

7

Post-Utopia

The Erotics of Power and Cuba's Revolutionary Children

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As I write, there is one image to which I keep returning: a Cuban grandson dancing with his Cuban grandmother. They dance for only a moment, but the image stays with me. The occasion is the grandson's birthday party, which he is hosting at his Miami house, a few blocks away from Calle Ocho. The grandmother is frail and light as a feather, and her grandson, who is strong-chested and strong-featured, his head neatly shaved, holds her up with a touch that is at once gentle and firm. She is nearly blind, very weak, has trouble walking, and needs around-the-clock attention. Her grandson has recently moved to Miami from Chicago to take charge of her care. No one else in the family is willing to do it. But he admires his grandmother for many reasons: for her openness of mind and because he respects the fact that when he left Cuba with his brothers and mother, she stayed behind keeping watch until his father, her son-in-law, was safely out of jail. For his mother, it would be an enormous sacrifice, he says, to have to take care of her own mother, but for him it is a joy to have his grandmother around, even if it means that he has to adjust his schedule to meet her needs. He is gay, a writer, photographer, and editor of an outspoken magazine by and about gay Latinos. At the party most of the guests are gay men, many are *cubanos*, both black and white, and a few are *locas*, transvestites who have come dressed as extravagantly beautiful females. The conversation is lively, and there are people dancing to Albita's "*Que Manera de Quererte*," with its frank admission "*Dónde podré vivir si no en tu sexo?*" (where can I live if not in your sex?—an interesting assertion coming from Albita, the recently emigrated Cuban diva, whose public

image shifts from "butch" to "femme" to keep her sexual identity ambiguous, floating between lesbian and straight). Plates keep being refilled with *pastelitos de guayaba*, guava pastries. Suddenly, the anthropologist in me opens her eyes and thinks, this is interesting, this is worth taking note of: Here, at the threshold of new identities and new kinds of attachments, there is room for a Cuban grandmother. I can still see her dancing, quietly, slowly, in tiny steps with her grandson in the house that is just a few blocks from the old Cuban exile heartland of Calle Ocho. This, it occurs to me, is one of the many unexpected sequels to the Cuban revolution, to what was to have been the utopia of the future. And it is a sequel, too, to the other utopia, the utopia of the past, that the exiles wanted to build in Miami, on Calle Ocho. What I think I see, in the image of this frail grandmother and gay grandson dancing, is a snapshot of post-utopia.

My desire here is not to define post-utopia, but rather to show it at work in stories, identities, images, and actions. What I come seeking in the term is a way to speak about new forms of attachment, of self-consciousness, of sentiment, of subjectivity. Post-utopia is a term that came to me as I thought about where my Cuban generation, the children of the 1959 revolution, stands now with respect to the Cuban dreaming we inherited from our parents as well as the Cuban dreaming we initiated on our own, whether we grew up on the island or in the diaspora. Our general historical moment in the late twentieth century often has been described as postmodern, but that term doesn't capture the particular emotional sensibilities, disenchantments, and life trajectories of those of us who came of age with an awareness of utopia as something that might *almost* have been possible in *our* Latin America. I would like to think of post-utopia as a translation into Cuban of the idea of postmodernity.

At the same time, I recognize that Cubans are not, of course, the only ones with a claim on post-utopia. With the end of the Cold War and the fall of communism in Europe, the current backlash against welfare liberalism and illegal immigration in the United States, and globalization driven by private profit and the corporate agenda, it no longer seems possible or even relevant to imagine, let alone try to enact, utopias. Perhaps the end of the century lends itself more to apocalyptic closures than to utopian beginnings. We no longer seem to believe in utopias, and least of all in socialist utopias, whose "beautiful ideas of equality and freedom from want" too often have "crossed the line into repression and deprivation."¹ Those utopias which promised a better future ironically ended up instilling, in the words of an Eastern European writer, an "immobility, this absence of a future, the absence of a dream. . . . There was hardly a way to say to

yourself: This is just temporary, it will pass, it must. On the contrary, we learned to think: This will go on forever, no matter what we do. We can't change it. It looked as if the omnipotent system had mastered time itself."² Our media in the West like to take a triumphalist position on all this, gloating over the apparent twin successes of capitalism and democratization—but free trade, we are learning, does not guarantee, and indeed too often works against, freedom of expression and human rights. Obviously, we must always condemn totalitarianism, and yet what the failure of socialism as an effort to imagine utopia *should* call forth is the most profound mourning. How was it possible that some of the most idealistic dreams for humanity fell so terribly far short?

Cuba, to return again to that island in the Caribbean that sought and won a place in the map of the world with its 1959 revolution, continues to have pride of place in the search for answers to that crucial question. Cubans have never been alone in their Cuban dreaming. The fate of the Cuban revolution has consequences for all future efforts to imagine utopia, especially in Latin America. We have witnessed how Cuba, at the dawn of the 1990s, entered *el periodo especial*, a special period characterized by a wild scramble for food, fuel, and dollars, a vengeful return of the repressed (namely, tourism, prostitution, and foreign investment), and the onset of a desperate moral crisis. A *Miami Herald* article recently announced, "No graduates in Marxism this year in Marxist Cuba," noting that the University of Havana's philosophy concentration in Marxist thought only draws a handful of students while dozens flock to courses on contemporary U.S. history and property law.³ As Cuba's utopian social project finally unravels and becomes another consumer product—like the T-shirts of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro—the Latin American left has become, in the words of Jorge Castañeda, a "utopia unarmed," bereft of any real model with which to imagine "the possibility of an 'alternative,' noncapitalist Latin American modernity," which can take on North America as its "other." At best, suggests Castañeda, the Latin American left will have to learn to live with capitalism but not identify with the "soul" of capitalism.⁴

This kind of juggling act is the spirit of post-utopia. Just as post-modernity emerges from the crisis of modernity, the loss of faith in master-texts, so too post-utopia emerges from the crisis of utopia, the loss of faith in master-ideologies and monolithic ways of imagining community and the self. But we have to keep in mind, as Nestor Canclini asserts, that Latin American societies—which intermingle the ancient and the modern, liberal institutions and authoritarian habits—have arrived at postmodernity

without undergoing modernization, and so he urges researchers to study this postmodernity empirically, without falling into the "philosophical speculation and aesthetic intuitionism that dominate the postmodern bibliography."⁵ Consider this essay, then, an empirical journey into the Cuban postmodern.

