

Out in Nicaragua: Local and Transnational Desires after the Revolution

Florence E. Babb
University of Iowa

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

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-identified¹⁶ 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

the international level.²⁷ This parallels other international holidays celebrated by activists in Nicaragua, including International Women's Day (March 8) and the socialist workers' holiday (May 1), signaling a desire to identify with a transnational movement.²⁸

Material, ideological, and linguistic markers reveal Nicaraguans' pride in affiliating with an international gay movement. Although understood at first by the select few, these signifiers are beginning to enter the mainstream through newspapers and other media. International symbols used in Nicaragua today include pink triangles, rainbows, red ribbons, interlocking male or female symbols, the labrys, the color purple, and the acronym LGBT—often LBTT, to recognize not only lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered individuals, but also transvestites. The inclusion of transgender and bisexual among sexual minority categories also signals a growing engagement with global gay politics, as noted by a gay male activist I spoke to and whom I recognized as having appeared in the video *Sex and the Sandinistas* (1991).²⁹ The trope of the "closet," "coming out," and "gaining visibility" are widespread now—as evident, for example, in the publication *Fuera del closet* and in the Grupo por la Visibilidad Lesbica.³⁰

The central place of "coming out" and "gaining visibility" among lesbians and gay men in the United States and other Northern nations is well known. That the same centrality is given to visibility as a political strategy in Nicaragua is notable. In José Quiroga's (2000) essays on queer Latino America, he emphasizes that identity politics and the insistence on gaining visibility that is paramount in U.S. gay culture is tied to an imperial history and may not be liberatory south of the border. He describes the way that cultural politics may collide with identity politics in gay Latin America, where queer bodies are sometimes "masked" as a deliberate strategy. Even in an age of global capitalism, the AIDS pandemic, and the transnationalization of the body, some may opt successfully for a queering of culture that does not rely on unmasking and declaring one's sexual identity.³¹

To be sure, some Nicaraguans may resist the closet in their personal lives and still not emulate the "coming out" political strategy of the North, but others regard it as a highly useful tool for organizing a nascent movement. This is apparent in the frequent articles appearing in the magazine *Fuera del closet* that offer support to readers to come out to family, friends, and coworkers. The international influence on gay men and lesbians to come out is clear in the June 2002 issue of the magazine, which carries no fewer than three articles—two of them downloaded from global Internet sites—on the decision to make one's sexual identity known to others. Speaking with individual gay men and lesbians, it becomes evident that the decision whether to come out is a negotiated process in Nicaragua, as elsewhere. One man told me, "Yo no soy closet, ni soy balcón [I'm not in the closet or on the balcony]," meaning that he reveals his identity selectively, as he deems desirable (interview, June 24, 2002).

Language itself is a significant marker of sexual identity and of the changes that are presently under way. Earlier studies discovered that men having

same-sex relations were divided into active (unmarked) and passive (marked, *cochón*) categories, and in some sectors of Nicaragua the word *cochóna* (signifying a masculine woman who has sex with other women) is better known than *lesbiana* (Bolt González 1996:295). However, there are multiple terminologies used by and about men and women to signal their sexual orientations and identities. Far more frequently now, we hear references in Spanish to *lesbiana* and *gay*, as well as to *homosexual* in Nicaragua.³² A *gay* bar may still attract more men, but *la política lesbica-gay* finds more women than men in the leadership. The public presence of Gay Pride (*Orgullo Gay*) activities has contributed to a more widespread usage of global LGBT terminology in the country. In general, today we find a multiplicity of coexisting identities, from those who unselfconsciously participate in same-sex activity without embracing LGBT identity, to others who adopt many attributes and preferences of gay men and lesbians worldwide.

Further evidence of the appropriation of global gay political strategies may be found in the emphasis given to discourses and activism relating to AIDS and to human rights. It is undeniable that these issues resonate deeply in the Nicaraguan context, where social movements are calling for democratization and citizenship rights in civil society. But AIDS work and demands for extending equal human rights to gay men and lesbians also have the strategic advantage of appealing to broad humanitarian and liberal interests. Attention is thus turned from perceived deviant behavior to medical necessity and social justice. Added to the slogan advanced a few years earlier, "For a sexuality free of prejudice," there is a call now for a closer monitoring of sexual behavior and for safer sex practices. At a time when most organizations are seeking international support as NGOs, focusing on AIDS prevention and on human rights offers greater assurance of being heard, becoming part of a global dialogue, and receiving financial support. Needless to say, there is a certain risk that whereas lesbians working on AIDS prevention may appear selfless and civic-minded, gay men in general may be "medicalized" and appear to be the problem that requires a cure.

