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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group

GAY HUMAN RIGHTS IN CUBA: EXILE,
HEGEMONY AND LIBERATION IN
REINALDO ARENAS'S *LA VIEJA ROSA* AND
ARTURO, LA ESTRELLA MÁS BRILLANTE

On 3 February 1986, US Immigration Judge Robert Brown granted Fidel Armando-Toboso's request to withhold his deportation to Cuba on the grounds that Toboso fitted into the definition of a refugee by virtue of being 'a member of a particular social group (homosexuals)' who feared persecution from the Cuban government. On 12 March 1990 the US Board of Immigration Appeals upheld Judge Brown's decision. On 16 June 1994 US Attorney General Reno ordered that the decision should set a legal precedent. According to the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), as of March 1994, 24 similar requests had been granted to gay, lesbian and transsexual petitioners from the developing world. The US decision to allow homosexuals to be considered as political refugees is part of a larger trend within the developed world. The disparity between the countries of origin of the refugees – Iran, China, El Salvador, Bangladesh, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Colombia, etc. – contrasts sharply with the list of the countries granting asylum – Australia, Belgium, Finland, New Zealand, the UK, etc. Recently, the granting of asylum has widened the scope of human rights issues to include African female genital mutilation, the treatment of political dissidents in China after the Tiananmen square riots, and child slavery. It is insufficient to interpret these as the benevolent acts of civilized countries towards suffering citizens of despotic governments without taking into account the self-serving and imperialist narratives that are (re)produced by such seemingly humane acts of kindness.

At its broadest and most ambitious, this paper strives to resolve the problematic political situation in which the discourse of human rights is appropriated by the hegemony of industrialized capitalist states in order to de-legitimize Third World regimes that refuse to submit to and be dominated by the economic, political and cultural ideologies of these industrial superpowers. For the sake of keeping to the more realistic goals that a paper of this length requires, my study will concentrate on one particular case – that of the Euro-North American moral attack on Cuba's record on gay rights – which, because of its recent history and topical nature, provides a fresh and clear example of this larger practice.

My position lies within the fissure of argumentative fault lines whose friction I feel painfully at every shifting slip of the political-rhetorical ground. Having grown up within Caribbean *machista* culture understanding myself as queer – or *maricón* – I understand the urgent need to stop the state-sponsored violence and brutality directed against those who challenge its rigid gender categories. Conversely, I am disturbed by

the overemphasis on the gay rights' records of certain countries that resist US hegemonic control. What makes this selectivity particularly insidious is that it conceals the oppression existing in states whose ruling bodies align themselves in accordance with capitalist models and erases the violence and the discrimination that still exist in the US and in much of the industrialized world. This rhetorical displacement is irresponsible as it strives to resolve abroad problems that also occur at home. Perhaps most troublesome is the underlying political strategy of vilification that authorizes these discourses on Third World gay rights. The use of a social justice issue as a means to uproot the structure of a smaller state is indefensible. It is more than an ordinary abuse of power: it is an act of deception in that it does not openly reveal its driving motivation, which is to provide proof that many Third World governments do not represent their people, do not govern justly and that this, therefore, calls for Western capitalist intervention.

My concerns circle around certain key questions: Is it ethical to strive for political justice for a geographical region that one no longer inhabits? When do exiled, diasporic subjects start becoming instruments of the first-world hegemonic powers to which they have migrated? And how may the efforts of these exiles at transforming their homelands be a variation of standard hegemonic practices concealed under the veil of 'ethnic authenticity?' If it is true that the fight for gay rights in the Third World compromises a nation's self-determination, should gays within Cuba or Cuba within the international system be viewed as most needing of protection?

Because of my training in literary criticism and my growing awareness of the difficulty in arriving at any satisfactory synthesis which would do justice to the complexity of the issue, I have chosen to allegorize it. I present two novellas by Reinaldo Arenas, *La Vieja Rosa* (1980) and *Arturo, La Estrella más Brillante* (1984), and examine how they function as novelistic components within the political rhetoric of human rights of the 1980s and 1990s in US–Cuban relations.

