ability to remain, let alone to become, an ideal man by penetrating a real man. The “new man” is, as Castro indicates, more “internationalist” in approach, a man marked, at his most ideal, by Stalinist sexual morality rather than by Cuban sexual tradition.⁶⁰ For all of Freud’s speculations, uninhibited homosexual impulses are not compatible with the new group ties that are those, ideally, of the revolution.

Placing the national ideal within a more international framework, Castro makes clear that he is concerned with work in common and with the particular, practical sublimations and desexualizations it supposedly entails. In fact, the desexualization of love between men, the sublimation of homosexuality en masse, appears to be part of the selflessness and self-sacrifice that the Cuban leader deems necessary to social solidarity.⁶¹ With self-love limited and love for others sublimated, the common work of civilization seems relatively secure. After all, as Freud explains, “it is precisely those sexual impulses which are inhibited in their aims which achieve such lasting ties between people.”⁶² In a similar vein, Freud writes of “love instincts which have been diverted from their original aims,” but which continue to operate with the same amount of energy.⁶³ Inhibited, diverted love, pulsing with libidinal energy, must nevertheless find some outlet of expression, and for Freud it does so through a complex process of identification. Along with the ego, Freud posits the ego ideal (*Ichideal*), an agency that is the effective precipitate of narcissism and sublimation and whose functions include “self-observation, the

⁵⁹The formulation is Lancaster’s. “Literally, in terms of male-male sexual relations, when one ‘uses’ a *cochón*, one acquires masculinity; when one is ‘used’ as a *cochón*, one expends it. The same act, then, makes one man an *hombre-hombre*, a manly man, and the other a *cochón*” (“That We Should All Turn Queer?” [n. 3 above], p. 150).

⁶⁰Lancaster also notes the tension between the ideal or project of the “New Man” and “traditional” machismo. In his view, the project of the “New Man” fails in Nicaragua because it leaves “*machismo*’s driving engine largely untouched” (*ibid.*, p. 154).

⁶¹Paul Julian Smith, in “The Language of Strawberry,” *Sight and Sound* 4 (1994): 31–33, offers a similar reading in relation to Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s film *Strawberry and Chocolate*. “What the film offers gay Cubans,” Smith claims, “is not the chance to rethink the . . . alliance between homophobia and Fidelismo, but to reframe that alliance by incorporating a sexless and self-sacrificing homosexuality into [the] regime itself” (p. 32).

⁶²Freud, *Group Psychology* (n. 48 above), p. 59.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 45.

moral conscience, the censorship of dreams, and the chief influence in repression.”⁶⁴ The ego ideal, distinguished from the ego (perhaps indeed a distinguished ego), is therefore an agency of critique, but it is also a site of satisfaction, that is to say, of displaced satisfaction because dissatisfaction with the ego is there made good. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, the ego ideal is involved in a process of symbolic “identification with the very place *from where* we are being observed, *from where* we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love.”⁶⁵

Žižek’s work is germane to my reading because he teases out the implications of identification for a range of contemporary political regimes, including those which fall under the shadow of Stalin. Fidel Castro’s own much-debated Stalinist turns are not incidental to Cuban policies on sexual conduct, but even as I note them, I want to stay with the significance of the ego ideal in group formation. Although Freud describes the ego ideal as a site of satisfaction, displaced and distinguished from the ego, he does not stop there. Instead, he (dis)places the ego ideal within a complex web of renunciations, substitutions, and devotions. Freud includes under the latter category, the “sublimated devotion to an abstract idea” and describes how the idea may function as an object put in the place of the ego ideal.⁶⁶ Pure abstraction tends, however, to be of limited efficacy and requires a more palpable, or at least more visible, home. That home is the body of the leader, the place from where “I” may be observed, and like “myself,” as part of a “we.” The plural subject, the “we,” is itself the effect of a renunciation, substitution, and devotion in common, a process by which individuals are bound together in mutual identification, lovingly but not quite sexually. Summarizing this identificatory process, Freud affirms that “the individual gives up his ego ideal and substitutes for it the group ideal as embodied in the leader.”⁶⁷ It is just this embodiment of the group ideal that I want to flesh out in Castro.

The body of Fidel Castro, like his name, is the object of both veneration and revilement, of passionate defenses and passionate attacks, of

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 52.

⁶⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, 1989), p. 105; emphasis original.

⁶⁶ Freud, *Group Psychology*, p. 57.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 78–79. Freud writes of primary and secondary groups, although the latter seems to fall outside the purview of his study: “We are quite in a position to give the formula for the libidinal constitution of groups, or at least of such groups as we have hitherto considered—namely, those that have a leader and have not been able by means of too much ‘organization’ to acquire secondarily the characteristics of an individual. *A primary group of this kind is a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego*” (p. 61; emphasis original).

love and hate. Occupying a position of great visibility, Castro appears subject to the global traffic in images and meanings. Celebrated by revolutionaries and would-be revolutionaries throughout the world, he also appears, in the popular press of the very nation most against him, as the veritable embodiment of revolution. More intricate than the rhetoric of absolute opposition would allow, Castro's relation to the United States is mediated and popularized in interviews in *Playboy* and in *Vanity Fair*. In the latter, one of the most recent (1994) in a long series of interviews, he is presented as a "formidable man," a man of "awesome vigor."⁶⁸ "Dressed as always in a crisp olive-green uniform and black combat boots," Castro appears as a man of great constancy.⁶⁹ His beard may have greyed, his cigar may have disappeared, but Castro has attained the status of icon.

That this icon signifies different things for different people in different places is no doubt important, but equally important is the sense that Castro is, despite these differences, solid as a rock. This sense of solidity is generated, in part, by Castro and his supporters, for whom the leader's self-professed lack of doubt is proof of his commitment, integrity, rightness, and resistance.⁷⁰ For others, his lack of self-doubt, his solidity, is proof of his dogmatic inflexibility, his resistance not just to capitalism and American imperialism but to historical reality itself. But on another level, his solidity signifies a body politic of a curiously sexual sort. Even as Castro has distanced himself from previous policies against homosexual "conduct" (policies that he claims never to have given rise to persecution),⁷¹ even as he has stated that he personally has never "suffered" from homophobia, his own posture has been one of solid, self-sacrificing, heterosexual masculinity. Husband to no one, father to many, Castro signals

⁶⁸ Bardach (n. 31 above), p. 130.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ In a 1985 interview with Jeffrey M. Elliot and Mervyn M. Dymally, *Fidel Castro: Nothing Can Stop the Course of History* (New York, 1986), excerpts of which appeared in *Playboy*, Castro declares, "I must say, in all frankness, that I can't recall ever having doubts or a lack of confidence. I've never had them. That may be good, or it may be bad. If what you're doing is objectively correct, then not having doubts is good. But if what you're doing is objectively bad, then not having doubts is bad" (pp. 23–24). Needless to say, Castro believes that what he is doing is "objectively correct."

⁷¹ In recent years, Castro has repeatedly denied the persecution of homosexuals. In his interview with Alfredo Conde, *Una conversación en la Habana* (Madrid, 1989), he is categorical: "At a certain moment there was a certain rigidity in the way of seeing, of conceptualizing, the phenomenon of homosexuality; that is true. There was never repression [Represión no hubo nunca]. A somewhat rigid, a somewhat machista, way of seeing the problem, true enough, but that is associated with what we inherited, our received culture" (p. 131; translation mine).

a sort of abstract paternity, and hence the occasion for “fraternal” bonding, that runs counter to the prevailing image of the homosexual.⁷² As the leader of the revolution, he embodies a group ideal from where the homosexual subject—already identified in a way that hinders identification with the subject in power—is hard-pressed to find himself, as Žižek puts it, “likeable, worthy of love.”

The preidentification, or socially scripted identification, to which I have alluded holds the homosexual to be self-centered and hypersexual, incapable of the limitation of narcissism and the strengthening of sublimated libidinal ties necessary to an identification with others through the leader. Narcissism and hypersexuality are indeed two of the most insistent signs of identity thrust onto the gay subject. In Cuba, they are associated furthermore with any mode of art that valorizes experimentation, play, and pleasure, serious and somber as they may often be. Arenas’s own valorization of intellectual inquiry, artistic creation, and homosexual practice, all intertwined as the restive signs of his identity, is a case in point and may be read in conjunction with Cuban officials’ now subtle, now overt, linking of intellectual-artistic activity and “sexual (im)morality.”⁷³ Castro’s 1961 “Words to the Intellectuals,” with its emphasis on sacrifice and redemption, is only one in a celebrated line of pronouncements on art and morality in revolutionary Cuba.⁷⁴ Another, this one of even greater import for gays and lesbians, is the 1971 Declaration of the First National Congress on Education and Culture. In it, homosexuality, coming once again on the rhetorical heels of prostitution, is described as a “deviation” and as a form of “social pathology.”⁷⁵ Rejecting homosexuality on the basis of “militant principle,” the Con-

⁷²In 1948, Castro married Mirta Díaz Balart, the mother of Félix Fidel Castro Díaz, known in and out of the family as “Fidelito.” See Robert E. Quirk, *Fidel Castro* (New York, 1993), pp. 27–29. The marriage was short-lived. In 1954, Díaz Balart divorced Castro and was given custody of their child. Castro has never remarried; as one interviewee quips in *Improper Conduct*, he is married to the revolution.

⁷³I want to insist that Arenas identifies himself, critically to be sure, in terms that are profoundly artistic. When he leaves Cuba, it is thus not only (or perhaps even primarily) because he cannot be freely homosexual, but also (and perhaps indeed primarily) because he cannot be freely artistic, because he cannot write and publish without censorship, rejection, and restraint.

⁷⁴Castro’s “Palabras a los intelectuales” (n. 49 above) is in fact more marked by anti-intellectualism than homophobia, more concerned with the proper path of the mind than the proper path of the body.

