

GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND REVOLUTION IN CUBA

Alfred Padula
University of Southern Maine

- EL AMOR, EL SEXO Y LOS CELOS.* By Alberto Orlandini. (Santiago de Cuba: Oriente, 1993, Pp. 199.)
- BEFORE NIGHT FALLS: A MEMOIR.* By Reinaldo Arenas. (New York: Viking, 1993. Pp. 317. \$23.00 cloth, \$12.95 paper.)
- EL CAIMAN ANTE EL ESPEJO: UN ENSAYO DE INTERPRETACION DE LO CUBANO.* By Uva de Aragón Clavijo. (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1993. Pp. 108. \$13.00 paper.)
- CUBA SIN CAUDILLOS: UN ENFOQUE FEMINISTA PARA EL SIGLO XXI.* By Ileana Fuentes. (Princeton, N.J.: Linden Lane, 1994. Pp. 161. \$15.00 paper.)
- MUCHACHAS DE ORO.* By Lisette Morera, Víctor Joaquín Ortega, Manolo Cabalé, Alfonso Nacienceno, and Enrique Montesinos. (Havana: Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, 1992. Pp. 140.)
- LA MUJER RURAL Y URBANA: ESTUDIOS DE CASOS.* By Mariana Ravenet Ramírez, Niurka Pérez Rojas, and Marta Toledo Fraga. (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1989. Pp. 208. \$5.00 paper.)
- SEXUAL POLITICS IN CUBA: MACHISMO, HOMOSEXUALITY, AND AIDS.* By Marvin Leiner. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1993. Pp. 184. \$47.50 cloth, \$18.95 paper.)
- SUGAR'S SECRETS: RACE AND THE EROTICS OF CUBAN NATIONALISM.* By Vera M. Kutzinski. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993. Pp. 287. \$40.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper.)

Some years ago at a conference held by the Instituto de Estudios Cubanos at Harvard, a participant opined that more could be divined about the nature of the Cuban Revolution from a study of child-raising habits than from the examination of the throw weights of Russian missiles. This observation was greeted with the raised eyebrows that signal the presence of the slightly daft, if not the clinically insane.

Happily for the future of humanity, the insane have now carried the day, and missiles, imperial struggles, and metropolises and peripheries no longer dominate thinking about Latin America. Increasingly, the environment, local and provincial history, business, private life, and gender studies are the subjects that occupy Latin Americanists' attention. The

books under review here focus on private life, on women, and on gender and sexuality and how these issues have played out in that most aggressively masculine of countries—Cuba.

La mujer rural y urbana was written at the behest of UNESCO in the mid-1980s by Mariana Ravenet Ramírez, Niurka Pérez Rojas, and Marta Toledo Fraga. It argues that since 1959, Cuba has made significant progress in “integrating women fully into society” and in equalizing opportunities for life and work between rural and urban women. The volume is particularly informative on women’s role in agricultural cooperatives.¹

La mujer rural y urbana reviews the early reforms of the revolution, particularly the universalization of education that has been so important for Cuban women. Access to education accompanied by encouragement from the government and particularly from the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC) led increasing numbers of women to enter the paid labor force. The numbers roughly doubled from about 18 percent in 1959 to 39 percent by 1985, a trend aided by the development of state-provided day care. By 1985, there were 842 day-care centers, a good beginning but “still insufficient,” according to the authors. The reviewer’s data suggest that day care currently serves about 10 percent of Cuba’s one million children age six or younger.² It has been helpful nonetheless, as have after-school programs that look after children until six or seven in the evening.

The central focus of *La mujer rural y urbana* is the lives of three women: Rosa, the wife of a small farmer; María who works in an agricultural cooperative; and Marta who is employed at a sugar mill. Each life is described in considerable detail à la Oscar Lewis. Readers get to know the three women’s life histories, their homes, children, daily schedules, and hopes and disappointments.

Rosa is fifty, married, and has three children, some of whom are married but still living at home because of the housing shortage. Her family has benefited significantly from the revolution, particularly from access to education. Even so, they feel isolated by lack of transportation. Rosa’s life centers around child care and home maintenance with occasional work in the family garden. Her family consumes the classic rural diet of rice, beans, root vegetables, and an occasional chicken. The revolution has provided vitamin pills, electricity, and potable water. Rosa’s house is clean, the family bathes frequently and is amply clothed and shod. It is a life that might be envied by most rural people in Latin America.

