

MACHO LOVE

(SEX BEHIND BARS IN CENTRAL AMERICA)

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DEDICATION

For Ellyn Kaschak, my friend and sister. Blood relationships are not necessarily the closest or those vested with the greatest solidarity. We have both learnt that families have not been the best creation in history and that to make them work, it is necessary to build them, like sexuality. To establish a relationship of more than 30 years, you need something more than shared genes or surnames. As a writer and professor at the University of California, Ellyn is well known. But to me she has been a great influence for having taught me about the marvels of cynical Jewish humor and the leftist, questioning, revolutionary vein of my people. Although she may not appreciate my obsession with Jews like Levinas and Derrida (as males with somewhat unclear attitudes to feminism), we share the idea that Judaism means something more than following religious precepts: it is a preoccupation with how we might make this a more just world and respect the difference, the “Other” of Levinas.

Jacobo Schifter Sikora

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However, the events described in this book are the exclusive responsibility of the author and do not represent the position of ILPES or the Ministry of Justice.

PREFACE

This study represents more than ten years of research in Costa Rican and Central American prisons. My interest in writing about homosexuality in these institutions stems from my commitment to fight against HIV infection. Back in 1988, I began giving AIDS prevention workshops as part of my work with the former “Asociación de Lucha Contra el Sida”, today known as the Latin American Institute for Prevention and Health Education (ILPES). As a result of these efforts, I was contracted by the World Health Organization (WHO) to conduct a study about the knowledge and practices of men who have sex with other men in Costa Rica. This study would include a section on the situation in the penitentiary system. Some of the data gathered from that study has been used in this book. Later, I began a series of workshops with prison inmates to increase their knowledge about AIDS and improve prevention efforts. The different histories of hundreds of prisoners were imprinted forever in my mind.

The objective of this book is to reveal part of the sexual culture of prisons in order to improve AIDS prevention programs. The aim is to study the type of relationships which occur in these institutions and the factors which place inmates at risk from contracting the HIV virus. This data has been facilitated thanks to a series of studies carried out with the close collaboration of ILPES and the Ministry of Justice. Finally, I would like to make some general recommendations so that the holistic approach to prevention may take new leaps forward in the fight against AIDS.

I believe that all attempts to “colonize” the sexual culture of prison inmates -- whether through medical lectures, psychoanalytical therapies, mandatory AIDS testing, scientific “pamphlets” in condom packets, theater “plays” that spread terror of Aids, visits by social workers from the Department for the Control of Aids -- will fail unless they learn to respect that culture. This type of sensitivity has been demonstrated in Costa Rica by the Ministry of Justice and the Department of Social Adaptation. I hope that many other Justice ministries around the continent will be interested in examining this policy, both its many successes and its failures.

Another wish, no less important to me, is to describe how a sexual culture, far removed from the discourse of Costa Rica’s middle-classes, is built up by the most dispossessed sectors of our society. This prison culture develops parallel to the predominant culture and, at the same time, allows us to look in a different way at our own culture. Even within a sexual counter-culture, relations of power are established which create resistances. Any discourse or practice that attempts to set general rules for the entire population has its saboteurs, its revolutionaries and its martyrs.

I. GENERAL ASPECTS

Information Sources

This study consists of several research phases. The first phase was conducted in 1989, as part of a program financed by the World Health Organization, in which nine countries participated.¹ The objective was to study the risk of HIV infection among men who have sex with other men. To this end, a questionnaire known as the “Homosexual Response Survey”, prepared jointly by all nine countries, was used. In order to assess the possibility of circulating the questionnaire, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight openly homosexual or transvestite inmates in one prison. As a result, 22 out of the 24 inmates who were registered as “homosexuals” in the prison files, agreed to complete the questionnaire. Only two were unwilling to participate. Thus, the sample obtained represents the group of “obvious” homosexuals or transvestites, as they describe themselves.

To strengthen our research in this particular prison, an additional questionnaire was circulated among the prison’s administrative staff. In January of 1990, staff were asked to complete a short, self-administered questionnaire, with questions relating to symptoms, origins and forms of prevention of HIV virus as well as attitudes towards homosexuals. Data was gathered from 37 prison officials.