Utopias were born in Europe, so let me pause for a moment and rewind the tape, because it is in Europe that I really need to begin this story. And immediately I am struck by a conjuncture whose legacy, from a Cuban perspective, is deeply haunting: Thomas More's *Utopia* was published in 1517, in England, just three years after Niccolo Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*. On one hand, *The Prince* was a guide to the Medici overlords of Florence in their quest for autocratic power. Indeed, the text was written as a how-to guide directly and unapologetically addressed to the autocrat. *Utopia*, on the other hand, sought to expose the evils of living under the rule of tyrants by offering an account of an imaginary commonwealth whose inhabitants disdained gold and silver, and where not even the prince was distinguished from his fellow citizens by a robe or crown. Appearing twenty-five years after the "discovery" of America, when there were still few accurate descriptions of the New World, More's *Utopia* offered a vision that was at once fanciful, humorous, and seductive, of the new land beyond the ocean—a vision that, to this day, is a key legacy of both our Americas, North and South, determining "not our immediate institutions, but the level of our expectations."⁶ And with these expectations, in the very shadow of utopia, also came power, the bold, unashamed, and unchecked power of the prince.

The relevance to twentieth-century Cuba of this sixteenth-century conjuncture of *Utopia* and *The Prince* is obvious, and I won't belabor it: The Cuban revolution heralded utopia, while Fidel Castro's eventual monopoly on power led to the rule of tyranny. (I seem to remember reading somewhere that *The Prince* is actually one of Castro's favorite books, but I'm not sure now if this is true or if I dreamed it up.) But even if this conjuncture of utopia and power had not existed, Thomas More's *Utopia* by itself would have alerted us to the tragic paradox, "the big rub with all Utopias," as one commentator put it: "that instead of planning the paradise to gratify the people (*other* people), the proprietor is tempted to plan the people to satisfy the specifications of the paradise."⁷

Utopias, like mayflies, expire quickly, which is why social theorists have such trouble describing them. Try explaining what Durkheim meant by "effervescence," or Victor Turner by "*communitas*." In Cuba, the

moment of revolutionary effervescence or *communitas* takes place in 1959, when Fidel Castro is met with extraordinary popular support as he enters Havana with his guerrilla followers. In that short-lived but potent moment of utopia, the yearning of a nation took palpable form. Cuba's long and unfinished struggle for independence seemed finally to be over. Cuba's justified quest to free itself from the yoke of U.S. domination had seemed to find its redemption. And the yearning for a better world not yet imaginable looked as if it would finally be realized as *pueblo* (people), *patria* (fatherland), and *patriarca* (patriarch) were fused in the dawn of 1959.

Turning back now, almost forty years later, to that moment, our post-utopian eyes inevitably distrust it. What we distrust, I think, is the way utopia was being built around the cult of a hero. But it was a moment when the world, not only Cuba, desperately desired heroes, desperately desired a rebel with a cause. Fidel's entrance into Havana beckoned the future but evoked the past, the remembered revolutions, the remembered liberators. In Norman Mailer's history-bending words, "It was as if the ghost of Cortés had appeared in our century riding Zapata's white horse. You were the first and greatest hero to appear in the world since the Second War. . . . I think you must be given credit for some part of a new and better mood which has been coming to America. . . . Like Bolivar, you were sending the wind of new rebellion in our lungs. You were making it possible to breathe again."⁸

Fidel, fused and confused with Cortés, Zapata, and Bolivar, became inseparable from the revolution and from the nation—the nation gendered as male, or *la patria*, the fatherland. To dissent from the revolution was to dissent from Fidel. To dissent from Fidel, in turn, was to be *apatria*, nationless, un-Cuban, fatherless. This dynamic of "Fidel-patria-revolution" was rooted in a form of authoritarian state power whose sexual politics privileged the male charismatic revolutionary. Only the heterosexual male revolutionary could confront the emasculating power of U.S. imperialism. The revolution called for an ultra-virile sense of national identity, which required constant military mobilization, the transmission of power along male lines, and severe punishment for those men, especially homosexuals, who deviated from the ideal of "the new man." After the death of Che Guevara, a symbolic trinity took form, in which El Che became the revolutionary martyr or "father"; Fidel Castro, by continually invoking El Che's presence in his speeches, became El Che's exclusive heir or "son"; and the Cuban revolution—even the Cuban nation—became the "holy ghost," in what was a clear pattern of homosocial masculine inheritance or "immaculate conception."

In his *Education and the New Man*, Che Guevara wrote of the revolutionary as a man guided by the sentiment of love for the people, a man dedicated entirely to the revolutionary cause, a man who would not allow his mind to be distracted by trivial matters, such as whether his children had holes in their shoes. There is only one specific mention of women in El Che's text, and it is cast in the language of abjection—women's role, he says, ought to be to sacrifice their lives to help the revolution come to fruition.⁹

Redeeming the Cuban nation required—continues to require—the creation not so much of a new woman but a new man. In a speech delivered by Fidel Castro in Pinar del Río in 1987 on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the death of Che Guevara, he declares that he has often dreamed of Che's return, in body and soul, to the world of the living. Che, he says, is a symbol for all oppressed people, for all revolutionaries. He speaks at length of Che's body, of how his physical body was destroyed and made to disappear, so there would be no place where he could be worshiped. And yet, Castro exclaims, Che's presence lives on, especially among the young pioneers who invoke him daily when they say, "We will be like El Che!"