⁷⁵The Declaration is quoted in Montaner (n. 26 above), p. 179; all translations are mine. For an English version, see Young (n. 1 above), pp. 32–33, who takes it from *Granma Weekly Review* (May 9, 1971), the English-language abstract of the Cuban Communist paper, *Granma*.

gress recommends that further study of “this complex problem” be undertaken without, for all that, considering it “a central or fundamental problem for our society.”⁷⁶

Such problematic oscillation between center and margin, presented in terms of education and prevention, effectively permits the “*saneamiento* (the reordering, but literally the draining or cleansing) of focuses [of homosexual activity] and even the control and relocation of isolated cases,” supposedly without implicating the political system as a whole.⁷⁷ But if the “antisocial character” of homosexuality is not a central problem for “our” society (homosexuality appears to matter, but not too much), it remains, needless to say, decidedly more central a problem for homosexuals themselves.⁷⁸ Of course, no sooner is this so-called problem recognized as central by particular individuals, no sooner does the homosexual recognize him- or herself to be the problem, than the specter of narcissism and sexual obsession reasserts itself. Interpellated by the revolutionary regime as problematic and peripheral, the homosexual subject confronts the limits of our society, recognizes the exclusionary shape of the “we” by recognizing the “I” as excluded according to a rationale in which the sexual is quite definitely the political. This (homo)-sexual I is hence the effect, at least in part, of the very system that subjects it to a disciplinary program of education, production, and correction. In what amounts to a classic double bind, any attempt at self-defense or self-justification—even, if not especially, when undertaken in the name of a “minor” or “alternate” community—may be read as a defense or justification of the self, the sexual self. Hailed in the language of prior recognitions, the homosexual subject appears to re-cognize him- or herself as self-concerned and sexual, incapable of limiting narcissism or of strengthening, by sublimating, libidinal ties. Homosexual identity is already identified, that is, by strong, sexually sublimated others.

The 1971 Congress of Education and Culture, amid all of its collective observations and recommendations, pays special attention to the place of the artist: “It is not permissible that, by means of ‘artistic quality,’ recognized homosexuals win influence and have an effect on the education of our youth.”⁷⁹ Once more the image of the predatory homosexual is invoked, though now in the guise of the Cuban artist cum pedagogue rather than the North American capitalist. The ready linking

⁷⁶ Quoted in Montaner, p. 179.

⁷⁷ Quoted in *ibid.* A structurally similar, though ostensibly more “benevolent,” policy of control and containment has been mobilized in Cuba around AIDS. For more on mandatory testing for HIV and compulsory isolation (quarantine) in state-run AIDS sanatoriums in Cuba, see Leiner (n. 2 above), pp. 117–49.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Montaner, p. 179.

⁷⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 180.

of art to education is indicative of a didactic and utilitarian conception of aesthetics, codified most notably as social realism, and evinces a fairly standard anxiety about the dangers of the artistic imagination. Castro himself, in his closing speech to the 1971 Congress, rails against “privileged minorities” who have “monopolized the title of intellectuals” and whose writings are useless, mere “expressions of decadence.”⁸⁰ Castro’s words apply to the visual arts, but they are perhaps even more forcibly addressed to the art of writing.⁸¹ Bothered at having to refer to such liberal bourgeois “trash,” at having to raise to the level of “problems” matters that are not really problems that should matter at all, Castro affirms the validity of censorship as well as the importance of “a firm, solid, unanimous, monolithic position.”⁸² He does not refer directly to homosexuality (the Congress at large performs that task), but he shadows it forth in his depictions of the “unproductive parasite” and “intellectual rat” for whom aesthetic value is found in anything that entertains, diverts, or helps to wile away boredom.⁸³

The underlying assumption is here a relatively old one, found again and again in the conflation of literary and literal decadence, in the wild corruption of the letter and the body alike.⁸⁴ For the revolutionary imagination, the pleasure of the text, given to dissipation and wasteful dissemination, reflects and expands the pleasure of the flesh, expands it, somewhat paradoxically, as the threat of a generalized sexual narcissism:

⁸⁰From Castro’s “En la clausura del Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura,” in his *Discursos* (Havana, 1975), 1:152. This and all other translations of this speech are mine. See also Castro’s *Cuba y los derechos humanos (Entrevista con la NBC)* (Buenos Aires, 1988).

⁸¹Castro’s 1961 “Palabras a los intelectuales” comes in the wake of the controversy surrounding Orlando Jiménez Leal and Sabá Cabrera Infante’s film *P.M.* Castro is clearly concerned with how the revolution is seen as well as how it is articulated and discussed. For more on *P.M.* see Cabrera Infante (n. 17 above), pp. 52–54.

⁸²Castro, “En la clausura del Primer Congreso,” pp. 149, 144. The notorious “*caso Padilla*,” in which the Cuban writer Heberto Padilla is obliged by the revolutionary regime of Fidel Castro to make a public self-critique, or *autocrítica*, is indicative of this demand for a monolithic position. “The *caso Arenas*,” Cabrera Infante remarks, “is a much less well-known case than the *caso Padilla*. But of the two the one who suffered most at the hands of State Security was Reinaldo Arenas” (p. 414).

⁸³Castro, “En la clausura del Primer Congreso,” pp. 152–54.

⁸⁴It should be clear that I am using the term “decadence” in the broad sense in which it was used by Castro and his supporters in their repeated references to (the decadence of) the bourgeoisie, capitalism, colonialism, and artistic endeavors that do not serve the revolutionary ends defined by the regime. The significant historical and conceptual differences between Latin American and non-Latin American literary decadence are here not at issue for the simple reason that, in the rhetoric of the Cuban political bureaucracy, decadence was decadence: anything that lacked a certain state-defined integrity, be it an “effeminate” body or a “frivolous” book.

after all, one cannot focus on the play of the signifier without being in some way withdrawn from the work of society. The time and energy required to write and read the often opaque writing of such Cubans as José Lezama Lima, Severo Sarduy, Virgilio Piñera, and Arenas clash with the social realist ideal and, through an appeal to biographical data, tend to reinforce the connection between homosexuality and nonutilitarian art. The narcissistic, sexually driven subject has, it appears, an art of its own.

The notion of a (homo)sexually specific art is intriguing, and in Arenas's case certainly viable, but when homosexuality is so doggedly identified with narcissism and unproductive sensualism, more needs to be said. Michael Warner, for one, challenges the tendency, in both psychoanalytic and popular discourse, to characterize homosexuality as narcissistic. Concerned less with denying the role of the ego and the ego ideal in the formation of identity than with exposing their ideological manipulations, Warner declares that "modern heterosexuality needs a discourse about homosexuality as a displacement of its own narcissistic sources."⁸⁵ Following Warner, it is possible to see Castro's regime (perhaps any regime) as simultaneously fomenting and disguising a narcissism of its own, a grandiose identification of egos, in the plural, with a center, a leader, both solid and sublime. Egoism, individualism, and related "problems" of the self and the same are accordingly displaced and condensed—in a word, focalized—in the homosexual.

A similar dynamic holds, I believe, for the question of unsublimated sexuality, where the loss of libidinal energy is perceived as being at odds with the (re)production of strong revolutionary subjects. Never mind that heterosexuals do not sacrifice sexual activity in order to increase the reserves of national power, homosexuals are identified as being particularly prone to the profligate psychosexual expenditure that the revolution's "new man" opposes. I have already spoken of a process of preidentification and interpellation by which the homosexual is deemed to be decadent and nostalgic for an older regime, but here too there is more to be said. Judith Butler touches on the compulsive repetition of "the new" (new man, new deal, new order) in political signification. For Butler, "a signifier is political to the extent that it implicitly cites the prior instances of itself."⁸⁶ This citing, or reciting, takes "the phantasmatic promise of those prior signifiers, reworking them into the production and promise of 'the new,' a 'new' that is itself only established through recourse to those embedded conventions, past conventions, that have

⁸⁵ Michael Warner, "Homo-Narcissism; or, Heterosexuality," in *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*, ed. Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden (New York, 1990), p. 206.

⁸⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993).

conventionally been invested with the political power to signify the future.”⁸⁷ Butler’s remarks shed light on the revolutionary ideal of the “new man,” against which the homosexual is measured and found lacking, and shows it to be suffused with past conventions and established prejudices. Eminently controlled in conduct and appearance, the new man is the old man, man as he has long been promised to be: the eternal masculine.

In his 1992 interview with Tomás Borge, Castro describes the “problem” of homosexuality as a problem of history. For him, prejudice against gays and lesbians is the result of machismo, and machismo the result of colonialism. Machismo is, as Castro sees it, one of the many “bad habits” Cubans received from Spanish conquistadores, who themselves received it from Arab conquerors.⁸⁸ While the slippage of cultural and historical responsibility—away from Cuba and the present to an ever-distant Arabic past—is revealing, the thing that so slips is perhaps even more significant. The culprit is, in Castro’s phrase, “esa cosa machista,” that machista thing.⁸⁹ “Chose étrange,” Lacan might add, that machista thing—“esa cosa del machismo”—is the legacy of conquest, of power and dominion, violence and death.⁹⁰ It is a thing of and yet not of this world, be it new or old, a thing between cultures and yet before and behind them. In Žižek’s rendition of Lacan, the thing, *das Ding*, is “the real-traumatic kernel in the midst of symbolic order,” a nonhistorical place around which history constitutes itself, a place at once sublime and monstrous, a place perhaps strangely eternal.⁹¹

Judith Butler rightly takes Žižek to task for symbolizing this unsymbolizable thing as the kernel, or rock, of the real, as strangely masculine (strangely so, because signified, like the phallus, through the threat of castration). As Butler points out, Žižek does not simply present this

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 220.

⁸⁸ Borge (n. 43 above), p. 214. A similar genealogy of machismo may be found in theoretically informed texts as well. Lancaster, as we have seen, suggests a Mediterranean origin; and Salessi (n. 3 above) calls “the persistent distinction between an active and a passive role in male-male sex . . . a residue of a Mediterranean concept and representation of sex” (p. 367). My interest is not so much in locating the geopolitical origin of machismo as in noting the tendency to elide the capacity of machismo to originate meaning in such non-Mediterranean places as Cuba. As Lancaster himself says, in “‘That We Should All Turn Queer?’” (n. 3 above), machismo is as much productive as it is a product of systems (p. 148).

⁸⁹ Borge, p. 214.

⁹⁰ Ibid. Lacan’s phrase is from “La chose freudienne,” in *Écrits I* (Paris, 1966), p. 219, translated by Alan Sheridan as “The Freudian Thing,” in *Écrits: A Selection* (New York, 1977). In the English, it is translated as “strange to say” (p. 122), thereby losing the very “thing” that Lacan finds so compelling.

