

# The Dialectic of the International: Elaborating the Historical Materialism of the Gay Liberationists

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What is the relation between sexuality and the international? The literature on sexuality within international studies demonstrates that a full appreciation of contemporary transformations of sexuality across the globe requires an interrogation of the divisions—West/non-West, North/South, or core/periphery—that characterize our view of the international. While many have studied how the transnational circulation of sexual discourses troubles such divisions, fewer have asked how they came about in the first place. Historical materialism is uniquely instructive in this regard. This methodology expounds the division of the international into distinct spheres as historically constituted and founded on capitalist social relations. Such a methodology can be found within the intellectual writings of the gay liberation movement. Through their fraught relationship with the Cuban government, which represented them as a cultural imperialist offensive against the newly formed Communist state, the gay liberationists developed a dialectical conception of the international that acknowledged the differential constitution of sexual life within specific contexts, yet sought to reveal the international systems of power that produce and regulate those seemingly distinct sexual formations across international divides. Gay liberationism, this article argues, offers us a rich tradition for developing accounts of sexuality within a stratified capitalist world order.

¿Cuál es la relación entre la sexualidad y lo internacional? La literatura sobre la sexualidad dentro de los estudios internacionales demuestra que una apreciación completa de las transformaciones contemporáneas de la sexualidad en todo el mundo requiere una interrogación de las divisiones; Occidente/no Occidente, Norte/Sur, centro/periferia; que caracterizan nuestra visión de lo internacional. Aunque muchos han estudiado cómo la circulación transnacional de los discursos sexuales dificulta estas divisiones, son menos los que se han preguntado cómo surgieron en primer lugar. El materialismo histórico es especialmente instructivo en este sentido. Esta metodología expone la división de lo internacional en distintas esferas como históricamente constituidas y fundadas en las relaciones sociales capitalistas. Esta metodología puede encontrarse en los escritos intelectuales del movimiento de liberación homosexual. A través de su tensa relación con el gobierno cubano, que los representaba como una ofensiva cultural imperialista contra el recién formado estado comunista, los liberadores homosexuales desarrollaron una concepción dialéctica de lo internacional que reconocía la constitución diferencial de la vida sexual dentro de contextos específicos, pero que trataba de revelar los sistemas internacionales de poder que producen y regulan esas formaciones sexuales aparentemente distintas a través de las divisiones internacionales. El liberacionismo homosexual, según este artículo, nos ofrece una rica tradición para elaborar relatos sobre la sexualidad dentro de un orden mundial capitalista estratificado.

Quelle est la relation entre la sexualité et l'international? La littérature sur la sexualité des études internationales démontre que pour apprécier pleinement les transformations contemporaines de la sexualité à travers le monde, il est nécessaire de s'interroger sur les divisions—occidentale/non occidentale, nord/sud, centre/périphérie—qui caractérisent notre vision de l'international. Bien que beaucoup de travaux aient étudié la manière dont la circulation transnationale des discours sexuels perturbe ces divisions, peu se sont interrogés sur leur origine. Le matérialisme historique est particulièrement instructif à cet égard. Cette méthodologie expose la division de l'international en sphères distinctes comme étant historiquement constituée et fondée sur les relations sociales capitalistes. Une telle méthodologie peut être constatée dans les écrits intellectuels du mouvement de libération gay. Dans le cadre de leurs relations tendues avec le gouvernement cubain, qui les représentait comme une offensive culturelle impérialiste contre l'État communiste nouvellement formé, les libérationnistes gays ont développé une conception dialectique de l'international qui reconnaissait la constitution différentielle de la vie sexuelle dans des contextes spécifiques tout en cherchant à révéler les systèmes internationaux de pouvoir qui produisaient et régulaient ces formations sexuelles apparemment distinctes au-delà des divisions internationales. Cet article soutient que le libérationnisme gay nous offre une riche tradition de développement de comptes rendus de la sexualité dans un ordre mondial capitaliste stratifié.

## Introduction

What is the relation between sexuality and the international? Within the current neoliberal era of globalization, sexuality has become imbricated in a range of new transnational discourses, practices, and institutional sites. The fight against HIV/AIDS necessitated transnationally coordinated policy discussions, educational spaces, and treatment strate-

gies. These interventions ushered in new forms of sexual surveillance and generated intimate connections between state policies, pharmaceutical and biomedical institutions, and sexual communities. The spread of mass media and communications has since enabled the creation of virtual communities, a global consumer culture has universalized ideas of desirability, and transnational struggles for sexual rights have achieved the international recognition and visibility of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex (LGBTI) identities.