In this speech an interesting relation is suggested between Fidel's presence as a physical body in power and Che's absent presence as a spiritual body. It has been noted that democratic political systems lack a center of power; there is a vacancy at the center that is filled provisionally by different bodies at different times. But in authoritarian political systems, the center is never vacant: It is filled with a body, a body that literally and metaphorically represents the center of power. In the Cuban case, the homosocial erotic tie between Che, the supreme dead revolutionary, and Fidel, the supreme living revolutionary, legitimates the body politic which keeps Castro in power. The recent return of Che Guevara's remains to Cuba for proper burial and worship closes the circle of connection between the Argentine revolutionary and Fidel.

The male homosocial basis of the Cuban revolution is further reflected in Fidel Castro's 1992 speech commemorating the thirty-ninth anniversary of the assault on Moncada, which is entitled *Los tiempos difíciles prueban a los hombres* (Difficult times are a test to men).¹⁰ By choosing to use the male pronoun, Castro suggests that it is men, *as men*, who must prove themselves in difficult times. It is in this speech, too, that Fidel Castro announces that revolutionary Cuba boasts the best-educated and most-sophisticated prostitutes of the world. But prostitutes ultimately don't destabilize the utopia of new men. Nothing has ever threatened the

utopia of new men more profoundly than homosexuality, a supposed “deviation” from “true” manhood. In the 1970s, gay men suffered harassment, persecution, and imprisonment in Cuba, a fact that has been documented in human-rights accounts as well as in literature and film.¹¹ As they left the port of Mariel in 1980, gay men were shouted down with the words, “Que se vaya la escoria, que se vayan los homosexuales” (get out scum, get out homosexuals).

And yet because this homophobia was so terribly conscious, so terribly out of the closet, it also left deep wounds in the revolutionary psyche. Only recently have Cubans on the island begun to reflect on this wrenching moment of the revolutionary process, largely as a result of the Cuban film *Fresa y chocolate* (Strawberry and chocolate, 1993), based on a short story by Cuban writer Senel Paz, who also wrote the film script.¹² The film, building on the original story, “The Fox, the Forest, and the New Man,” focuses precisely on the complexities of Cuban male identity as they emerge in the friendship of a gay critic of the revolution (who ends up deciding to leave Cuba) and a young revolutionary (who overcomes his homophobia through that friendship). Despite the many merits of this humane and moving film, it is significant that the gay critic and the revolutionary are imagined as separate, not as one and the same person. And it is significant, too, that it is their male-to-male reconciliation, to the exclusion of women, which is presented as the central reconciliation needed to heal the wounds of a nation divided by revolution, the Cold War, and exile. The film also quietly obscures the fact that there is no public lesbian and gay movement in Cuba, although there certainly is a lesbian and gay culture.¹³ Diego, the gay character in the film, ultimately must leave Cuba. The body politic of the Cuban nation cannot yet include him. At the same time, the film’s hero is Diego. And most fascinating of all, the film suggests that much of what is great in Cuban culture has been the work of such gay creative artists as José Lezama Lima, Virgilio Piñera, and Ernesto Lecuona.

Cuban revolutionary ideology has always been deeply contradictory about the erotics of power. The revolution was scripted in male homosocial terms, but homosexuality was anathema. Where women are concerned, the contradictions are even more knotted. The revolutionary state sought to undo the evils of patriarchy by providing all women with free education, health care, birth control, access to abortion, nutritional support for pregnant mothers and young children, day care, the freedom to divorce, and the unequivocal defense of women’s sexuality in its own right. Indeed,

Fidel Castro took such a strong interest in “the woman question” that he himself called the feminist revolution in Cuba “a revolution within the Revolution.” And yet patriarchy could be dismantled only as long as the figure of the patriarch—namely, Fidel—was never touched.

One of Fidel Castro’s first dramatic gestures after taking power was to close the brothels of Havana, which were humiliatingly associated with *yanqui* imperialism and its emasculation of Cuba’s men. In the new Cuba, women would be firm pillars of society, never again forced to work as housewives, maids, and whores. Women were organized into a mass organization, the FMC (Federation of Cuban Women), whose founder and president, Vilma Espín, fought in the Sierra Maestra with Fidel Castro and became the wife of his brother Raúl Castro, the head of the armed forces and second-in-command in Cuba. The FMC, in its early years, offered education to maids, rehabilitated prostitutes, and sought to raise the consciousness of housewives, like the protagonist of the film “Portrait of Teresa” (1979) who leaves her husband because he refuses to agree that men have no more right than women to be unfaithful in marriage.¹⁴

The national desire to transform gender relations was serious, radical, and wide-ranging. But “feminism” as a term and concept remained unacceptable in a society where the women’s movement was subordinate to the revolution. Espín has repeatedly said that the FMC is a “feminine” and not a “feminist” organization: an organization of women committed to a revolution that already speaks in their name. She has roundly declared: “We hate the feminist movement in the United States . . . which conceived struggles of equality of women against men! . . . That is absurd! It doesn’t make any sense! For these feminists to say that they are revolutionaries is ridiculous! . . . That’s what’s most tragic. They’re just being manipulated, being used. The feminist movement! Ha! You even see lesbians in their movement. Our work is to make everyone advanced. Then when everyone has a high consciousness, nobody will have to think in terms of equality.”¹⁵ Espín’s horror that the North American women’s movement includes lesbians, as well as her disdain for the idea of gender egalitarianism, suggests that some women may have found it in their interest to collude in institutionalizing male heterosexual state power. As a critical observer puts it, Espín leads “a mass movement of women who construct their social-sexual identity and libidinal body from the perspective of the heterosexual male referential.”¹⁶