⁹¹ Žižek (n. 65 above), p. 135.

rock, kernel, or thing as devoid of specific historical and ideological content; he also strives to defend it from dissolution. Žižek and Butler, by their very disagreement, provide the critical parameters for Castro's more fortuitous, and decidedly more conventional, formulation of that machista thing. Strangely masculine though it may be, this thing appears uncannily familiar to Castro. In fact, although he implies that he seeks its dissolution, he seems more committed to dressing it up in standard, even rather comforting, historical clothes. So styled, that machista thing is perhaps troubling, but certainly not terrifying (remember, according to Castro, there has been no terror, no persecution). Castro may hold it responsible for homophobia and misogyny, but it is also, whether he admits it or not, crucial to the style and mystique of the leader himself: olive-green uniform, black combat boots, unflagging certainty, and all.⁹²

According to Roger Lancaster, machismo consists of "an ideal of masculinity defined by assertiveness, aggression, and competition; relatively privileged access to space and mobility; disproportionate control over resources; and a willingness to take risks."⁹³ So pervasive is this ideal, that Lancaster speaks of a "culture of machismo," replete with rules of conduct and codes of discipline.⁹⁴ It is a culture of violence, intimidation, and strength, all understood in gender-specific terms. Wherever it comes from, whatever its origins, machismo is "more than an 'effect' produced by other material causes. It has its own materiality, its own power to produce effects."⁹⁵ Productive of contemporary Latin American culture as much as some age-old product of Arabic culture, machismo is perhaps at its most intense, its most active, when the general social context is one of war or military preparedness.⁹⁶ Castro's claim to see machismo as a problem is complicated by the very fact that he is a man of the military, one whose conception of the "new man" relies, al-

⁹² Cabrera Infante (n. 17 above), in a curious ventriloquial act, states, "Fidel Castro is, as gays in the United States like to say with terrible Spanish grammar, *mucho macho*" (p. 71).

⁹³ Lancaster, "That We Should All Turn Queer?" p. 140.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 137. Lancaster takes the phrase "culture of machismo" from Oscar Lewis's "culture of poverty."

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 148.

⁹⁶ As Lancaster puts it, "Even while the Sandinistas devoted themselves to combatting machismo in some arenas, the logic of this sexual construct, and its disciplinary force in creating and consolidating a genre of masculinity, was ultimately reinforced by conditions of war" (ibid., p. 141). In Cuba, the conditions of war are not those of a protracted struggle with a force analogous to the Contras, but rather the sense of defensive preparedness that marks Cuban relations with the United States. So formulated, the continuation of machismo in Cuba is as much an effect of North American hostility as it is of a Hispano-Arabic past: it legitimates the hyperpresence of the military and renders difficult, if not impossible, the revolution within the revolution to which Lancaster refers.

most despite itself, on the continuation of certain well-established marks of masculine and military power. Lancaster's dictum, made with regard to Nicaragua, holds for Cuba: changing machismo, problematic as it is, "would have required a revolution within the revolution."⁹⁷ No stranger to paradox, machismo is the thing that at once impels and obstructs the revolution: that solid thing that is only all too solid.⁹⁸

That machista thing, solid as a rock and yet wary of dissolution, is named by Castro in his discussion of misogyny and homophobia. But it is also, and perhaps more perversely, Castro's name. Perversely perhaps, because the name tends to be placed outside of play and polyvocality, fortified deep inside the realm of the proper, underwriting the correspondence on which social realism depends. Though permeated by political history, the proper name is arguably the individual's most precious, albeit illusory, property: something not without weight in a regime where private property is ostensibly abolished. And if this holds for the "common" subject, it holds all the more powerfully for the leader, for Castro. Proper conduct, proper appearance, and proper political consciousness are bound up in proper names.⁹⁹ Both Butler and Žižek, along with their queries into the rock of the real, sound out what is at stake in the proper name, how it may and may not perform in society. While Butler strives to affirm the slippage of the name and the failure of identification as "the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference," it is Žižek who, however problematically, plays this slippage out in his work.¹⁰⁰ Following Lacan, he reads names "improperly," that is to say poetically, as styles and stylos of the unconscious: the very stuff that social realism rejects.

Among the names that Žižek takes on is, as I have previously indi-

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 148.

⁹⁸ The greatest paradox of machismo is that it relies, at its most honorable, on a stigmatized version of homosexuality. This is one of Lancaster's most perceptive and persuasive points: "The *machista's* 'honor' and the *cochón's* 'shame' are opposite sides of the same coin." Accordingly, "what is at stake is not simply a question of the construction of minority sexual identity through stigma, but moreover the elaboration of a majority status and a prevailing culture through the circulation of stigma" ("That We Should All Turn Queer?" [n. 3 above], pp. 150, 151). It is in this sense that the identification and punishment of *maricones* in Cuba can be seen as part of a new project of national "elaboration."

⁹⁹ Proper consciousness is a fundamental revolutionary tenet and goal. According to Bunck (n. 15 above), "[Che] Guevara advocated offering moral incentives to citizens who demonstrated proper *conciencia*" (p. 127). And Castro himself says, in his interview with Gianni Minà (n. 51 above), "Che spoke of the new man. It is the continuation of the other idea, that a new society has to create a new consciousness. A socialist revolutionary process has to create a new human being also. In essence, the new human being has to express much more solidarity, be much more selfless, to look on all others as brothers" (p. 143).

¹⁰⁰ Butler (n. 86 above), p. 219.

cated, that of Stalin. Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhughashvili comes to us in history under a rather telling proper name: Stalin. As Žižek notes, “‘Stalin’ (Russian for ‘[made] of steel’) alludes to some steely, inexorable characteristic of Stalin himself.”¹⁰¹ A name of steel for a self-made man of steel, “Stalin” is “the ideal point” from where the leader and his followers see themselves as they desire.¹⁰² “In the Stalinist vision,” Žižek asserts, “the Communists are ‘men of iron will,’ somehow excluded from the everyday cycle of ordinary human passions and weakness.”¹⁰³ They are, or they see themselves as being, men of unyielding resolve: “firm, solid, unanimous, [and] monolithic,” as Castro frames it. Little wonder that women and homosexuals, already identified as soft and pliable, are not often within the core of power. That machista thing, doubtless under another name, seems to have been at work in the Stalinist regime as well.

Castro’s turn to Stalin has been the subject of considerable discussion, both inside and outside of Cuba.¹⁰⁴ Enrique Baloyra, referring to Castro’s ties to Stalinism, speaks of “the cycle of hard and soft stages of personalist domination in Cuba,” while Tomás Borge, less inclined to see personalism here as a problem, presses Castro on his view of Stalin in the wake of the Soviet collapse.¹⁰⁵ Castro admits that Stalin made mistakes, but he sees him as a man of merits and successes; while he may distance himself from the Soviet leader, he in many ways continues to stand by him. Fidel Castro’s steadfastness is characteristic of the leader, and allows for an interesting return to the play of the proper name. “Fidel,” of course, is bound to faith and fidelity, a coincidence that the Spanish novelist Juan Goytisolo exploits in his parodies of “our always very faithful island of Cuba” (“nuestra muy fiel isla de Cuba”).¹⁰⁶ “Castro” is equally evocative. A family name rather than an invented name

¹⁰¹ Žižek (n. 65 above), p. 108.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 145.

¹⁰⁴ Baloyra (n. 42 above), studies the similarities and differences between Stalinism and *Fidelismo*: “It is *fielismo*, not the PSP, which comes closer to resembling Stalinism in the Cuban case. Their ‘Muscovite’ allegiances connected the PSP leadership to a Soviet party that had undergone a Leninist restoration before the triumph of the Cuban insurrection” (p. 40). The so-called return to Lenin that marked the opening (and fragmenting) of the Soviet Union was resisted by Castro, for whom Stalinism continued to hold certain merits. “In Cuba,” Baloyra writes, “‘Stalinism’ has not so much implied permanent terror and hypercentralization, but quasi-permanent mobilization, relative institutional chaos, intimidation, and uncertainty” (p. 39). Baloyra nonetheless notes important personal differences between Castro and Stalin, describing the latter as an insecure recluse who detested interpersonal contact and rarely delivered speeches and the former as “a consummate showman [who] truly enjoys performing before mass audiences” (p. 57).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁰⁶ Juan Goytisolo, *Las virtudes del pájaro solitario* (Barcelona, 1988), translated by Helen Lane as *The Virtues of the Solitary Bird* (London, 1991), p. 94.

(like Stalin), *Castro* is an old Castilian word that means “castle” or “military fortification.” Specially significant in Galicia and Asturias, it is a word, a name, that enjoys a privileged connection to the language of the Empire, to the “castle” that is at the base of Castile and Castilian alike. Adjectively, it is related to the word *castrense*, meaning “of, or proper to, the military profession.” “Castro” is also, as chance would have it, the first person singular of the verb *castrar*, “to castrate,” and may thus be translated as “I castrate.” Given the interplay of prohibition and transgression in the romance of the national family (a “fraternity” “ideally” constituted through the leader), the fact that the name of the Cuban leader is also the voice of castration, or better yet, that every utterance of the leader’s name is an assumption, in the first person, of the agency of castration, is certainly one of the more uncanny accidents of political language.¹⁰⁷

But this menacing meaning is supplemented by a meaning, though related, more modest. Phonetically and poetically “Castro” resonates with *casto* (“chaste”), something that does not seem to escape Arenas, who declares in his posthumously published autobiography, *Antes que anochezca* (*Before Night Falls*): “Toda dictadura es casta y antivital” (every dictatorship is chaste and anti-life).¹⁰⁸ “All affirmations of life,” Arenas comments, “are diametrically opposed to dogmatic regimes. It was logical for Fidel Castro to persecute us, and to try to suppress any public display of the life force.”¹⁰⁹ Arenas symbolically casts Castro as the chastiser of life, as the castrator of male homosexuality in particular, and thus implicitly as the champion of death. As in so much of his work, Arenas presents himself as Castro’s steadfast opponent: steadfast despite his relative weakness, fragility, and disadvantage. Despite the fact that his only arms are words.

For Arenas, this disadvantage, troublingly turned to his advantage, seems to extend to his name as well. Commenting on the early confusion between “Reinaldo” and “Reynaldo,” Emir Rodríguez-Monegal states that “not even the spelling of his name is certain.”¹¹⁰ He and Enrico Mario Santí both describe Arenas as a nonperson or nonwriter in his native Cuba, a man whose name has suffered from suppression and erasure almost as much as his writing.¹¹¹ “Arenas” itself means “sands” or

¹⁰⁷ Another “accident” is that “Castro,” in the United States, is the name of a famous gay district in San Francisco.