Arturo, La Estrella más Brillante is a continuation of *La Vieja Rosa* and their shared narrative within the literary corpus of Reinaldo Arenas makes them particularly useful for this purpose. In a certain sense, these two novellas tell the story of Old Rosa, a land-owning matriarch who manifests strong sexual and religious anxieties. Old Rosa is woman of strong Catholic upbringing who refuses to have sex with Pablo, her husband, because of her moralistic ideas about female virtue. In this way, she is comparable to Ursula, the matriarch of García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Ursula refuses to have sex with her husband out of fear of conceiving a child with the head of a pig – a popular myth concerning the offspring of cousins. Despite her aversion to sex, Old Rosa eventually surrenders to the advances of her husband and gets pregnant four times. The fourth pregnancy resulting in a stillbirth and delivery complications, she commends herself to God, vowing not to become pregnant again if she emerges from the ordeal alive. She gets better and never has sex with her husband again; this drives him to drink and, eventually, to hang himself, to her dismay, one Christmas Eve. Because she is a *hacendada*, a large landowner in the countryside, fighting fiercely to retain her right to property during the land-redistribution period of the Cuban Revolution, she is emblematic of the old Regime of capitalist exploitation under Batista. In much the same way as she proves impotent in her struggle to keep her property in her hands, so her three children slip from her grasp as they grow up. Proving her status as a 'failed mother' all three of her children challenge her authoritarian control: Armando, the oldest, becomes

a revolutionary; Rosa, the second, blonde, 'almost albino' daughter marries a black man, and Arturo, her favorite and youngest child, is revealed to the readers in a striking passage as a homosexual:

Pero, quién demonios, pensaba La Vieja Rosa, había podido subir hasta el cuarto del hijo. Era imposible, pues ella había estado en la casa todo el día y no había visto llegar a ninguno de los amigos del muchacho. Quizá él estaba hablando solo. Contuvo la respiración y se acercó más a la puerta. Aunque era muy difícil entender las palabras que le llegaban, La Vieja Rosa dedujo que el muchacho no hablaba solo. Su voz era muy ronca y, de vez en cuando, parecía como si se alzase, temblorosa. Entonces, las palabras sueltas que desconcertaban más aún. Trató de poner mayor atención y por un momento creyó que el hijo estaba rezando, pero alguien, a veces, le contestaba. Sí, decía la otra voz; y luego sólo se escuchaba la música de la radio. Más intrigada aún, La Vieja Rosa permaneció un instante recostada a la puerta, sin decidirse a abrirla. Y, aunque en ese momento no pudo explicarse el por qué, una oscura sensación de terror se le fue instalando en una de las regiones más imprecisas del cuerpo. Con gran cuidado, comenzó a abrir la puerta. Y se asomó a la habitación. Los dos muchachos, casi desnudos, estaban de pie en el centro del cuarto, besándose. (Arenas, 1980: 86–7)

[But, who in hell, thought Old Rosa, could have gone upstairs to her son's room. It was impossible, because she had been at the house all day and had not seen any of the boy's friends come over. Maybe he was talking to himself. She held her breath and approached the door. Even though it was hard to make out the words she heard, Old Rosa deduced that the boy was not talking to himself. His voice was hoarse and, every once in a while, seemed to rise, tremulously. Then, the scattered words she did manage to comprehend were even more disconcerting. She tried to pay even closer attention and for a moment thought that her son was praying, but sometimes, someone would answer him. Yes, said the other voice; then you could only hear the music coming from the radio. Even more intrigued, Old Rosa kept leaning against the door, without deciding to open it. And, even though at that moment it was impossible to explain it, a dark feeling of terror lodged itself in one of the least precise regions of her body. With great care, she began to open the door. And she peeked into the room. The two boys, almost naked, were standing up in the middle of the room, kissing.]¹

This passage illustrates many of the ways in which the discourse of gay rights portrays Cuba. For instance, Marvin Leiner, in his *Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality, and AIDS*, describes how, in agricultural brigades, young men who were suspected of being gay were propositioned by others in order to obtain evidence to punish them (1994: 31–2), how effeminate boys were taken out of school to prevent others from being 'infected' (1994: 33), and how men suspected of being homosexual were rounded up and taken to 'rehabilitation camps' (1994: 28). Arenas's description of the suspicious mother who invades the privacy of her son's bedroom operates as a symbol of Castro's totalitarian control of the inhabitants of the island whose every activity is under the constant surveillance of the dictator. This idea of the controlling gaze of the state is reinforced by the sensory and spatial imagery of

the passage. Old Rosa ‘feels’ the homophobic terror somewhere within her body, which is also the political body that Arturo inhabits. The house as an extension of the mother’s body intensifies the idea of a constricting and suffocating political womb from which any act that attempts to undermine her power will always be seen, felt and ‘caught-in-the-act’.