But there is a downside. Rosa’s life is circumscribed by patriarchal

1. Niurka Pérez Rojas is a leading commentator on co-ops. See, for example, Carmen Diana Deere, Mieke Meurs, and Niurka Pérez, “Hacia una periodización del proceso de colectivización cubana: Incentivos cambiantes y respuesta campesina,” *Cuban Studies*, no. 22 (1992):115–50.

2. For a more ample discussion, see Lois Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

authority. She must obtain her husband's permission to participate in any activity outside the home—even a shopping trip. For Rosa, being a woman implies acceptance of male authority and male opinions.

In the fields, a distinct sexual division of labor is evident. Women are occasionally enlisted to pull weeds or clean cane, but "hard work"—cutting cane, driving tractors, working with oxen—is done by men only. Rosa's dream is that her children will go to the university and become professionals. She believes that the ideal family should have only two children. Her daughters use birth-control pills to control their fecundity.

La mujer rural y urbana provides useful time charts on how Rosa and the other women spend their days. In general, husbands work more outside the home than do women. Inside the home, men do rather little, despite the insistence of the Cuban Family Code of 1975 that made such work obligatory.

By the mid-1980s, Rosa notes, the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC), which was at one time very active in the countryside, was no longer meeting in her region. This reflects a general loss of mission for the FMC. In the early 1990s, its publications *Muchachas* and *Mujeres* ceased publication, and there was talk of disbanding the organization entirely. Nonetheless, the women at FMC headquarters on 23rd Street in Havana assured this visitor in 1994 that the organization was still alive and well.³

As a sociological study, *La mujer rural y urbana* has two major problems. Many of the dreams of Rosa and other Cuban women have been undercut by the economic crisis of the 1990s. State services have been reduced, university admissions cut in half. Yet rural dwellers can at least eat. Second, the book is carefully blindered: only certain topics are fit for discussion. Nothing is said about the overall efficacy of the revolution's rural projects. The Soviet Union, which underwrote the Cuban Revolution for three decades at a cost estimated by some at more than one hundred billion dollars, is not mentioned even once.

One ambition of the revolution has been to excel in international athletic competitions. *Muchachas de oro* proudly celebrates the achievements of Cuba's women athletes. Education Minister José Ramón Fernández notes in his introduction that women athletes have brought "international glory and fame to Cuba" and great pride and satisfaction to the Cuban people. FMC President Vilma Espín observes that since 1959, women have won 24 percent of the medals awarded to Cuba in Pan American, Central American, and Caribbean games.

Muchachas de oro provides brief sketches of the island's leading women athletes beginning with Alejandrina Herrera, a discus thrower in the 1950s. Although she was black at a time when black athletes faced substantial prejudice, she won a number of medals at Central American

3. Visit by the author in June 1994.

and Caribbean games. The period since 1959 has produced basketball player Mireya Luis, runner Miguelina Cobián, martial-arts specialist Estela Rodríguez, chess champion Asela de Armas, javelin thrower María Caridad Colón, target shooter Tania Pérez, rhythmic gymnast Lourdes Medina, runner Ana Fidelia Quirot, and others. *Muchachas de oro* also contains seventy pages of statistics on women's sports, including names of winners and the medals they won. None of the data relate to local, regional, or collegiate sports as the book focuses exclusively on international competitions.

Some ironies are evident here. Cuba's most successful female athletes in volleyball, basketball, and track and field are black or *mulata*. But the cover of *Muchachas de oro* features a young woman with a pale Nordic visage.⁴ Four of the book's five authors are men, and it is obvious that men run women's athletics in Cuba.

