Introduction

Cooperation and co-optation, despite their shared prefixes, seem to suggest very different approaches to establishing coalitions, politics and sociality. Where cooperation suggests prioritizing collective knowledge - shared ways of thinking, being and doing - co-optation is often understood as a kind of political thievery, usurping the politics, ideologies and practices of one collective in order to advance the goals of another. The cooperative impulse to create a synergy of skills, seems to find its reverse when we talk of co-optation; it is instead the appropriation of those synergic skills, or put differently: hitching one’s political wagon to another’s in order to reap the benefits therein. While co-optation is often invoked in the negative as an inappropriate, or at least uninvited, form of borrowing, I would like to recast the notion of co-optation in a more positive register as that “process of placing one’s political goals within a larger rubric of political success.”

What I would like to elaborate here, based on my anthropological fieldwork among sexual rights activists in Nicaragua, is what I am calling the “strategic co-optation” of lesbian and homosexual identity. While Nicaragua is a country likely still remembered for the Sandinista Revolution, what is less well known is that following the end of the Sandinista regime in 1990, the country instituted Latin America’s most repressive anti-sodomy law (Article 204), which mandated that “anyone who induces, promotes, propagandizes or practices in scandalous form sexual intercourse between persons of the same sex commits the crime of sodomy and shall incur 1 to 3 years imprisonment.”¹ My research has been an attempt to understand how

¹ Article 204 went on to declare that if one of the persons engaging in homosexual intercourse—whether between two men or two women—held power or authority over the other party, even if in private, s/he would be punishable with 2 to 4 years of imprisonment for “unlawful seduction.” The phrasing of the legislation, in particular the clause “anyone
advocates of sexual rights in Nicaragua, and their cooperantes (often in the form of feminists) have worked—discursively and practically—to overturn their country’s anti-sodomy law. Many activists have indeed wed their struggles to the categories of “homosexual” and “lesbian” subjectivity. However, I will argue that we ought not see this as an example of colonial discursive dispersions where Southern subjects are victims of an assimilationist logic handed down from the North. Rather, I want to suggest that as activists invoke these political terms—ones that certainly have traction in the transnational world of human rights advocacy—they have done so in ways that allow for creative and flexible appropriations of the terms themselves. These categories are, in other words, spacious signs with political teeth that are being strategically co-opted to address locally relevant concerns, both political and cultural. First, let me outline some of the scholarly concerns about transnational gay and lesbian rights and identity before I then turn to the work of Nicaraguan sexual rights advocates.

A World of Sexualities

The increased global visibility of sexual identities and subjectivities has been a site of critical engagement for sexuality and gender scholars, as well as activists, particularly as discourses and praxis move more easily and rapidly in a digital and globalized age. Much of the debate around the utility and consequences of “identity” has centered upon what Michel Foucault understood as our epoch of “sexual heterogeneities” (1990: 37): a veritable flood of sexual categories and classifications that distinguish, often in medico-legal registers, a knowable personage, or as Foucault famously put it, the transformation of the sodomite into the “species” of “the homosexual” (1990: 43). The specter of this particular subject has haunted the culturally relative imagination. How can one speak of “the” homosexual (as invented in the 17th century west) as analogous, or indeed sharing any

who induces, promotes, propagandizes” potentially threatened organizations, therapists, social workers, media outlets etc., that might be considered to be “promoting” same sex sexuality.

Though my case study focuses on Nicaragua, I have designated these activist practices as “transnational” not only because Nicaragua (as the rest of Latin America) has been influenced by global political practices since the colonial era, but because the country continues to be affected by global discourses (such as sexual rights and feminism) and political strategies (such as human rights). In a longer historical view, beginning in the late 1920s-early 1930s Augusto César Sandino’s appropriation of Eastern European Marxist models in his struggle against U.S. Imperialism, was later re-crafted into the political ideology of Sandinismo (in the early 1960s) that fueled the Sandinista Revolution (1979).
kinship with, the diverse practices of homosociality and same-sex sexual behaviors found in other places and historical periods? For instance in many parts of the Mediterranean region and Latin America (including Nicaragua)\(^3\) sexual acts between two men (or women) does not necessarily render each participant marked as a homosexual (or a lesbian). For many Nicaraguans, a man who has sex with other men as the ‘activo’ (as opposed to ‘pasivo’) partner is simply a normal man—an hombre hombre—as long as he never lets his masculinity flag. In other words it is gender presentation and one’s sexual role that demarcates one’s place in the sexual scheme of things, not one’s sexual object choice. Given this configuration, it is fair to question how we can even speak of “a” (singular) “homosexual” or “lesbian” subject.

