

## ***LOS MARIELITOS OF 1980: RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY***

Silvia Pedraza

Since the flow of Cuban refugees had halted for many years, few expected the chaotic flotilla exodus in 1980. It began when six desperate young men drove a bus past the guards, straight into the Peruvian Embassy compound, asking for political asylum. A few days later, on April 4, 1980, Fidel Castro announced the unusual decision to leave the embassy unguarded, and to allow those who wanted to leave Cuba. Within days it grew massive: over 10,000 persons crowded into the compound. When this acute refugee exodus ceased the following September, it had brought close to 125,000 more Cubans to America, approximately 18 percent of all Cuban immigrants that had arrived until 1990. This wave lacked order and process. From Miami, thousands of boats manned by relatives sped across the 90 miles of sea to Cuba's Mariel harbor. At times they succeeded in bringing their families, other times they brought whomever angry officials put on the boats.

Robert Bach (1980; Bach et al. 1981/82) studied the characteristics of the *Marielitos* soon after their arrival, while they were still in the processing centers and the refugee camps. Among the most salient characteristics was their youth (most were young men single or without their families) and the visibly higher proportion of blacks than ever (Bach et al. 1981/82:33-35). Given their youth, the *Marielitos* clearly constituted a different political generation, one whose coming of age was long after the early revolutionary struggle and sharp social cleavages that demanded enormous sacrifices but also affirmed the loyalty of many. Roughly half of the Mariel immigrants came

of age during the late 1960s or the 1970s. Also, the proportion non-white was visibly higher than ever before. According to Juan Clark (1992), non-whites constituted from 20 to 40 percent of the *Marielitos*. Clearly for this wave of young people, comparisons with the years of Batista could no longer serve to promote the consent of a generation that could scarcely remember them.

Moreover, during these years, problems of freedom of expression became particularly acute for artists and intellectuals. A key incident was that sparked by Herberto Padilla's prize-winning poetry book expressing the marginality of those who lived *Fuera del Juego*—*Outside of the Game* (1998 [1968]). Moreover, deviance, particularly homosexuality, was scorned and dealt with by imprisonment. Zolberg et al. (1989) distinguished among different types of refugees: supporters of the *ancien régime*; targets of the government; and mere victims. Many of the Cubans who came through *el Mariel* had clearly been targeted for their political opinions, their religious beliefs, or their sexual orientation. These constituted stigmas that, as Erving Goffman (1963) underscored, placed them at the margins of society—people who were seen as morally tainted, disgraced, to be avoided lest their social identity pollute others.

The *Marielitos*, therefore, were a significantly different "vintage"—one whose lived experience, or *experiencia vivencial*, as we say in Spanish, contrasts sharply with other "vintages." In particular, at the two poles of twenty years of emigration, stand two "vintages" that at best can hardly comprehend one

another and at worst may be, as Kunz noted (1973), hostile. Over time the dramatic changes the Cuban revolution effected progressed through distinct stages, and these stages interacted with the social characteristics of those affected to produce markedly different processes of political disaffection.

In this paper, which is part of ongoing work for a book that will be titled *False Hopes: Political Disaffection in Cuba's Revolution and Exodus*, I try to shed light on the distinct characteristics of the Mariel exodus, of Cubans that left at a particular conjuncture of the Cuban revolution when to survive economically entailed participating in the black market, women faced extreme familial burdens, gay Cubans were persecuted, and problems of freedom of expression loomed paramount. I do this in the paper by discussing race, class, gender and sexuality, in addition to the issue of freedom of artistic expression of the *Marielitos*. In exploring these issues, I allow the voices of the *Marielitos* themselves to tell their histories, relying on a series of interviews with boatlift participants that I have conducted.<sup>1</sup>

## RACE

Though Cuba has always been a multi-racial society, despite their differences, prior to Mariel both major waves of Cuban immigrants were predominantly white. Yet, while throughout the decade of the sixties the occupational distribution of Cuban refugees became more representative of Cuban society, “paradoxically,” said Benigno Aguirre (1976: 105), Cuban blacks “participated less in it.”

A small island that throughout all of its history has both welcomed and seen depart huge currents of migrants, Cuba's racial composition has changed dramatically over time. The enormous migration of Spaniards to Cuba in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after independence, contributed to the whitening of the Cuban population. The 1953 Cuban census, taken just a few years before the revolution, gave the proportion of Cubans who were white as 73 percent,

Cubans who were black as 12 percent and 15 percent mulattos—by American standards, 27 percent non-whites. In Cuba, like much of the Caribbean, social class and race overlapped in the extreme. But during the years of the revolution, while the social class level of the Cuban migration dropped, the immigrants to the U. S. remained overwhelmingly white. Based on the U. S. Census of 2000, 87 percent of the immigrants were white Cubans, 3 percent were black Cubans, 0.2 percent were Asians (no doubt *Chinos Cubanos*), and 10 percent designated themselves as being “other race” or mixed race. In Cuba, as in the rest of the Caribbean, this usually corresponds to mulattos, or *mulaticos*, as affectionately called. Still, there are substantial differences in the racial composition of the various waves.