¹⁰⁸ Arenas, *Before Night Falls* (n. 41 above), p. 119; my translation.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹¹⁰ Emir Rodríguez-Monegal, “The Labyrinthine World of Reinaldo Arenas,” *Latin American Literary Review* 8 (1980): 126–31, 126.

¹¹¹ Enrico Mario Santí, “The Life and Times of Reinaldo Arenas,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 23 (1984): 227–36.

“sand,” a word at times scattered, or settled, strategically in his texts.¹¹² The scattering of names, their fragmentation and dissolution into kernels of a different sort, is part of a prodigious play of language, part of what Arenas describes from early on in his career as the multiple, infinite, and radically interpretable movement of reality itself.¹¹³ Given Castro’s insistence on monolithic integrity, it is scarcely surprising that Arenas’s belief in the value of the particular—be it of bodies, images, or names—gets him into trouble. Affirming a particularity that does not stay put, an identity whose force and durability are meted in its dispersion, Arenas holds onto the self, his self, by letting it go, in part. Such paradoxical, poetic configurations of subjectivity are grating to a regime that lays claim to scientific objectivity, rationality, and unity; they appear not just decadent and degenerative, but dangerously erosive. Along with the man of steel and the castle of fortified faith and chastity: the man of sand, bearer of scattered dreams and nightmares.

CROSSING THE LINE OF BEAUTY: RAGE, DESIRE,
AND DEATH IN REINALDO ARENAS

Reinaldo Arenas is a writer against all odds. He is marked by poverty, imprisonment, forced labor, homelessness, flight, exile, AIDS, and suicide. His work itself is repeatedly lost, sequestered, and destroyed; much of it, toward the end, is rewritten from memory, hurriedly brought into print, and posthumously published.¹¹⁴ His faith in writing and the (ho-

¹¹² Regarding the scattered name of the author, *Arturo* is a case in point. Among the lists of rich and exotic signifiers by which Arturo seeks to transcend his surroundings, “there were still so many marvels to be made—sandy beaches (‘arenas’), orchids, hollows and glens and Patrocluses”; see Arenas, *Arturo, la estrella más brillante* (Barcelona, 1984), translated by Andrew Hurley as *The Brightest Star*, in *Old Rosa: A Novel in Two Stories* (New York), p. 97. The instance of the author’s name, *arenas* (sands), among the list of precious items is no doubt significant, as is the name of Patroclus, considered to be the “beloved” of Achilles.

¹¹³ This description is from “Celestino y yo” (“Celestino and I”), *Unión* 6 (1967): 117–20. It is Arenas’s account of his first and only work published in Cuba, *Celestino antes del alba* (Havana, 1967), revised as *Cantando en el pozo* (Barcelona, 1982), and translated by Andrew Hurley as *Singing from the Well* (New York, 1987). Arenas’s article takes on, in unmistakable terms, the doctrinaire centrality of social realism and, by extension, the ideological unity of the regime itself.

¹¹⁴ Born in 1943 of unmarried peasant parents in Cuba’s rural, easternmost Oriente province, Arenas is raised by his mother, grandparents, and ten aunts. After a brief involvement with the anti-Batista rebel forces, Arenas wins a scholarship to study accounting under the revolution’s new agrarian reform program. In 1963, he enters a contest for children’s stories and displays what would be a lasting interest in memory and childhood. His first works published in Cuba avoid a staunch revolutionary line, but he gradually becomes

mo)sexual body contrasts with Fidel's faith, and demand for faith, in a revolutionary line that has little room for play, plurality, and ambivalence. The regime's demand for loyal and faithful subjects does not, of course, pass Arenas by. Hailed by the regime in a way that makes it impossible for him to respond satisfactorily (hailed, i.e., as a homosexual artist), Arenas finds himself at a loss: unable to publish his work at home, removed from his job at the Writer's Union, sent off for reindoctrination at a sugar mill, and arrested on charges of corruption, charges that are first presented as being of a moral rather than political nature. The distinction between morality and politics is far from clear, and the one slips into the other with considerable ease. In the words of Arenas himself: "I was no longer being accused of just a common crime, a public scandal, as the original arrest records showed. Now I was a counterrevolutionary engaged in incessant propaganda against the regime, which I published abroad. Everything had been set up to convict me."¹¹⁵ Out of step with both heterosexual and social realist norms, Arenas is (seen as being) out of step with the revolution as a whole.

The slippage between morality and politics is accompanied by a more classically metonymic slippage between the part and the whole: what are at times taken as mere attributes are at other times taken as essential. Arenas's status as homosexual writer raises questions about his status as revolutionary subject. This is not to say that Arenas championed the revolution and was unjustly accused by the regime on the basis of literary style and sexual orientation alone; rather, it is to say that Arenas's criticism of the revolution is intricately intertwined with the revolution's criticism of "people like him." And people like Arenas are, in the rhetoric of the regime, decadent, frivolous, and dangerous: narcissistic pleasure-

more restive and critical. By the time he flees Cuba in the 1980 with the Mariel exodus, he has managed to publish three novels and a collection of short stories, one in Spain (*El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas*, translated as *The Palace of the White Skunks*), one in Mexico (*El mundo alucinante*, translated as *The Ill-Fated Peregrinations of Fray Servando*), and only one in Cuba (*Celestino antes del alba*, revised and translated as *Singing from the Well*). The publication in France of *El mundo alucinante* after being smuggled out of Cuba garnered Arenas the wrath of the authorities. Charged with corruption of minors and improper conduct, he was imprisoned various times before fleeing Cuba in 1980. In exile in New York City, he managed to finish his projected series of five novels. Suffering from AIDS, he committed suicide in 1990. The reception of Arenas's work inside Cuba was couched in silence and denial, while outside, it became embroiled in the debate on the Cuban revolution in particular and on communist ideology in general. Branded as ideologically suspect, Arenas noticed the change in his work's reception: not merely its continued suppression in Cuba, but also its gradual disappearance from reading lists and syllabi in the United States and other Western nations.

¹¹⁵ Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, p. 156.

seekers. They are, as Castro states in a speech shortly after the exodus of some 125,000 people in 1980 from the port of Mariel, “declassed, antisocial, lumpen elements that are receptive to imperialist enticements and ideas.”¹¹⁶ Or, as he also puts it, they are, quite simply, *escoria*, scum.

As one of the people who leaves Cuba from Mariel, as a Marielito, Arenas is merely one of the more notorious lumpen elements, scum with style. “The people’s repudiation of the scum (*escoria*),” Castro asserts in the same speech, “also meant that they repudiated undisciplined behavior, sponging, accommodation, negligence, and other such negative attitudes.”¹¹⁷ The people’s repudiation of the people, pronounced here by the leader, places Arenas in a mass that is not the mass valorized by communism. Massified as scum and duly repudiated, Arenas is the abject of the revolutionary project: one, among many, who is thrown down and out, thrown away, by a regime that purports to throw itself forever forward. Repudiation and abjection are critical and dovetail the sexual politics of Castro’s state.¹¹⁸ Castro and Cuba are not, in this, alone; for as Judith Butler observes, “sexed positions are themselves secured through the repudiation and abjection of homosexuality and the assumption of normative heterosexuality.”¹¹⁹

What Butler calls the “logic” of repudiation and abjection works simultaneously to bind and sunder people: “The specificity of identity is purchased through the loss and degradation of connection.”¹²⁰ But if the price of identity is the loss and degradation of another, it is a price that varies according to reigning standards of value. In other words, heterosexuality may be “purchased” through the repudiation and abjection of homosexuality, but the repudiation and abjection of heterosexuality, by which homosexuality might presumably be “purchased,” come at a much higher price. Simply put, this logic is neither invariable nor egalitarian. Thus, while it is logical that “what is refused or repudiated in the

¹¹⁶ Castro, “Excerpt from Report to Second Party Congress, December 17, 1980,” in his *Speeches*, vol. 2, *Our Power Is That of the Working People: Building Socialism in Cuba*, ed. Michael Taber (New York, 1983), p. 309. See also the September 27, 1980, speech, “No Revolution Can Ignore Its Links to the Masses,” in the same volume, pp. 299–305. For Arenas’s account, partially reiterated in his autobiography, see *Necesidad de libertad: Mariel: Testimonios de un intelectual disidente* (Mexico City, 1986).

¹¹⁷ Castro, “Excerpt from Report,” p. 310.

¹¹⁸ Peter T. Johnson, in “The Nuanced Lives of the Intelligentsia,” in *Conflict and Change in Cuba*, ed. Enrique A. Baloyra and James A. Morris (n. 42 above), depicts “acts of repudiation” as “a standard tactic used against dissidents” in Cuba (p. 157).

¹¹⁹ Butler (n. 86 above), p. 111. Even if we limit Butler’s observations to the West and modernity, Cuba is implicated. Between the process of Spanish colonization, North American imperialism, and Socialist re-education, Western thought certainly shapes Cuba.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

formation of the subject continues to determine that subject,”¹²¹ the force and scope of the subject’s formation, continuation, and determination may vary a great deal. Butler, to be sure, knows this and treats the loss and degradation of connections with heterosexuality in gay and lesbian separatism as problematic and special.

Insofar as Reinaldo Arenas is concerned, separatism tends to be of a more solitary sort, for he remains skeptical of the gay and lesbian movement itself. At the same time, his separatism and solitude—or at least the separatism and solitude that he figures in his fiction and autobiography—are never absolute. Not only is he bound to other gays and other Cubans, he is bound, as I have previously suggested, to Cuba and Castro. The Cuban leader is for Arenas what Butler calls a “defining negativity,” a terrible touchstone by which the subject, though abjected and repudiated, is and by which the writer writes.¹²² Freud describes a similar dynamic, in which “the leader or the leading idea might also . . . be negative; hatred against a particular person or institution might operate in just the same unifying way, and might call upon the same kind of emotional ties as positive attachment.”¹²³ Arenas’s hatred for Castro is passionate in the extreme, but his union with others who hate the leader is hardly easy.

Arenas’s “self-confessed homosexuality, delirious and reproachable,” as he calls it in his novel *The Doorman* (*El portero*), makes him a queer ally of conservative Miami-based Cubans whose opposition to homosexuality is here evidently outstripped by their opposition to Castro.¹²⁴ Ruby Rich and Lourdes Argüelles, two of the most outspoken critics of the manipulation of the “homosexual problem” by the Cuban Right, go so far as to suggest that Arenas is part of the “U.S.-financed war against the Cuban revolution.”¹²⁵ Although they adduce no proof, Rich and Argüelles present Arenas as guilty as charged. This is a powerful tactic because whatever one may think of Rich’s and Argüelles’s assertions,

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Freud, *Group Psychology* (n. 48 above), p. 41.

