Out in Nicaragua: Local and Transnational Desires after the Revolution

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In June 2000, I returned to spend several weeks in Nicaragua after two years away and found the capital city of Managua transformed by the rebuilding of an urban center, with new government buildings, immense traffic circles and plazas, and hotels and commercial establishments in abundance. My first day back, I ventured into one of two major shopping malls and discovered that the movie *Boys Don't Cry (Muchachos no lloran,* with subtitles) was playing at a multiplex cinema. In a city where a couple of years before the only movie theatres were exceptionally seedy and offered X-rated porn, I was curious to see what reception this film would have in the Nicaraguan setting soon after its release to wide acclaim in the United States. The audience at the matinee was small and fairly middle class—not surprising in a nation where the two-dollar ticket price was beyond the means of the majority—but it seemed to appreciate the movie's powerful story of sexual-identity transgression and its consequences in the American Midwest.[1]

When it comes to sex and sexuality, some stories are told whereas others remain untold. Histories of sexuality everywhere are subject to revision and debate when local, national, or transnational conditions prompt caution on the one hand or allow more open discussion of sexual difference and transgression on the other.[2] Periods of social transformation may present opportunities for personal or national reflection on the politics of gender and sexuality, or they may push such reflection to the margins in the name of settling larger historical accounts. But what happens when personal or local desires are supported by transnational political currents and then clash dramatically with perceived national interests?

For over a decade, I have observed the particular way that Nicaraguan women and men have negotiated the terrain of same-sex sexual politics.[3] Whereas men's everyday sex lives have received public and scholarly attention, women's social activism around sexual politics is now gaining attention in Nicaragua and is deserving of wider scholarly notice. Feminist theorists, including

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pioneering feminist anthropologists, have long pointed to the historical development of women's relationship to the private sphere and men's to the public sphere as contributing to their unequal power in society. Recently, however, Carla Freeman (2001) has shown that a related assumption that women are more closely linked with the local and men are linked to the global has contributed to the undertheorization of women's participation in globalization processes. I want to suggest that the Nicaraguan case in question warrants attention precisely because, somewhat contrary to expectation, it has been men's widespread local same-sex practices that have often obscured women's local and global activism around lesbian and gay issues. My intervention in Latin American sexuality studies is to call for a closer examination of women and gender differences, not simply to be more inclusive, but because this is necessary if we are to understand both local sexual practices and transnational political movements.

The Nicaraguan Revolution, which came to fruition in 1979 and held state power until 1990, offered an opportunity for women and men who were disenfranchised to become significant players in a social drama that would transform much of the national landscape during that decade.[4] Frequent invocations of "30 percent women's participation" in the reports of the insurrectionary struggle that triumphed suggested that gender barriers, like class barriers, were overturned in the Sandinista period. The governing power that emerged from the struggle placed women and gender issues on the agenda, along with agrarian, health, education, and legal reform as national priorities. Indeed, laws were quickly passed that prohibited sexism in advertising, penalized commercial sex, ended the category of illegitimacy, and established fathers' responsibility for the well-being of their children. A new Constitution in 1987 was the first to include women's rights under the rubric of protecting the family as the basic unit in society.

In extending rights to women and protection to families in which marriage was de facto as well as legal, the Sandinistas had a more inclusive vision—particularly in a society in which nearly half of households are headed by women and those with adult men are often not sanctified by legal marriage. The governing Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) was not willing, however, to go further to establish reproductive choice or protection from domestic violence and sexual harassment as constitutional rights. Nor was the FSLN willing or able to move beyond a heteronormative conception of the Nicaraguan family and society. An emergent feminist movement and a nascent lesbian and gay movement would later question the underlying assumptions that went unchallenged by the Nicaraguan Revolution.[5]