In the years since the revolution, dramatic changes have taken place in the racial composition of the island. These resulted from the disproportionate participation of whites in the exodus since 1959, the higher fertility rate of black Cubans, increasing racial intermarriage, and changes in racial self-definition. According to the 1981 Cuban census, 22 years after the triumph of the revolution, 66 percent of the population described itself as white, 22 percent as mulattos, and 12 percent as black. Until the Cuban government releases the 2002 Cuban census data, the estimates for the present vary widely. The data given by the Central Intelligence Agency (2003) place the proportion of Cubans of African descent on the island at over 60 percent: white 37 percent; mulattos 51 percent; black 11 percent; Chinese 1 percent (see also Martínez-Fernández 2003). However, a survey conducted by the Center for Demographic Studies at the University of Havana placed the proportion white at 64 percent, black at 12 percent, and mixed at 24 percent (Bustamante 2003). Thus, the CIA estimates describe Cuba as a predominantly non-white nation (63 percent), while the University of Havana estimates describe Cuba as a predominantly white nation (64 percent). In large part, this may be due to

1. In this paper I rely on interviews with Teresita Sánchez (real); Lorenzo Fernández-Dueñas (real); Rogelio Santos (pseudonym) and his brothers Guillermo, Lázaro, Raúl, and Juan (pseudonyms); José Macías (pseudonym) and his brother Miguel (pseudonym); René Cifuentes (real); Jesús Selgas (real); Armando Alvarez-Bravo (real); and Fidelia Suárez (pseudonym).

the two different social definitions of race that operate in the U. S. (the CIA estimates) and the Caribbean (the Cuban estimates).

The differential migration of the Cuban races up to this time was quite explainable. Two different social processes, Aguirre concluded, were at work. At the outset, the revolution pulled out the power from under the upper classes, that had deliberately excluded blacks from their midst. The immigration proceeded through the chain of extended family and friends, further selecting whites. In addition, the migration policy of the United States and Cuba has always contributed to blacks being excluded, as they gave priority to close relatives of Cubans already in the United States. As the initial exodus drew from the white middle cases, white Cubans had family networks in place outside of Cuba that pulled more whites to leave; black Cubans lacked these same family networks.

Moreover, blacks in Cuba did benefit from the revolution. Unlike the U. S., Cuba never had a “separate but equal” system of legal segregation; and Cuban culture was a “creolization” of white Spanish and black African cultural traditions. Yet prerevolutionary Cuba excluded blacks from the pinnacles of society: yacht and country clubs, the best vacation resorts and beaches, hotels, private schools reserved for the elite.

One of the first acts of the revolution was to make these exclusive facilities public, available to all, regardless of color or wealth. In addition, the Cuban government promoted new opportunities for blacks in employment and education. Richard Fagen et al. (1968:120) noted that the race problem in Cuba was “a boon to Castro.” The revolutionaries found it extremely useful for discrediting the old social order. With the “instant liberation” of blacks “tens of thousands of disadvantaged Cubans were recruited into the ranks of revolutionary enthusiasts.”

While the proportion non-white was visibly higher in the Mariel exodus than ever before, the actual estimates vary. According to Juan Clark (1992), non-whites constituted from 20 to 40 percent of the *Marielitos*. Notwithstanding some limitations of the U.S. census data,<sup>2</sup> the 2000 U. S. census, can serve to illustrate the changing racial composition of the Cuban exodus. Around 93 percent of the refugees who came over in the first wave, Cuba’s elite, were white. But the proportion white declined quite markedly during the second wave. From 9 to 13 percent of those who immigrated from 1965-1979 designated themselves as “other race” or mixed. The *Marielitos* had the lowest proportion white of any wave, close to 81 percent, while 14 percent considered themselves “other race” or mixed race (mulattos or mestizos in Cuba), and 5 percent considered themselves black. By American standards, close to 20 percent were non-white.

Given the Cuban revolution’s appeal to race, why such a large presence in recent years? As early as the seventies, Geoffrey Fox (1971:21) remarked that “almost all those emigrating today are among the poorer classes in Cuba, the very people in whose name the revolution was made,” blacks included. To study “the defections of the sans-culottes,” Fox interviewed a few working-class *émigrés* in Chicago and concluded that both for white and black workers the salience of race in the revolution created strain—whites complained of favoritism, blacks of tokenism. Moreover, although discrimination was eliminated, racial prejudice persisted in Cuba, attitudes which Cuban blacks might have sensed as real, denying the changes that had taken place. As Max Weber (1946 [1922]:280) pointed to so long ago, whatever their origins, ideas, once established, take on a life of their own and guide action.

Whatever role their race may have played in the decision to emigrate, black Cubans find their steps uncertain in America. As blacks, they are not fully ac-

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2. Two important limitations are, first, that race or ethnicity in the census is the result of self-identification; second, the census has a serious problem with respect to the undercounting of the poor, immigrants, blacks, and Hispanics.

cepted by whites; while among blacks, they are Cubans (see Dixon 1988).

### CLASS

As many of the *Marielitos*, Lorenzo Dueñas-Fernández (real name) was an unskilled worker; only six years old when the revolution triumphed, he was clearly a child of communism. Born and raised in the rural areas outside of Santa Clara, he was of humble extraction (as we say in Spanish), and had finished only a sixth grade education. His father had worked from the age of 12 as a *carretero*, driving a cart drawn by oxen loaded with sugar cane to the nearby sugar mill; later on, for 40 years, he had worked as a bus driver, where he often drove *los Camilitos* (after Camilo Cienfuegos), the young men that had joined the army, to the city. “My father did nothing else in his life other than work,” stressed Lorenzo. He himself was only 26 years old when he joined the Mariel exodus in its early stages, in May, after 10 years of pumping gasoline at a service station.