Although I have argued that the connections to transnational gay culture and politics are clear, this begs the question of whether there is currently a Nicaraguan gay and lesbian movement. In contrast to what I found in the early to mid-1990s when a fledgling movement was celebrated, my revisits to Managua in June 2000 and June 2002 produced contradictory responses to the question. Whereas some individuals were still confident that a young movement was in the making, others, including some of the pioneers in political groups and NGOs, were reluctant to say that any unified social movement could be identified. Instead, they asserted, there were activities undertaken by a number of smaller groups that addressed issues of concern to lesbians and gay men. Although my trips were scheduled to coincide with Gay Pride, I had trouble learning in 2000, despite much questioning, what major activities were planned that would draw people together as in past years. I finally heard of and attended several events, including a presentation of USAID-funded research

on gay sex practices and safer sex held at the bookstore-café Amatl, but they did not bring out the large crowds that were typical a few years earlier. Hazel Fonseca of Xochiquetzal suggested to me that under the conservative government of Alemán, a more cautious approach was being taken, with groups quietly conducting their work and seeking cultural openings in which to make gradual changes (interview, June 20, 2000). Nevertheless, there was an impressive range of activities that year, from the local, Puntos de Encuentro educating urban youth about sexual and other cultural differences, to the global, Nimehuatzín preparing to participate in an international AIDS conference in South Africa. Nicaraguan activists were well aware of the differences that separated them from one another as well as from internacionalistas, and they were working to develop politically at a time of national-level uncertainty and social fragmentation.

We might justifiably conclude that the movement has not taken off as expected a few years before, but it would be more accurate to say that organizing has taken a somewhat different course. Pluralist politics are the order of the day, with a number of groups incorporating gay rights issues into their more comprehensive agendas. Whether this is evidence that gay politics has exceeded the limits of a unitary movement, has been “watered down,” or that NGOs and other groups are competing for scarce resources in the competitive environment of neoliberalism is open to debate. The decline in broader-based, organized activity among lesbians and gay men parallels the diminishing presence of other mass political organizations in the post-Sandinista period. Even so, Gay Pride had more visibility in 2002 than a few years before, as a series of events that were well publicized by Xochiquetzal and cosponsoring organizations. Panels were held at Puntos de Encuentro, Xochiquetzal, the Central American University (which drew a record crowd of students to its video and discussion of the popular television program, *Sexto Sentido*), and even the gay bar Locos Discos. Social events and contests to select the Goddess Xochiquetzal and Mr. Macho lightened the mood. Most significantly, though not so widely known, a group of 13 lesbians and 13 gay men came together for a day-long meeting held at a lesbian-owned bar, Tabu, to form a Managua “cell” that would be a model for other cells and help build a national lesbian and gay movement. Among the principles established were those to endorse lesbian and gay rights, to support other Nicaraguans to “come out,” and to move cautiously toward forming alliances at the international level.

Local and global politics are inevitably mediated by national politics. From the late 1990s, Liberal Party President Alemán and leading Sandinista Daniel Ortega formed a pact to protect their personal interests (Envío 1999). Alemán attempted to hide his record of corruption while Ortega sought to retain parliamentary immunity from charges of sexual abuse made in 1998 by his adoptive stepdaughter, Zoilamérica Narvaez. The latter’s charges brought sexual violence to the forefront of national discourse as she made public allegations of 20 years of abuse. Ortega’s wife, Rosario Murillo, stated in an interview for a major daily newspaper that her daughter’s allegations against her

stepfather were influenced by individuals of “uncertain sexual identity” who rejected marriage and family and “in general the values and culture of heterosexual relations” (*La Prensa*, June 5, 1998:1). Although homophobia is more common among political conservatives, lesbian and gay-baiting among prominent Sandinistas has been a cynical response to a threatened loss of power.³³