But what is most striking is the way Espín has spoken of the relation between Fidel and Cuban women in highly erotic terms: “As for the affection our people have for Fidel, it is something intimate. And the women

know how to express it so well! They greet him with so much emotion anywhere amongst the thousands of places he visits in his daily activities. . . . What excited happiness there is when Fidel arrives! Each one wants to kiss him, hold his hand, tell him how much the revolution means to her, what her children are doing, her grandchildren. . . . How many write to us at the Federation asking for a photo of Fidel!"¹⁷

If power is eroticized, domination has to be confronted not so much on the level of conventional politics but on the level of gender and sexual identity. Gender and sexual resistance become the basis for rethinking conceptions of nation and diaspora. In creative and critical work, the intellectuals, writers, and artists who make up the generation of Cuba's revolutionary children, both on the island and in the diaspora, have shown profound understanding of this seductive web of dominance and resistance. Their work challenges the foundational romances, the erotic fictions, that are key building blocks of nation-building.¹⁸

Despite the early efforts of Cuban revolutionary leaders to eliminate the image of Cuba as an exotic sexual haven by sponsoring highly publicized campaigns to re-educate prostitutes, the Cuban state always made paid sex available to political leaders, the diplomatic corps, and tourists. But with increasing economic hardship since the collapse of the Soviet Union, prostitution has returned to Cuba with a vengeance, and the state is struggling to maintain control over the many Cuban female (and gay male) bodies that are "on the loose." Yet the state's growing inability to provide for its citizens has created a new tolerance for prostitution, and Havana is being called the Bangkok of the Caribbean. Foreign men, from Spain, Italy, Germany, Canada, Mexico, and even the United States, go to Cuba again as they did before the revolution, seeking to play out their wildest pornographic fantasies with beautiful Cuban women, *jineteras* who may be starving for dollars but can still boast that they are among the best-educated prostitutes in the world. It is now considered a survival strategy to *jinetear* (literally "jockeying"), the term used in Cuba for providing personal services, particularly prostitution, to tourists and foreigners.

The image of the island of Cuba as itself a sexual body that is currently for sale is vividly depicted in a popular article published a few years ago entitled "Why the Latins Still Love Fidel." The article notes that "Latins are frankly fascinated by Castro, susceptible to his charisma in the same way they have been over the years to other overpowering political personalities." And the author continues, "Even conservative Latins secretly admire the way the Cuban dictator has raised his country—under other

circumstances, a rather unimportant Caribbean island—to the status of a quasi-world power." (As an aside, I would add that it's obviously not just Latins who have been mesmerized by Fidel's uncanny power, but many Americans as well.) But, the author argues, such power comes at a cost: "Of course they know that to accomplish this the Cuban people have had to pay a terrible price, and they wouldn't trade places with them." And then, in closing, the devastating metaphor: "Castro's Cuba is like a pornographic movie: they wouldn't want to do those things themselves, but they enjoy seeing them done by someone else."¹⁹

For the intellectual and artistic children of the Cuban revolution, the image of Cuba as a pornographic movie unfortunately hits home. Rampant prostitution on the island has become a sad metaphor for the more-rampant merchandising of Cuba, which includes the sale of images of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara as tourist souvenirs. Artists on the island are producing critical work that comments ironically on the nature of Cuban post-utopia. For example, the artist Tania Bruguera produced a show "Postwar Memory," for which she made souvenirs T-shirts, posters, key holders, lighters, ball-point pens, and ash-trays, with the phrase "Postwar Memory" written in drippy lettering. As she later noted, "I wanted to show that what we are selling are pieces of our own misery, of our own failure."²⁰ Bruguera was also the editor of *Memorias de la Postguerra*, (Postwar memories), a publication that sought to include work by Cubans living "anywhere and everywhere," which was published clandestinely until it was banned by the state.

Cuban artists also have produced satires of socialist realism and visions of alternative utopias that offer creative resistance to the emptiness of propaganda slogans and the deification of state power in the cult of heroes. For example, the artist Tomás Esson, who defected to the United States a few years ago, produces mockeries of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara as icons that critically deconstruct the political megalomania of macho revolutionary heroes. In contrast, the artist José Toirac, who lives in Cuba, has produced a clandestine book of images of Fidel Castro based on actual photographs from *Granma*, the official newspaper, and revolutionary photographs taken in the Sierra Maestra, many of which, Toirac says, were taken as posed pictures after the actual battle for the revolution had long ended. In his book *Printing Press Parables: 33 Official Cuban Printing Press Images*, he analyzes Castro's rise to national power by juxtaposing it to the allegory of Jesus Christ rising to divine power. This project ponders Castro's illusion of allowing himself to be experienced as a kind of deity, a super-hero.

The efforts of both Bruguera and Toirac, who are in their late twenties, come on the heels of the work of Cuban artists of the generation of the 1980s, who sought to open new spaces for public discourse only to find themselves exiting Cuba via Mexico; most have since crossed over to Miami and New York. Cultural critic Osvaldo Sánchez, who forms part of that generation and now lives in Mexico, noted that the authorities "proved themselves incapable of distinguishing between the sincerity of a critical comment (present in a work of art) and the causes of the disaster. They could not grasp that the political acerbity expressed by the young was one last legitimizing gesture toward the Revolution as a genuine participatory process."²¹ Indeed, what Cuba's revolutionary children have continually done is test, in the words of island-based art critic Gerardo Mosquera, "how far the bounds of the permissible will stretch in a society in which the function of criticism has not yet been defined."²²

In the United States, in turn, Cuban-American intellectuals and writers have pushed against the limits of the view that the Cuban nation and its diaspora are "others," even "enemies," of one another, questioning both the nation's "bigotry of its disremembering and the complacency of its apologetics" and the exile's "nostalgic *siesta* and vengeful rage."²³ For the Cuban-American cultural critic Maria de los Angeles Torres, there is a refusal

to accept the either/or definition of my identity which demands that you choose sides. My identity is far more complex than this. I was born in Havana. I was raised in Texas. I was radicalized with Chicanos. I returned to Cuba and thus was ostracized from my community. Now I live in Chicago, but I also live in Havana, emotionally and professionally. I am always returning. . . . [Yet] even as I write, I do not know if things I say will offend those who determine whether or not I receive a reentry permit. . . . I am comforted by the fact that no matter how hard states try, they cannot control the nation or legislate identities; they cannot erase our history. Our identity is multiple, for power struggles have fragmented who we are.²⁴

Or, as Roman de la Campa puts it, "What does it mean to have grown more comfortable with the nomadic tendencies implicit in the feeling that I belong to a multiplicity of places for different reasons and at different times?"²⁵ Here is the heart of post-utopian Cuban thinking: a fierce unwillingness to be bound to a single identity, a single place, a single history, and a single future.