New interdisciplinary and expanding academic fields, such as transnational sexuality studies (TSS) and queer

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international relations (QIR), have emerged to address the role of sexuality within these processes of globalization. The literature provides a compelling critique of the persistent divisions—West/non-West, North/South, or core/periphery—that characterize our accounts of the internationalization of sexuality, and of the international more broadly. It demonstrates that a full appreciation of the transformations of sexual life across the postcolonial divide requires an interrogation of dualistic views of the world. Many have drawn on notions of hybridity, deconstruction, and decentering to show how assumed dualisms are disrupted through the transnational encounters and exchanges of sexual discourses. Fewer have asked how these divisions came about *in the first place*. This article argues that historical materialism is uniquely instructive in this regard. A historical materialist mode of analysis expounds the division of the international into the distinct spheres of West/non-West, North/South, or core/periphery as historically constituted and founded on capitalist social relations.

We find such a historical materialist approach to theorizing sexuality and the international within the intellectual writings and transnational activities of the gay liberation movement. This article therefore turns to the gay liberationists of the late sixties and early seventies as unlikely theorists of the international. There are two main components of their historical materialism. First, the gay liberation movement successfully politicized homosexuality by conceptualizing it as a structural position that is constituted in relation to international systems of power. The term “gay,” in this context, denoted a political stance that was forged through the struggle to abolish those systems. Second, the liberationists rewrote the international dialectically as an emergent imperial form of social organization *and* as a site of immanent possibility for a postimperial reorganization of the world. This conception of the international acknowledged the differential constitution of homosexual life within specific contexts, yet sought to reveal the international systems of power that produce and regulate those *seemingly* disparate, discrete, and discontinuous sexual formations across divisions of the international. Through this historical materialist approach, the gay liberationists were able to elucidate the social logic that manifests itself in the division of the international into separate spheres as at once an imperial and a *sexual* logic.

### Sexuality and the Divisions of the International

The shortcomings of the global sexual rights movement have been the subject of extensive scholarly debate over the past two decades. In a scathing critique of what he termed “the Gay International,” Joseph Massad (2002) influentially condemned the universalization of lesbian and gay rights as a colonial project. His charge was two-fold. First, the Gay International assimilates non-Western subjects who exhibit same-sex desires and practices into a Western sexual epistemology. Gay and lesbian human rights discourse, Massad (2002, 363) argued, “produces homosexuals [...] where they do not exist.” Second, the Gay International appoints itself as the defender of the homosexuals it creates, thus rehearsing a familiar orientalist script whereby “natives” must be protected from their barbaric homeland. These missionary ambitions, however, produce the violent practices they seek to eradicate. Massad (2002, 375) wrote that “the Gay International is *correctly* perceived as part of Western encroachment on Arab and Muslim cultures” and is represented by the same institutions that “advance US imperial interests.” He accordingly explained the violent crackdown on

dozens of “Westernized Egyptian gay-identified men” that took place in Cairo in 2001 as a direct result of the Gay International’s “missionary campaign.” Massad (2002, 382) stated unequivocally that “it is not same-sex sexual practices that are being repressed by the Egyptian police but rather the sociopolitical identification of these practices with the Western identity of gayness and the publicness that these gay-identified men seek.” The Gay International’s ostensible liberation project is, in short, an imperialist undertaking that is “destroying social and sexual configurations of desire” in the non-West through the imposition of a Western sexual epistemology and inciting non-Western states to violence against those who display a Westernized identity of gayness (Massad 2002, 385).

What conception of the international is at work in Joseph Massad’s notion of the “Gay International”? I use the term “international” here as a conceptual category, rather than as a descriptor of the inter-national or cross-cultural character of discourses, practices, and institutions surrounding sexuality (captured in this article with the word “transnational”). Massad’s analysis of the transnational activities of the “Gay International” relies on a conception of the international that is structured around a persistent strand of dichotomous thinking. Certain abiding divisions—most prominently, “the West” versus “the Arab world”—are presumed uncritically. Many scholars within TSS and QIR who share Massad’s concerns about the imperialist impulses of transnational sexual rights activism have been more alert to the limitations of understanding these developments solely through his model of Western cultural imperialism. They have nuanced Massad’s model by problematizing the divisions that characterize his account of the international and explaining their historical conditions of possibility.

#### *Problematizing Divisions: Deconstruction, Hybridization, and Decentering*

Attempts to problematize the familiar divisions of West/non-West, North/South, and core/periphery can be schematically placed into three categories: deconstruction, hybridization, and decentering. Deconstructive approaches critique the assumption that sexual cultures are fixed, homogeneous, or static within the West, and foreground the connected, mutually constitutive histories of so-called Western and non-Western sexual cultures. Massad’s separation of “the West” and “the Arab world” posits “a radical *discontinuity* among global formations of same-sex meaning” (Hemmings 2007, 18). The notion that sexual discourses and practices are exported from one sphere to another presupposes that each can be understood as a bounded entity. It also presumes that those globalized sexual discourses have a stable, monolithic, unitary meaning within the so-called West. Numerous studies have argued that Massad’s cultural imperialism model inadvertently denies the contested nature of sexual rights discourses within the West. Ryan Thoreson’s study of The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), for instance, insists on the heterogeneity and instability of the category of sexual rights itself. Rather than simply imposing a pre-determined and universal framework of “LGBT human rights” on the non-West, Thoreson (2014, 212) argues, brokers at IGLHRC “inject specificity into their campaigns by constructing, promoting, and institutionalizing particular understandings of those rights that reflect the needs of the group they represent.” Sexual rights are profoundly dynamic: they are negotiated through a series of contestations and feedback loops. In a similar vein,

Rahul Rao (2010, 189) speaks of the “Gay International” as “an extraordinarily fractious space,” composed of constituents from across the political spectrum who “disagree radically on whether, when, and how” to promote sexual rights.