This fictional narrative of parental surveillance continues with the motifs of violence and expulsion that also characterize many of the political and cultural works dealing with gay rights in Cuba:

(Los muchachos) cayeron, semejando casi un solo cuerpo, sobre la cama. La Vieja Rosa volvió a cerrar muy despacio la puerta. Comenzó a bajar las escaleras. Cruzó la sala, y, sin detenerse, fue hasta la pared del comedor y descolgó la escopeta polvorienta . . . Llegó otra vez hasta la puerta de la habitación y la entreabrió con cautela . . . Con gran precisión se llevó el arma hasta la altura de los hombros e hizo fuego . . . Los muchachos, aterrados, se pusieron de pie y miraron a La Vieja Rosa que de nuevo apuntaba hacia ellos. Corrieron hasta la ventana, la abrieron de golpes, y saltaron fuera de la habitación. (Arenas, 1980: 87)

[(The boys) fell, like one single body, onto the bed. Old Rosa closed the door again very slowly. She began to descend the stairs. She crossed the living room, and, without stopping, reached the kitchen wall and unhooked the dusty rifle . . . Once again she reached the door of the bedroom and cautiously half-opened it. With extreme precision she lifted the weapon to her shoulders and fired. The boys, frightened, rose to their feet and saw Old Rosa, who again was aiming at them. They ran to the window, forced it open, and leaped out.]

The flight of the boys resonates with the images of forced exile so prevalent within the discourse of Cuban Gay rights. Allen Young, in his *Gays under the Cuban Revolution*, points to the large number of gay men and lesbians in the Mariel Boatlift of 1980. He indicates that reliable reports estimate that anywhere between 2,000 and 10,000 of those refugees were homosexual (Young, 1981: 34).

Arenas himself was among those refugees. In his biography *Antes que Anochezca* he gives a personal account of the incidents that constituted one of the largest mass exoduses in recent history. Arenas corroborates Young’s statement that many of the ‘Marielitos’ were indeed homosexual. Arenas further mentions that ‘otros que ni siquiera lo eran, se hicieron pasar también por locas para abandonar el país por el puerto del Mariel’ [Others, without being queers, pretended to be so in order to leave the country through the port of Mariel] (1992: 301). It appears that gays were involved from the very start in the disturbances which led to the exodus. On 2 April 1980 a bus crashed into the Peruvian embassy compound in Havana where the driver and all the passengers demanded political asylum. *Paris Match* reported that of the 23 passengers on that bus, 12 were homosexual (Young, 1981: 35). When the Cuban government announced that it was withdrawing police protection from the embassy as a scare tactic designed to deter the refugees’ occupation of the embassy, it backfired. With the embassy guard removed, thousands of Cubans who wanted to flee the country joined ranks with the initial bus passengers at the embassy. Reinaldo Arenas was not among them but his homosexual orientation and the identity card which showed that he had

been imprisoned for ‘public scandal’ was enough to legitimize his status as undesirable. Arenas recounts his experience at the police station where he tried to be counted among those seeking asylum. ‘A mi me hicieron caminar delante de ellos para comprobar si era loca o no; había allí unas mujeres que eran psicólogas. Yo pasé la prueba y el teniente le gritó a otro militar: ‘A éste me lo mandas directo’ [They made me walk in front of them in order to determine whether I was a homosexual. There were there some women who were psychologists. I passed the test and the lieutenant screamed to another officer ‘Send this one over right away’] (Arenas, 1992: 301). After this, a fortunate series of events, including his own shrewd adulteration of his name in his passport – from Arenas to Arinas – granted him access to Mariel without his being stopped by those who would have recognized his name as that of a writer. According to Arenas, neither writers who had published abroad nor university graduates nor anyone who could discredit the government were ever allowed to leave. The Cuban government attempted to save face through a rhetorical shift in which all of those seeking asylum were represented as degenerates and sexual perverts who had to be expelled from Cuba. In fact, only some of the masses of people who disembarked at Key West were made up of those who were seeking asylum at the embassy: there was also included a large population of other ‘undesirables’ such as the mentally impaired, prisoners and prostitutes (Arenas, 1992). La Vieja Rosa’s violence toward her son in the passage in which she chases him out of her house with a gun and he, in turn, runs for his life can be interpreted as emblematic of Castro’s dictatorial violence against his people.