¿Donde podrá vivir si no en tu sexo? (where can I live if not in your

sex?) croons Albita, who can satisfy the Miami Cuban community's need for island nostalgia while being an ambiguously sexed diva. If diasporic consciousness, nomadism, and a sense of multiple identity define the post-utopian moment of Cuba's revolutionary children, it is no surprise to discover that the body, and sex itself, have become the home-away-from-home, the resting point for so much homelessness. Add to this the Cuban concern with the erotics of power, and it becomes clear why this generation must map the new world by reinventing gender and sexuality.

Most of all, what must be reinvented, yet again, is the meaning of manhood, the meaning of the "new man." The key images of Cuban masculinity are embedded in the twin icons of Ricky Ricardo, the 1950s' Cuban mambo king, indifferent to politics and unphased by his colonized position as a Latino in the United States, and Fidel Castro, whose warrior manhood and constant need to combat the emasculating power of U.S. imperialism is symbolized by the army fatigues he wears morning, noon, and night.

One arena where I see a fresh vision of Cuban manhood being put forth is in Rafael Campo's book of poems, *The Other Man Was Me: A Voyage to the New World*. Campo, a Cuban-American physician and poet who is also gay, tells the story of his search for a new world in a series of interwoven sonnets that claim not a geographic territory, but an empowered identity based on a loving relationship between two men, both Latino, who are raising an adopted son together. Homophobia is deeply rooted on both sides of the Florida Straits, so for Campo there are no previous models of Cuban manhood on which to draw. He must, necessarily, invent a new world. In his poem, "What Loving Parents Are," he writes:

Our son will see us simply holding hands.
Our son will play football. Our son will grow
And open like a flower from a fist.
We hope at day care he'll be brave and say
"I have two dads. What's wrong with love?"

Yet while treating a patient with AIDS, he recognizes the painful split in the gay community between those who are and aren't infected with the virus:

One day, I drew his blood, and while I did
He laughed, and said I was his girlfriend now,
His blood-brother. "Vampire-slut," he cried,
"You'll make me live forever!" Wrinkled brows
were all I managed in reply. I know
I'm drowning in his blood, his purple blood.

But Campo never becomes despondent. His vision of the new world is post-utopian in a way that is not immune to hope. He can imagine a world where laws

Concerning homosexuality
And immigration would be kind and just:
Offenders would be subject to a fine
Not more in value than a poet's line,
Nor less than what my country's freedom cost.

And he can imagine a world where reconciliation with the Cuba left behind is an essential step toward closing the broken circle of memory. In "I Take Our Son to Cuba," he writes:

Until I take our son to Cuba, glass
Will seem too powerful a spell to break.
The photographs will almost seem to wake
From all their years of sleep; my past,
Wherever it's reflected, will be near
But out of reach . . .²⁶

In counterpoint to Campo, the work of visual artist Rolando Estévez, who lives on the island in the town of Matanzas, embodies the new world through a series of images that likewise comment on the themes of national identity, the family, power, and sexuality.

Estévez has an unusual sense of compassion for those of us second-generation types who were taken out of Cuba during the early years of the revolution and so feel we left behind our childhoods in Cuba. His compassion stems from a quite different, and more devastating, experience of loss and mourning. He never left Cuba; it was his family who left him. His parents and younger sister emigrated to Miami when he was fifteen. By Cuban law, Estévez could not leave, because he was of military age. Forced to make a terrible decision, like so many other Cuban families—whether to "sacrifice" both children or "save" one at least—his parents left, planning to get Estévez out later. But when Estévez's parents were finally able to get him out of Cuba, Estévez refused to go. He had been wounded deeply by having been left behind, and he had made up his mind never to leave Cuba no matter how desperate the situation became.

Sitting next to each other on his old Soviet sofa-bed, the tape recorder between us, he says, "I also consider myself an exile. An exile of my family. Those who leave take things. And those things, if you don't have them, turn you into an exile. I came to know my sister when I was already forty

and she was thirty-two. She was only eight when she left." Suddenly he pauses. We are making this tape not just for my anthropological benefit, but as a kind of open letter to his sister, in which Estévez is trying to express to her the connections between his life and his artistic work. "It is so hard for me to say this. She is listening to me and I want her to listen to me with well-meaning ears, because it is so hard for me to believe that she is my sister." Later, Estévez will ask me please not to copy this part of our tape for his sister, to erase these words that at the time he still thinks he wants to address to her.

Living together you create bonds, ideas in common, points of identification, and distance creates heartbreak, especially when the distance is forced upon you, when it is of such magnitude. I can't get a visa to visit the United States and she refuses to come to Cuba because she doesn't want to give money to the Cuban government. . . . It's been fifteen years since I've seen my mother. Ten years since I've seen my father. . . . The heartbreak of those who stay behind is enormous. Seeing someone leave is like dying and seeing yourself from above, mutilated, lost. . . . You are left with the absence of those who formed you, those who *deformed* you too. Suddenly you're so alone.