The second phase of this research program began in 1991, when ILPES launched its AIDS prevention workshops for Costa Rican prison inmates. The courses were open to all prisoners and, by 1997, more than 1,000 had signed up for them. These workshops have enabled us to discuss issues relating to the sexual culture in prisons. Since each course consists of eight three-hour sessions, and covers a wide range of topics related to sexuality, drugs, love, violence, AIDS prevention and others, the workshops have provided a very rich source of information about sexual activity in prison. In 1993, we studied the pre-test and post-test responses of a total of 188 inmates of all sexual orientations. However, many participants preferred not to discuss very intimate details in public. Therefore, to gain further information on specific topics, in January and February of 1995, we conducted in-depth interviews with a dozen inmates known as “cacheros” (men who perform active anal sex), “zorras” (in-the-closet homosexuals) and “guilas” (young gay men), the categories not included in the first phase of the study. Workshop participants also recommended friends who fitted into these three categories and most participated willingly in the interviews. Some had participated in the courses and others had not. The interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours each. All participants were interviewed for two or three sessions. The average duration of the entire interview was three hours.

The interviewers were gay men who have worked for several years with support programs for prison inmates run by non-governmental organizations. They have gained inmates’ trust and

¹ Schifter, Jacobo and Madrigal, Johnny. **Hombres que aman hombres**, ILEP-SIDA, San Jose, Costa Rica, 1992.

much of the information obtained proves this fact. In the course of the interviews, prisoners discuss drug-trafficking, prostitution and even homicides which have occurred within prison walls. Without our assurances of complete confidentiality, they would not have revealed much of this information. The fact that the interviewers displayed familiarity with sexual jargon and culture, succeeded, on many occasions, in eliciting admissions of certain unrecognized practices and feelings on the part of interviewees.

With the introduction of the holistic workshops for inmates, certain things changed in the sexual culture of prisons. The results of evaluations show that sexual communication improved, condom use increased, knowledge about AIDS improved and homophobia decreased.² Nevertheless, these changes have not altered the main sexual relationships that predominate in the different prisons, and therefore the data gathered during the three phases of the study is still valid.

In order to protect the privacy of the inmates and prison staff who participated in the studies, we have changed their names or used acronyms. We have also omitted the names of the prisons selected for the sample, together with any descriptions which might identify the penitentiaries and their inmates.

ADMISSION

San Sebastian is San Jose's admission prison, from which prisoners are sent to other penal institutions. This facility has a long name, typical of official jargon: the Center for Institutional Attention of San Jose. But to the public it is known simply as San Sebastian, the name of the district in which it is located, a marginal area to the south of San Jose, just a few minutes from everywhere, like so many places in the Costa Rican capital.

The building is austere. New arrivals are greeted by the somber, pale green walls of the main facade, and by a sculpture of a group of seated peasants who appear to gaze coldly and lifelessly. At night, they often frighten passers-by who do not realize that they are made of stone. "Why are there statues of peasants in front of a prison where most of the inmates are from the city?", a foreign visitor asked us one day. "So people will understand that the lack of land and the influx of peasants into the cities is what has screwed up this country," we replied, without believing our own explanation.

Beyond the prison's outer fence is the reception counter where a female official enquires about the purpose of our visit. We then face the hostile or indifferent expressions of the guards who open the glass door that leads to the prison's administrative area.

This is the prison's "official" face, the one seen by occasional visitors and staff. There is another reality which can be sensed from the building itself, if you walk a little farther towards the south. Here, things change radically.

² Madrigal, Johnny. **Impacto de la prevención del sida en privados de libertad costarricenses**, ILPES, San Jose, Costa Rica, 1993, p1.

The walls suddenly lose their color, become gray and stained with damp. This is where visitors stand in line -- a line which sometimes seems interminable -- waiting to visit the inmates: there are men, of course, but the majority are women, presumably mothers, wives or girlfriends. They go through the admission procedure on visiting days: the long wait while documents are checked, the inquisitive look of the guards, a more or less thorough search. Above, on top of the prison walls, are the guard posts, the barbed wire and the weapons.

But there is yet another reality, the harshest of all: the reality of the inmates, the prison's permanent "residents". They arrive here under escort, guarded inside the "perreras" or "dog cages" (as the official prison transport vehicles are popularly termed) and are driven through an enormous gray metal gate.