Although his family was not well off, they also had lacked nothing, as his father’s hard work had served to keep them well-clothed and well-fed, but during Lorenzo’s youth they came to know want amidst the general economic scarcity in Cuba in those years. Hence, as he put it, despite his humble background, “All my life I was against it” and from the time he was very young, he wanted to leave Cuba. Yet, because the large family was extremely close, it is doubtful he would have left. But an army soldier that treated him in an abusive fashion precipitated his decision to leave. The soldier had arrived at the gas station one day and demanded that Leo pump the gasoline into his car immediately, since they were under a combat alarm. However, Lorenzo suffered from asthma and just then he was in the midst of an asthma attack, so he failed to do so, telling the soldier he could not help him, insisting the soldier fill his own tank. The soldier took Lorenzo to the police station and a trial was set for a few months later. While awaiting trial, every so often the soldier would come by the gas station and threaten him: “I am going to do you in,” he would say. With the help of an excellent lawyer, he was able to get off with only a large fine (200 pe-

sos), rather than the six months the trial lawyer was asking for.

But that incident became the last straw for him. Though he never joined any political group, and the dissident movement as we know it today had not yet emerged in Cuba, Lorenzo was deeply disaffected: “Mine is to work, and always to be against,” he said. Whenever he could speak against the government, against “*ese Señor*,” that gentleman, “whom no one mentions by name any longer,” he did, but he never participated in any organized political effort. Hence, when the Mariel exodus began to take place, he joined the exodus early on and left. After a month in Fort Indiantown, Pennsylvania, one of the four camps where the *Marielitos* awaited processing and resettlement, he was able to rejoin an aunt that had left through Spain in the early 1970s that lived in Chicago. However, he was not there long, as Chicago was too cold and there was no *Cubaneo*, so he soon left for Miami where he went on to work, first, in a shoe factory, then as a houseman in one of the tallest, colorfully lit downtown hotels, where he went on to work in maintenance. As Bach (1980) predicted, based on their socio-economic background, the majority of these refugees went on to find stable employment within the Cuban American working class in Miami.

Lorenzo was satisfied with the choice he felt he had made, but longed to return to Cuba to die in his homeland, “*mi tierra*.” He would always be grateful to the United States, he said, but he wanted to die like the *guajiros*, the peasants, died in Cuba—having the thick earth, *el cascajo*, thrown over them.

### GENDER

Why did so few women participate in *el Mariel*? Fídelia Suárez (pseudonym) wanted to leave through *el Mariel*, but was unable to do so, and arrived years later, in 1985. The youngest of six siblings, when the revolution first triumphed she was an architecture student at the university. Twenty years later, she was the only one of her siblings left in Cuba, with the responsibility to care for her aging father, who was then 91. Three of her siblings had left Cuba in the early years of the revolution—for Miami, Spain, and Venezuela. She remained behind with her older sister

and her husband, both their parents, and the only brother who sided with the revolution.

By the time the Mariel exodus began, 20 years later, the only ones left were her father and her. She lived surrounded by her paintings, her memories, a niece and nephew, a few close friends. She worked as an architect in public works. Since she worked well, although she did not participate politically, she earned the respect of her colleagues. In the small patio in the back of her house, she often rested after work, surrounded by verdant tropical foliage and bright flowers. Since there was no drawing paper in those years, she often painted miniature flowers on a tiny piece of paper. I first met her in 1981, a few months after the closing of *el Mariel*. She gave me a watercolor she had drawn with just a few, well-delineated strokes, of one of Cuba's loveliest beaches—Santa María del Mar. She had painted it on an envelope left over from a letter she never mailed. When I visited her in Cuba in 1981, my visit allowed me to understand the hardships of people's lives then. At a time when there were virtually no taxis in Cuba, getting back to my hotel in the center of Havana from her home in the Vedado neighborhood proved quite difficult. She called a friend who functioned as a taxi to those who knew him, but when he arrived his battery failed him. After a couple of attempts during which we all pushed his car down a steep incline, hoping to jump start it, we realized his car was quite dead. The only solution was to take the battery out of her car and put it in his, so he could return me to my hotel.

Asked whether the experiences she had as a young university student at the dawn of the revolution had impacted her, she replied that what had really marked her life was to have remained alone in Cuba, with the weight of the responsibility for her family on her shoulders. At that time, simply to survive, day to day, was an achievement. Managing to put food on the table every day required ingenuity, connections with others—friends and *socios* (partners that help one to solve problems)—with whom one bartered this item in exchange for that piece of food, with those who, to varying extents, participated in the black market. She put it vividly: “Tonight, you go to bed thinking about how you will get a chicken.

Tomorrow, you do whatever it takes to get the chicken. The days pass; the years pass.”

Like many Cubans, she jokingly talked about *sociolismo* (rather than *socialismo*) as the system they utilized to solve problems, above and below board (See also Sandoval 1986:34). “*Sobrevivir a toda costa*,” she stressed, whatever survival may cost—that was the aim of her life then, like that of most Cubans. This also entailed living by the rules of the revolution, by its relentless, military-like discipline, trying to protect one's individuality that threatened to disappear in a society organized into masses that are manipulated as masses. To protect herself psychologically, she painted. Like many Cubans then in the island, she engaged in what Inkeles and Bauer (1959) in their study of the Soviet Union called “the inner emigration.” For over twenty years, leaving Cuba had been impossible for her, given the family responsibility she bore. Even if her family overseas had been able to successfully claim her, she could not have given up her job, as was then required, and waited for months until the day to leave came. But when her father died, at the age of 93 in 1982, at the funeral home itself she made the decision to leave. Thereafter, it took three years before she was able to leave, when she took an early retirement. She left for Spain, “as the last *escoria*—the very last scum.”