Joseph Massad (2002) has been very dubious of organizations such as ILGA (the International Lesbian and Gay Association) and IGLHRC (the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission), which he considers to be a part of what he calls “The Gay International.” Massad is critical of what he calls their “missionizing,” assimilationist and orientalist approach that, in a quest to establish human rights for lesbians and homosexuals, works to codify particular identity categories. Massad rightly points out that a “prediscursive axiom” underlies these campaigns, one that appears self-evident in the titles of the organizations themselves. The effect of these rights campaigns, for Massad, is the production of “homosexuals and lesbians,” and the transformation of “practitioners of same sex contact into subjects who identify as lesbian and gay [emphasis mine]” (2002: 362). Or put another way, “The Gay International” implicitly asserts and assumes that a “universal... always already homosexual population” (2002: 363) exists even in places where it does not. Fair enough. Like Massad, I am critical of universalizing moves, including the proposition that there is such a thing as a homogenous (homo)sexual subject in the North or the South, no matter what category one chooses to assume. More specifically, I’d like to interrogate the notion that the use of these terms necessarily indicates assimilation to Northern (or Western) values—tentative as those categories are themselves—nor does it suggest that those employing these terms are politically naïve dupes in a gay “missionary” project.

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\(^3\) Being a cochón (an “effeminate” or “passive” man who has affective and sexual relationships with other, often more masculine, men) or a cochona (a “masculine” woman who has affective and sexual relationships with other, often more feminine, women), has never been an honorable designation in Nicaragua. But neither have these subject positions been wholly vilified or the object of the sort of homophobia found in some other settings. Nicaraguans have held “fags” and “dykes,” especially those who transgress gender norms, in disregard and often ill repute, while still recognizing them as part of a larger gender and sexual system along a continuum of masculinity and femininity (Kulick 1998; Lancaster 1992), rather than simply sexually transgressive (Carrier 1995; Parker 1998; Priuer 1998).
Sexual rights advocacy in Nicaragua, while it does make use of these terms, should not be seen as a sure sign of discursive and political colonization. Rather, I find the work of advocates to be more canny. What I hope to propose here is a more mediated understanding of how sexual rights activists are indeed cooperating with identity paradigms, but in a co-optational fashion. In their struggles against the country’s anti-sodomy law, activists have strategically co-opted the subject of “the homosexual” and “the lesbian” as political leverage points in their bids to de-criminalize same sex attraction and practice. However, their use of these terms should not be seen as direct cultural “translations” or “importations” of the presumptions that undergird many Western (or Northern) concepts of lesbianism and homosexuality (namely as “out,” identity-bound and “egalitarian” [or non-gender-role based]). In order to advance the rights and legal protections for those who are not part of Nicaragua’s normative hetero-mainstream sexual rights advocates have co-opted these putatively universal categories in creative, flexible and locally salient ways

Los grupos de lesbianas

Let me now turn briefly to some of my experiences doing fieldwork with grassroots and NGO-sponsored lesbian discussion groups in Nicaragua; I’ll then go into some detail about a “social justice soap opera” that activists produced in the early 2000s. Lesbian discussion groups in Nicaragua emerged in the mid-1990s in response to the anti-sodomy law and have continued in an effort to create what activists call “A Sexuality Free from Prejudice.” Sexuality discussion groups are nearly always single gendered, either for men or for women, and they have been relatively clandestine for fear of being prosecuted for “promoting” homosexuality. Group facilitators are also aware of the risks of social stigma. They leave secret messages for participants, for example, never saying “I’m calling from the lesbian group,” but rather, “tell her Marta called.” In lesbian discussion groups, in both rural and urban settings, much of the focus is upon discussing sexuality, self-esteem and the subject of lesbianismo. The facilitators who lead discussion groups play a pedagogical role that privileges questioning; their purpose, they contend, is to encourage

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4 I alternate between the terms “advocates” and “activists” throughout this discussion to designate those who are involved in the struggles for sexual rights in Nicaragua. Some of these advocates are NGO professionals and others are “grassroots” activists who engage in street protests, convene discussion groups and organize campaigns to promote sexual rights. I intentionally avoid creating a sharp distinction between paid “advocates” and “activists” for to do so would be to dismiss the deeply-held convictions that professional advocates consistently attribute to their social justice work.
participants to co-construct their sense of “lesbian-ness” as a negotiated identity. The grupos de lesbianas are less about cultivating a singular model of lesbian identity than they are oriented toward encouraging participants to understand and question their sexuality, as such. In this particular “education of desire” (Stoler, 1995), I see activist-facilitators and participants involved in a strategic co-optation of sexual identity categories, one that troubles universalizing assumptions as to what constitutes sexual subjects such as “the lesbian.” This is not “a world where no one questions the identification of gayness” (Massad 2002: 374). Rather, questioning gayness and identification is at the center of these projects.