My location as an international researcher aware of the involvement of lesbian and gay activists from abroad working on a range of social issues in Nicaragua—and also aware of broad cultural differences between gay communities in the United States and Latin America—made me question the degree to which transnational political currents had inspired the gay movement there.[6] To take up this question, I need to keep several ideas in play. I first examine the ways that same-sex sexuality and politics were both expressed and suppressed during the years of the revolution and then consider the first glimmer of a gay movement in the post-Sandinista period; it is my view that homosexual politics emerged differently in the context of the Nicaraguan Revolution than in capitalist societies like the United States but with some similar results. I then argue that greater attention to women and gender differences will enable us to move beyond the earlier insistence on indigenous and culturally "authentic" masculine same-sex identities to a broader analysis of contemporary sexual identities—including politically conscious gay men and lesbians.[7] Finally, and following from the first two points, I turn to the related and vexing question of how to understand local sexualities in a globalizing era. My objective is to show that although same-sex sexual practices have been widespread for some time among Nicaraguans who do not identify as gay, the 1990s have made visible a growing number of women and men who identify closely with the trans-national lesbian and gay movement. How they negotiate simultaneously the local and the global in their cultural politics, and the multiplicity of sexual identities that currently coexist, should illuminate these processes as they occur on a wider playing field beyond this small Central American nation.[8]

Coming Out in the Revolution

Nicaraguan writer and scholar Erick Blandón-Guevara (2001) describes an indigenous tradition of racial, class, gender, and sexual transgression held every year in late October in the barrio of Monimbó and the neighboring town of Masaya, which lie a short distance to the southeast of Managua. There, a carnival known as Torovenado (a hybrid of the words for bull and deer, hinting at active and passive male-sex practices) offers an opportunity for men of subaltern social class and racial identities to masquerade as women and parade openly through the streets to the delight of other participants and bystanders. In classic carnival tradition, such wanton public displays are permissible just once each year, after which the everyday rules maintaining "proper" social distinctions are again enforced. In this way, the temporary and playful breaking of rules serves to consolidate existing racial, gender, and sexual divisions as normative. Although it is well known that the Torovenado attracts homosexuals from near and far, the folklore maintains that theirs is a momentary deviation rather than a long-term sexual orientation.[9]

Two North American writers who spent time in Nicaragua in the 1980s commented on the prevalence of same-sex practices among men even in the absence of a gay community (Adam 1989; Lancaster 1988). Barry Adam noted the lack of structural support for gay identities and communities emerging in a period of political unrest and economic hardship and in a culture constrained by the conservative views of the family promulgated by the Catholic Church. Roger Lancaster noted that homosexuality was associated with the decadence of earlier years during the Somoza dictatorship and, therefore, clashed with notions of morally correct revolutionaries.[10] Moreover, a man could enjoy sex with other men as well as with women and still be considered "manly," so long as he was the active, penetrating partner *(activo)* and not the stigmatized, passive partner (*pasivo* or *cochón*). Lancaster's (1992) influential work cautioned against using Western concepts of gay identity and culture in settings like the Managua barrio where he carried out research. Before 1990, scholars said little of the identities and practices of women having same-sex relationships in Nicaragua.[11]

In a Third World society in which large families often share close quarters with little privacy, it is not surprising that same-sex desires have found few opportunities for open expression. In the United States, the historical formation of gay identities and communities has been linked to the growth of capitalism, a lessening reliance on the household as an economic unit, and resultant changes in work and family (D'Emilio 1983). Without the same historical trajectory of individuals leaving home to establish new work lives and new sexual identities, how might gay identity be experienced?[12] Interestingly, when young Nicaraguans left home to participate in the revolutionary movement in the late 1970s and, again, left behind families in the early 1980s to participate in health and literacy brigades, they found needed opportunities for independence and privacy. Gay and lesbian Sandinistas who played important roles in the revolution have begun, since the FSLN left power, to provide accounts of their experiences. Some individuals have related that although they were not entirely open about their sexual orientation, it was known and accepted by their acquaintances. The revolutionary leadership called on thousands of young people, students and workers, men and women, without regard to their social standing. As long as a certain "militance" in defense of the nation was evident, sexual transgression might be overlooked.