The issue of "men in control" is part of a larger question that cannot be discussed in Havana: patriarchy. Happily, this silence has now been broken by Cuban-American women living in Miami. Ileana Fuentes's *Cuba sin caudillos* offers a polemical but engaging analysis of Cuba's patriarchal gender culture. Fuentes, former director of the office of Hispanic Arts at Rutgers, is currently head of the Cuban Museum of Art and Culture in Miami. She provides a series of short essays asserting that the central dilemma of Cuban culture—in Miami as well as in Havana—is a patriarchal system that fails to take women into account and thus makes its claims to be democratic ring hollow.

For Fuentes, the one promising moment for women during the Cuban Republic (1898–1958) occurred in 1934, when President Grau San Martín decreed women's suffrage. But nothing followed from that act. Only a handful of women became cabinet ministers over the next quarter-century. Given women's important role in defeating the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, one might have expected a significant change in the power quotient after 1959. Fuentes argues that the revolution was simply a new iteration of the old heroic culture, the old macho militarism in revolutionary guise: Marx plus testosterone.⁵

As a remedy, Fuentes proposes a law that would guarantee women half of the "*espacios oficiales*." She cites Cuban poet Severo Sarduy's view

4. For more than two decades, the substantial fashion sections of the FMC's magazines *Muchachas* and *Mujeres* featured slim, white, Nordic-looking models in page after page of dress designs and fashion. Not a *mulata* in sight—shades of Xuxa! Even more ironic for a worker's republic, the clothing was intended almost exclusively for play, not for work. In an 1986 interview, the editor of *Mujeres* explained that many of the designs had been lifted from Soviet magazines, which had previously copied them from fashion magazines of the West.

5. One thinks of Che Guevara's observation during a firefight with the forces of dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1956 that war was "a virile sport." Che was shot in the neck shortly thereafter.

that Cuba's patriarchal culture "comes not only from the Spain of Torquemada—repressive and fascinated by humiliation and death—but also from fanatical Islam and from black African cultures rigidly structured in a hierarchy of chiefs and subchiefs, of little kings and big operators . . ." (p. 19). Fuentes argues that the masculine will to be "hard, never to yield, to be virile" became enmeshed with Cuban nationalism in an ethos that is deeply misogynistic.⁶ What is feminine is viewed as weak and worthless. Qualities such as "sensitivity, sentimentalism, humanism, pacifism, and willingness to negotiate" are rejected by the dominant patriarchal culture. This machismo, Fuentes reasons, leads to "intolerance, overseas adventurism, war, lies, political prison, the national security state, the firing squad, torture, homophobia, cultural and religious censorship, the dictatorship of force . . ." (p. 33).

Just as there are few women in positions of power in Havana, the same is true in Miami, according to Fuentes. Among the sixty-eight directors of the Cuban American National Foundation, only three are women. The ratio is about the same in the highest ranks of the Communist party in Cuba.

Fuentes considers Cuba's human rights organizations to be a hopeful omen, however. She particularly admires poet María Elena Cruz Varela, whose "Declaration of Principles" was the "first public feminist critique of patriarchy."⁷ Fuentes asserts that if the gender and ethnic composition of Cuba were taken into account, the island's next president would be "an Afro-American woman" (p. 62).

There is a paradox in Fuentes. She wants to preserve many of the social gains of the revolution, but she abhors the undemocratic and patriarchal means used to achieve them. And if democracy and the vote are to be the ultimate arbiter, then how can Fuentes resolve the repeated rejection of female candidates in local and regional elections over the past two decades?

Uva de Aragón Clavijo's *El caimán ante el espejo* (Cuba in the Looking Glass) reflects a more conservative school of thinking than Fuentes's *Cuba sin caudillos*. Clavijo, a columnist for Miami's *Diario Las Américas* and associate director of Florida International University's Cuba Research Center, is not a feminist at full throat. Yet her collection of essays echoes, albeit sotto voce, many of Fuentes's concerns.

Clavijo ponders an intriguing question: why did Cubans, who as

6. Reminiscing about his youth, sociologist Nelson Valdés recalled that Cuban boys used to play a game in which a ball is thrown as hard as possible at another player. The object was to inflict pain and to resist showing pain. The game is still being played in Cuba. Interview with Valdés, Havana, June 1994.