One of the most disturbing facts of Cuba’s treatment of homosexuals was the setting up of the Unidad Militar de Ayuda a la Producción (UMAP). From 1965 to 1967, these were labor camps to which homosexuals were sent to work in the sugarcane plantation industry, having been rounded up from the streets. To most writers involved in the project of Cuban gay rights, the UMAP camps have become an icon of the repressive nature of the revolution, endorsing US claims regarding the unlawful nature of Castro’s government. Leiner calls them ‘the epitome of organized repression against male homosexuality’ (1994: 29) where ‘Early UMAP draftees were treated so inhumanely that the officers responsible were court-martialed and replaced with leaders assigned to bring order to the camps’ (1994: 28–9). Leiner recounts a 1984 interview with Juan Escalona, the Cuban minister of justice, in which Escalona referred to homosexuals as ‘disabled’ and backed the position that homosexuals should never be allowed to be members of the party. In addition to this, he described homosexuals with scorn and derision in his essentialist remarks on gay manners and clothing. It was precisely the ‘ostentatious’ display of effeminate behavior that was used by the police to determine who was homosexual in the frequent public sweeps they would conduct. National and international pressure forced Fidel Castro to oppose the military in his decision to phase out the camps. In particular, the national group Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos (UNEAC) protested at the rounding up of intellectuals for confinement in the work camps (Leiner, 1994). Many writers, especially those belonging to the non-conformist literary group ‘El Puente’, were heavily targeted (Leiner, 1994).

Many European intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre joined the UNEAC’s protests. He was known to have made frequent comparisons between the treatment of Jews under the Nazis and the homosexuals in the UMAP camps (Lumsden, 1996).

Outside the US, France seemed to be the most propitious soil for the proliferation of texts about the camps and about the conditions of gay Cubans in general. The *Nouvel Observateur* was very interested in following the story of Cuban gays and interviewed Arenas in his first year of exile in 1980 (Foster, 1994). Moreover, many of Arenas's novels were initially published in France: he had managed to smuggle them to publishers there with the help of tourists and friends with permission to travel abroad.

Jean-Luc Hennig and Guy Hocquenghem, a well-known French gay activist and part of Michel Foucault's circle involved with the magazine *GaiPied*, put together a series of scandalous interviews that exposed the salacious habits of ordinary French people in *Les Français de la Honte: La Morale des Français d'aujourd'hui racontée par eux-mêmes*. This volume, published in 1983 at the height of the Cuban gay rights activity abroad, includes an interview titled 'J'étais homosexuel chez Castro' [I was a homosexual under Castro]. The interview clearly caters to the French demand to construct a national image of freedom in a vast chaos of international unrest:

La répression homosexuelle était terrible. Manuel m'a fait me souvenir de tous ces terreurs Avoir à se cacher constamment, tout ça, et quand je suis arrivé ici, évidemment, la liberté était fantastique. (Hennig and Hocquenghem, 1983: 288)

[The repression was terrible. Manuel made me remember all those terrors.

Having to hide constantly, all that, and when I arrived here, of course, the freedom was fantastic.]

It is noteworthy that the interview not only focuses on France as a site of freedom vis-à-vis the developing world, but also positions France as a better place to migrate than the US:

– Pourquoi n'êtes-vous pas allés aux Etats-Unis, comme beaucoup d'autres réfugiés cubains?

– C'était . . . un peu fou, toute cette histoire des gens qui partaient par bateau aux Etats-Unis, et parfois même, je pensais que c'était un piège, que ça n'allait pas se passer comme ça

– C'en était un, puisque la plupart ont été mis dans des camps à leur arrivée en Floride.

– Oui, c'est ça. Moi, je suivais par la radio les nouvelles des gens qui arrivaient aux Etats-Unis, et ça m'a fait un peu peur. (Hennig and Hocquenghem, 1983: 288)

[– Why didn't you go to the US like so many other Cuban refugees?

– It was . . . a little crazy, all this story of people who left on boats to the US, and even me, at times, thought it was a trap, that it wasn't worth it to leave like that.

– It was a trap, most of them were put in camps upon their arrival in Florida.

– Yes, it's true. I used to follow the news on the radio of people who arrived in the US and it frightened me.]

This demonstrates how the discourse of international gay rights is, in many ways, predicated on a nationalist rhetoric that proclaims the benevolence of the state where the discourse is produced as fact and as authentic proof of its representational nature at the expense of discrediting other nations, whether in the Third World or not.