In Spain, she was most grateful to the Red Cross that had helped her as a refugee, not only economically but also psychologically, before she was able to begin working. The Red Cross also organized a show of “Artists in Exile.” Fidelia had showed her paintings at 30 of these exhibits, thus making a contribution to the cultural life of Spain, she felt.

Painting again became the medium through which she found psychological comfort in her solitude. At first, she painted cats—the memory of the house she had left behind. Then she painted themes that pertained to Spain—the bullfight, the flamenco, the wheat fields of Galicia, the fishing boats of La Coruña. This was her way of living in the present and closing the door on the past. Apolitical in Cuba, she remained apolitical in exile. Never a church goer, she nonetheless lived “the mystery of life,” as she called it, deeply and privately, and often examined it

through her paintings. When she had offers to sell her paintings, despite her real need, sometimes she found it impossible to do so because her work represented, for her, so much more than her livelihood. A small collage she made particularly caught my eye. She had placed a few torn pieces of letters and envelopes that went to and from Cuba, under a Cuban stamp that commemorated Amelia Peláez, one of Cuba's most revered artists and a close friend of hers. She explained: "These letters come and go, as you can see. They are the communication among those who love one another but are apart. A trip takes place. It is a trip with no return."

### CLASS AND GENDER

Rogelio Santos (pseudonym) is a man of humble origins, a semi-skilled worker who had worked in construction, a *guaguero* who had driven a bus. But he had been much more politically engaged and had paid the high price of repeated prison terms for his anti-communism. When the Mariel exodus set on, he was in his second marriage, with a small daughter. His wife had been very integrated to the revolution, a gender difference I have often noticed in Cuba. As a woman, he explained, she had not felt the pressures the revolution placed on men, for example, its militarism; instead, the revolution had allowed her to rise, as a woman, to the level of her talents. His wife was grateful for the educational opportunities she was able to gain from the revolution. As a member of the *Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas* (UJC) she often spent her weekends doing voluntary work. The government valued her worth, and she felt affirmed by them in return. So after *el Mariel* set on, in the three months before he actually got on the boat, they each silently realized that he would leave, while she would stay. He left on a boat from the Mariel harbor without telling her that he was leaving, partly because he wanted to protect her, but also partly because he was afraid to discuss his plans openly with her since she might be the one to betray him. This silence among family members engaged in the most intimate relationships regarding their true thoughts and feelings is one that I have often encountered in Cuba. It is a silence that is difficult to understand for those of us who do not live in an authoritarian society, for

whom intimacy means, precisely, the ability to share one's deepest thoughts and feelings with another. But Rogelio was aware that he lived "in a country that was full of all kinds of dangers," and the reality that your closest ones might betray you was one of the dangers. From his own experience, he knew that innocent family members paid the consequences of those who were against the government. On one occasion, when Rogelio was sought after by the police, they grabbed one of his brothers as hostage, insisting that until he showed up they would not let him go. Rogelio had shown up, so that his brother could go free.

Only nine years old when the revolution triumphed in 1959, Rogelio initially was quite sympathetic to the revolution, and defended the idea of the revolution—with sympathy and affection. He aspired to become a member of the UJC when he got older, and together with other teachers and students in his school he did volunteer work, such as cutting sugar cane during *la zafra*, the harvest time, waving the hand-held flags at mass rallies, and the like. However, from the age of 19 on, he began to experience a process of political disaffection. He began to act less like part of a mass, and more as an individual, as he himself put it. Moreover, after so many years he began to feel tired of so much sacrifice, of so many revolutionary *lemas*, cheers like "*¡Viva la revolución!*" and the practice of socialist emulation. A mulatto that was clearly very *macho*, he was quite attractive to women. As a young man, he wanted to look well and to have a good time, which he found impossible given that clothes were rationed down to two pairs of pants and one pair of shoes a year. If someone managed to do better than that, it singled him out as someone that was participating in the black market. He also came face to face with the reality that working in construction, he was earning only 67 cents an hour, less than 100 pesos a month, while a pair of pants was 200 pesos on the black market, as was a pair of shoes. So he joined the extensive black market in Cuba that existed in Cuba then (before the dollarization of the economy that took place in the 1990's and the institutionalization of stores where goods are sold for dollars today).

Although he was deeply involved with the black market, this was not the reason he fell in prison, however. Rather, it was his anti-government political activities and his plans to leave the country illegally that landed him in prison, where he served for three years. During that time, three times he escaped—a *fuga de rebeldía* (a rebellious escape), as it was called, because he had no place to go but home, where they easily found him again. The third time landed him in one of the worst prisons, El Castillo del Príncipe, in Havana, where they placed him in “zone five,” where the political prisoners were housed and where he could see Huber Matos from a distance. His anti-government activities had consisted of painting signs saying things like “Down with Fidel!” on city walls, the *malecón* by the sea, store windows. In 1978, after leaving prison, he redoubled his efforts. He and his friends—a group without a formal name since dissident organizations had not yet emerged in Cuba—had painted a bed sheet with huge, red letters that read “*¡Fuera el comunismo de Cuba!*,” expressing his desire for communism to end in Cuba, tied two corners of the sheet with huge rocks while securing it on top with more rocks, and dropped the sheet down the side of a huge building for all to see. So he fell in prison under the charges of “revolutionary antipathy” and the attempt—illegal at this time—to leave the country. To punish him for his escapes, the prison guards put him in *la Leonera*, truly the lion’s den, and beat him with a bayonet. “Here is the proof of my *bayonetazos*,” he said, while pointing to the bayonet marks in his body. After he left prison, he continued the work of making the signs, but he was careful not to speak openly against the government in public places, as he had freely done before, while driving a bus.