7. Cruz Varela observed at one point that Fidel Castro was not her father. She was later beaten up and imprisoned for her remarks and for her role in human rights activities. Thereafter, she traveled to the United States. During 1995 she was on a year-long "sabbatical" in Puerto Rico.

individuals are so open, affectionate, and peaceable (citizens of a nation that shunned bullfighting as too violent), become a nation of “extremes” with a bloody history of violence. Clavijo, like Fuentes, blames machismo. According to Clavijo, Cubans feel more admiration for the “genital organs of [General Antonio] Maceo than for the poetic vision of [José] Martí” (p. 37). Cuban President Gustavo Machado (1925–1933) actually stated on one occasion that the key to governing was a masculine organ. Decades later, Fidel Castro (who is known as “El Caballo”) continues this tradition. Clavijo notes that most-admired woman in Cuba—the only one to whom a major statue is dedicated—is dutiful mother Mariana Grajales, who offered ten of her sons to Mars during the protracted struggle for Cuban independence in the 1860s.

For Clavijo, militarism and caudillismo, the twin curses of Latin American life, originated in the cult of virility, while Castro’s revolution represents the triumph of machismo. Even in Miami, to disagree with exile leaders or to favor dialogue instead of war is to risk being perceived as weak and tagged as “*un maricón*” (a queer). It is really quite simple.

Interrelated questions of homosexuality, machismo, AIDS, sex education, and gender equality are explored in Marvin Leiner’s *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality, and AIDS*. Professor emeritus of Queens College, Leiner is a democratic socialist. Although known for his sympathetic book on day care in Cuba, he adopts a more critical posture in *Sexual Politics*.⁸

Leiner finds the Cuban Revolution paradoxical. There was so much to admire: the universalization of health care and education, social equality, the social mobility provided to ordinary people. Yet these virtues are conjoined to a politics of power that does not permit freedom of opinion or assembly or private behavior for those same citizens of the revolution.

Leiner is deeply distressed by the revolution’s intolerance of homosexuals. Writer Samuel Feijoó neatly captured this policy: the revolution was an affair “of fists and not of feathers.” This intolerance flows not simply from “El Caballo” but also from Cuban officials at every level. It is a cultural phenomenon, Leiner believes, and its end result in the 1960s was the infamous system of UMAP work camps, where gays and other undesirables were sent to be punished and reformed by using the latest “scientific methods.” The cult of masculinity was so pervasive that men feared wearing pants without creases—too effeminate.⁹ In the 1960s, Cuban officials assumed that homosexuality was learned, a factor of culture rather than genetic disposition. The camps were closed in the late 1960s, but as Leiner notes, although government policies have changed somewhat (thanks in part to two decades of criticism by gays in Europe and

8. Marvin Leiner, *Children Are the Revolution: Day Care in Cuba* (New York: Penguin, 1978).

9. So that men could have this “masculine edge,” women would have to do more ironing.

the Americas), homophobia remains deeply embedded in Cuban culture. It flourishes despite the pioneering work of sex educators like Monika Krause, to whom Leiner pays considerable attention.¹⁰

Leiner makes some useful observations on the nature of the Cuban women's movement. He cites writer Reynaldo González to the effect that women's progress in Cuba had more to do with the need for workers than with the ideas of feminists or the sexual revolution of the 1960s: "In Cuba feminism is a sort of education of the female masses for work, but we have not had the theorizing that comes with this kind of work. . . . The woman's revolution in Cuba didn't have any theorizing . . ." (p. 13).

Leiner concludes *Sexual Politics in Cuba* with a chapter on AIDS. He notes that thanks to a nationwide program of HIV testing and the quarantining of HIV carriers, Cuba has been very successful in limiting the impact of AIDS.¹¹ Nonetheless, the policy of quarantining "los siderosos" in special sanatoriums has provoked an international outcry. Leiner cites three reasons why Cuba has used confinement rather than pursuing a more "Western" approach to the crisis that would emphasize education: because of the general rejection of sex education, a national prejudice against homosexuality, and a powerful belief that male sexuality is uncontrollable (pp. 133–34).

In sum, Leiner finds the revolution deeply frustrating because it fails to balance social achievements with political rights. The revolution—and Fidel—seem unable to move beyond the need for "macho control" of Cuban citizens.