But, I interrupt him, "You forgive your parents, don't you?" And he replies:

Forgiveness exists and doesn't exist. Of what use is forgiveness? My mother is a lacerated soul. I know she has suffered. And I imagine she has suffered more than I can know. She needs to be forgiven, not because she is my mother but because she is a human being. In the case of my father, it's different. My father is a much stronger person. He had aspirations, or one very concrete aspiration: that his only daughter, the daughter of his old age, not be raised in Cuba, that she not cut sugarcane, not participate in work groups, not have to get on buses with black people, that she achieve a dignified career, and he has attained all this. But my mother is much more frustrated—she left her mother, son, brothers and sisters, her neighborhood. . . . I remember my mother dancing, singing, entertaining the old ladies in her house. . . . I don't know how she has managed in a country where you can't go out at night, where you can't be chatting with your neighbors constantly.

Estévez's mother returned in 1978, during the family-reunification program, two years before Estévez's daughter was born. During this time,

Estévez had gone from living with his godparents, with whom his parents had left him, to living with his then-wife, a performance artist.

In a way I had reinvented some kind of family for myself, and that helped me to receive my mother. I can't describe to you the emotional impact of her return. . . . My mother came loaded with pills from head to toes. My mother had turned into a sick person in the United States. She'd never taken a single pill for her nerves in Cuba. But after 1969 she became a psychopath. She herself said to me, "I couldn't have gotten here without the pills. I had to take one on the plane and another when I came to see you." She had to prepare herself to see me. She didn't have any other arms but those pills. And in the kitchen she broke into tears, saying that she'd purged herself of having left Cuba, of having left me. Purged herself, I never forgot those words.

After a second trip to Cuba, Estévez's mother fell into a coma, and when she awakened again, six months later, she was in even worse physical and psychological shape. She never again returned to Cuba. Later, Estévez's own life took a different course, as he entered into a relationship with a man—a nurse who cared for him during a long bout with hepatitis and with whom he now lives. Estévez's family in the States doesn't know about this part of his life. I must keep my mouth shut when I visit Estévez's mother in her subsidized apartment in north Miami. "You see how poor we are," his mother says to me when I meet her. "Everything we ever had was for Cuba. To send to Cuba. That's why we were left with nothing for ourselves." And then, when she asks, "So how is my son?," I say he is fine, that he is just fine and misses her greatly and wishes he could see her. And when she asks, "How is my granddaughter, whom I don't even know?" again I have to say she is fine, just fine, that everything is fine.

But of course everything isn't fine. Estévez's daughter has just turned fifteen—the same age Estévez was when his parents left Cuba—and this has forced him to face his past and his daughter's future. One of the things Estévez tells me is that he wants to do everything in his power to prevent his daughter from going through what he went through. "I have to believe that being here with her is much more important than sending her two hundred dollars from the United States each month," he says. But more uncertainly, he adds: "I have many fears. I'm struggling so that my daughter won't reproach me later, won't hold it against me that she stayed in Cuba."

In his art, Estévez continually reflects on the family, diaspora, loss, and

longing, and the erotics of power. He uses the body as his central image throughout his work. For a series of images on the family, he created a "*Cuerpo de lágrimas*" (Body of tears), exploring the image of the body being split by the wall of revolution and exile, with boats slipping and sliding desperately as they search for safe harbor. Clearly, it is his own body of tears that is being referenced here: the splitting of his body and heart by the immigration of his family. For a series on power, Estévez produced various images that question the meaning of power. In "*Cabeza coronada numero uno*" (Crowned head, number one), he suggests that the body of power is headless; its crown floats in the air. In another image in the series, "*Largo cuello quebrado*" (Long neck broken), Estévez depicts the head properly crowned, but it is nearly decapitated, attached by the slimmest edge to the rest of the body. Both images suggest that power—whether the power of a specific leader or the power of the state in general—is not as sure of itself, maybe not even as totalitarian, as might appear.

Recently, Estévez has begun a new series on sex that is blatantly pornographic, even ridiculously pornographic. He is playing, I think quite consciously, on the trope of Cuba as a site of pleasure and desire, as, indeed, a pornographic movie that most of us would prefer to visit and not to live within. But he seems to be suggesting, too, that sexuality may be one site that the hand of power cannot reach, cannot control as fully as it wishes. Estévez begins the series with an image, "*Figura simple sobre telón complejo*" (Simple figure before complex background), that again explores the split body, but this time as an androgynous body—part female, part male. He continues this exploration in "*Ausencia, presencia*" (Absence, presence) and with yet more humor in "*Espejo del alma*" (Mirror of the soul), which questions the inevitable link between identity and gender by placing a female head on a male body and a male head on a female body. The insatiable desire of and for the phallus is the theme of "*Bésame mucho*" (Kiss me a lot) while "*Naturaleza muerta*" (Still life) offers a vision of the expendable and expired phallus of the aging patriarch.

Gender and sexuality take on yet other dimensions in the work of feminist artist Rocío García. A professor at the San Alejandro Art Academy, Rocío produces her unique drawings and paintings in the dining room of a friend's stately old house in the Vedado section of Havana. Her friend lends her the space out of respect for the fact that his brother, a painter who now lives in Mexico, was once a student of Rocío's. In order to earn much-needed dollars, her friend rents out two rooms of the house to foreigners, almost

always men who bring with them a procession of ever-younger *jineteras*. It is no accident that Rocío's disturbingly beautiful female nudes were conceived just a wall away from the spaces where desire and need, pleasure and pain, beauty and shame converged. And afterwards, when the paintings were finished and hung in the rented rooms, young Cuban women made love in spaces decorated with Rocío's female nudes, who silently but forcefully seek to tell the story of their passions and sadnesses.

Rocío did her university and graduate work in art in Leningrad, where she spent nearly seven years on a fellowship. She is the only Cuban woman to have completed an art degree in a Russian university since the revolution. When she returned to Cuba in 1983, she found that many of her contemporaries, with whom she'd studied art in high school, rejected her because of her educational training with the Soviets. The generation of the 1980s was (understandably) suspicious of Russian socialist realism and sought to create their own visual iconography by working in more-conceptual as well as more-folkloric forms of art. Although Rocío was never a militant of the Communist Party, nor even a *pionera* (as some of her contemporaries who later defected were), she was ostracized and began to work in solitude, without the support of the artistic cohort of her generation. She visited Spain in 1991 and could easily have emigrated, but returned to Cuba for fear she would end up having to sell *croquetas* to make a living and be able to send money back home to her parents. At least in Cuba, she says, she can devote herself to her art.