Just as military and college life have offered opportunities for sexual exploration in the United States and other societies, in revolutionary Nicaragua an unintended outcome of service in the military and the brigades was the discovery of same-sex desire among a number of young women and men.[13] Similarly, collectivized production and the emphasis on drawing women, as well as men, into the workforce also provided new opportunities for members of the same sex to come together away from homes and families. Solidarity with the revolution and greater proximity in work relations doubtless allowed some men and women workers to question gender and sexual relations. For example, feminist and lesbian participation in such mass labor-based organizations as the Sandinista Association of Rural Workers (ATC) served as a precursor to more independent political movements in the 1990s. A number of individuals were able to explore more intimate aspects of their sexual lives as a result of their collective participation in work and political activism.[14]

Once the FSLN rose to power and undertook its nation-building project, however, some social needs took precedence over others. By the time the Sandinista government was preparing its new constitution, it was also contending with the Contra War and a deepening economic crisis and set aside some expectations advanced by women. Not coincidentally, the first stirrings of a feminist movement—at once more radical and more democratic—that departed from the Sandinista mass organization AMNLAE (Nicaraguan Women's Association, Luisa Amanda Espinosa) can be traced to 1987, the year the new constitution was approved (Kampwirth 1998).

That same year, state security officials clamped down on a group of lesbians and gay men who had quietly been meeting together since the end of 1985 in Managua (Bolt González 1996:295). Those who were called in and detained in March 1987 were active Sandinistas, but their organizing around gay rights was viewed as a deviation and not approved by the FSLN. Rita Arauz, who later became a well-known AIDS activist and NGO founder, was arrested but later released. She and others who were detained chose not to damage the revolutionary government by going public with their experience and therefore remained silent. Thus, the public was unaware of the incident, and the international response that surely would have followed this breach of human rights was avoided (Randall 1994).

In November 1987, gay men and lesbians who were among those organizing clandestinely in Managua neighborhoods formed CEP-SIDA, an AIDS-education NGO. Perhaps because of the FSLN's chagrin over the intervention by state security, and reflecting the revolutionary government's ambivalence and uncertainty over how to respond to gay organizing, the Ministry of Health offered support to this grassroots program organized by members of the gay community. Significantly, the ministry's efforts were motivated by the 1988 arrival in Managua of a San Francisco-based health colloquium that addressed the issue of AIDS. Under the sympathetic direction of Minister Dora María Téllez, activists began distributing condoms to men in cruising areas and to students and sex workers, at a time when AIDS had barely made an appearance in Nicaragua and gay activism was almost unheard of (Schreiber and Stephen 1989). This show of support for a health-related initiative may have provided the government with a "safe" way to respond to the lesbian and gay community.

Then, in 1989, a contingent of gay and lesbian Nicaraguans and internationalists, about fifty in all, participated prominently in the march to Managua's Plaza de la Revolución in honor of the revolution's tenth anniversary (Randall 1993). They wore black T-shirts with hand-painted pink triangles, which had an impact on many observers as an international symbol of gay pride. This public coming-out of lesbian and gay-identified Sandinistas and their allies was empowering and paved the way for further activism. When I made my first trip to Nicaragua just a few weeks later, I found signs, however subtle, of a gay and lesbian social and political presence in Managua. Although the FSLN had slowed the public appearance of gay activism in the country, the revolution and the changes it brought about also provided the social and political space needed for a movement to coalesce.

Post-Sandinista Spaces for Lesbian and Gay Organizing

The electoral defeat of the FSLN in 1990 has generally been understood by analysts as resulting from the revolutionary government's internal weaknesses as well as the U.S. aggression waged through the Contra War and the economic embargo. Lesbians and gay men adjusted to the new terms of their participation in oppositional politics as they confronted the neoliberalism of Chamorro and later governments, whose social agendas were considerably more conservative than that of the Sandinistas. Nonetheless, lesbians and gay men were empowered by the expanding social and cultural space they occupied. Like the women's movement in Nicaragua, the incipient gay and lesbian movement gained new openings and greater autonomy after 1990, as activists were no longer wedded to priorities established by the revolutionary government. That year, Shomos (We Homosexuals) formed as a collective of men and women, and Nosotras (We Women) formed as a lesbian feminist collective, first in Managua and then in other parts of the country (Bolt González 1996:296).