This theme of "macho control" is also echoed in the powerful autobiography of Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls*. Arenas lived his life within the revolution. It provided him with an education and transformed him with jobs and scholarships from a peasant and a factory worker into a princeling in the literary world of Havana. But in the end, the revolution crushed him and drove him into exile and early death because Arenas was gay and the revolution was macho.

Arenas published some short stories, then his first novel, *El mundo halucinante*, which playwright Virgilio Piñera helped him rewrite. Arenas came to know and despise the revolution's literati: Miguel Barnet, Eliseo Diego, Pablo Armando Fernández, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Nicolás Guillén. He considered them all cowards, policemen, handmaids of the revolution.

10. Krause returned to her native Germany in the early 1990s. A remarkable person, she pioneered in sex education in the Hispanic world. Krause has been fearless in expressing her sometimes controversial views. Much of the sex education materials that she used in the 1970s and 1980s were translations of German material, which gave rise to some resentment. The newer material, like that in Orlandini's book, is written by Cubans.

11. The most recent data show that 210 persons have died from AIDS in Cuba and 1098 are currently HIV-positive. See Pablo Alfonso, "210 muertos por SIDA," *El Nuevo Herald* (Miami), 30 Dec. 1994, p. 3A.

Arenas eventually fell into trouble with the police. His aunt routinely betrayed him. He began to view gays as a powerful subversive force: elusive, omnipresent, refusing to surrender to the puritans and Stalinists within the revolution. Arenas began to publish abroad. He was pursued, he escaped, and he was caught. Accused of being a homosexual and an enemy of the revolution, Arenas was imprisoned for four years.

In the late 1970s, Arenas was released and ended up living in the Havana underworld of crumbling buildings and bizarre characters. He was constantly harassed by the police, who frequently confiscated his manuscripts, which he would then rewrite. In 1980 he escaped Cuba by joining the Mariel boat lift to the United States.

But the United States proved to be no utopia. Miami was in love with money; New York was a cold and cruel city. Arenas gave conferences at U.S. universities and was appalled by the reverence shown by U.S. intellectuals for the Cuban Revolution. Were they blind? He regarded them as idiots, fascists.

In the end, Arenas's pursuit of freedom and sexual liberty killed him. He once observed with some satisfaction that he had had more than five thousand male partners by the time he was twenty-five, and many more after that. One of those partners killed him. Stricken with AIDS, he committed suicide in Manhattan in 1990 at the age of forty-seven. Death gave him the ultimate freedom he had sought.

Sex is also the master in Vera Kutzinski's *Sugar's Secrets: Race and Erotics of Cuban Nationalism*. This work is a literary deconstructionist's examination of the place of women, race, and sexuality in Cuban literature. The book is infuriating in its density, its need to be patiently deciphered like a Mayan codex. It also lacks a proper historical framework and a conclusion. Nonetheless, *Sugar's Secrets* is an important and even daring work that traces the "sublime [Hispanic] masculinity" that has dominated Cuban literature from Cirilio Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés* in the 1830s to poet Nicolás Guillén's rhythmic mulatas of the 1960s. Kutzinski's purpose is to track the "erasure" of women from a Cuban literature that is "prominently masculinist and frequently misogynistic" (p. 15).

Kutzinski begins by analyzing the fortunes of three generations of mulatas in *Cecilia Valdés*, that panoramic novel of life in early-nineteenth-century Cuba. She finds the mulatas "locked in a cycle of sexual exploitation, abandonment and despair" (p. 20). Like every other major Cuban writer, Villaverde found the mulata sexually dangerous, tricky, a baited trap. The mulata's ambulating hips were for him an invitation to miscegenation—and disaster in terms of social standing, family name, and property. White women, in contrast, he portrayed as honorable, marmoreal, cold as ice.

Kutzinski makes fascinating use in *Sugar's Secrets* of cigar and cigarette wrappers as evidence of women's fortunes in the second half of

the nineteenth century. In the engravings of Eduardo Laplante, she finds white women in classical motifs in which they are invariably passive, variations of the Virgin Mary. Blacks, in contrast, appear stereotypically as semi-nude and wild, performing pagan dances.