Deconstructive approaches often underline the interconnections of sexual cultures across the divides of West/non-West or North/South. As Momin Rahman (2015, 99) notes, Massad’s rejection of sexual rights as a form of Western imperialism replays “a mutual exclusivity” between Western and non-Western constructions of sexuality. Rahman (2020, 418) argues that the feminist tradition of intersectional analysis “provides a theoretical and empirical corrective to the mutually exclusive and oppositional positioning of LGBT and Muslim.” Indeed, an intersectional focus on diasporic queer Muslim identities that are constituted through an entanglement of various national, racial, ethno-religious, and sexual identifications complicates the assumed divisions that underwrite the cultural imperialism model. Cynthia Weber (2016, 143–91) confirms this observation in her theorization of how “pluralized” figures who exceed the singular *either/or* logics of sexuality, race, religion, or nation can question the traditional coordinates of the international.

The cultural imperialism model has also been persuasively problematized through the notion of hybridity. Against Massad’s representation of postcolonial subjects who identify as “gay” as “victims of false consciousness or unwitting agents of Empire,” Nikita Dhawan (2016, 60) maintains that Western sexual norms and identities are appropriated, resignified, and rearticulated through cross-cultural encounters and exchanges. There are numerous ethnographic studies that dispel the notion that Western sexual cultures are simply copied or directly recreated within non-Western contexts. To name but a few notable examples, Mark McLelland (2000) has highlighted the significant differences between the associations of the term “gay” within Japan and the English-speaking world, Peter Jackson (2001) has mapped the variegated ways in which foreign sexual discourses have been selectively and strategically appropriated within Asian contexts toward the creation of new sexual cultures, Jasbir Puar (2001) has shown how the effects of globalization in Trinidad have revealed the limited capacity of Western sexual discourses to travel transnationally, and Katie King (2002) has considered the political implications of local mistranslations of the term “lesbian.” Within the above accounts, “the local” is almost invariably imagined as a force of resistance to “the global” (Grewal and Kaplan 2001, 671). It is figured as a site of experimentation, negotiation, and destabilization. Due to these processes of hybridization, Neville Hoad (2007, 63) reminds us, it is impossible to know in advance what will count as a Western import: “President Mugabe is obviously less worried about Western cultural imperialism when he puts on a suit and tie in the morning, and no one accuses monogamous heterosexuality of being a decadent Western import.” Examining resistances to lesbian and gay human rights in sub-Saharan Africa, he argues that what qualifies as “traditional” or “indigenous” is subject to continual revision in the present (Hoad 2007, 75–76).

A decentering approach to problematization contests the notion that the trajectory of sexual discourses follows a unidirectional path from West to non-West and acknowledges non-Western forms of agency in contemporary deployments of queerphobia across the postcolonial divide (Rhaman 2015; Dhawan 2016). In an exploration of the (dis-)affiliations between Filipino gay men and the dominant rhetoric of “Stonewall,” Manalansan (1995, 437–38) finds that the US lesbian and gay movement and its attendant narratives of coming out and the closet “do not

follow a single axis from center to periphery.” They are reconfigured along a more circuitous route of exchange. This third approach challenges the tendency of the cultural imperialism model to continue to position the West as the locus of agency. The explanation of state-sanctioned homophobic violence in the non-West as a direct outcome of a monolithic “Gay International” presumes that the actions of those nation-states originate in the West. This presumption encodes Western supremacy by foreclosing the possibility of non-Western agency in the authorship of anti-queer violence. Rahul Rao (2020, 9) hence writes that meaningful critique “must do more than simply remind us of the enduring legacies of colonialism” lest it become unable to apportion responsibility for contemporary oppression between colonial and postcolonial nation-states and understand the processes through which postcolonial regimes “become colonial in their own right.”

Joseph Massad’s explanation of the Egyptian state’s arrest of fifty-two men on the *Queen Boat* in May 2001 as originating in the actions of the Gay International has been convincingly challenged through such a decentering approach. In a detailed account of the incident, Paul Amar (2013, 76) shows that “[i]t was the Egyptian police and security apparatus, not gay human-rights organizations, that mobilized precisely to incite discourse around globalizing ‘gay’ terminologies and identities.” The *Queen Boat* raid is more accurately understood, he argues, within the context of a human-security governance regime in the global South whose operations are linked to the construction of non-normative sexualities as a threat to public safety. These sexual subjectivities, Amar (2013, 15) writes, “have emerged not in the headquarters of the UN or in the humanitarian agencies of the Global North,” but rather through evolving practices of policing and urban planning in the global South. Mehmet Sinan Birdal (2020, 269–70) corroborates this decentered view, pointing out that it was in fact the Egyptian government that “outed” the arrested men and that the Egyptian state had begun to mark and repress same-sex intimacy “decades before the Gay International.” These two accounts of the *Queen Boat* case highlight how Massad’s cultural imperialism model inevitably leads to a misrepresentation of the multifaceted origins of queerphobic repression and criminalization in the global South by centering the practices of a presumably monolithic “Gay International.”