In contrast to the recognition of Nicaraguan men's homosexual practices prior to 1990, when such practices were less politicized and less evident to the dominant heteronormative society, lesbians have become more visible, both as sexual subjects and as political activists in the years since then. In 1991, many Nicaraguan feminists broke away publicly from AMNLAE for a weekend of activities known as the Festival of the 52 Percent, a reference to the proportion of women in the country. At the festival, held in March to celebrate International Women's Day, one of a number of booths offering information was occupied by lesbians who were beginning to organize openly in Managua. They were well received and at the close of the festivities I observed that their booth did a thriving business selling slices of lemon meringue pie to an eager line of customers. That evening, same-sex couples were among the women and men dancing to the beat of a local band.

In June of that year, I attended Nicaragua's first public celebration of Gay Pride. Several hundred people came to a well-known cultural center, Coro de Angeles, for a showing of the gay-themed North American movie *Torch Song Trilogy*, selected as emblematic of gay lives globally, followed by a panel discussion of homosexuality and human rights. The audience responded with passionate testimonies of experiences suffered in families and in society, speaking out about injustice and personal pain. The diverse crowd that evening included well-known Nicaraguans who were both straight and gay and who were clearly hopeful and enthusiastic about the historic event taking place. In the years since then, Gay Pride has received more attention, with weeks of activities to commemorate it.

Lesbian and gay political activism was galvanized in 1992 by the reactivation of a repressive sodomy law, known as Article 204. That year, the Chamorro government set out to regulate sexual behavior, sanctioning as "natural" and legal only those sexual practices that were related to procreation (Isbester 1998:377–379). Article 204 of the Penal Code criminalizes sexual activity "between persons of the same sex" in a "scandalous way," as nonprocreative sex was determined to be a crime against the state. In response to the law, regarded as the most repressive in the Americas, more than 25 groups came together to launch the Campaign for a Sexuality Free of Prejudice. For several weeks, panels, protests, and celebrations of Gay Pride took place in

Managua. The Xochiquetzal Foundation, an NGO constituted in 1990 and codirected by lesbian feminists Hazel Fonseca and Mary Bolt González, played a leading role in generating support for the campaign. Despite the strong opposition to the law, it has remained on the books.[15]

By the early 1990s, several NGOs had been established that addressed the needs of gay men and lesbians. Nimehuatzín, an active AIDS-education foundation headed by Rita Arauz, also functioned at the outset as a gay community center before it adopted a more "professional" character. Xochiquetzal, mentioned above, offers health and psychological services as well as sex education, directed largely, though not exclusively, to a gay and lesbian clientele; since 1993, this NGO has published the magazine *Fuera del closet* (Out of the closet), which presents a mix of informative articles, poetry, and art, and has come to be the central location for organizing Gay Pride and other activities. The feminist NGO Puntos de Encuentro (Encounter Points) and women's health centers like S. I. Mujer and IXCHEN began to conduct workshops on women's sexuality and to support gay rights. More lesbian organizations joined Nosotras, including Entre Amigas (Among Women Friends), and Grupo por la Visibilidad Lesbica (Group for Lesbian Visibility), which briefly published the magazine *Humanas* (Female humans). The significant involvement of lesbians in organizations and projects, outnumbering gay men, has turned the tide in establishing women's central and public place in lesbian and gay activism.

Amy Bank, one of the founders of Puntos de Encuentro, described the *vocación fundante* (vocation to found organizations) of lesbians who, in contrast to middle-class gay men with professional careers, sought to carve out a niche for themselves as they engaged in political activism (interview, June 26, 2002). Although somewhat humorous, the observation may account for a very notable presence of women heading NGOs that are concerned with gender, sexuality, and AIDS. A male bisexual-identified[16] owner of a gay bar told me that whereas men have more access to social space, women control the organizations; he went so far as to characterize gay men as the subordinates and the lesbians as the *machas* (women viewed as strongly masculine) (interview, June 21, 2002). A certain tension exists over this perceived inequality, even between gay men and lesbians who join forces to work together. Mary Bolt González may have revealed the attitude of a number of women when she shrugged off the notion that gay men are disempowered by lesbians: "Poor boys, I'm going to give them some Kleenex," she commented in an exaggerated tone (interview, June 24, 2002). In her view, this is purely a vestige of sexist thinking and, moreover, lesbians working in NGOs are going about doing their jobs, not seeking power through political activism.