Of all the texts exposing the oppression of gays in Cuba, the 1984 film ‘*Conducta Impropria/Mauvaise Conduite*’ [Improper Conduct], produced by the Cuban exiles Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez-Leal, was the one that reached the largest audience and had the most forceful mobilizing effect. In his prologue to the screenplay, Almendros speaks of taking his project to television networks both in Spain and in the US, only to be rejected. Only in France did they find sponsors: Les Films du Losagne and Antenne 2 (Almendros and Jiménez-Leal, 1984: 17). In a documentary-style format the film strives to create ‘truth’ through the testimonies of many who witnessed and experienced the forced labor of the camps. Through these testimonies, they re-create images reminiscent of the Holocaust. Homosexuals, Jehovah’s witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and members of any group considered counter-revolutionary were rounded up in public parks without being told where they were being taken. Rumors of concentration camps ran through the crowd but no one was sure. José Mario, the director of *El Puente* literary press, who was also detained in the camps, was one of the interviewees. He describes being detained by a soldier who told him ‘con cierta sorna, que él sabía que pertenecía a la Unión de Escritores y Artistas y que todos los intelectuales y los escritores eran maricones’ [with a certain disdain that he knew he belonged to the Union of Writers and Artists and that all intellectuals and writers were faggots] (Almendros and Jiménez-Leal, 1984: 33). After being ordered to walk around the room in order to demonstrate the alleged effeminacy of his manners, he was taken to the buses that were taking the detained away:

Cuando los autocares salieron del stadium, se produjeron escenas de histeria entre los familiares que estaban alrededor. Hubo personas que se agarraron a los autocares. Una mujer fue lanzada al suelo cuando los autocares salieron. (Almendros and Jiménez-Leal, 1984: 35)

[When the buses pulled out of the stadium, there were scenes of hysteria among the family members who gathered around. There were people who grabbed on to the buses. A woman was thrown to the ground when the buses left.]

The film is based largely on personal anecdotes of suffering and state brutality and, as it had as its audience the international media, it was designed to publicize the hegemonic representation of Cuba as an island where injustice reigned, based on the inexcusable treatment of a persecuted minority. The film preys upon the desperation of people who have suffered tremendous agony by redeploying their cries as a call for foreign intervention in the internal affairs of Cuba. The fundamental contradiction it shares with the larger discourse on Cuban gay rights is its dangerous conflation of homophobia with communism, when in reality what needs to be pointed out is the ways in which homophobia is incompatible with the goals of liberation and equity proclaimed by the Revolution and the steps that are being taken in Cuba in order to incorporate homosexual rights along the race, gender and class equality objectives on which it was founded.

Because it was a local organization, the UNEAC’s challenges to the UMAP camps were less problematic, and perhaps more effective, than the protests, the texts and the films by foreigners and Cuban exiles. Perhaps the most singular method of resistance was carried out by the prisoners themselves within the prisons. ‘Caracol’ [‘Conch-shell’], a

Cuban female impersonator, in an interview in *Mauvaise Conduite/Conducta Impropria* narrates how:

Alla dentro uno tenía maquillaje, se hacían vestidos con las mismas sábanas que daban, pero dispuestos a que si el guardia o el responsable nos cogía, podíamos ‘jalar’ un mes más. Pero tu sabes cómo somos nosotros, que nos olvidamos . . . y a romper sábanas y a romper colchones para hacer vestidos y fiestas – porque nosotros allá dentro hacíamos fiestas y todo–, pero dispuestos a que nos dieran golpes. (Almendros and Jiménez-Leal, 1984: 56)

[On the inside you had make-up, and you’d make dresses out of the very sheets they handed out, knowing that if the guard or any other person in charge found out, we could get another month in there. But you know how we are, we used to forget . . . and off we went tearing up the sheets and tearing up the mattresses for dresses and parties – because in there we used to have parties and all that –, but ready for the punches they’d give us [for it].]

‘Caracol’s’ account of the festivities of the ‘locas’ inside the prison points to the appropriation and creation of sites of disruption within hegemonic structures that offer liberatory possibilities for those who are positioned beneath the oppressive power of these coercive social bodies. The materiality of the revolt is evident in the disassembly of the elements they have been given – the sheets – and their rearrangement and re-constitution of these into objects that will aid them to perform their dissatisfaction within the order of the prison. The transformation of materials considered simply basic and essential into items of relative frivolity and luxury is an inversion of the ideology that institutions like the prison allow mainstream society to produce and reproduce. In so doing, it disempowers the prison as a place of reformation by enacting the activities it tries to suppress within its very walls. It also uses the prison’s weapon of containment against it by exploiting the power of the concentration of large numbers of queer bodies in such a limited space in the form of an organized riot. The riot of the homosexual-transvestites does not indicate that issues which society values as frivolous are basic to them – such as their sexual identity and performance – but rather that in order to advance one’s agenda it is necessary to turn the system on its head even if this does not secure a literal liberation, but a performative one instead. The turning of the prison into a party venue points to the tremendous emancipatory potential of the burlesque for political and sexual subjects in specific historical and temporal locations in which an ideal release is out of reach. Even as it remains a non-violent method of revolt, it preserves an element of affront, threat and action that is lacking in hunger strikes and sit-ins and which appears to answer more appropriately to the particular situations of queer subjects in dictatorial regimes.