New arrivals are usually handcuffed and suddenly pass from the pitch darkness of the prison van into the blinding light outside. They are quickly taken to the "reception" area, where they undergo administrative procedures for their admission to prison. Seated on a long wooden bench, under the watchful gaze of blue-uniformed guards, new arrivals wait their turn to be admitted. Most are poorly dressed, dirty individuals, who sit in silence and look apprehensively at everything around them.

Behind an old typewriter, one of the guards fills in the registration forms, and then takes the prisoners' fingerprints. Afterwards, they are taken to an office where, after an interview, they are assigned to a particular section of the prison and their treatment program is defined. We hear a new inmate being interviewed: "Profession?", asks the prison official. "Bank manager", replies the prisoner.

Inmates who are here for the first time and have not yet been sentenced are sent to Section A, the remand section. The same fate that awaits first-timers who are admitted after sentencing. Section B1 is where re-offending prisoners who have already been sentenced are placed. Any inmate who has problems with another "resident" of B1 is sent to section C1.

Repeat offenders are sent to sections B2 or C2. Other Costa Rican prisons have Maximum Security wings that house violent inmates, those serving very long sentences or prisoners who must be isolated for personal security reasons.

Once the admission procedure is completed, the new arrival begins his journey towards the heart of the jail. He moves along narrow passageways, painted blue and cream, through a succession of metal gates and electric locks, which are operated by invisible hands. As he goes deeper into the jail, the faces become increasingly hostile.

Suddenly, reality hits him: when he passes through the last gate of the administrative section, he comes face to face with his new world: the interior of the prison. The officer who guards this point performs a final search and a second metal gate opens. This is the boundary between freedom and captivity. It is where prison reveals its true face.

Here, my guide and contact, "Pico de Lora" (Parrot Beak") is waiting to introduce me to prison society. I see him walk towards me. He is about thirty years old and quite attractive looking, with fine features. His hair is black with a few gray hairs. He is shirtless and has a phenomenal chest,

like a body-builder. “Good afternoon,” he says in a thick voice. “Are you the one who’s going to write about us?”, he asks. “Yes, I want to write a book about sexual culture and you were recommended to help make the contacts for me,” I reply confidently. “Well, are you going to write about sex or culture?”. “No, ‘Pico de Lora’, you don’t understand. Sexual culture is one subject,” I answer obligingly. “You’re the one who doesn’t understand shit,” he retorts. “Are you really going to write a book or have you come as a voyeur, so you can jerk off at home later?”, he asks in all seriousness. “I’m here to write a book, and if I jerk off later that’s not your problem,” I answer to win his respect. Pico de Lora grins and asks no more questions.

Behind bars, a makeshift “pulpería” (corner store) sells refreshments, sweets and packaged snacks to the inmates. This is the “International Mall”, says the store administrator, another inmate. “We take all credit cards here except Hijack-Express. Problem is, we don’t give any of ’em back.” “And what do you sell here?” I ask. “Well, anything from a goddamn pizza to duck ‘à l’orange’. Week-ends we have spiced foxes ,” answers the store man. Pico de Lora winks, “the store man is the fox”.

Beyond are some large metal containers filled with garbage and flies, where the waste from the cell blocks is collected. “The fly is the national bird of San Seba”, says my companion. “Some guys even keep them as pets.” This is the beginning of the long passageway, lined with wire mesh, which leads to the prisoners’ final destination. The sense of smell is the first casualty here: it is impossible to escape from the penetrating odor of “Carbolina”, a strong disinfectant used to keep cockroaches and other pests at bay. This substance is mixed with water and sprayed everywhere. “If you don’t like the smell, I’ll spray you with Paco Rabanne in a moment,” says Pico de Lora.