Coming from a family whose ancestors were not only black Cubans and white Spaniards but also Chinese and Indians, the six brothers and one sister ranged widely in color. Using the terminology used in Cuba, Rogelio described himself as *piel canela*, cinnamon-colored, as were his brothers Guillermo and Lázaro. Raúl was what Cubans call *Negro teléfono* (black as a telephone), while Juan was called *el jabao* for his nearly white appearance. I first visited the family in the Spring of 1981 in their home in Luyanó, only a

few months after *el Mariel* had ended, and the trauma and desperation of families that the exodus had rent apart was still palpable.

I visited them again in 1996. We sat on a bench, just outside the hotel, alone, with no one near. I asked him a great deal. He told me details about Cuba I had never heard before. At one point, he pulled out his identity card, which had his name, photograph, a number, addresses at home and work. “Everyone has one of these,” he said. “You see this number. That number is a file. And in that file they have your life. They know where you are, where you work, where you live, when and where you were imprisoned. Each of us has a complete file.” Over and over again, I became aware of the dissimulation, the double life, people lived all the time, practice which impressed itself inside me deeply (Pedraza-Bailey 1982). Such was also the life their brother Raúl led. Publicly, he was a communist party member, though privately he was quite critical of the system. During my trip fifteen years later, in 1996, we drove together in his Russian-made *motoneta*, a rare motorcycle in Cuba, down the streets of old Havana at night. On the side car, I could enjoy the sound of the sea waves hitting *el malecón*, the stars out in the pitch black of the night, above buildings in centuries-old Spanish architecture, the few people out late at night. Later, after a couple of rum drinks that enabled him to speak out, he pulled out his red communist party membership identification, slapped it on the table, and, pointing to it, he owned up: “We live better,” he underscored. “My family has decent clothes to wear; twice a month we go out for dinner.”

Guillermo and Raúl engaged in dissimulation, what Cubans call “*la doble moral*”—the dual morality that becomes a mask Cubans commonly wear; however, their brother Juan, *el jabao*, was quite honestly proud of his participation in the revolution. He rose to become a professor and administrator at one of Cuba’s universities.

Ranging as they did in political expression and opinion, all the brothers were glad Rogelio had left Cuba via *el Mariel* because, at the young age of 30, he had clearly reached a dead end. After Rogelio left Cuba, he received a letter from his brother Raúl that ac-

cused him of not being able to survive in that system—as he himself had done, adjusting to it. Mercedes Cros Sandoval was a sociologist who was the Director of a Community Mental Health Program in Miami at the time the Mariel exodus took place. For the next two years, Sandoval (1986) informally interviewed 439 *Marielitos* to assess their needs for program development and, particularly, to identify the most prevalent coping patterns they used while adapting to the conditions in the island. She found that wearing a mask, as Raúl had done, was a common way to cope with the system.

Rogelio and his brothers also participated, to varying extents, in *santería*—the Afro-Cuban syncretism—the blend of the Catholic saints with the West African religious deities (cf. Barnet 2001; Franco 1978). Rogelio himself had been a *palero*. This is a similar though distinct religious expression whose origins lie in the people of the Congo, rather than the Yoruba people, the origin of *santería* (Fernández-Robaina 1997). These African-based forms of worship and ritual also came to the U. S. with the Mariel exodus. Here they have flourished with more abandon and openness than in the past. In Miami, for example, now there is a church where this form of worship is openly conducted—*la Iglesia Lucumí Babalú Ayé*. Rogelio had been to see a *babalao*, a *santería* priest, in Cuba who had engaged in divination of the future by throwing the *caracoles* for him. With the aid of the cowrie shells, he told Rogelio that he could see him crossing the ocean. As he did.

## SEXUALITY

To José Macías (pseudonym) both his race and sexuality were decisive in the decision to leave Cuba. José was 12 years old when the revolution triumphed, and initially he shared in its great enthusiasm, as he joined the Conrado Benítez Brigade for the literacy campaign that took young people to the remotest areas of *el campo*, the rural areas, to teach the *campesinos* to read and write. José taught a peasant that did not even know the vowels. He himself was so young that at night, rocking himself in a chair inside the family's thatched-roof hut, that in Cuba are called by their Indian-origin name of *bohío*, he would ask: "Which way is Havana? And I would begin to cry,

like a child." That turned out to be his sole participation in the political institutions that denoted commitment, integration to the revolution. To thank the young men for their service, the government awarded them a fellowship to study further, and he spent four years studying accounting. But he was unable to enter the University to continue studying economics because "I was not part of the communist youth, and to study the career of economics you had to be a young communist." So his studies ended in 1968.

Like other families, José's also divided deeply over the political question. But that family division cut even deeper than most due to, on the one hand, his being gay, which by itself had been the cause of his distancing from his family, and, on the other hand, by his brother Miguel being a famous baseball star. Miguel was a household word in Cuba—he traveled the whole world pitching to the admiration of many, representing Cuba before the rest of the world.