At the private level, to be sure, lesbians have continued to suffer the effects of social discrimination, reportedly having low self-esteem and self-confidence. This subject is explored in the first Nicaraguan book on lesbian lives, *Sencillamente diferentes . . .* (Simply different . . .), written by psychologist (then codirector of Xochiquetzal) Bolt González and published in 1996. In its prologue, prominent Sandinista Dora María Téllez invokes the country's revolutionary past, calling on Nicaraguans to tolerate and respect cultural diversity, including sexual differences.[17] The book's release was the focus of a Gay Pride celebration that year, when once again a large and enthusiastic audience turned out in Managua for a panel discussion of the study along with food, socializing, and music by the popular singer Norma Helena Gadea. This came at a time when women across the political spectrum had joined together in the National Women's Coalition to address issues of broad importance to them during that election year, and their sense of empowerment was shared by lesbians who spoke out about social discrimination.[18]

Despite the growing visibility of lesbians in public culture and in the gay rights movement, they have not successfully claimed social space to the same degree as gay men. Since 1990, the neoliberal turn in the country has presented new opportunities for men, including "Miami boys" who have returned from their self-imposed exile during the revolutionary period.[19] Gay bars and clubs have opened to cater to the minority of gay men who have the economic means to enjoy reasonably safe public spaces, but women are just a small minority of the clientele. The pastor of the Iglesia Metropolitana, an activist church group of gay men and lesbians that has become in the past few years one of the major organizations serving the gay community, related to me the various places that gay men often meet in Managua. He described the bars, movie theaters, and even the Metrocentro mall, which he referred to as "Metro Gay," along with house parties that attract dozens of men each weekend, as providing the space that gay men desire. Recalling that the old cathedral was a meeting place of gay men until it was boarded up, he smiled as he told me that for several weeks a group of gay men had gathered in the new cathedral of conservative Cardinal Obando y Bravo. In contrast to the diverse areas frequented by gay men, he said that lesbians had few places to meet and socialize, and he characterized their parties as *fiestas de traje* (potlucks) (Armando Sánchez Bermúdez, interview, June 29, 2002).

Even when a new bar, La Diferencia, opened in 1993 and declared itself a welcome space for "all who are different," few women were among the gay men present the night I went there with a few friends. The bar's music, tables for talking, and dance floor made the place an attractive venue, but like other "gay bars," this one was principally a place for men to cruise or socialize. Around midnight there was a fairly raucous transvestite performance, with smashing bottles and glasses as a grand finale. The situation had changed little by 2000, when I ventured into a new and popular gay venue, Locos Discos—the only difference was the huge crowd of well-dressed, evidently middle-class men dancing and drinking at the bar. I estimated that there were over a hundred men and about a half dozen women present that night. Lesbians may stay away because they lack the financial resources, have family responsibilities, or because of the perception that the bars are a male space; even in gay and lesbian culture, Nicaraguans associate men with *la calle* (the street) and women with *la casa* (the house).[20]

From the Local to the Transnational

Analysts of same-sex sexuality in the era of globalization have ranged from those who celebrate an opening up of opportunities for sexual minorities, to those who lament an incursion of western culture and imperialist politics in Third World areas. Tilting toward the former perspective, Dennis Altman writes that "new sexual identities mean a loss of certain traditional cultural comforts while offering new possibilities to those who adopt them, and activists in non-Western countries will consciously draw on both traditions" (2001:95). Offering a passionate call for the second, more critical view, Martin F. Manalansan writes that "globalization obfuscates hierarchical relations between metropolitan centers and sub-urban peripheries. By privileging Western definitions of same-sex sexual practices, non-Western practices are marginalized and cast as 'premodern' or unliberated" (1997:486). Still others reject an approach that assumes "an imported versus indigenous binary" (Puar 2001:1061) when examining sexual cultures in a time of transnational exchange, which seems a salutary response to the debate that has emerged.