In her work, Rocío explores a range of quotidian female sites, among them the beauty parlor. In her "*peluquerías*" (beauty parlor) series, she has a striking image of two women with their long hair clipped together with a clothespin; this image explores, as do many of her pieces, the tense relationship between dyads of women. Rocío says she consciously explores lesbianism and gay relationships, not only on sexual terms but as a way of exploring the breakdown in communication between the two members of any couple. The wolf of the Red Riding Hood tale figures frequently in Rocío's work, as a creature to be flirted with and even ignored, but also, at times, a creature to be feared. There is the overbearing wolf who leans over his captive victim, saying "Te pintaré las uñas y si quieres, el corazón" (I will paint your nails and, if you like, your heart, too), but there is also an image of the handcuffed and gagged wolf, who is at the mercy of his former victim.

The women in these works are depicted as "geishas" (in Japan the geisha is literally, "a woman of artistic talent" who is trained to provide a range of services to men, often including sex). Rocío turns to this iconic

representation to comment not only on the rise of prostitution among Cuban women but to show how identity becomes masked under conditions of censorship and silencing. In a recent exhibit, "*Mis pedacitos en venta*" (Little pieces of me for sale), Rocío focuses on a range of images of geishas. Some of the Cuban women who engage in sex work, Rocío has learned, are actually gay women who submit to male desires for their bodies in order to earn dollars. But they wait impatiently for the moment when they can again rest in the arms of their female lovers. (Here, too, there is a metaphoric link to the traditional Japanese geisha, who lives in a community of females who are homoerotically bonded.) Rocío plays with the sound of the word "gei-sha" to suggest that the prostitute might well be "gay," a woman who finds greater pleasure in an amorous union with another of her own sex. Not that lesbian relations and women's intimate friendships are romanticized in her work. On the contrary, they are fraught with painful uncertainty. In "*La geisha y el angel*" (The geisha and the angel), two women, rather than Adam and Eve, sit around the proverbial bowl of apples; and the knife, as if it were a snake between them, suggests the possibility of a terrible betrayal about to happen. The horror of "*La fumadora de opio*" (She who smokes opium) is that this geisha doesn't know that her pleasure is being surveilled by other malevolent geishas who appear ready to plot against her. In "*Luna llena*" (Full moon), Rocío brings on stage the wolf who so terrified Little Red Riding Hood and is a frequent character in her work; now he haunts two women, one of whom has chosen to be conquered and another who is trying to save her from his violent desire, and in the process turns into a wolf herself. Nor does Rocío exclude the possibility that the "gay-sha" might be a male transvestite masquerading as a woman, as in the kabuki-inspired "*Strip-tease*." (Indeed, in eighteenth-century Japan, the first geishas were male.) And she is likewise able to imagine the gay voyeur in "*El sueño*" (The dream) as giraffe-necked and lascivious, while in "*La Movida*" (The game) she reflects upon male sexual vulnerability and offers her compassion as well to Cuban gay men who earn their living as sex workers.

One of the aesthetic challenges Rocío set for herself was to paint a "*maja*" or "Olympia," the quintessential female nude of the Western male gaze, painted by Velázquez, Rembrandt, Titian, Goya, and Manet, among others. These female figures typically cover their erotic zones with a shy hand. The "*Maja Geisha*" combines Western and Eastern visual traditions to depict a woman who perhaps is masturbating, but who definitely is flirting with the sword of power. How will she use this sword? The response comes in a counterpointing work, "*Geisha Samurai*," where the

sword is used not to win power, after all, but for the purposes of self-censorship and self-destruction. We see how, behind her beautiful face, the "Maja Geisha" conceals strong and unpredictable passions. In Japan, *harakiri* was limited to samurai males, though there are tales of samurai wives who killed themselves after a husband's death or to regain sullied honor. But Rocío endows her geishas with the privilege of performing a *harakiri*, of chopping off their own heads. Imaginatively fusing geisha and samurai conventions in her "Geisha Samurai," she creates a compelling image that simultaneously expresses feminist rage and feminine powerlessness.

An image of Rocío's that has stayed with me is an intricate white ink drawing on gray paper; it depicts a solitary woman lying naked on the tiled Star of David floor of what appears to be a classical museum or mansion, in which a huge chandelier is about to come crashing down on her. The woman seems unable to move, unable to decide what she should do. Will she move? Or will the chandelier fall on her? How long can she lie there? How long can the chandelier hang from its frazzled chain? I can think of no more vivid image with which to depict the sense of expectancy felt by all of us who care about Cuba. All of us who wait to see what will happen next to that island that tried so hard to be paradise and now must settle for the sad title of post-utopia.

In the winter of 1996 I find myself on Lincoln Road in Miami Beach at a conference on "gay desire." I am one of only three women. It is profoundly interesting being around men who don't view *me* as an object of desire. An open forum is taking place about the gay community and its needs and future. The first panelist is saying, "I moved to Miami a few years ago because I was really attracted to the Latin scene here. I'm a white northeastern guy, so I'm a little uptight, you know, but I want to learn to move my hips like the Latin guys do." Other things get said, the conversation moves in various directions, but then a member of the audience, a sophisticated-looking man with a French accent says, "I object to the way that speaker spoke about Latin *bodies*. He sounded to me like an old-fashioned colonialist, coming to Miami to colonize Latinos." And there is a brief pause, and the man sitting behind him raises his hand and says, "Guess what? I'm Cuban, and I'm part of the gay Latin scene, and I want to assure you of one thing—Don't worry about us. We're not about to let you colonize us. We don't go around with our heads down. We're not about to become the objects of *your* gay desire."