Macías confirmed the impact that the initial return visits of the exiles had in setting off the Mariel exodus. Until then, he underlined, Cubans were "*conforme*"—they had adjusted to the style of life they had, and to everything that they lacked. But when the exiles (then renamed "members of the Cuban community abroad" by the government) first returned in 1979, they could see that they lived rather well—they had the latest model car, a house, they could travel. Those in Cuba could not see how dearly they had to pay for these things, "how hard life is," he underscored, "in other ways, in this country." For Macías, the problems had started early in the revolution. After his initial revolutionary enthusiasm, the constant obligation placed on Cubans became a problem for him. His mother had made efforts for him to join other groups, such as the *Jóvenes Rebeldes*, but he did not last long in the Rebel Youth as he would not do even the expected *guardias del comité*—the security rounds organized by the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) that existed in every block. You were always obliged to serve and "I did not like the imposition," he underscored. His homosexuality was also a problem: "Fidel *nos acorraló*. He hounded us, making gays out to be the worst part of the society, rather than a

group where there are both good and bad people, like any other.” Asked whether he ever participated in any dissident group, he underscored that he never did because, given his homosexuality, if he landed in prison, they might even kill him. A friend that he had lived with for a year had been in prison: “He had a scar here, from a bayonet.”

José came from a decent, working class, black family. His father had been a contractor and handyman, and his grandparents had worked in the tobacco factories of Pinar del Río, where they chose the finest leaves to roll the best tobacco. His mother initially had been a *manejadora*, caring for the children of the upper middle class, and had also sold popcorn and nuts in the schools, with José’s help as a child. Later on, she had been a textile worker in one of the factories in the outskirts of Havana. The revolution had enabled him to study—to a point—and had given them a house near the other textile workers. He himself had worked transporting agricultural products until he left through *el Mariel* and was resettled out of Fort Chaffee to Los Angeles, where he had become the food manager and diet clerk for one of its best hospitals.

Because his brother had risen to stardom, as a baseball star, no matter how deteriorated life became in Cuba, his brother continued to see “*el lado bueno*,” the good side of the revolution. Yet while his brother remained affirmed to a revolutionary government that had telescoped him into fame, all José could see was that as fine an athlete as he, would have been a millionaire in the U. S. “Fidel only harmed him by keeping him there,” he said. He also thought his brother worked for the state security police. When their parents divorced, José remained with this mother and another sibling, while Miguel and another sibling went on to live apart, though very near. But the distance that separated them really lay elsewhere, in José’s homosexuality, because Miguel could not accept it. “Once he asked me when I was going to get married. I replied: ‘You know my real preferences.’ ... And he began to cry.”

Without doubt, his being gay left him totally isolated in Cuba. “I represented the worst things that can happen to anyone in Cuba: I was not a communist, I

did not like the government, and I was a homosexual.” When I asked him to compare what being black and being gay was like in Cuba and in the U. S., he was quite precise: “In Cuba, being black was a bit ...” and he shrugged his shoulders. “But oh—being gay!” and his arms gesticulated to say: it was enormous. “Here, being gay is a bit of a problem, but not a very big problem. But oh—being black!” and again his arms said: it is enormous. Despite this fine sociological contrast, he did not want to credit the revolution with having done much for blacks in Cuba. He recognized that Castro’s government had opened up the private beaches to all, making them public; had ended the racial segregation in the private school system; and opened up other opportunities to blacks in Cuba. But, he explained, these were just like giving blacks some candy, while whites still retained the best opportunities. “Look at the Central Committee of the Communist Party,” he stressed. “How many blacks are there? Only three. ... Look at the sports teams—80 percent black.” Castro, he underscored, used blacks for his own ends. “And then you go to the prisons in Cuba, and they are full of blacks.”

#### ART

René Cifuentes is white, but his being gay also meant that all doors closed on him. He could date with precision the moment in which everything in Cuba turned against him: Fidel Castro’s speech at the *Congreso de Educación y Cultura* (National Conference on Education and Culture) in 1971 when he was 17. At the closing, in the *Escuela Nacional de Instructores de Arte* (National Institute for Art Teachers), thanks to the sound system placed outside the theater where the event was taking place, he was able to hear Castro when he defined the “parameters” of the revolution, what Cifuentes (1984) was to title, many years later, “the parameters of paradise.” A series of laws followed, such as the 1973 Law No. 1249, revised in 1979, and the 1979 *Ley de la Peligrosidad*, all of which made homosexuality a crime, subject to fines and imprisonment, along with alcoholism, prostitution, drug addiction and the like, all of which “clearly contradicted the norms of socialist morality” (“Leyes Cubanas” 1984). Castro said that, with respect to homosexual deviations, the government defined them as “social pathology” and he went on to stress the

government would reject its overt expression and would, in no way, allow its diffusion. At that moment, Cifuentes “realized that the ‘equality’ he had learned so well in school in the Marxist texts did not exist for a homosexual, that outright ‘rejection’ was to be the attitude in place towards them, given their ‘pathological’ condition and that, of course, he would immediately be expelled from his study center” (Cifuentes 1984:12). It was the first time that a Cuban president had publicly turned against homosexuals. The consequences were soon felt as actors, singers, dancers, artists were soon removed from their jobs because they did not fit within the parameters of the revolution.