¹²⁴ Arenas, *El portero* (Miami, 1990), translated by Dolores M. Koch as *The Doorman* (New York, 1991), p. 97; my translation.

¹²⁵ Rich and Argüelles, “Homosexuality, . . . Part II” (n. 1 above), p. 132. Arenas has indeed been read as a pawn of the homophobic Right, as the dupe of the *gusanos* (anti-Communist Cuban “worms” or parasites) in Southern Florida. While Rich and Argüelles employ some rather dubious tactics in their reading—their portrait of Cuban Miami as awash in “drug production, casino gambling, prostitution, and the like” (p. 121) corresponds exactly to Castro’s portrait of the United States as “the paradise of gambling, prostitution, drugs, etc.” (Minà [n. 51 above], p. 63)—they are right that many anti-Castristas masked their own homophobia in order to drive a wedge in the left itself.

Arenas himself is made suspect, a man whose writing must contend with the phantom of complicity, disingenuousness, and other forms of political impropriety. Arenas may aspire toward aesthetic autonomy and creative freedom, he may indeed create compellingly imaginative works of art, but he, as author, is so shadowed by political reality, by all kinds of plots and misalliances, that the work that bears his name is the work, figuratively speaking, of others as well. It is in this sense that the more he is against Castro's Cuba, the more he is in it, even in exile. At the risk of troubling both supporters and detractors alike, one might even say that Arenas's is an extreme case of the revolutionary infidel as in-Fidel.¹²⁶

Read as an example, symptom, or type even when he is most autobiographically specific, Arenas fits a preexisting profile: the homosexual as traitor. Historian David Greenberg, like Allen Young before him, notes how homosexuality, in Cuba as elsewhere, carries a stamp of questionable loyalty.¹²⁷ Repeated over and over, this idea appears in Senel Paz's prizewinning novella from 1991, *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* (*The Wolf, the Woods, and the New Man*): "One must always be alert: fags are traitors by nature, by original sin."¹²⁸ It also appears in the much-touted

¹²⁶Arenas's psychosymbolic imbrication in Castro does not mean that he would not have existed as an artist without the Cuban leader, but rather that he would not have existed as the artist we know. This is an obvious fact, perhaps even a truism, but it bears examining. Whatever the meaning and force of his creativity, whatever his "talent" or his "artistic desire," the shape that his art takes is profoundly, inevitably, marked by the Cuban revolution and Castro. Profoundly and inevitably shaped, but not determined: Arenas's work cannot be reduced to mere propaganda (as Rich and Argüelles imply) any more than it can be reduced to the furtive realm of pure art and imagination. To imagine Arenas without Castro, to imagine his writing without the phantasmatic presence of the leader of the nation, is to continue to imagine both the writer and his writing with Castro, but a Castro rendered even more phantasmatic, a Castro relegated to the realm of the what if. Of course, this very imagining, possible among Arenas's readers, is imagined by Arenas himself: it haunts every direct and indirect reference to the relation between writing and the world, every speculation about the nature of beauty and its fate under dictatorship, every fabulation of an alternate world, whether it be one of beauty and pleasure (as in *The Brightest Star*) or one of apocalyptic terror and suffering (as in *The Assault*). We can never know what Arenas would have been or what he would have written without Castro; we can only know that that imagining, that impossible possibility, is itself part of his creative power.

¹²⁷Greenberg (n. 16 above), p. 442. Cuba and elsewhere: the connection between homosexuality and presumed disloyalty is found throughout the West and those societies profoundly touched by the West.

¹²⁸Senel Paz, *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* (Mexico City, 1991) p. 46; translation mine. See also Emilio Bejel, "Senel Paz: Homosexualidad, nacionalismo y utopía," *Plural* 269 (1994): 58–65. Paz's position is undeniably critical toward the Castro regime; but it is far from easy with the issue of homosexuality itself, appearances notwithstanding. Paz states in an interview with Teresa Toledo—"Intolerance," *Sight and Sound* 4 (1994): 33–34—that "the central issue [of the story] is not homosexuality. The problems raised go much further: it is friendship and tolerance that are at stake" (p. 33). Paz's liberal humanist

cinematic adaptation by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío, *Fresa y chocolate* (*Strawberry and Chocolate*).¹²⁹ Ostensibly a critique of Cuban homophobia from the inside, and hence an indication of the regime's increasing tolerance, Paz's story and Gutiérrez Alea's film nonetheless reiterate, without rigorously criticizing, many of the most persistent sexual stereotypes. Indeed, as Paul Julian Smith points out, the film goes even further than the story in its use of stereotypes and in its strategies of disavowal, framing "the gay action within a hetero narrative which safely contains it for nervous straights."¹³⁰ Appearing shortly after Arenas's suicide, these works, whatever their aims and achievements, do not alter the fact that Arenas, marked as a counterrevolutionary in Cuba, continues to face the charge of betrayal and infidelity even after his death. No doubt this is because Arenas draws attention to—or, as some might say, makes an issue of—the clash between his homosexuality and Castro's homophobia (Arenas holds Castro personally responsible) and essentially denies that there is anything positive about the revolution at all. But if Arenas is an enemy of the revolution and an uneasy ally of the counterrevolution, he also resists aligning himself with the gay movement in the United States.

Far from applauding the notion of a gay community based on equality and reciprocity, Arenas finds sexual relations in exile to be, as he remarks in *Before Night Falls*, "tedious and unrewarding":

statement, repeated a number of times in the course of this short interview, reasserts the virtual inviability of focusing on homosexuality. It is interesting, moreover, that Paz articulates a sort of disjunction between, on the one hand, homosexuality, and on the other, friendship and tolerance.

¹²⁹Gutiérrez Alea is the veteran, revolutionary director of such provocative films as *Death of a Bureaucrat* and *Memories of Underdevelopment*.

¹³⁰Smith (n. 61 above), p. 31. Going against the grain of the celebratory readings of Gutiérrez Alea's film, Smith takes the film to task for its "pallid and patronizing images of gay men," its "moments of transparent homosexual panic, demonstrations of sexless and self-sacrificing gay love . . . interspersed with more explicit straight sex scenes" (p. 31). Rejecting the idea that the film is either gay or "universal," and maintaining instead that it is most definitely, and most anxiously, "straight," Smith asks why "the question of homosexuality [is] such a 'problem' [to use director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's word] for the revolution, one which it can bring itself to address [in film] only now, *in extremis*?" He also contrasts it with the work of Reinaldo Arenas, saying, quite wistfully, that "it is a pity that Alea's dour Diego [the film's main homosexual character] is not allowed even a glimmer of Arenas's defiantly proud eroticism" (p. 32). Smith's most persuasive observation, however, has to do with the film's moral. "Its moral, as banal as it is unconvincing, is that people are all the same and that sex is like ice-cream, simply a matter of taste. It is therefore impossible, within the terms of the film, to examine why 'people who preferred strawberry' were sent to forced labour camps while 'people who preferred chocolate' were not" (p. 32). Philip Kemp, in his review of the film, likewise published in *Sight and Sound* 4 (1994): 48, also notes the stereotypes and "dismal expectations" of the film, going so far as to call it "cul-

The queer gets together with the queer and everybody does everything. One sucks first, and then they reverse roles. How can that bring satisfaction? What we are really looking for is our opposite. The beauty of our relationships then was that we met our opposites. We would find that man, that powerful recruit who wanted desperately to fuck us. We were fucked under bridges, in the bushes, everywhere, by men who wanted satisfaction while they penetrated us. Either conditions here are different, or it is just difficult to duplicate what we had there. Everything here is so regulated that groups and societies have been created in which it is very difficult for a homosexual to find a man, that is, the real object of his desire.¹³¹

This is a striking picture of pleasure and beauty. For what Arenas criticizes is not the commodification of eroticism and art under capitalism but, rather, an apparent lack of oppositionality, indeed of oppression, in sexual relationships among men in the United States. Unsatisfied by a sexual reversibility in which discrete positions of “activity” and “passivity” are blurred, and implicitly accepting certain tenets of the machista tradition, Arenas waxes nostalgic about the conditions of sex in Cuba. Inasmuch as these conditions include furtive encounters with powerful recruits, guards, and other military men, with the very “men” engaged in keeping the “queers” in place, he finds them difficult to duplicate in the United States. But the conditions of sex in Cuba, or more precisely the new rules and limitations set by the revolutionary regime on those conditions, are, along with the censorial conditions of writing, precisely what Arenas flees.¹³² What is there unbearable is here the very stuff of longing and desire: something that he cannot quite live with or without. This can make for some rather disturbing generalizations, such as Cabrera Infante’s assertion that Arenas’s memoirs “prove . . . that the harsher the persecution against homosexuals in Cuba became, the more enjoyment (that is the word) it gave homosexuals.”¹³³ In many respects,

pably naive.” At the same time, unlike Smith, Kemp finds a critical impulse in the film, noting a sense of “desperation” and “urgency.”

¹³¹ Arenas, *Before Night Falls* (n. 41 above), pp. 106–7.

¹³² The relationship between sex and writing imposes itself yet again. We can only wonder whether Arenas would have fled Cuba had he been able to write (and publish) without problems. The persecution of the creative writer is as important, if not more so, in Arenas’s exile as the persecution of the homosexual.

¹³³ Cabrera Infante (n. 17 above), p. 416. Then again, Cabrera Infante portrays Arenas in terms of sexual destruction. “Three passions ruled the life and death of Reinaldo Arenas,” Cabrera Infante asserts, “literature not as a game but as a flame that consumes, passive sex and active politics. Of the three, the dominant passion was sex” (p. 413). Cabrera Infante makes this claim at the very beginning of a chapter dedicated to Arenas titled, “Rein-

this is an absurd assertion (it implies that the paradise of homosexual pleasure is hell), contradicted by the fact of Arenas's flight and fight, but it points, nevertheless, to the persistence of paradox in the "explication" of sexuality.