Here I want to consider to what degree and to what effect there has been a shift in Nicaragua between 1990 and the turn of the millennium from local and private same-sex practices to a more open engagement with transnational gay practices and politics.[21] Once again, I argue that most of the discussion has focused on men's experiences and that more attention must go to examining women's experiences and gender differences at local, national, and global levels. We cannot assume that men and women, specifically gay men and lesbians, experience the same "comforts" or the same injustices or that they will respond alike to the transnationalization of sexual identities. There is no doubt that shared experiences of discrimination based on race, class, nationality, or sexual orientation may draw gay men and lesbians together, but male privilege generally confers greater economic advantage to men, who in greater numbers than women may claim new rights as consumers under conditions of globalization. On the other hand, women who have chafed under traditional cultural expectations may see greater opportunities for gaining social and political space through participation in international gay activism.

Transitions in the political culture of sexuality and broader social transitions, in Nicaragua and elsewhere, cannot be treated separately.[22] The transition from the Somoza dictatorship to the Sandinista revolutionary government led to a transformation of the political economy to the benefit of a majority, yet there was a distinct narrowness of vision when it came to sexual expression.[23] The post-Sandinista period has been notable for its rapid reversals as the revolutionary, socialist-oriented government gave way to a neoliberal one. Under the terms of the market-driven governments of Chamorro (1990–96), Alemán (1996–2001), and now Enrique Bolaños, citizens have been encouraged to compete for scarce goods and opportunities, and rewards go to those who survive as the "fittest." The freedom to compete for jobs and other resources extends to certain openings for commercial ventures that were not available under the Sandinistas. The rising poverty of many Nicaraguans has led more of them, including *travestis* (transvestites or transgendered persons) to prostitution,[24] whereas a wealthier class of Nicaraguans opens businesses and clubs in Managua's more fashionable neighborhoods. At the same time, the conservative social climate prohibits open nonnormative sexuality without risk of undesired consequences. To an extent, the current climate may not be so different from the pre-Sandinista days when gay culture was tolerated to a limited degree, but only so long as it remained submerged in the dominant culture.

Nevertheless, lesbian and gay activism emerged in this altered social space from the clandestine gatherings in the latter half of the 1980s to open organizing just a few years later. Not surprisingly, some of the Nicaraguans who formed the leadership of new groups and NGOs had gained experience in the United States or other nations with longer histories of gay organizing. Rita Arauz is one who returned to Nicaragua in the mid-1980s after ten years in San Francisco where her sexual identity and politics took form; on her return she founded the NGO Nimehuatzín as an "out" lesbian. Arauz, along with activist Lupita Sequeira, appeared in the British TV documentary *Sex and the Sandinistas* (1991), which considered the situation of lesbians and gay men during the revolution and its aftermath.[25] Notably, and in contrast to others interviewed in the video, the two women spoke in English, reflecting the experience they had obtained outside their country as well as with English speakers in Nicaragua. During this period, from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s, a number of resident *internacionalistas* (international activists) were among the most active in gay mobilization, even if behind the scenes. In a conversation among seven lesbians recorded by Margaret Randall (1993) only two were originally from Nicaragua whereas the others were from Costa Rica, France, Spain, and the United States.[26]

Transnational aspects of the lesbian and gay movement become significantly more apparent once women are brought into the picture. As we have seen, earlier accounts of same-sex sexuality and gay life focused on men, some of whom traditionally identified as straight but enjoying sex (as *activos*) with men as well as women or as quietly deviant (the *pasivos* or *cochones*). Some men participated as gay activists in the transition period, particularly when the AIDS pandemic galvanized them, but women have been more prominent among activists in the 1990s. Whether as founders of AIDS-related NGOs like Nimehuatzín and Xochiquetzal (Rita Arauz, Hazel Fonseca, and Mary Bolt González) or feminist NGOs like Puntos de Encuentro (including long-time internationalists Amy Bank and Ana Criquillon), women have played a decisive role in devoting attention to gay and lesbian rights.

The transnational influence in gay rights politics in Nicaragua is evident in the adoption of the Gay Pride celebration on or around June 28 each year, following the practice in the United States (in honor of the Stonewall rebellion in New York City in 1969) and other countries. Nicaraguans debated whether to recognize that date or another one more closely related to their own national experience (for example, the intervention of state security officials in 1987), but settled on the date that had come to have the clearest symbolic meaning at

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