Inasmuch as their performance is predicated on the real material elements to which they have access, so their deployment of those materials is contingent upon the social categories that are available to them. Their shows consist of investing themselves with the sheets and with the essentialist notions of homosexuality that the society has put at their disposal. After all, they are performing in the way homosexuals are supposed to behave: they are not performing what they are. For acting ‘what one is supposed to be’ demonstrates precisely the falsity of the mask with which one plays and points to the multiplicity of possible queer subjectivities underneath the disguise.

In *Arturo, La Estrella más Brillante*, Arturo, the third child of La Vieja Rosa, is taken to one of the UMAP camps. There among the maricones, he is emblematic of the performative scripting-on-the-body of queerness as he struggles to escape his initial role in the camp as social misfit:

... si quería sobrevivir tenía que adaptarse o fingir adaptarse como quizás hacían los otros que ahora mismo lo atropellaban, tenía que hablar como ellos, tenía que reírse como ellos, tenía que hacer los mismos gestos que ellos, y Arturo manipuló aquella jeringonza afectada y delirante, comenzó a lanzar la típica carcajada de la loca histérica, cantar, modelar, pintarse los ojos y el pelo y los labios con lo que apareciese, hacerse grandes y azules ojeras, todo esto lo hizo él hasta dominar y adueñarse de todas las jergas y ademanes típicos del maricón prisionero y lo logró Arturo (Arenas, 1984: 37–8)

[If he wanted to survive he would have to adapt or pretend to adapt like the others who now harassed him probably did, he would have to talk like them, he would have to laugh like them, he would have to imitate their gestures, and Arturo manipulated that affected and delirious jargon, started to cackle and howl with laughter like any ordinary hysterical queen, to sing, to model, to color his eyes and hair and lips with whatever came to hand, to draw large, blue rings around his eyes, all this he did he until he was mistress and owner of all the slang and mannerisms appropriate to a queen in jail and Arturo did it]

The transformation of Arturo reveals how there is no gay essence but, rather, how it is all surface, and how this surface is enabling in that it conceals personal differences which could hinder the work of revolt for which social cohesion is so important. As such, it critiques essentialist notions of identity by making evident the always relational and compulsory nature of that identity within hegemonic or counter-hegemonic social structures. However, Arturo's drag performance highlights the role of personal choice in the construction of identity and the important role that this plays in the assembling of a radical community that can contest the oppressive status quo. Arenas's depiction of Arturo's gender impersonation appears to point to the enabling uses of assimilation by revealing how notions of personal choice and political goal modulate an otherwise mutilating process of compliance. Through his drag performance, Arturo consents to the need for solidarity in the struggle for liberation by accepting the politically enabling aspects of acculturation to the common standards of his political and sexual kin. Only in realizing queerness as performance and not as rearrangement of personality does he join in the drag-show-as-revolt – an activity in which he has great success, as his winning the title of 'La Reina de las Locas Cautivas' [The Queen of the Captive Queers] proves. This scene, intertextually linked to the prison party described by Caracol in *Conducta Impropia*, shows how the end result of the prisoners' resistance is the building of a power hierarchy that can contest the dictatorial regime which has incarcerated them. Even if the monarchical and farcical elements of the drag contest serve only to provide a comical foil to Castro's power structure, the affront implied in the setting up of an alternative form of government well illustrates the kind of subversive mimicry elaborated by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994). If the Cuban queens' power can challenge the island's hegemonic political patriarchy, it is also strong enough to fend off the encroachment of

globalized queer movements. It is important to consider how the queens' contest shows how the desire for beauty products manufactured in the First World makes evident the embeddedness of Cuban gay liberation movements within the consumerist capitalism of the First World. Nevertheless, the resourcefulness of the gay prisoners, their lack of dependence on these products and their ability to improvise with domestic materials points to the possibility of developing a truly local politics of liberation that can transcend the problematic alliance with the First World. Speaking more directly to this essay's concerns for globalized human rights, it is important to note that the narrative of the 'Locas Cautivas' does not rely on a damsel-in-distress trope by which captive queers are rescued by a valiant external masculinity. The fact that the performance of such resistance and victory was of a purely internal nature privileges a praxis of local struggle over one of foreign intervention.