Amigas Juntas ([female] Friends Together) is a grassroots lesbian discussion group in Managua, founded by Victoria, who described Amigas Juntas as a space “for conversation and reflection…[a space] to grow and create an identity.” In one of our conversations before we began our group discussion, Victoria detailed the ways in which there is latitude in formulating lesbianism as a particular “way of being.”

We say that each person, each woman, needs to have her own way of being…There are many ways to be a lesbian. We cannot say, ‘you must be this and that and follow some rules.’ No….Heterosexuals don’t have rules about how they must be!…It’s not about constructing a model….Really, it is about having a consciousness about one’s rights…that is, that we as lesbians have the right to many things.

Xochiquetzal, a Managuan NGO, has hosted a lesbian discussion group for several years. Groups that have institutional support from an NGO tend to have more longevity than grassroots groups, though there are exceptions. The Xochiquetzal group, based on a year-long series of discussions about lesbianismo, was divided into segments discussing such things as workplace and family issues, jealousy and violence, the “sex/gender” system and the meanings surrounding key terms such as the familiar concept of “orientación sexual” (sexual orientation). Of equal importance, however, was a category they dubbed “opción sexual” (sexual choice). For Luz Marina, a participant, opción sexual was “having defined your sexuality” and “identifying what you want to be.” For Lelia it was, “a sense, a way of being that one knows about their sexual attraction.” Irma described it as “our own self-definition.” The responses of participants highlighted the ability to choose one’s own “definition,” and “what you want to be.” Though they may predicate their understanding of sexual option on liberal values of (individual) choice, they described sexual option as an agentive process, one in which they saw themselves as co-creating lesbian identity. While sexual “orientation” was described as “an inclination” or “the way you are” by our facilitator, sexual “option,” on the other hand, was designated as the sexual life “you choose to live:” providing
a link between idioms of being and doing, or ontology and praxis, that work to unravel any definitive category of “the” lesbian.

**Screening Sexuality**

Let me now turn to a set of activist practices in Nicaragua that I call “televisionary.” In January 2001, a feminist NGO in Managua debuted the television program Sexto Sentido (The Sixth Sense), a social justice soap opera⁵ that after six months of screening was rated the most popular TV show among Nicaraguan youth, its target audience. The program also claimed extraordinarily high ratings in the national market with approximately 70-80% of the country regularly watching the show. During its 5-year run, Sexto Sentido addressed issues of sexuality, reproductive health, intrafamiliar violence, sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, discrimination against disabled people, prejudices against costeños (Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast population who are largely of African-descent) and biases against campesinos (“farmers” or “country folk”). The show treated nearly every “ism” imaginable in Nicaragua; but it was also entertaining and often funny. Supported by funds from US AID and other international development programs, the TV show was hailed as a Nicaraguan version of the U.S.-produced comedy “Friends.” However, the show was distinct from most Nicaraguan programming that is imported from Mexico, Colombia, Brazil or the United States. Sexto Sentido was the only dramatic series to have ever been produced in Nicaragua. It was shot entirely on location in familiar locales around Managua, with local actors using dichos (colloquial expressions) unique to Nicaragua. As many people told me, they loved the show because it was pura Nicaraguense, that is, “purely” or “really and truly” Nicaraguan.

For the producers of Sexto Sentido, the show was meant to provide both a dialogic space of conversation (between producers and viewers), and foment a national dialogue (among viewers) about the issues of discrimination it presented. The show’s creators hoped to make it a reciprocal encounter, one with communicative salience—a utopian

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⁵ The Managua based NGO, Puntos de Encuentro (Common Ground) began during the early 1990s during Nicaragua’s “boom” in civil society organizing following the electoral demise of the Sandinista administration. The television program was a part of the NGO’s multi-year campaign, “We are Different, We are Equal.” The television show ran for a total of 80 episodes.