#### *Explaining Divisions: Introducing Historical Materialism*

The problematizations of a dualistic understanding of the international leave questions about its historical conditions of possibility open: How do these international divisions emerge in the first place? If encounters and interactions across the postcolonial divide are more complex than the divisions North/South, West/East, and core/periphery suggest, why do we continue to think in these dualistic terms? Deconstruction, hybridization, and decentering are ways of problematizing these persistent divisions by interrogating how the exchanges and circulations of sexual rights discourses and practices complicate a dualistic view of the world. As such, they seek to expose the ways that divisions shape (and constrain) our understanding of transnational sexual cultures. These approaches, however, often forgo an explanation of *why* that dualistic discursive frame came to dominate our imaginaries.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This heuristic distinction between problematization and explanation risks overlooking work that does not fall neatly into either category. Weber’s (2016) deconstructive method cited above, for instance, does not only illustrate how

Historical materialism is particularly well-suited to this task. Indeed, most TSS and QIR texts that have sought to explain the historical emergence of international divisions have, at least tacitly, adopted elements of historical materialism (Peterson 2000; Amar 2013; Birdal 2015, 2020; Rao 2020; Smith 2020). This mode of analysis looks “beneath” the reified social spheres of North/South and West/non-West to find an imperial form of social organization called “the international,” and presents the role of such divisions in structuring this emergent imperial order. Importantly, it neither takes these divisions as transhistorical givens, nor does it suggest that we can abandon them as though they were simply illusions that can be dispelled through theoretical problematization. Rather, historical materialism treats these divisions as historically produced spheres through which a totality of capitalist social relations—i.e., the international—is differentiated.

Rarely are the central tenets of historical materialism elaborated in such a way within TSS and QIR. There is a warranted skepticism toward historical materialism that stems from its historical silences on questions of sexuality, gender, and race (Ferguson 2004, 5). For example, in her historical analysis of how the public/private division structures our accounts of the international, V. Spike Peterson (2000, 15) situates this division in relation to the capitalist mode of production yet simultaneously expresses a wariness toward historical materialist perspectives due to their customary inattentiveness to the feminized sphere of social reproduction. Such reticence is reflected in wider debates within disciplinary IR about historical materialism’s limitations,<sup>2</sup> evidenced in Agathangelou and Ling’s (2004, 28) characteristic description of historical materialism as a rebellious and potentially emancipatory methodology that nonetheless relies exclusively on “Western intellectual traditions, concepts, and methods.” A recent attempt to overcome the fraught relationship between queer studies and historical materialism is Nicola Smith’s work on sexuality’s positioning within the reproduction of the global capitalist economy, which argues that “sexuality [must] be expanded to include the analysis of capitalist power relations” (Smith 2020, 18).

Ironically, criticisms of historical materialism’s undertheorization of sexuality and calls for a reworking of historical materialism to comprise sexuality *both* participate in the effacement of already existing historical materialist analyses of sexuality. As this article shows, gay liberationists were developing analyses of sexual difference under capitalism two decades before the institutionalization of queer studies as an academic discipline. Rosemary Hennessy (1994, 91) has envisioned historical materialism’s contribution to queer studies as an elucidation of how systems of (sexual) oppression organize social life across the globe “while always being historically and differentially inflected.” The gay liberationists theorized sexuality in markedly similar terms: they understood seemingly disconnected sexual formations to in fact be historically constituted by the same imperial organization of social relations. The reason those sexual formations *appear* as separate is because the processes that produce and regulate them are mystified by the internal differentiation of the international into separate spheres. Not dissimilar to capital’s enforcement of a differentiation between the public and private spheres, which is in part based upon a *gendered* division of labor, the gay liberationists understood imperialism’s enforcement of the differentiations

core/periphery and West/non-West to be based in part on a *sexual* division.

In what regard is a dualistic conception of the international based on a sexual division? On their travels to Cuba, the gay liberationists were confronted with a striking contradiction: They positioned themselves as staunch anti-imperialists yet were accused by the Cuban government of being a cultural imperialist offensive against the new Communist state. The charge of imperialism held that they were imposing homosexuality, a Western disease and perversion that stemmed from the excesses of capitalist culture, onto Cuban culture. The following sections show how, through a historical materialist approach, the gay liberationists were able to recognize the association of homosexuality with perversion and degeneracy as a mainstay of the global imperial order and develop an immanent critique thereof. Uncovering a history of connections between the liberationists and the Cuban regime, I show how their historical materialism provides a critique of the cultural imperialism model that is distinct from the more familiar strategies of problematization.