La Vieja Rosa, who dies at the end of the first novel, reappears at the end of *Arturo, La Estrella más Brillante* to close the narrative cycle of the two novels. Arturo decides to flee the camp after a choir of angels announces the arrival of his imagined lover. The magic and the real blend in this singular scene when he realizes that the angels are, in fact, soldiers and that the leader of the soldiers is not one of the officers of the regiments in the camp but his mother, Old Rosa, dressed in military garb. This image of the returning maternal specter links these novels with some other works of new Latin American fiction such as Esquivel's *Como agua Pera Chocolate* and Allende's *la cosa de los Espiritus*. With a rifle in hand, Old Rosa screams at him: 'maricón, ahora sí que no te me vas a escapar' [This time you won't get way from me, you faggot!] (Arenas, 1984: 91). The shot is fired and Arturo falls lifeless on the field. The polysemic nature of Old Rosa becomes fully evident here as the pre-revolutionary 'hacendada' status of her character in the previous novel merges with a vision that is emblematic of the repression of the post-revolutionary government. Here Arenas signals how the Castro regime is but one of a series of political systems of order in Cuba that have been hostile to homosexuals.

As Old Rosa moves from embodying Batista through her endorsement of land ownership for the Cuban elite to a magical-realist merger with Castro, Arenas exposes the hypocrisy of a Communist government that has not fully disengaged itself from the capitalist practices that preceded it. Moreover, the identification of Old Rosa with Batista and Castro reveals the thorough masculinization of Old Rosa in Arenas's narratives. In her channeling the spirit of male dictators, Old Rosa is queered. Her persecution of her gay son is revealed as a form of abjection grounded in hypocrisy and self-hate. Consequently, Old Rosa's aversion to sex with her husband can be re-interpreted as stemming not so much from her religious upbringing but from a latent and secretive homosexuality. As such, in this final scene of *Arturo, La Estrella más Brillante*, Arenas exposes Old Rosa's allegorical relationship to the trans-historical government of Cuba – a collection of duplicitous and tyrannical rulers dominating the island before and after the Revolution.

In his postscript to his autobiography, *Antes que Anochezca*, Arenas explains that because of his advanced illness he had decided to take his own life. Instead of blaming HIV or any of the AIDS-related diseases he was suffering from, he gave a name to his murderer. He says:

Sólo hay un responsable: Fidel Castro. Los sufrimientos del exilio, las penas del destierro, la soledad y las enfermedades que haya podido contraer en el destierro

seguramente no las hubiera sufrido de haber vivido libre en mi país. (Arenas, 1992: 343)

[There is only one person responsible: Fidel Castro. The sufferings of exile, the pains of uprootedness, loneliness and the diseases that I contracted abroad: I probably would have suffered none of these had I lived in freedom in my country.]

This last denunciation and his exhortation to Cubans abroad and on the island to continue his struggle for freedom in Cuba demonstrate his stern conviction that in order for homosexuals to attain any basic human rights in Cuba it is necessary for Castro to be overthrown. That Arenas's work should have been embraced, despite its homosexual themes, even by many on the right should not be surprising but rather something to be expected. To them, politics comes before and in spite of sexuality and for Arenas it seems that sexual freedom took precedence over Cuban self-determination.

The late-modern deployment of the discourse of human rights for the purposes of globalization is but the latest iteration of a five-hundred-year history of European and North American moralistic arguments for intervening in the affairs of the rest of the world. From the accusations of Carib cannibalism to the human sacrifices of the Aztecs, and Sati – the immolation of widows – in India, the colonial project has been characterized by attempts to de-legitimize regional governments through an exposure of the atrocities that these governments commit against their own populations. Having established this, the imperial rhetoric quickly makes a call for the need to intervene, overthrow and settle these barbarous lands. Having largely accomplished a worldwide rearrangement of resources that created the economic gap between the First and Third Worlds, by the end of the Second World War the industrialized world codified its religious and philosophical traditions through the 1948 crafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Culled from humanistic discourses within Judeo-Christian scriptures and the writings of the European philosophers Thomas Paine, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and G. W. F. Hegel, the Declaration enforces a Western cultural bias on the rest of the world for the purposes of maintaining gaps forged during the militaristic-expansionist phase of the Euro–North American project of global hegemony. Postcolonial feminist critics note the predominance of gender in this newer variant of the imperialistic uses of human rights discourse in the late-modern era. Gayatri Spivak's comment on 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak, 1988: 296) is reiterated by Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminism's theorizing for Third World women (Mohanty, 1998: 52). Spivak's and Mohanty's comments find frightening confirmation in the more recent US media representation of Afghani women oppressed under the weight of *burkhas* as a rationale for the overthrowing of the Taliban regime. This current emphasis on the rhetoric of gay human rights would appear to point to a further specialization of the gendering of human rights discourse for the purposes of regulating the contemporary geopolitical order.