It is also impossible to escape the stares, which visitors are warned not to return. New arrivals must endure the gaze of dozens of pairs of eyes, from every direction: from those wandering along the passageway, from the dark windows of the modules, which are separated from them by a “green” area. “Why do the inmates stare?”, we ask Pico de Lora. “Well, the eyes are like a color TV. When you come into jail, the guys see different things.” he replies. “Different colors?” I ask in surprise. Pico de Lora becomes irritated at these questions and, with some reluctance, explains:

“Yeah, it’s like you’re watching a black and white movie and you suddenly get it in color. For example, I’m looking at you now in black and white, but I notice you have a gold chain. This appears in pure color because I want it. Each guy sees color in the things he wants. A “cachero” will see your butt all pink, and a mugger will see your wallet red, full of colorful toucans.” (“Toucan” is slang for a 5,000 colon note, approx. \$20).

Pico de Lora is right in a way. We all have black and white screens and colors are added according to what our minds decide is of interest: there is no specific look, no general interest. The inmates see the new arrival in accordance with their desires, and these may vary every moment. I begin to feel aware of my entire body. I feel like a walking rainbow. “What is a ‘cachero’?” I ask Pico de Lora. “Uh, don’t be a jerk !”, he replies, not believing my ignorance. As he does not answer I ask, “And why a pink butt?”

I remain perplexed, thinking about televisions. All of our minds giving color to what we like and leaving in black and white what we do not. It sounds funny, but it conceals a great tragedy. Everyone is into their own thing; only desire matters. We are in the same prison and each person chooses what he sees. There cannot be much impartiality in my eyes. I have my colors too. "Pico de Lora, does this mean that there cannot be one book, but thousands, about this jail?", I ask, not expecting an answer. "What colors are you seeing now?" he asks.

As one moves down the corridor, one is overwhelmed by a feeling of desperation. It is here that, for the first time, one senses freedom ebbing away. At the end of the passageway, dismal bars rise up at the entrance to each module, the inmate's final destination. Crowds of men are crammed into cells that were built to accommodate half their number. "Who designed this?", I ask innocently. "Designed?", Pico de Lora asks in a sarcastic tone. "Excuse me, but design sounds like something fancy and this here is a shit-hole. The guy who did this, or conceived it, shall we say, was a butcher or a public architect -- it's all the same shit."

We go into a cell. It smells of sweat, but it does not stink. The inmates are clean and they all turn to stare at us. "Is this guy a toad (an informer) or a public official?", they will ask themselves. "Hi guys," I say, "I'm here to write a book". "Well, look here, Truman 'Chayote' just arrived to do a novel!" replies a venomous transvestite. "I'm Mother Teresa and a great whore," continues the transvestite, who introduces 'herself' as "Clitoris". "No, really, I want to write a book about you," I insist, as I ask myself why the hell I'm doing this work. I fix my gaze on Clitoris. I think 'she' is the ugliest queen I have seen in my entire life: she has drooping breasts which have deflated for lack of silicone, a mouth swollen from so many beatings and a nose more twisted than Friday 13th. "Well, girls, since Princess Diana died, the paparazzi have nothing to do, so they come to photograph us. I'm going to make sure that my chauffeur isn't stoned so he can take me immediately," says Clitoris, trying to wisecrack. The rest of the inmates, who are accustomed to her outbursts, laugh with a mixture of sympathy and contempt. "OK, that's enough!", says Pico de Lora. "Let our friend do his interviews so he can tell people what goes on here." "Okay, so what's your book about?", asks Toro. "I'm here to write about sex in jail," I answer with some trepidation. "Holy cow! Tere's going to collapse", exclaims Clitoris, pretending to faint.

First Impact

Prisons are characterized by overcrowding, the result of a growing population, growing crime and increased penalties for certain offenses such as drug-trafficking. In the prisons we selected to conduct our interviews, overpopulation in 1997 exceeded 100%. Facilities built to accommodate 300 inmates now hold more than 1,000. Blocks designed to house 40 people hold an average of 100 prisoners. Cells with capacity for four people, now have up to 15. In 1997, the prison population in Costa Rica totalled 5,730. Pico de Lora tells me that congestion produces violence. "When you put rats in small spaces, they end up eating each other," he says sadly. "Here, the rats have more freedom than we do and they're less stressed out because they can wander up and down," he adds.

Overcrowding means that many inmates do not even have a bed or a mattress to sleep on. The bathrooms are always full, and prisoners must wait for hours to answer the call of Nature. In some prisons, water pours into the cells when it rains. Rats and cockroaches can be seen

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