### Gay Liberationism’s Rendering of Historical Materialism

The gay liberation movement has been elided within contemporary scholarship on the internationalization of sexuality. Within the United States, the gay liberation movement spread rapidly after the riots sparked by a police raid at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York’s Greenwich Village, in the summer of 1969. Within a year of the Stonewall rebellion, there would be Gay Liberation Front (GLF) chapters in over ten US cities (Rimmerman 2015, 23). While the gay liberation movement had greater racial and class diversity than the earlier homophile movement, most GLF chapters were predominantly white and middle-class (Stein 2012, 82–83). Various caucuses for people of color within GLF chapters renamed themselves as Third World gay groups, and many lesbian caucuses also began to organize separately. Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), founded by Sylvia Rivera and Marsha Johnson in 1970, was composed primarily of poor, gender-nonconforming, and transgender street activists (Hobson 2016, 26). These groups were united in their opposition to the forces of postwar state repression (including police brutality, imprisonment, and pathologization) that sought to rein in homosexuality and other “lawless,” often racialized, proletarian surplus populations in cities (Chitty 2020, 36). Left-oriented gay liberation groups formed on campuses and in cities across the United States, Canada, Australasia, Britain, Italy, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Mexico, and Argentina (Adam 1987, 82–89). In the words of Allen Young (1981, 91), gay liberationism was “by no means a movement ‘headquartered’ in the US.”

Gay liberationism makes an ideal case study because, as James Darsey (1991, 44) notes, it had “a well-defined point of origin” and was “of short enough duration that we can make a relatively complete inventory of its organizations, publications, and spokespersons.” The gay liberation movement is also well-suited for qualitative textual analysis as it was the first social movement to spur the widespread production and dissemination of textual sources about gay life and politics. In the early seventies, reflecting a new moment of collective gay consciousness, liberationists produced a variety of texts intended for a public readership (Seidman 1995, 120). Their emphasis on coming out went hand in hand with the proliferation of memoirs, documentaries, and coming out stories. My corpus encompasses a range of such archival material, including manifestos, political speeches,

pluralized figures trouble the dualistic logics of statecraft but also illustrate how they function to consolidate those logics, or indeed produce new ones altogether.

<sup>2</sup>See Laffey (2004) on the common charge of economism, and Stoffel (2021) on the tensions within Rahul Rao’s recent deployment of historical materialism.

magazine articles, and autobiographical writings, to demonstrate that a historical materialist perspective was present across multiple sites of liberationist intellectual production.

Relatively few texts, however, constitute my main points of reference. This is in part due to the limited availability of documents about the gay liberationists' trips to Cuba, explored in the following section. While constructing a small corpus allowed me to conduct a detailed and thorough excavation of historical materialist discourses within the texts, it involved considerable trade-offs. Crucially, a study of gay liberationist thought in its full complexity and discursive heterogeneity is impossible with such fragmentary, selective accounts of the movement's history. Moreover, I selected documents almost exclusively written by prominent activists within the movement. Although this sampling method has advantages because their prominence lent them significant institutional power and hence a disproportionate role in the formulation of gay liberationist thought, it further limited the representativeness of my corpus. Finally, I should note that these documents were analyzed for purposes that do not fully accord with the purposes for which they were produced. The liberationists' primary goal was not to elaborate a methodology or theoretical framework, and they did not necessarily identify themselves as "historical materialists." This article inevitably engages in a degree of historical revision, as it approaches the archive with an eye to the present concerns of queer academic scholarship.

#### *Homosexuality as a Social Relation*

The gay liberation movement emerged toward the end of a decade of mass uprisings and social unrest. Numerous anti-systemic struggles—including opposition to the Vietnam War, the Black Power movement, women's liberation, militant student organizing, countercultural revolutionary groups, and contemporaneous national liberation movements across the globe—threatened to erode the foundations of the hegemonic American moral order. It was within this context of global counterhegemonic struggle that cultures of same-sex desire were politicized (Chitty 2020, 173). The identity marker "gay," which liberationists juxtaposed to the medicalized discourse of "homosexuality," signaled a sense of belonging rooted in shared experiences of state repression, violence, and exile. Ironically, it was the state's representation of homosexuality as a pervasive, insidious, spectral threat to the stability of the entire sociopolitical order that lent legitimation to the gay liberationists' invocation of homosexuality's revolutionary capacities. Within the US postwar era, clinical psychoanalytic discourse on homosexuality focused on interpersonal (mainly familial) relations as the determinants of sexual deviancy (Floyd 2009, 128). This diagnosis dovetailed with the state's representation of homosexuals as vulnerable, maladjusted individuals that were particularly susceptible to the influence of communism. Both communism and homosexuality were figured as stealthy, metastasizing threats to state power. This state discourse, Kevin Floyd (2009, 131) writes, "paradoxically and ineluctably partook of a universalizing logic whereby homosexuality, like communism itself, constituted a potent uncontrollable force fundamentally subversive of the nation as such." This logic was largely embraced and repeated, rather than undermined, within the gay liberationist intellectual writings of the period. The most comprehensive theoretical elaborations of gay liberationism, Dennis Altman's *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* and Mario Mieli's *Towards a Gay Communism*, bring this dialectical

relation between the state's persecution of homosexuals and the emergence of a politicized gay movement to the fore.