For Cubans such as René Cifuentes, Reinaldo Arenas, Jesús Selgas, all of whom were the closest of friends, issues of artistic freedom and sexuality were closely linked—perhaps inseparable. Hence, soon after their arrival in the U. S., they founded the literary and artistic magazine *Mariel*. They went on to live and work in New York, partly because of the lack of acceptance they also felt from the Cuban exile community in Miami. Probably few Cubans suffered as much as Reinaldo Arenas from both the lack of artistic freedom and the lack of tolerance for their sexuality in Cuba. Unquestionably, he was one of Cuba’s most gifted writers. In one sentence, Lezama Lima, one of Cuba’s most respected writers, juxtaposed the poverty of Arenas’ origins in the Cuban countryside and the enormity of his talent: “Genius, when it blows, has no limits; it can reach even a shepherd from Holguín” (Estévez 1998:130).

Arenas, whom I met briefly when he had only a few months left to live, weakened by AIDS, left his life behind for the world to see in his autobiography *Antes que Anochezca* (1992) that mixes autobiography and fiction, as was characteristic of all his work (Soto 1990; Estévez 1998). Recently turned into a movie, “Before Night Falls,” Arenas’ life reached an even broader audience, carrying the message of his life. They were able to see the despair and ostracism which one of Cuba’s most talented native sons endured; the censoring of his work, most of which he managed to smuggle out of the country; the necessity to publish in other countries—France, Spain—

where he could not see his work, long before he left Cuba; the ill-treatment regularly meted out in a Cuban prison like El Morro to those like him. As Juan Abreu (1998:137), another writer who also shared the label of *escoria*, explained: Arenas was persecuted because he was homosexual, because he was free. Arenas, at whose suicide Cifuentes was present, was an icon that was able to bring together, around him, a generation of Cuban artists and intellectuals that felt they had been silenced twice—once in Cuba and then again in exile (Ballagas 1982). Even more, he emphasized the hostility of the American academy to Cuban writers in exile. In return, Arenas used to call them “the festive Left.”

Arenas’ first short story “Comienza el Desfile” (“The Parade Begins”), written in 1965, told the story of the euphoric triumph of the Cuban revolution seen through the eyes of a young man in the countryside who does not fully understand what he fought for but is happy to join the parade passing by. That story reappeared later in the anthology published in Spain after Arenas had left Cuba, *Termina el Desfile (The Parade Ends)* (1981), which relives the onset of *el Mariel* in the Embassy of Peru, when in only a few days in April over 10,000 Cubans crowded, desperately, on the grounds, trying to leave Cuba (Soto 1990). For them, like for Arenas, the parade, indeed, had come to an end.

It is their shared, lived experience of the Cuban revolution that makes the many writers and artists that left Cuba at that time “the Mariel generation,” though, as Jesús Barquet (1998) (himself a member) pointed out, they do not share the commonality of artistic vision and style that is normally understood as a literary generation. However, to a sociologist, they do constitute a political generation, precisely because of the commonality of shared social and political experiences they lived through in a particular historical phase that coincided with their coming to adulthood (Mannheim 1952; Aguilar-León 1972; Zeitlin 1966). Roberto Valero (1983) and Jesús Barquet (1998) analyzed the various publications in which the work of *Marielitos* appeared (*Linden Lane Magazine, Término, Unveiling Cuba, Mariel*) and delineated their common attitudes and values, those

which truly make them *la generación del Mariel*: their opposition to all dictatorships—of the Left and of the Right; their opposition to sexual intolerance, both in Cuba and in exile; their virulent anti-Castroism and anti-Sovietism, resulting from their lived experience; their admiration for José Lezama-Lima and Virgilio Piñera above all other writers; their shared goal of creating an art, in all its forms (including music, film, writing, painting) to which politics is subsumed; their private, though deeply-held, religiosity.

Even more, social marginality, imprisonment were often part of this generation's experience. Rene Cifuentes, for example, served three years in prison. Though most of his family resided in the U. S., including his mother, and he could have legally been granted an exit visa, he was denied it due to his homosexuality. So he attempted to leave Cuba illegally, as a result of which he served in prison for three years. When he left prison, he found all doors closed. Unable to publish in Cuba, he published his first short stories in Venezuela. Soon that door also closed, as the government put in practice the *Ley de Patrimonio Nacional* (National Patrimony Law), by virtue of which all works of art belonged to the state. Thereafter, publishing overseas without the official state sanction meant prison (for him, the return to prison). For Cifuentes, Cuba became "a nightmare" from which he could not awake. Living in such a state of social exclusion, when the Mariel exodus began, he discovered that being gay suddenly conferred upon him the right to leave Cuba, as he, Reinaldo Arenas, Jesús Selgas, and so many others like them thankfully did.

The crossing itself was quite dangerous for many of them. Surrounded by hundreds of boats, overflowing with people, in his journey Carlos Victoria (1998:134) remembered being accompanied by those that had been in prison for real crimes—"matones de verdad" (real thugs), who displayed their tattoos in the sun, men that only the previous night had slept in prison, resigned to a long sentence, and now, perplexed, found themselves at sea. Jesús Selgas, for example, came in a shrimper designed to hold 80 persons, but with over 300 on board. The night he crossed a tempest broke, boats overturned, some

drowned, while others were rescued by helicopter. Pitch dark in the middle of the night, he could see neither the sea nor the sky, but only felt the waves passing over him, which made him think that he was already dead, at the bottom of the ocean—strangely at peace.