⁶ The funding agencies and programs which provided financial support for the show are: Novib Agencia Sueca para el Desarrollo Internacional, Hivos, Instituto Austriaco Norte Sur, The Summit Foundation, The Moriah Fund, Shaler Adams Foundation, NDC/US AID and The Ford Foundation.
engagement with Habermas’s “public sphere.” Holding focus groups and asking viewers to send their reactions to the show (via email or post), activist-producers sought answers from their target audience, hoping to “democratize,” the narrative content and performative aspects of the show. Actively seeking feedback and audience response, the TV program mirrored many of the progressive values of the sponsoring NGO. Sexto Sentido’s director explained to me that the TV characters would undergo “a process of self-discovery” that would then generate conversations among those watching. The self-discoveries she drew my attention to were “identities, the changing roles of men and women, romantic and sexual relationships, and self-esteem.” This process of self-discovery, with an eye toward social transformation, is reminiscent of Paolo Freire’s conscientización practices that were integral to Nicaragua’s revolutionary project, even as they are here married to a multiculturalist discourse of identity, self-fulfillment and subjectivity. Drawing from a revolutionary patrimony and progressive ideals, the show was certainly a hybrid constellation of political commitments, including questions surrounding sexuality. As Sexto Sentido’s director put it, “the issue of homosexuality has always been discussed openly because one of our principle characters is gay.” A lesbian character was also introduced early in the show’s run. While these characters were prominent, and overwhelmingly positive, they were also mediated by audience participation. During one focus group, I listened as a group of young women commented on how Vicki (the lesbian character) ought to dress—in a typically feminine way, or in a more masculine fashion—conversations that spoke to gender roles and sexuality very specifically. Through this process, these relatively novel identities: a homosexual (or gay) man and lesbian woman were being crafted to meet the expectations of a very specific audience. In this way, internationally circulated identity categories that are part of a larger global erotiscape, are brought “home.”

Normalidad and Angelic Gay Men

“Angel” was Sexto Sentido’s gay protagonist. The show’s producers assured me that Angel’s name was purely coincidental; nonetheless, Angel was pretty angelic. He was, as a screenwriter put it, “so damn likeable, it’s impossible to hate him for anything. That’s the kind of gay character we have to create: one that is beyond reproach.” Angel was declarado to most of his friends; almost all of them knew he was attracted to men and Angel had a boyfriend, Christian. He and his boyfriend had an apparently “egalitarian” relationship as opposed to a “gender role-based” homosexual coupling. Neither of them ever behaved particularly “macho”
(hypermasculine) or “loca” (crazy, queer or “queen”-like) and they were clearly, and monogamously, devoted to one another.

Angel was, importantly, extraordinarily successful, accomplishing goals that many Nicaraguans would admire including earning a scholarship to study in Mexico. Angel’s successes, personal and educational, are not the norm for many sexual minorities in Nicaragua who regularly face discrimination at school and at work and who, though they may not encounter overt acts of violence, are often objects of mockery. In addition to his rather angelic demeanor, Angel was performed as an equally perfect national subject: aspiring for and achieving the laudable ability to perform one’s way out of the difficult economic conditions that continue to haunt Nicaragua—the second poorest country in the western hemisphere. In this sense, Angel both “out-performed” the possibilities available to many sexual minorities in Nicaragua, just as he epitomized many of the values of personal success and accomplishment of “regular” Nicaraguans.