Dennis Altman (2012, xi) is an Australian political scientist who became part of the emerging US gay liberation movement during his brief stay in New York City in the early seventies. In *Homosexual*, Altman (2012 [1971], 84) writes that "any theory of sexual liberation needs to take into account the essentially polymorphous and bisexual needs of the human being." Altman uses the term *bisexual* here not to refer to an identity category, but rather to a universal desire that has been repressed "in the interests of economic development" (Altman 2012 [1971], 87). For Altman (2012 [1971], 89), it is "the historical function of the homosexual to overcome" the repression of the soul's inherent bisexuality through the eroticization of all areas of life. Altman (2012 [1971], 103) advocates an expansive view of sexual liberation: it demands a concern "with the nature of Western capitalism, imperialism, consumerism, bureaucracy etc." These themes are also central to Mario Mieli's writings. Mieli was an Italian activist who partook in the London GLF as a student in 1971 and in *Fuori!*, founded in 1971 in Milan (Mieli 2018 [1977], xvi). He, too, insisted on the polymorphous perversity of human sexuality, "negated by capitalist-heterosexual ideology" (Mieli 2018 [1977], xxxvii). In a characteristic inversion of clinical psychoanalytic discourse, Mieli (2018 [1977], 22) writes: "What is pathological and pathogenic is not homoeroticism, but rather its persecution." He contends in even more brazen terms than Altman that liberation entails "the collapse of the capitalist system, which rests on the masculinist and heterosexual foundation of society and on the repression and exploitation of Eros" (Mieli 2018 [1977], 255).

Both accounts refuse the minoritization of gayness. The notion of an innate polymorphous perversity re-figured gayness as a universal desire that was present within everyone. Writes Mieli (2018 [1977], 6): "In actual fact, latent homosexuality exists in everyone who is not a manifest homosexual, as a residue of infantile sexuality, polymorphous and 'perverse,' and hence also gay." Alternatively, consider Altman's (2012 [1971], 79) formulation that "unlike other minorities, we lie within the oppressor himself." The universalization of gay desire takes these authors beyond the coordinates of identity, since it indexes a liberation from the constraining identity categories "heterosexual" and "homosexual" as such. Mieli (2018 [1977], 254) contends that the "antithesis of heterosexuality and homosexuality will be overcome" through the "(re)conquest of Eros," and Altman (2012 [1971], 110) states that "[w]ith liberation, homosexuality and heterosexuality would cease to be viewed as separate conditions." The abolition of gendered and sexual categories through the liberation of Eros implied nothing less than the birth of a new consciousness, of a new human. This emancipatory horizon was shared by gay and lesbian activists across North America, Britain, continental Europe, and Australasia (Altman 2012, 5–6), and was echoed within the manifestos, pamphlets, and magazines of the period. Even the liberationist groups that were more reluctant to ground their analysis in the notion of a universal desire embraced these utopian ambitions. The socialist Red Butterfly collective, for instance, regarded liberation as the advent of "a *labelless* society—one that will be free of the stereotypes that divide man from man" (*Come Out!* 1970, 4). Similarly, the *Gay Revolution Party* (1971, 344) defined gay revolution as the movement to "produce a world in which [...] homo- and heterosexuality will be incomprehensible terms."

It may be objected that, despite their opposition to normative gender and sexual categories, the gay liberationists

nevertheless based their claims in an account of human nature. There is certainly a persistent strand of essentialism in their Jungian archetypes of polymorphous, perverse sexuality. Although some of the conclusions that the liberationists reached appear implausible and naïve today, this should not be grounds for a wholesale dismissal of gay liberationist thought. Crucially, if the gay liberationists used the notion of a polymorphous human nature as a normative basis on which to assail capitalist society, their view of this universal gayness had no positive content. Their ideology could not be transformed into a set of concrete prescriptions. That is, their argument that the elimination of the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality would require “the liberation of the total human being” (Rat 2019 [1969], 7) was not followed by meditations on what this disalienated, eroticized human life would look like. They were largely agnostic about what forms of sexual life would emerge once the forces that produced the homo-/heterosexual divide were abolished. The liberationist position should be read as *anti-essentialist* in its insistence on the socially and historically produced character of sexual formations and on the desirability of their transcendence. As the GLF activist Allen Young (1992a [1972a], 28) declared: “Gay, in its most far-reaching sense, means not homosexual, but sexually free.” This quote illustrates that the term “gay” carried a decidedly future-orientated quality, invoking a utopian society where the repression of gay desire had been overcome.