When I returned to Nicaragua in the summer of 2000, the pact still shielded the two leading figures in the nation’s politics. The sodomy law remained in place and, although it was largely unenforced, a young working-class lesbian had recently been arrested under the law and was murdered after her release, in what many regarded (and protested) as a hate crime. Bitter debates over Alemán’s plan to turn the Nicaraguan Institute of Women into a new and conservative Ministry of the Family continued unabated. Yet, at the same time that there were obstacles to progressive change, there were more hopeful openings as well. A new and popular course on “Sexuality and Representation” was being offered by Erick Blandón-Guevara through the Gender and Human Studies Program at the Central American University. Cable television was bringing to Managua viewers Brazilian *novelas* (soap operas or sitcoms) with sensitive depictions of gay characters, and the first Nicaraguan novela to include strong women and gay characters, *Sexto Sentido* (2001), was in production with the collaboration of the feminist NGO Puntos de Encuentro.³⁴

The film *Boys Don’t Cry* was meeting a favorable response from some members of the cultural elite when I visited with Rita Arauz of Nimehuatzín; she expressed the wish that all the legislators in the nation could see the movie, because it would open up discussion and have a positive impact on creating a more tolerant society. Though she described herself with a smile as an “old dyke” (in her forties, she referred not so much to her age as to her generation’s sexual politics), she welcomed the “queer” cultural flows from outside Nicaragua.³⁵ She acknowledged that gay imperialist interventions had sometimes been a problem in the past but suggested that the local population is now able to negotiate what elements of international culture to incorporate and which ones to reject (interview, June 23, 2000).³⁶

Arauz’s position is close to one articulated by scholars Elizabeth A. Povinelli and George Chauncey, who point to a need for studies of sexuality and globalization that move beyond abstract discussion of “flows, circuits, circulations of people, capital, and culture—without any model of subjective mediation” (1999:445). Indeed, anthropologists and others seeking to discover “authentic” and local same-sex desire in pristine form in distant places—who argue against the use of “Western” concepts and terminologies—might take heed.³⁷ The evidence of the transnationalization of sexuality is strong, yet what is introduced and retained is a matter of cultural and political negotiation even when unequal power relations are in play.

At times it has been strategic for Nicaraguan gay activists to reference the distant and indigenous past rather than the recent influence of gay movements in the United States or Europe in tracing their political genealogies. For example, a decade ago Xochiquetzal’s center featured a mural on the exterior wall

with indigenous designs suggesting the deep roots of gay culture in the region and engaging in a familiar sort of myth-making, depicting gay sexuality as transhistorical. Activist Lupita Sequeira invoked the timelessness, naturalness, and “authenticity” of Nicaragua’s gay past, even as she pointed to connections between the country’s contemporary gay culture and an international gay movement (*Sex and the Sandinistas*, 1991). Indeed, the cultural borrowings from lesbian and gay politics to the North are unmistakable, and it is this mix of local and transnational elements that is so evident today at the same time that few would claim that there exists a unified national gay identity or community.

In the current Nicaraguan context, lesbian and gay groups and NGOs may feel that more is to be gained by creating and claiming ties with international counterparts and movements than by remaining focused at the local or national level. At a time when organizational growth has brought to light significant political differences and when homophobia is still pronounced in the society, identification and solidarity with international groups may be desired. Moreover, most organizations in the country depend on international financial support, often from Europe, and funding agencies expect to find programs and services that mirror their own countries’ gay rights movement activities.³⁸ As a result, the neoliberal competition over scarce funding is often fierce in feminist and gay organizations. Some Nicaraguans are privately questioning how far their own social and political agendas are being established by international interests and priorities, but in order to be viable many consent to be guided by parameters set far from their shores. Arguably, the competition for resources among NGOs and other groups impedes rather substantially the formation of stronger ties of solidarity at the national level. Even those who are the beneficiaries of such international support are often harsh critics of the consequences of the state relinquishing responsibility for many social projects now taken on by NGOs. As feminist and left intellectual Sofía Montenegro put it, “NGOs are cheap for the state and good for capitalism, but the social movements have become NGO-ized” (interview, June 19, 2002).

The problem was to some extent ameliorated by the outcome of the November 2001 presidential election, which saw the victory of Liberal Enrique Bolaños over Daniel Ortega. In his early months in office, Bolaños proved himself to be serious not only about confronting rampant corruption in the country but also about establishing closer working relations with NGOs. The improved climate at the national level may help to account for the somewhat more vibrant Gay Pride activities in June 2002 and for the renewed efforts to build a lesbian and gay movement in the country.