For Arenas, himself no stranger to the poetic potential of paradox, the predicament of homosexual desire lies in the desire for a man, a real man, a man who is not also and at the same time a homosexual. If the real object of male homosexual desire is a man who is the opposite of the male homosexual, then the paradigmatic object of desire could well be, for Arenas, Fidel Castro himself.¹³⁴ After all, it is Castro who ultimately commands the recruits and who is, again for Arenas, ultimately responsible for the forcibly clandestine conditions of homosexual activity in Cuba. But there is another way to read this. If the real object of male homosexual desire is a man who is the opposite of the male homosexual, then the male homosexual is somehow other than a man. Woman, of course, has long been assumed to be man's other, and while the male homosexual may at times mimic, or be assumed to mimic, the "otherness" of woman, he remains other to her as well. Affirming the logic of opposition to be the logic of desire itself, the male homosexual thus occupies a position that is oddly untenable, a position in which the opposite that is the object of his desire is not a woman and not, strictly speaking, a heterosexual male. For the men that Arenas remembers and desires are men who do engage in sexual relations with other men, men who penetrate without being penetrated in turn, men who enable the male homosexual to experience homosexuality without being implicated in it themselves (again, the opposition between *maricón* and *bugarrón*, between so-called receptive and insertive positions).¹³⁵

In the United States, on the whole, such a man is implicated in homosexuality: he is the "butch" who is as much a part of gay "mythology" as the "queen." He is implicated, moreover, in a way that tends to place the opposition between power and pleasure, as well as the erotics of disci-

aldo Arenas, or Destruction by Sex." In so doing, he effectively reiterates and reinforces, acritically, the perception of the homosexual as first and foremost Homosexual, that is to say, as hypersexual, obsessive, and masochistic, even death-driven. With these stereotypes conveniently set in motion, Cabrera Infante describes Arenas's life as "a hazardous trek in a penetrable forest of penises, leaving behind the sign of his semen and of his writing" (p. 414); or again, "in the novel of the life of Reinaldo Arenas there are only penises and pain" (p. 416).

¹³⁴ According to Cabrera Infante, at Arenas's trial for corruption of a minor, "the corpus delicti was a hefty man of twenty-five with a fully grown beard and much taller than Arenas. (Arenas insists to this day that his partner was a Castro lookalike)" (p. 79).

¹³⁵ Cabrera Infante gives a concise, perhaps too concise, formulation of the sexual dynamics here: "The passive homosexual is an extreme woman, the active homosexual is a supermacho—because, they reason, he fornicates machos only" (p. 413).

pline and punishment, in the realm of simulation and play.¹³⁶ What Foucault calls the “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” may be acted out in the United States in sadomasochistic rituals and other such “regulated” performances,¹³⁷ but in Cuba, as Arenas recalls them, such spirals were the structure of homosexual reality itself. Arenas, perhaps even more intimately than Foucault, inhabits these spirals of pleasure and power: “the pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it.”¹³⁸ So intricate is this spiral that Arenas claims that “the sexual revolution in Cuba actually came about as a result of the existing sexual repression. Perhaps as a protest against the regime, homosexuality began to flourish with ever-increasing defiance.”¹³⁹ However partial such a claim may be, the beauty that Arenas sees in the encounter with one’s opposite is thick, it seems, with the pleasure of a powerful opposition.

Fraught with contradiction, beauty appears to be the effect of an unbearably pleasurable state of oppression. Indeed, to Arenas’s eyes, if beauty resides in Castro’s Cuba it is only because the one is so passionately against the other. In *Before Night Falls*, he writes, “A sense of beauty is always dangerous and antagonistic to any dictatorship because it im-

¹³⁶In the United States, a man who engages in sex with other men and yet refuses to call himself homosexual, may be called everything from a “repressed homosexual” to a “self-hating gay man.” If he agrees to call himself homosexual, he may be called “dominant,” “butch,” or a “top.” In Cuba, as in other Latin American countries, such “implication” in the category (what Arenas means by the greater regulation) of the homosexual is not as common. Arenas himself says, “I do not know what to call the young Cuban men of those days, whether homosexuals who played the male role [*bugarrones*] or bisexuals. The truth is that they had girlfriends or wives” (Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, p. 107). Arenas’s uncertainty here is more than semantic; it attests to a cross-cultural or intercultural situation in which one term (the popular-based Cuban *bugarrón*) exists in ambivalent tension with another term (the Western-inflected, medicoscientific “bisexual”). This uncertainty has political consequences, and not just from the perspective of a controlling, disciplinary regime. It also effects the very possibility of “organized” resistance. As Lancaster points out in *Life Is Hard* (n. 3 above), inasmuch as the receptive, “homosexually” marked individual requires the insertive, unmarked man, “his activity and identity can never be quite independent” (p. 243). As a result, he cannot, or not as directly, vindicate a relatively self-sustaining sexual community encompassing both insertive and receptive positions. As Lancaster says, “homosexuality” (as the term itself indicates) in most of Latin America “lacks the theoretical independence attributed to Western homosexuality as a distinct category and personal identity” (p. 243).

¹³⁷Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978), 1:45.

¹³⁸Ibid.

¹³⁹Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, p. 107.

plies a realm extending beyond the limits that a dictatorship can impose on human beings. Beauty is a territory that escapes the control of the political police. Being independent and outside of their domain, beauty is so irritating to dictators that they attempt to destroy it whichever way they can. Under a dictatorship, beauty is always a dissident force, because a dictatorship is itself unaesthetic, grotesque; to a dictator and his agents, the attempt to create beauty is an escapist or reactionary act.”¹⁴⁰ It is the very danger and dissidence of beauty that motivates the novella *The Brightest Star* (1984). Dedicated to Nelson Rodríguez, a homosexual counterrevolutionary who died in an attempted hijacking, the text is at the same time dedicated to freedom, beauty, and sacrifice. I will only note in passing that such dedication is signed by others elsewhere, including Castro, in the name of the revolution. Indeed, Arenas’s brightest blindness has to do with the subjectivity of beauty, with the fact that even the state does not dispense with some conception or another of beauty. Arenas, to be sure, sees beauty as that which both exceeds and lacks the transparency and straight linearity of a social-realist aesthetic, as that which irritates power and flirts with destruction. Beauty, for him as for André Breton, must be convulsive or it is not to be at all.

True to this conception of convulsive, convoluted beauty, *The Brightest Star* consists of one intricate sentence, turning and returning on itself, running to and from historical reality and literary invention, to and from pain and pleasure, suffering and release. Alternatively baroque and banal, it recalls the so-called stream of consciousness narratives of writers like Joyce or Faulkner. The text may be read as an intense monologic staging of the movements of the (un)conscious subject. Its often daunting formal qualities at once reveal and conceal a relatively simple plot: Arturo, a young homosexual Cuban writer (or would-be writer) is imprisoned for “improper conduct” and forced to work in a governmentally organized labor camp. His world is suffused with suffering and he is excruciatingly lonely. His loneliness is, however, an effect of a certain rough resistance, for he is, in fact, surrounded by people. Using a concise classificatory system, Arturo acknowledges—and yet resists acknowledging—three groups of people. Otherness is, as it were, tripartite and hierarchically ordered: “He had established three categories: *them*, *the others*, and *the rest*.”¹⁴¹ Briefly put, “they” (*ellos* or, better yet, *ellas*, where the feminine ending allows for a transvestite play on the level of language itself) are his fellow inmates, homosexual queens whose shrill vulgarity Arturo arrogantly dismisses. They are characterized by “their endless,

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁴¹ Arenas, *The Brightest Star* (n. 112 above), p. 52.

stupid conversations, . . . [by] their exaggerated, effeminate, affected, artificial, false, gross, grotesque gesturings and posturings.”¹⁴² They are submissive, absurd, and disgraceful, given to “cheapening and corrupting everything, even the authentic rage of the man who suffers terror.”¹⁴³ The fate of authenticity, rage, suffering, and terror are crucial for Arturo’s, if not Arenas’s, conception of individual freedom and creativity, a conception that clashes not only with the collectivity of communism but with the solidarity of homosexual (or gay) identity as well.

In fact, Arturo’s celebration of individuality is such that unity and cohesion of any form are seen as perilously restrictive. This brings me to his second category, where restriction is made manifest. Arturo designates this category as: “The others, the ones that came after them, . . . the ones that guarded, the ones that considered themselves superior, the elect, the pure, the high and mighty ones who prided themselves on never having had, never having (though it wasn’t necessarily true), relations with anybody but women.”¹⁴⁴ “The others” are, in short, the keepers of the prison, the recruits who desire and yet do not desire “them,” men whose power is direct and coercive (the very men about whom Arenas waxes nostalgic in his autobiography). Beyond these “others” are the members of the third and final category, those whom Arenas calls “the rest,” all those “good” Cuban citizens whose power is, in a somewhat twisted application of Gramsci, less coercive than hegemonic. Against them, the others, and the rest, and beyond Arturo himself, there is only he, *él*, the imaginary lover whose return is contingent upon Arturo’s ability to produce an alternate world of beauty, imagination, and invention. In *The Brightest Star*, this alternate world is inhabited by regal elephants and other majestic creatures that Arturo professes to have seen, somewhere in the past, in a writing of his own making, “when he was still convinced that a cluster of signs, a cadence of images perfectly described—*words*—might save him.”¹⁴⁵ This profession of past certainty and present doubt, in and around words, is central to Arturo’s, and I dare say, Arenas’s project.

As the text progresses, the writing of this faraway place becomes ever more intense and precise, ever more rich in detail. Writing on scraps of paper, on official documents, and on Marx “himself,” writing on and in the margins, Arturo comes close to (re)capturing the beautiful naked boy that is the object of his desire.¹⁴⁶ But as fantasy gains control of

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

reality, Arturo slips away from his captors, mistakes them for the enigmatic mother (Old Rosa) he so deeply fears, flees from them, and is shot: "It was not until Arturo reached the monumental row of stately, regal elephants that the bullets struck him down at last."¹⁴⁷ The text closes by coming full circle, but closes with a fatal price: as the world of beauty and bliss is "realized," the reality of ugliness and pain reasserts itself and wrecks destruction. To court beauty is, it would seem, to court death. Perhaps because beauty is, in Arturo's conflicted world, what is most extravagant, most excessive; perhaps because beauty, to be truly beautiful, must be lost and remembered. Beyond and beneath material utility and material productivity, beauty exceeds, and yet falls forever short of, what matters to the state. Reluctant to relinquish the mysterious and the sublime, the mystical and the abject, beauty becomes for Arenas the sign that exceeds signs. And yet part of this excess, perhaps the fatal part, is that it is contingent on a manifest lack of solidarity with the excess and extravagance of the other prisoners, of them. What he does not appear to see is that the grotesque gesturings, posturings, and appearances of them, are his as well.