Before leaving for his studies further North, however, Angel wanted to declare himself to his parents who are campesinos. He explained to them, “I want you to know so that you understand me…I like men. I am a homosexual.” Angel’s parents reacted negatively at first. His father glared at him and walked away while his mother had a tearful breakdown, asking what they had done wrong. Ultimately, they came to accept their son’s new identity, most pointedly through his father’s comment, “sos mi hijo (you are my son)” and “may God bless you.” Angel has indeed been exceptionally “good” even if his parents are initially concerned about their son’s new, and explicit, sexual identity. Angel, his boyfriend, and his revelatory process represent a particular kind of homosexual subject, one that is no doubt familiar to those making funding decisions at USAID. But this is also an identity that is, at least in the TV world of Angel and his friends, recognizable to Angel’s older campesino parents. His new-found identity was not so foreign as to be unrecognizable, challenging though it may have been. Internationally circulated ideas of homosexuality are then mediated through the television program in order to suit the Nicaraguan context: in the heartland of the campo in a TV serial that trades in familiarity and localized scenes, expressions and sensibilities. This project, and process, can be seen as a co-optational strategy of “normalizing” (Warner, 1999) homosexuality and gay identity with Nicaragüense, or “pura Nicaragüense” in mind.
The formulation of a gay man, as (an) Angel is, I would argue, a media message crafted to evoke a “preferred reading” (Hall 1980)—one that shares a kinship with internationally circulated images of lesbian and gay (or homosexual) subjectivity. Carefully coiffed in a dramatic process of normalizing homosexuality—the TV show’s same-sex attracted characters meet almost Weberian ideal types of monogamy, gender conformity and social success—even when obtaining these sorts of successes may be the exception in Nicaragua, for both straight and gay people. In this sense, Angel’s performance as “a homosexual” is not limited to his sexuality. Embodied in Angel are (at least) two powerful messages. The first is certainly a call for tolerance of same sex sexuality and homosexual identity, but at the same time, and just as importantly, Angel channels another (national) desire: to have access to the freedoms that come with greater financial stability and educational achievement. From this vantage, Angel’s characterization follows the logics that Lila Abu-Lughod has called “development realism.” Studying Egyptian soap operas Abu-Lughod found similar, repeated narrative forms that “idealize[d] education, progress and modernity within the nation” (Abu-Lughod, 2004: 81). The sorts of development desires that Angel evokes, in addition to his sexual identity, play upon many Nicaraguans’s hopes as well as their anxieties. These kinds of performances index more than simply sexuality, or the rights of gays and lesbians. They mediate a whole series of questions about one’s place in the world.

Who is watching?

One afternoon, while talking with the Director of US AID’s Managua office, he shared with me that not only did he watch Sexto Sentido, avidly, but that the agency itself considered the show to be “a model” for development in the “developing” world. This statement is of course, a provocation: is the show an example of social engineering on a shoestring budget, or a powerful and popular means of inciting dialogue and critiquing the anti-sodomy law in the public sphere, or all of the above?

Sexto Sentido’s programming aesthetics may be shaped with local populations in mind, but clearly they have transnational appeals as well: using internationally recognizable categories of sexual identity function to both “sell” them in Nicaragua and because they are familiar to North American and European funding bodies, they are perhaps more marketable characters in those settings as well. It is not that the categories themselves

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7 Hall understood that dominant ideology(ies) are typically manifest in a text’s “preferred reading,” however this “preferred” reading is not always adopted by readers.
(homosexual, lesbian, gay) are eschewed in these activist projects, but, I would argue, they are strategically co-opted. The “out” sensibility of an angelic gay man, and the proffering of “lesbian” identity in discussion groups follow some of the contours of internationally circulated lesbian and gay paradigms of identity. But they evoke much more, including notions of development, personal aspiration and accomplishment, the opportunity to craft one’s sexual self, and a personal investment in questioning sexuality: at both the level of the individual (as we saw in the lesbian discussion groups) and that of the nation (as in the television program).

Focusing on local conditions, which include a virulent anti-sodomy law, Nicaraguan activists have “borrowed” terms that Massad has associated with “The Gay International.” But the content of these categories—co-constructed and based in local legal and cultural settings—cannot be understood as a mere importation of Northern political values and identities. Instead, these activist moves offer a more situated crafting and, as I see it, a strategic co-optation of these categories in order to challenge Nicaraguan law and offer new ways of envisioning, experiencing and living one’s sexuality. These sexual rights politics are, as Judith Butler (1990) might put it, performing under the sign of homosexual and lesbian. But these are also spacious signs. They can, and do, stand for many things: sexuality to be sure, but one that involves “opción” (or choice) and one that is intimately invested in locality and a larger national narrative of desire and aspiration.  

Finally, as an epilogue to this story of sexual rights, it is good to finish with this: in 2008, following 16 years of advocacy on the part of activists, and undoubtedly some horse-trading in the halls of the National Assembly, the anti-sodomy law, Article 204, was overturned. It is no longer criminal to practice same-sex sexuality in Nicaragua, no matter what the terms and categories may be.

8 The same could be said of an earlier era, beginning in the late 1920s-early 1930s with Augusto César Sandino’s appropriation of Eastern European Marxist models in his struggle against U.S. Imperialism, which was later re-crafted into the political ideology of Sandinismo (in the early 1960s) that fueled the Sandinista Revolution (1979).
References