Kutzinski finds no significant changes in the “nonbeing” of women in the mind of Cuba’s intellectuals in the twentieth century. The mulata continues to be “little more than a body inscribed with, and subjected to male desire, sexual and political” (p. 174). This attitude is typified in a line about mulatas by poet laureate Nicolás Guillén: “Your womb knows more than your head . . .” (p. 176). Kutzinski finds critic Juan José Arrom equally guilty because of his statement that “nonwhite women . . . are barely human” (p. 185). Historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals is the only one who understands the link between sugar, slavery, and sexuality in Cuba: “Slavery distorted the slave’s sexuality, and the racists justified such distortions by inventing the myth of the sadistic sexuality of the black man, the immorality of the black woman, and the promiscuity of the mulata” (p. 191).

Finally, one work under review here offers a note of hope: Alberto Orlandini’s *El amor, el sexo y los celos*. A psychiatrist at the Instituto de Ciencias Médicas in Santiago, Cuba, Orlandini has written a thoroughly modern little manual on sex education. Brief and explicit, it makes amusing references to the sexual habits of a variety of mammals and of humans as far afield as Eskimos and Trobriand Islanders. The book is written as a series of questions and answers and is, inter alia, an attack on machismo and male supremacy. This manual carries on the work of German sex educator Monika Krause. In *El amor, el sexo y los celos*, women are treated as fully intelligent partners and equals of men. Orlandini notes that since the sexual revolution of the 1960s, a woman’s loss of virginity prior to marriage is no longer a stigma of dishonor. He treats homosexuality with equanimity. Some cultures find it unobjectionable; others find it alarming. Orlandini observes with some audacity that “more conservative and religious groups attempt to repress homosexuality while more progressive and cultivated societies take a permissive attitude” (p. 132). Science, he notes, has yet to determine the causes of homosexuality. Homophobia is completely “unscientific,” resulting from an education in which children are told that gays are “despicable, perverse, ridiculous, and marginal citizens” (p. 135). Orlandini goes on to compare homophobia with racism. The fact that such views may be aired freely in Cuba in the 1990s indicates significant changes in the cultural climate since the years when Arenas was persecuted and UMAP camps abounded.¹²

Like all Cuban writers, Orlandini is careful not to discuss politics

12. It is curious that the illustrations in Orlandini’s *El amor, el sexo y los celos* (like those in *Muchachas de Oro*) show no mulatos or blacks.

or history, lest he provoke the attention of the censors in the Communist party. He merely provides scientific medical opinion. Orlandini identifies machismo as the "sexual ideology that concentrates all power and ability in men." The macho model is "vigorous, hard, aggressive, autonomous, rational, practical, mature, and polygamous" (p. 156). Women are, in the macho view, "passive, tender, incapable of resolving problems, dependent, emotional, romantic, childlike and monogamous, and not really interested in sex" (p. 156). Orlandini attributes machismo in part to Cuban mothers who often unconsciously transmit macho attitudes to their sons.

Orlandini reports that the sexual revolution in Cuba surged ahead notably in the 1980s. He cites the increasing use of contraceptives and abortion, the growing independence of young women from their families and from sexual control by their fathers, cultural campaigns attacking machismo, the growing availability of sex education, and the more frequent erotic themes in the media. These changes in sexual mores have also had their downside: family breakdown, divorce, and a rising level of paternal irresponsibility.

What, then, can be concluded from this curious potpourri of books on sex, gender, and revolution in Cuba? The authors are virtually unanimous in finding patriarchy and machismo deeply embedded in the Cuban psyche and in concluding that these tendencies pose powerful barriers to full equality for women. They find also that Fidel Castro's patriarchal revolution is paradoxically attempting to reform and improve women's condition. Finally, the authors provide evidence of some progress, in some cases significant, in women's estate, particularly in terms of sex education, direct and public criticism of machismo, and an easing of homophobic attitudes. The revolution is trying to transform itself, to move on to a second stage. But the task is not easy. It is a question not merely of habits but of power. The ultimate proof of change will come on the day dreamed of by Ileana Fuentes: when a mulata or a black woman is inaugurated as president of Cuba.