But what the protagonist of *The Brightest Star* does not see, the protagonist-narrator of *The Assault* does. Appearing just after the author's death in 1990, *The Assault* is the last of a series of five loosely interconnected, autobiographically infused novels that chart an imaginative history of Cuba from before the revolution to an unspecified time in the future.¹⁴⁸ Recalling the work of Kafka, Burroughs, and Orwell, *The Assault* depicts a realm of absolute terror. It is a work of astonishingly ugly beauty, merciless in its rage. Opening with a chapter titled "A View of Mariel," it presents a deadly opposition between the beleaguered Whisperers and the ruthlessly dominant Counter-Whisperers, between those who would speak and those who repress speech. The leader of the repres-

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁴⁸ The other works of the *pentagonía* are: *Celestino antes del alba*, *El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas* (both mentioned above), *Otra vez el mar* (*Farewell to the Sea*), and *El color del verano* (*The Color of Summer*). In the Firestone Library of Princeton University, there are reportedly at least three manuscript versions of *El asalto*, one written in Cuba, the last in New York City. See Ottmar Ette's *La escritura de la memoria: Reinaldo Arenas: Textos, estudios y documentación* (Frankfurt, 1992), for an extensive bibliography on Arenas up to shortly before the publication of *El asalto* and its translation, *The Assault*. For more on Arenas, see Eduardo C. Béjar, *La textualidad de Reinaldo Arenas: Juegos de la escritura postmoderna* (Madrid, 1987); Dolores Koch, "Reinaldo Arenas, con los ojos cerrados," *Revista Iberoamericana* 57 (1991): 685–88; Rita Virginia Molinero, "Donde no hay furia y desgarro, no hay literatura: Entrevista con Reinaldo Arenas," *Quimera* 17 (1982): 19–23; Perla Rozencvaig, "Reinaldo Arenas's Last Interview," trans. Alfred Mac Adam, *Review: Latin American Literature and Arts* 44 (1991): 78–83; Kessel Schwartz, "Homosexuality and the Fiction of Reinaldo Arenas," *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 5 (1984): 12–20.

sion or silencing of speech is the *Reprimerísimo*. Translated into English as “Repressident,” the Spanish is much more evocative. Not only does it resonate with “repression,” it also signifies the “first” (*primero*) and, through the play of an intensifying prefix (*re*) and superlative suffix (*ísimo*), the iterative first of the first, the supreme repressor, an entity beyond any historical *Generalísimo*.

The *Reprimerísimo* presides over a state of desolate conformity and excruciating brutality where people have been all but superseded by rats, pigs, and other animals. Repression is arbitrary, absolute, and chillingly efficient. Categorized as a “depraved criminal,” each and every person who slips before the frenzy of the state is a “political enemy, an enemy of our glorious Repressident and, therefore, an enemy of the Entire Glorious Nation. The persecution now has a double objective: both moral and political.”¹⁴⁹ And among the motives of persecution, homosexuality, that “Repugnant Perversion,” looms large.¹⁵⁰ Men, or beings once like men, are punished for wearing their hair too long or for using words outside the official vocabulary; they are executed, on the spot, for glancing at another man’s crotch. In this futuristic hell, improper conduct is not only rampant, it is a capital offense.

The Assault is political allegory in a hyperbolic mode. Language is near extinction; cannibalism is on the horizon; and fear and rage are the only enduring emotions. Though it contains few precise historical and topographical markers, *The Assault* clearly refers to Castro’s Cuba or, rather, to the nightmarish wake of Castro’s Cuba. This is an important distinction, because contrary to what one might expect, the *Reprimerísimo* is not Fidel Castro, at least not primarily. The primary figure of repression, the first of firsts, is the Mother. It is She whom the narrator-protagonist seeks to kill; worse still, it is in his search to kill Her that he is prepared to kill everyone else. She is a cow, a bitch, a beast, degraded and disgusting, vicious and ruthless, withered, stinking, and stained. Her hands are claws; her eyes are small and fierce; her mouth is a gaping hole. Arenas digs deep into the reserve of misogynist stereotypes, lays them brutally bare, and slings them throughout his text.

Present in virtually all of Arenas’s texts, fear and hatred of the mother dominate *The Assault*. In *The Brightest Star* Arturo sees his mother, not the armed guards, as the harbinger of death. This vision is itself a revision of a scene from a previous novella, *Old Rosa*, in which Arturo’s mother attempts to shoot him when she finds him embracing a young man (perhaps the young man of Arturo’s fantasy in *The Brightest Star*). So pre-

¹⁴⁹ Reinaldo Arenas, *El asalto* (Miami, 1991), translated by Andrew Hurley as *The Assault* (New York, 1994), p. 104.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

sented, the Mother is the consummate homophobe, the embodiment of repudiation, the abjector of the abject. In force and gruesomeness, she far outstrips the High Secretary, the highest male authority in *The Assault*, and perhaps the more adequate heir to Castro. She is a being whose power lies beyond the common tenure of the phallus, beyond the trappings of masculinity and machismo. Among the misogynist stereotypes, Arenas rehearses some of the more involute figures of psychoanalysis. In the words of Judith Butler, the “figure of excessive phallicism, typified by the phallic mother, is devouring and destructive, the negative fate of the phallus when attached to the feminine position.”¹⁵¹ The “monstrous ascent into phallicism” that Butler describes as marking the feminine assumption of power and as making for “figures of hell” is, under Arenas’s pen, what motivates and, more important, what justifies the assault that gives the text its title.¹⁵² Of course, motivation and justification are one thing, but success is quite another.

A number of events distinguish *The Assault*. It is the final installment in Arenas’s *pentagonía* or series of five novels; it is sent to press as the author is dying and is published after his death (there is “agony,” *agonía*, in this series); and it is the only novel of the entire series in which the narrator-protagonist—“this character who always dies,” as Arenas tells Francisco Soto—does not die.¹⁵³ He does not die but kills his Mother, kills the very incarnation of Death. He does not die, I repeat, but after the death of Death, he walks down to the shore and lies down in the sand: “Camino hasta la arena. Y me tiendo.”¹⁵⁴ I do not think it accidental that, in the final lines of the final novel of the series, the place of rest is the sand, *la arena*. After all, as is evident in *Otra vez el mar*, the sand, *la arena, las arenas*, is where he had started from. Arenas is too much a wordsmith not to be struck by the grain of language, by the lapping of place and name, and even if here he were not so struck, at least not consciously, he surely knows that he is otherwise stricken, that he is dying.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Butler (n. 86 above), p. 102. According to Butler, “Significant in its misogyny, this construction suggests that ‘having the phallus’ is much more destructive as a feminine operation than as a masculine one, a claim that symptomizes the displacement of phallic destructiveness and implies that there is no other way for women to assume the phallus except in its most killing modalities” (pp. 102–3).

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁵³ Francisco Soto, *Conversación con Reinaldo Arenas* (Madrid, 1990), p. 44.

¹⁵⁴ Arenas, *El asalto*, p. 141.

¹⁵⁵ Arenas discusses his plans for *The Assault* in a conversation with Francisco Soto in December 1987. This is a significant year for the writer, as is evident from the very first line of his autobiography: “I thought I was going to die in the winter of 1987. For months on end I had been having terrible fevers. I finally went to a doctor and he told me I had AIDS” (*Before Night Falls* [n. 41 above], p. ix). He does not die then, for “due to some diabolic bureaucracy, everything we desire seems to be slow in coming, even death” (p. ix). Arenas

Lacan, in his reading of *Hamlet*, indicates the interplay of knowledge, death, and the attempt, or assault, on the phallus. Writing of Hamlet's assault on Claudius, Lacan asserts that "it has to do with the phallus," the very phallus that, "even real, is a shadow."¹⁵⁶ Hamlet thus strikes out at a shadow or shade of power, never attaining it or, rather, attaining it only through "the complete sacrifice, and moreover in spite of himself, of every narcissistic attachment—that is to say, when he is mortally wounded and knows it."¹⁵⁷ Needless to say, Arenas and his character are not Hamlet, but they do evince a striking resemblance to Lacan's description of the dilemma of the prince of Denmark ("Reinaldo," bound to "rey," connotes a little king). Striking out against the power that would silence and suppress them, the power that only appears to be masculine, they strike at nothing so much as a shadow of power, an umbrous void, a maternal fault. They attain it, however, only through a sacrifice of narcissism, perhaps a narcissistic sacrifice, as the regime itself desires. Touched with death and knowing it, Arenas can have "this character who always dies" lie down in the sand, touched, if at all, by the death of the Mother and also, elsewhere, by the death of the author. This character who always dies lives, stretched there on the sands, as the author dies.

These places of death, between author and character, in and out of fiction and history, are rather strange. They center around not the Father, but the Mother, not that machista thing, but what Žižek, after Lacan, calls the Mother-Thing. The phallic Mother is indeed a terrific avatar of the Thing, and the Thing, *das Ding*, is no place more terrifying than the "place between two deaths," the "difference between real (biological) death and its symbolization, the 'settling of accounts,' the accomplishment of symbolic destiny."¹⁵⁸ In this view, the Mother-Thing is

completes his autobiography and *The Assault*, among other texts, aware of his condition. And yet, awareness is fragile. With respect to AIDS, Arenas says: "I do not know what it is. Nobody really knows. I have spoken with dozens of doctors and it is a puzzle to all of them. Illnesses related to AIDS are treated, but the actual nature of AIDS seems to be a state secret" (pp. xvi–xvii). Arenas goes on to suggest that AIDS may be a man-made disease that fulfills the desires of the "reactionary class always in power" to eliminate "a good part of the marginal population, whose only aspiration is to live and who therefore oppose all dogma and political hypocrisy" (p. xvii).

¹⁵⁶ Lacan, "Hamlet, par Lacan," *Ornicar?* 26–27 (1983): 5–44, 42. All translations from this and other works by Lacan are my own. I would like to express my gratitude for the advice and assistance of Linda Fleck, whose own work on Lacan and Philippe Sollers has been for me invaluable. See "L'Édipe et l'histoire revus et corrigés: *Les folies françaises*," *L'Infini* 45 (1994): 65–78.

¹⁵⁷ Lacan, "Hamlet," pp. 42–43.

¹⁵⁸ Žižek (n. 65 above), p. 135. In *Le Séminaire VII: L'éthique de la psychanalyse* (Paris, 1986), translated by Dennis Porter as *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1992), Lacan studies the "between two deaths" in conjunction with the figure of Antigone.

more unsettling than any mere man, however imposing he may appear in combat boots and olive-green fatigues, however great his leadership, however macho or machista his conduct. After all, the latter are more familiar signs of power, recognized as such in the light of every day: ruthless, perhaps, but also rather vulgar and banal.