Taking the *political* dimension of the term “gay,” as articulated by the liberationists, seriously has significant implications for how we understand various aspects of gay liberation history. Consider the centrality of “coming out” to the movement’s political strategy. Theorists have critiqued this tactic for its essentialism. Steven Seidman (1998, 178), for instance, writes: “The dominant discourses of Stonewall culture framed the closet in a way that assumes an already formed homosexual self.” Seidman argues that, for the liberationists, the closet served as a metaphor for the concealment of an authentic, true homosexual self. Such critiques, however, obscure the extent to which liberationists considered “gay” to be a political stance. If “gay” implied a challenge to “the very definitions and demarcations that society has created” (Altman 2012 [1971], 244)—and therefore involved a transformation of consciousness that would supplant the mindset of identity altogether—then “coming out” is more accurately understood as a *politicization* of homosexuality than as an *essentialization* of homosexuality. This crucial distinction is illustrated in popular liberationist slogans, such as “Out of the Closets and into the Streets” or “Coming out against the War.” The latter underscores the centrality of the US anti-war movement to the politicization of homosexuality. Since the claim to homosexuality could be used as a tactic to avoid the draft, it was within the context of mass anti-war protests that countless homosexual men “came out.” The historian Justin David Suran has, therefore, argued that the experience of finding a political voice often could not be disentangled from the process of assuming a gay identity. Suran (2001, 463) writes: “Adopting a gay identity in 1969 meant more than simply affirming one’s same-sex orientation by declaring oneself ‘a homosexual’; it meant positioning oneself in relation to a clearly articulated set of commitments and ideals associated at the time with radical politics.”

Mario Mieli (2018 [1977], 39) was clear about his intentions: As liberationists, he maintained, “far more than the ‘origin’ of our homosexuality, we are concerned to investigate and shed light on the motives for its persecution.” The liberationists endeavored to illuminate the forces that

repressed homosexuality, rather than discover its origins or ascertain its truth. Homosexuality was thus conceived as a social position produced in a constitutive relation to the totalizing systems of sexism, imperialism, and capitalism. We might say, then, that for the liberationists *homosexuality* named a *structural relation* to oppressive institutions (such as the nuclear family, education, the law, and private property), and *gay* named a shared *political consciousness* forged through the fight against those institutions. This politicized conception of sexuality was developed through the adoption, expansion, and reworking of many left-wing ideas. The New Left’s radical analyses of international systems of oppression—imperialism, capitalism, and sexism—“provided crucial ideological resources” for the articulation of gay liberationist ideology (Valocchi 2001, 455). It was the anti-imperialist consciousness of the period that proved especially foundational for the elaboration of gay liberationist conceptions of sexuality and the international.

### *The Dialectic of the International*

Many of the gay liberation movement’s first recruits had been active in protest movements against US state violence, from police brutality at home to imperialist wars abroad. From the very onset of the movement, gay liberationists drew connections between the national liberation struggles of the Third World and their own. By adopting the words “liberation” and “front” in its name, the GLF sought to reflect its affinities with the National Liberation Fronts of Vietnam and Algeria, and the politics of anti-imperialism more broadly (Stein 2012, 82). The Berkeley Gay Liberation Theater’s street performance entitled “No Vietnamese Ever Called Me a Queer,” which was staged in October 1969, attests to this attempt to discursively suture the gap between anti-militarist politics and gay identity. The performance was named after Muhammad Ali’s statement that “no Viet Cong ever called me n\*\*\*\*\*” when he refused the war draft. The Gay Liberation Theater sought to expose the perversity of “send[ing] men half way around the world to kill their brothers while we torment, rape, jail, and murder men for loving their brothers here” (quoted in Hobson 2016, 18). The theater group sought to aggregate various political horizons, from sexual freedom to anti-imperialism, under the umbrella of a politicized gay identity. The liberationists thus articulated a gay identity that was structured around opposition to the imperialist wars of the US state—that is, they identified military masculinity as a role that was imposed upon men to further the interests of the US imperialism. At a 1971 anti-war demonstration in Washington, the Gay Mayday Tribe characterized war and imperialism as extensions of heterosexuality, since they resulted from the socialization into conventional masculinity (Young 1992a [1972a], 20). “Gay,” in turn, became coupled to an anti-war, anti-imperialist political position.

The politicization of homosexuality was also achieved through a refusal to disarticulate gay identity from the issue of police brutality. In a July 1969 issue of the newspaper *Berkeley Tribe*, Leo Laurence (1969, 7), co-founder of the Bay Area Committee for Homosexual Freedom (CHF), wrote that a Black Panther official had approved the distribution of a CHF leaflet at a rally in Bobby Hutton Park. The leaflet included a statement about numerous recent police murders of gay men on the West Coast. It was this state violence, Jared Leighton (2019, 863) argues, that “put organizing against police brutality at the forefront of gay liberation activism in California and led gay activists to identify more closely with the Panthers.” The CHF, later renamed

San Francisco's GLF, forged political alliances with the Black Panther Party in their shared struggle against police brutality. This struggle was not confined to the West Coast. The *Chicago Gay Liberation* (1992 [1970], 346–48) famously stated in no uncertain terms: “Although we recognize that homosexuals have been oppressed in all societies, it is the struggle against that oppression in the context of American imperialism that faces us. [...] Our most immediate oppressors are the pigs.”