In spite of the dangerous deployment of human rights discourse for the purposes of colonization, the need to denounce oppression wherever it occurs remains a valid, indeed necessary, endeavor. How could we transcend such a contradiction? I would like to suggest that the crafting of a radical pedagogical activism might allow us to negotiate this apparent impasse and create the possibility of critiquing oppression elsewhere without necessarily negating national sovereignties. In order to counter the hegemonic globalization of human rights, such a radical pedagogy would seek to dissociate Third

World social problems from governmental illegitimacy and the need for foreign intervention. Making the theoretical practical, I would like to propose that such a radical pedagogy could be framed around certain discrete objectives that are made evident through the cultural narratives of Gay Cuban human rights discourse. One such discrete objective would be to reveal how real liberation is always local, never imported. Jean Paul Sartre's inexact and anachronistic comparison of the UMAP centers with Nazi concentration camps illustrates how liberation should be considered a non-exportable product. Liberation does not keep well during travel and upon arrival at its overseas destination poisons its consumers. The de-moralizing effects following outside intervention often outweigh the initial benefits provided by such intervention. In the light of this, the transvestite prison party narrated in *Conducta Improbia* and in *Arturo, la Estrella más Brillante* presents us with a more powerful type of resistance because it sabotages the machinery of oppression from within. In keeping with its privileging of the local, such a radical anti-globalization pedagogy would emphasize particular histories and undermine universalizing narratives that lead to the emplotment of the Third World within First World historical patterns. The European perspective in the accounts of the Mariel exodus in *Conducta Improbia* and *Paris Match* presents First World gay identities and conditions as the ideal towards which all Third World narratives should aspire. These Eurocentric narratives need to be tempered by a more relativistic approach that allows for multiple trajectories of sexual identity in the world.

Furthermore, such a radical anti-globalization pedagogy would take strides toward a redefinition of Human Rights. As presented at the outset of this paper, the IGLHRC narratives utilize the notion of universal human rights without taking heed of the ways in which these universal claims contain a dangerously homogenizing force with the potential to erase important cultural specificities. Therefore, such a radical pedagogy would hold forth the possibility of achieving unaided victory over one's oppressor as a human right. Similarly, it would encourage the development of local notions of human rights. In so doing, it would underscore the judgment that Imperialism negates the most basic human rights of the subjugated. One very practical way to establish conditions appropriate to such a redefinition of human rights is to work towards the restructuring of gay human rights organizations such as IGLHRC by urging them to establish headquarters outside the First World.

Moreover, this radical pedagogy would encourage an awareness within First World LGBTQ [Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transsexual Queer] movements and queer diasporic communities of the dangers of co-optation of discourses of sexual orientation by the state. It would show how industrialized states neutralize the radical politics of progressive movements by a tactic of assimilation that makes them complicit with strategies of neo-colonization. Following on from this, such a radical anti-globalization rhetoric would direct attention to the fact that exiles are not monolithic representatives of the nation. Arenas's exiled status in the United States gives him a liminal perspective vis-à-vis his homeland and place of residence. Nevertheless, his narratives are often used to articulate the discontent of dissenters of the Castro regime living in Cuba. Arenas's stories serve as reminders of the ways in which First World imperial discourses co-opt the narratives of Third World exiles by passing them off as authentic national narratives that call for outside intervention.

Reinaldo Arenas's work allegorizes and performs the problematic nature of attempting to create national reforms from abroad — even when it is for a 'humanitarian'

cause and even when the reformer is a person within that nation's diasporic population. Given the range of possible political links of exiles to their homeland, Reinaldo Arenas's work embodies and performs the option of continued involvement: in his case, he seeks to undermine the stability of his state of origin in order to achieve sexual freedom. As his work highlights the ways in which this political option collaborates with First World hegemonic desire to control developing nations, it becomes tempting to endorse the perhaps equally problematic option of non-interference from abroad, even as we witness the repression occurring there. Reinaldo Arenas's work stands, for me, as a warning sign on the road that leads out from the paralysis produced by the tension between the competing priorities of sexual and national freedom.

Note

1 All translations are my own.

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