The less familiar signs of power, recognized as such in the proverbial darkness of the unconscious, are those of the Mother. These signs include an all-consuming voracity, a chaotic indifferentiation, and an archaic vacuity. For Arenas's protagonist, they are the signs of a threatened identity: "My face was more and more my mother's face. I was coming to look more like her every day, and I still had not killed her. That thought made me even more furious, and frightened as well. . . . *I'm her, I'm her, and if I don't kill her soon I'll be exactly like her.*"¹⁵⁹ "Becoming like her, becoming her," writes Butler, "that is the fear of castration and, hence, the fear of falling into penis envy as well."¹⁶⁰ The fear of the castrating I, *el yo castro*, and of envying, after castration, the power of another, is played out in the narrator's hyperbolic phallicism at the climax of *The Assault*. But bound to the fear of castration, there is another, more obscure, fear. It is the fear of utter assimilation to the mother (reminiscent of the conventional view of homosexual desire as an excessive attachment to the mother), the fear of the effacement of the I, that propels this first-person narrative toward matricide. This fear coincides almost exactly with Julia Kristeva's claim in *Black Sun* that "matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation."¹⁶¹ And yet it also coincides with Arenas's fear of utter assimilation and self-effacement in communism. In fact, the coincidence of communist ideology and the archaic Mother-Thing may explain why *The Assault* takes the course that it does. Killing off the mother becomes the frightful price for a particular sociosymbolic meaning, for individuation, for a narcissistic attachment complete in its sacrifice: the frightful price for a place outside the communist state.

The coincidence of the Mother-Thing and Communism, strange as it may seem, is suggested by Žižek as well. If the place of the Thing is between two deaths, one real and the other symbolic, and if the Mother-Thing is there fearfully privileged, so is Stalinist-inflected communism, with its men of steel who are and yet are not of this world. As Žižek rather emphatically puts it: "The place of the Stalinist Communist is exactly between two deaths," one physical and the other sublime, one mere

¹⁵⁹ Arenas, *El asalto* (n. 149 above), p. 2; emphasis in original.

¹⁶⁰ Butler, p. 101.

¹⁶¹ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1991), pp. 27–28.

death and the other more than death (a sort of invulnerable remainder, a refashioning of Saint Paul's "spiritual body" in historical materialism).¹⁶² While I am skeptical of such emphatic claims, I am nonetheless intrigued by the way in which Žižek helps me figure Arenas's own terrible figures. As with so much else, Arenas appears unable or unwilling to accept Castro's word on homophobia and misogyny. While the Cuban leader identifies that machista thing as the root of these problems, Arenas pushes further, pushes in and through a homophobia and misogyny of his own, stripping power of its conventional accoutrements to come face to face with someThing truly terrible.

The murder of the Mother in *The Assault* is horribly significant: the protagonist-narrator does not merely slay her; instead, with his prick (*pinga*) or phallus (*falo*) enormously erect, he advances on her and strips her of seven layers of armor, seven military metallic veils. Once the final layer falls, she stands before him naked, "covered with blotches and wrinkles," looks at him pleadingly, and calls him "Son."¹⁶³ This word is more than he can bear and, taking one last step, "absolutely eroticized," he rapes her.¹⁶⁴ "Howling, she explodes in a blast of bolts, washers, screws, pieces of shrapnellike tin, gasoline, smoke, semen, shit, and streams of motor oil."¹⁶⁵ The explosion of the Mother signals the liberation of the Whisperers, who promptly proceed to kill every agent of power in sight. In this delirious political allegory, it is not simply that the phallus, unveiled, can no longer play its role, but rather that the phallus cum penis unveils an-other phallic Thing and liberates, horrifically, its power.

Such an account of liberation is hard, if not to say impossible, to reconcile with that of Castro and his supporters, or with that of the anti-Castro Cuban Right, or with that of gays and lesbians both in Cuba and abroad. Troubled by the specter of misogyny, and of homosexual misogyny to boot, Arenas's account is terribly personal and yet, as is so often the case, terribly archetypal. It is an account, or settling of accounts, that in refusing the dismissive charges of narcissism and hypersexuality takes on both, that in resisting repudiation and abjection expands them virtually beyond belief. If this is the subversive parody of which Butler speaks,

¹⁶² Žižek, p. 145. In 1 Cor. 15:42–44, Saint Paul writes, "What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body." We might do well to remember the ties that Castro himself sees between revolutionary and religious ideology.

¹⁶³ Arenas, *El asalto*, p. 144.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143. The phrase "absolutely eroticized" (*absolutamente erotizado*) is taken from the Spanish original, p. 139. The English translation is, "I have never been so aroused."

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

the extravagant reiteration of extravagance, it is so only at the risk of being horribly nonsubversive, of staying far too close to the stereotypes that it deploys. Risking the ethics of liberation, risking the good, it also risks the aesthetics of liberation, the beautiful. Arenas's passionate defense of beauty, of that lavishly ornate realm of Arturo's solitude, gives way here, at the close of his life, in exile and in AIDS, to a work of astonishing rage and destructiveness.¹⁶⁶

The magnificent palaces and the beautiful young man of Arturo's fancy, themselves touched by death, give way in *The Assault* to machines and beasts; and the murdering Mother gives way to the Mother murdered. It is as if, from one death to another, a barrier had been crossed, "the true barrier," as Lacan writes in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, "that arrests the subject before the unnameable field of radical desire," the "field of absolute destruction."¹⁶⁷ For Lacan, this field of absolute destruction is, "properly speaking, the aesthetic phenomenon," the dazzling flash of the beautiful, "the splendor of the true. . . . It is evidently because the true is not a pretty sight to see that the beautiful is, if not its splendor, at least its covering."¹⁶⁸ What Lacan suggests is not just that beauty does not occupy the same field as goodness, but that as far as moral experience is concerned the beautiful is closer to evil than the good: "plus près du mal que le bien." If the good is the first line of defense, "the first safety net," the beautiful is the second one: "It stops us, but it also indicates in what direction ('dans quel sens') the field of destruction is found."¹⁶⁹

Arenas himself might well agree. In his 1967 essay, "Celestino y yo" ("Celestino and I"), Arenas describes a child who uses the "prodigious arm" of the imagination to cross over the horror ("el horror") of immediate reality into "the other reality, the great reality, the true reality, that which has its place in the unconscious."¹⁷⁰ There is a sense of safety and tenderness there, but the horror, the terror, persists: "In those moments

¹⁶⁶ Arenas's rage, as I suggest at the end of this essay, is not without a rending beauty. It is also, of course, overdetermined by political and personal events, AIDS forcefully among them. As Leo Bersani asserts, in "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 197–222, the highly politicized, inevitably personal, context of AIDS is such that rage is not a sign of guilt or emotional impropriety. Indeed, for Bersani, when faced with AIDS, "analysis, while necessary, may also be an indefensible luxury" (p. 199); "morally, the only necessary response . . . is rage" (p. 201). It is in a similar light that *The Assault* may be read as an excruciatingly "responsible" work.

¹⁶⁷ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 256. Although a translation of this work has recently been published, all translations here are mine and pagination is from the French original. The corresponding pages in the English translation are pp. 216–17.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Arenas, "Celestino y yo" (n. 113 above), p. 118; my translation.

when innocence appears to rescue us through the dazzlement of beauty, there surges forth the terrible ('lo terrible'), opposing itself, interrupting, reiterating itself, seeking also a place which, unfortunately, belongs to it."¹⁷¹ Arenas, like Lacan, knows that beauty can take some terrible directions, some horrible senses. And Arenas's sense of the good and the beautiful almost always points in the direction of erotic desire. If *The Brightest Star* has a troubled sense of the good (Arturo denigrates women, derides and mimics the other queers in the camp) and a more established sense of the beautiful (exuberant metaphoricity and references to exotic, luxurious objects), *The Assault* has not only broken through the first safety net, it has all but broken the second.

Here, the good is abandoned absolutely (the protagonist-narrator becomes a brutal agent of the regime he despises in order to facilitate his search for his mother) and the beautiful persists only in the tatters of fabulous exaggeration. Homosexual desire is likewise abandoned; in fact, it is, along with the Mother, what the narrator-protagonist most mercilessly assaults. This similitude is no doubt significant, for it may serve to weaken the specter of homosexual misogyny that I acknowledged above. Weaken, though not destroy: for even though both (apparent or assumed) homosexuals and the Mother are singled out for assault, that does not mean that Arenas is simply assaulting what he truly values, what he truly loves. It does not mean that truth lies neatly under the surface, that it is somehow violently accessed through "inversion." "The mother is destructive and tender at the same time," Arenas tells Francisco Soto, and this ambivalence apparently extends to homosexuality itself.¹⁷²

Desire, for Arenas, homosexual desire, appears to be destructive and tender in the same stroke, shattering and soothing.¹⁷³ Like the art of writing, the other great sign of Arenas's desire, it is neither light nor easy, at least not as it is practiced here. Indeed, sexual desire is, in Arenas's view, all but inseparable from artistic desire, the fantasies and realities of the flesh all but inseparable from those of the letter. And like art, perhaps even as an art, it is fraught with contradiction and contention. Contending with various codes of proper conduct and consistently found improper; contending with harassment, ridicule, imprisonment, and

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Soto (n. 153 above), p. 43.

¹⁷³ The tension between violence and tenderness can of course be found in heterosexual desire. The specificity of homosexual desire, as Arenas presents it, is that the ambivalence is heightened and intensified by virtue of sociopolitical pressures (hence the contradiction, perhaps too readily naturalized by Cabrera Infante, between social oppression and sexual pleasure). This is, for better or for worse, part of what makes Arenas's sexual and literary activities passionate, replete not just with pleasure, but with suffering as well.

sundry charges of betrayal; contending with often conflicting demands, in both Cuba and the United States, for a particular ethical, aesthetic, and political position; contending with shades of misogyny and internalized homophobia; contending with notions of narcissism, hypersexuality, masochism, and abjection; contending, finally, with AIDS and all that it entails, Reinaldo Arenas's joint vision of homosexual desire and the art of literature is one that cannot but contend with visions of pain, with appearances of destruction. The desperate beauty of it all is that this vision is not, in the end, without a spectral touch of tenderness.