Conclusion

A number of writers examining gay identities have called favorable attention to the “transnational turn” in sexuality studies (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999:439; Altman 2001). Yet, others have cautioned against rushing to embrace globalization and its effects without due consideration of ways that

global identities and practices are offset by national desires for “cultural belonging, or cultural citizenship” (Rofel 1999:453). I have been guided by those who are at once mindful of continued local practices and of the enormous changes that are under way in many parts of the world, particularly in urbanized areas (Parker 1999). My research in Managua has shown that while global exchanges have presented needed opportunities to expand sexual expression and sexual rights, neoliberalism has also benefited some far more than others as sexual subjects and citizens, particularly men and cultural elites. Women and members of the popular classes in general have experienced diminished possibilities and greater hardship in the years since 1990, even if they have also found new ways of organizing collectively.

This leads me to the central point that I have advanced here, that gender must be drawn into our analysis as we assess the politics of sexuality in Nicaragua, as elsewhere. Insufficient attention to gender has been striking in sexuality studies (or gay or queer studies) generally and the Latin American region has been no exception (Green and Babb 2002). If we wish to keep culture and power at the forefront of our analysis and not simply emphasize the persistence of local sexual meanings and practices or celebrate globalized sexual cultures, gender along with race, class, and other social vectors must be understood as highly salient. The Nicaraguan case has shown that greater analytical attention to women, and specifically lesbians, challenges notions based on male same-sex sexuality in ways that should move us forward in our discussion of local, national, and transnational sexual expression. Earlier studies that examined the daily lives and sexual practices of low-income barrio men and more recent ones that critically assess the impact of neoliberalism in the lives of middle-class gay men who embrace global sexual culture as aspiring consumers are missing a large part of the story. This is not to diminish the importance of these studies, which have contributed greatly to what we know about sexual politics and cultures. Rather, I want to suggest, as feminists have for several decades, that experience is gendered and, what is more, the world is changing in ways that cannot be apprehended without that fundamental insight. By bringing gender and other forms of difference into view, we see in stark relief the social contradictions of individuals who are making collective gains through their life experience and political activism but continue to meet powerful obstacles to their self-determination and citizenship rights.

The mass mobilization of the population brought about by the Nicaraguan Revolution provided an unexpected opportunity for young women and men to explore and redefine their sexuality. During their years in power, the Sandinistas began to provide a space for more open discussion of gender and sexual relations and of personal life and politics, though they were ambivalent about the new desires that were expressed. In the post-Sandinista neoliberal era, the FSLN leadership has faced its own crisis in just these areas, sex and personal politics, signaling that there is much that is unresolved in Nicaragua’s *machista* political culture. For its part, the Liberal government has put in place a conservative social agenda that serves to underwrite the traditional nuclear

family and heteronormative gender relations. Even so, at this stage, feminist, lesbian, and gay organizing and a discourse of human rights lend greater support to those who have been silenced in the past. In a period of globalization, the transnational flow of ideas, information, people, and technologies is increasing rapidly and is meeting a more welcome response. Indeed, Nicaraguan gay men and lesbians have been groundbreakers in charting a politics of sexuality in Latin America.

Social critics and activists are emerging in Nicaragua who do not owe allegiance to parties and they are insisting on social justice in a democratic civil society. For the first time, the call for justice and equality includes the private sphere as well as the public sphere, the integrity of the body and the person as well as the society in a new political culture.³⁹ And gender and sexuality are increasingly understood to be social vectors that matter at the local, national, and transnational levels. Here I have suggested that sexual difference is deeply gendered at every level and that a consideration of women's experience may alter fundamentally our understanding of lesbian and gay identity and politics. My intervention in the dominant masculinist conception of local Nicaraguan same-sex desire is an attempt to engage discussion of transnational gay culture and politics in this postrevolutionary society. Whether lesbians and gay men will defend and build on the cultural space that has opened in the last decade and whether they will successfully gain political rights in this period of national uncertainty remains to be seen. At the very least, what they are doing in small and diverse groups to link local desires to transnational projects points in some intriguing directions for the future.

Recently, the traditional Nicaraguan carnival *Torovenado* has drawn to its annual procession an increasing number of "out" *locas* (drag queens),⁴⁰ who need not conceal their sexual identities during the rest of the year. Who knows whether viewing *Boys Don't Cry* has not challenged some of them to defy local convention and to claim transgressive and transnational identities as their own?

Notes

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