Hearing this snappy response, I felt heartened. I remembered how, in

her study of the relation between psychoanalysis, feminism, and the problem of domination, Jessica Benjamin had stated that "a theory or a politics that cannot cope with contradiction, that denies the irrational, that tries to sanitize the erotic, fantastic components of human life cannot visualize an authentic end to domination but only vacate the field."²⁷ The young gay Cuban at the conference on "gay desire," I thought, doesn't need to read Jessica Benjamin. Like the gay grandson with whom I began my essay, he has already entered post-utopia, where new forms of attachment, of self-consciousness, of subjectivity, and of sentiment are becoming possible, where already we can begin to envision an end to domination.

Notes

1. Tina Rosenberg, *The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts after Communism* (New York: Random House, 1995), 405.
2. Slavenka Drakulic, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 7.
3. "No graduates in Marxism this year in Marxist Cuba," *Miami Herald*, April 3, 1996, 9A.
4. Jorge Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 432; John Beverly and José Oviedo, eds., "Introduction" to *The Postmodern Debate in Latin America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 5.
5. Nestor Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 6.
6. Robert M. Adams, "Preface to the Second Edition" of Sir Thomas More, *Utopia* (New York: Norton, 1992), viii.
7. *Ibid.*, 212.
8. Cited in Van Gosse, *Where the Boys Are: Cuba, Cold War America and the Making of the New Left* (London: Verso, 1993), 99.
9. Ernesto Che Guevara, *Educación y hombre nuevo* (Havana: Editora Política, 1993).
10. Fidel Castro, *Los tiempos difíciles prueban a los hombres* (Havana: Editora Política, 1992).
11. See, for example, the memoir of gay writer Reinaldo Arenas, *Antes que anochezca* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1992), who left Cuba via the port of Mariel in 1980 and committed suicide after contracting AIDS in the United States.
12. The film was screened in Havana to enthusiastic audiences estimated at more than a million. Miramax bought the film, and it was screened for the first time in the United States in January 1995. My essay "Queer Times in Cuba," in *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba*, ed. Ruth Behar (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), offers a detailed interpretation of the film and its implications.

13. See Lourdes Arguelles and Ruby R. Rich, "Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience, Part I," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9, no. 4 (1984):696; Marvin Leiner, *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality, and AIDS* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994); Ian Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

14. See Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

15. Quoted by Max Azicri, "Women's Development through Revolutionary Mobilization," in *Cuban Communism*, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz, 6th ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1987), 36.

16. Shannon Bell, "The Political-Libidinal Economy of the Socialist Female Body: Flesh and Blood, Work and Ideas," *Dialectical Anthropology* 15 (1990): 249-58.

17. Vilma Espín, *Cuban Women Confront the Future*, ed. Deborah Shnookal (Melbourne, Australia: Ocean Press, 1991), 30-31. See also Elizabeth Stone, ed., *Women and the Cuban Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1981); Margaret Randall, *Gathering Rage: The Failure of 20th Century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1992); Ileana Fuentes, *Cuba sin caudillos: Un enfoque feminista para el siglo XXI* (Miami: Linden Lane Press, 1994).

18. Doris Sommer, "Irresistible Romance: The Foundational Fictions of Latin America," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990).

19. Mark Falcoff, "Why the Latins Still Love Fidel," *Public Opinion: The American Enterprise*, November-December 1990.

20. Quoted in Gerardo Mosquera, "Jineteando al turista en Cuba/Hustling the Tourist in Cuba," *Poliester: Pintura y No Pintura* 10, no. 3 (1994):17.

21. Osvaldo Sánchez, "Soñar con la espiral de Tatlin/"Dreaming of Tatlin's Spiral," *Poliester: Pintura y No Pintura* 4 (1993):15.

22. Gerardo Mosquera, "Los Hijos de Guillermo Tell/The Children of William Tell," *Poliester: Pintura y No Pintura* 4 (1993):21.

23. Sánchez, "Soñar con la espiral," 12.

24. Maria de los Angeles Torres, "Beyond the Rupture: Reconciling with Our Enemies, Reconciling with Ourselves," in *Bridges to Cuba*, ed. Behar.

25. Roman de la Campa, "Dialogue, Diaspora and the Cuban Nation," *Apuntes Postmodernos/Postmodern Notes* 4, no. 2 (1994):15.

26. Rafael Campo, *The Other Man Was Me: A Voyage to the New World* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1994), 82, 89, 113, 94.

27. Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Random House, 1988), 10.

8

Cuban Condemnation of Queer Bodies

Emilio Bejel

In spite of the universality of the modern concept of nationhood and the obsession of nationalist discourses to claim a natural essence, the construct of the nation is a historical artifact, discontinuous and adaptable, whose ideology is neither reactionary nor progressive in and of itself. This is why diverse forms of nationality have, in modern history, adapted themselves to liberalism, fascism, and socialism, to peace and war, and to images of the past and hopes for the future, according to the circumstances and formative discourses of each specific nation. This adaptability and diversity are related to the discursive precariousness of nationalism—that is to say, to its extreme dependence on practices and definitions (always variable, multiple, and changing) that attempt to contain its discursive limits. Indeed, the very intelligibility of each nation depends on such practices and definitions, since nationhood rather than an identity (something identical to itself) is a relational category whose meaning is derived from a system of differences. Thus, so-called "national identity" is determined to a large extent as a function of what it is not, or rather what it *presumes* not to be at any given moment. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the production of what we could call the ideological field of nationality is *exclusively* a process of negative or excluding oppositions. National discourse *also* consolidates itself based on mechanisms of identification and of "shared memory" among its citizens. But it must be emphasized that, for the discourse of nationality to have referential validity, there would have to exist a homogeneous horizontal community that could express itself through time in spite of time—that is to say, in spite of changes and temporal differences, in spite of accidents and the plurality of contingency.