Eventually coming to New York city, Selgas was able to actualize himself as an artist whose theme commonly is painting the saints and *orishas* (deities) that Cuban *santería* blends as one, as well as virgins such as *la Virgen de la Caridad* (Cuba's patron saint) or *la Virgen de Fátima* (revered in Portugal), that are expressions of popular religiosity with which the Cuban people deeply identify. He painted *la Caridad* for the first time when his mother died and he was not allowed to return to Cuba to be with her. Shortly thereafter, he painted an unusual version of the image: the painted canvas is folded into the shape of a boat, and the boat is painted to become the virgin herself. Looking at it closely, one can see a number of symbols of *santería*, the blend of African and Catholic religiosity that is Cuban.

Cuban folklore would probably not have been Selgas' theme had he not left Cuba to live elsewhere. That also happened to Lydia Cabrera, he stressed, one of Cuba's foremost social scientists, who discovered what *lo Cubano* was when she was in Paris, at a distance, standing by the river Seine. She then went on to write *El Monte* (Cabrera 1978) that explained the African backdrop of Cuban culture. Likewise, Selgas began to depict Cuba's religious syncretism when he was no longer in Cuba. When he first created the virgin as a boat, he thought he would be making only one. But as soon as an art gallery in Chicago displayed it and people saw it, they ordered another and then another, until when I interviewed him he had sold over 60. It was, he said, as if *la virgen* had come to his rescue.

In many ways, his work also portrays an indelible characteristic of Cuban culture—the extent to which the culture of white Cubans is penetrated by the culture of black Cubans. Several pieces of his work are now shown in museums, a remarkable outcome for a man that for the 10 years prior to *el Mariel* had lived from the sale of handbags and decorative weavings

for tourists in the plaza in front of the cathedral. Even more, he had obtained the fibers for his weavings from burlap sacks, lamp oil wicks, even shoe laces. Prior to *el Mariel*, Cuban culture in Miami was often dedicated to preserving the past, *la Cuba de ayer* prior to the revolution; but through *el Mariel* also came an extremely talented group of artists, writers, musicians who revitalized Cuban culture with contemporary artistic expression, *la Cuba de hoy* on this side of the ocean.

While Cuban culture—more generally, Latin American culture—can be said to be homophobic, given its Spanish and Catholic roots, its Mediterranean notions of *machismo*, and strongly-held notions of sexuality expressing honor and shame, this cultural explanation seemed to me insufficient to account for what had happened in Cuba in these decades—the outright persecution of homosexuals. Jesús Selgas, who was expelled from the Art School in the late 1960s for being gay, though he was so young then that he had no sexual knowledge, explained it best: because the revolution wanted to create “the new man,” as Che Guevara (1970) had specified. And that *hombre nuevo*, Selgas stressed, was to be passive, under the direction of the state, pure as light, impeccable, a family man, a *macho*, lacking individualism, lacking desire for himself, wanting only to give selflessly to others. “The homosexual does not fit the mold,” he stressed. “He goes against the grain.” In her analysis of the intersections between race, ethnicity, and sexuality, Joane Nagel (2003:147) pointed out that nationalism, as an ideology through which to construct the modern state, erects moral boundaries regarding who is an insider (to be venerated) and who is an outsider (to be vilified) in that society: “The margins of nations—ethnic frontiers, gender frontiers, sexual frontiers, ethnosexual frontiers—are all locations where rules about citizenship and proper national demeanor are tested and contested.” In line with Selgas’ thinking, Nagel (2003:159) also underscored that the culture of hegemonic masculinity goes hand in hand with the culture and ideology of hegemonic nationalism, both because the nationalist state is an institution run by men and because the culture of nationalism is totally tied to the culture of manhood,

thus becoming intolerant of sexual diversity, particularly homosexuality.

In addition, in Cuba at this time artists were also seen as people who could not be trusted. After the case of Heberto Padilla, accused of engaging in counterrevolutionary activity for his prize-winning book, *Fuera del Juego (Out of the Game)*, the government explicitly stated that the function of art was to educate—a socialist realism (See *Política Cultural* 1977). But to him, as one of his most admired teachers had taught him, artists came to the world not to educate but “*a confundir*” (to confuse others), to express themselves symbolically, which necessarily entails being free.

Asked what aspects of the revolution he would put on both sides of a balance that weighed the good on one side and the bad on the other, Selgas emphasized that the revolution had given him an education that had pulled him out of the very poor social milieu his family had fallen in, partly due to his father’s mental illness and partly due to the loss of the family business, the bakeries, in which all family members had worked. Without the educational opportunity the government gave him, he might not have been able to realize himself, to meet the best artists, many of them courageous people. Perhaps he might have ended up like his sister, who had become a domestic, looking after other’s children. Yet, Selgas emphasized, what they had given, they had also taken away, condemning him to a life of social ostracism, insisting his individuality as a human being should not exist. In general, what the revolutionary government did was to insist they were creating *una maravilla*, a marvel, in the future, while simultaneously they were creating a terror, in the present. They gave gifts, he said—land to the peasants, houses to those who did not own homes, decent health coverage, a free education—but simultaneously they took away the free press, they created concentration camps, such as the *UMAP (Unidad Militar de Ayuda a la Producción)*, the Military Units to Help Production, whose real goal was to reeducate those they considered subversive, they destroyed the opposition, they created fear.

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