This final quote's conception of police brutality as one facet of US imperialism is not unfamiliar. The Black Panthers placed the operations of the US state, both domestic and foreign, within a single discursive frame. Their understanding of the US black freedom struggle refuted the separation of the condition of black Americans and of colonized peoples in Asia, Africa, and Latin America by embedding it within the tradition of Third World anti-colonialism (Malloy 2017, 72). Whereas the civil rights movement had constructed black Americans as citizens that had been denied their rights—a diagnosis that placed their analysis of racism firmly within the domestic frame of the nation-state—the Panthers' anti-colonial vernacular enabled them to tie themselves to anti-colonial groups across the Third World. Ideological tools such as the term “pig” were used to refer to police power in urban US black communities *and* to the US government's puppet regimes around the world (Malloy 2017, 85).

This analysis of Western imperialism as a global system of domination—developed from the political thought of twentieth-century anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist revolutionaries such as Vladimir Lenin, W.E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, and George Padmore—was the central ideological frame for US anti-imperialist groups in the sixties. Adom Getachew (2019, 4) explains that this internationalist tradition recognized that imperialism “did not create one world but instead entailed racialized differentiation.” That is, imperial integration produced its opposite: the multiplication of exclusions, dependencies, and inequalities. For the anti-imperialist movement of the period, of which the Black Panthers constituted the vanguard in the United States, imperialism created the international through the consolidation of structures of racial domination and hierarchy, so the full realization of the international as a realm of non-domination and egalitarianism would be achieved through anti-imperialism. In other words, imperialism produced the international as a site of immanent possibility for a postimperial reordering of the world. Hence, the centrality of the dialectic was as follows: the totalization of systems of domination and the rapid spread of revolutionary fervor were to be understood as oppositional yet interrelated effects of a *single* historical process, namely the making of the international. This understanding of the international as co-extensive with imperialist systems of social organization, as well as the internal movements for their supersession, rewrites it as a site of politics rather than a mere descriptive category or a pre-constituted terrain on which politics plays out.

The gay liberation movement largely embraced this analysis of the international. This occurred on a stylistic, ideological, and institutional level. The use of the epithet “pig” for police officers illustrates their appropriation of the radical rhetorical styles present within the militant activism of the period (Jay and Young 1992, xxxv). The unviability of divorcing the liberationists' conception of gay oppression from an anti-imperialist frame can be illustrated via the widely used concept of the “gay ghetto,” which mirrors the Black Panthers' conception of racism as a form of “internal colo-

nialism.” The historian Emily Hobson (2016, 26) writes that the gay liberationists “used the concept of the gay ghetto to describe a wide-ranging social system that constrained sexuality and gender.” In the view of many liberationists, the “gay ghetto” named a system of exploitation and repression that was upheld through the same social structures that controlled the “black colonies” within the United States. As Wittman's (1992 [1970], 340) manifesto claims, “our common enemies are: police, city hall, capitalism.” The term “gay ghetto” was therefore one way for gay and lesbian activists to reconceptualize gender and sexual liberation as a fundamental transformation in structures and relations of power, breaking with a conception of justice as the recognition of homosexuality as a minoritarian status.

Gay liberationist thought, however, did not simply rehearse the anti-imperialist analysis of this period without modification. They were confronted with a contradiction that led them to further develop their understanding of the international. While they were adopting the ideology and political strategies of anti-imperialist radicals, the gay liberationists were simultaneously being accused of cultural imperialism by the Cuban government. This contradictory position provided the gay liberationists with a unique standpoint from where to interrogate how the separation of the international into distinct spheres was not only socially, but also sexually, constituted. The final section turns to the transnational links of the gay liberation movement to Cuba. First, I examine the Cuban state discourse on homosexuality, which characterized it as a pathology and a cultural imperialist offensive. I then explore how the gay liberationists' dialectical conception of the international, combined with their politicization of homosexuality, allowed them to articulate an effective response to the Cuban government's accusations.

### The Gay Liberationists Go to Cuba: Reconsidering the Relation between Sexuality and the International

In 1969, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) mobilized hundreds of left-wing US activists to travel to Cuba, in violation of the travel embargo, where they contributed their labor to the new Communist state by cutting and harvesting sugarcane and gained direct experience of Cuban society and culture (Lekus 2004, 57). Several gay and lesbian liberationists embarked upon these illegal trips, called the Venceremos Brigades. In Cuba, they distributed gay liberation material and met with other visitors from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Brazil, and Bolivia (Galvin 1970, 19). The activist Allen Young joined the first tour prior to coming out and only five months before the Stonewall riots. He returned deeply disturbed by his discoveries about the government's historical internment of homosexuals in work camps, as well as the ongoing persecution, ghettoization, and abuse of homosexuals and the prevalent anti-gay sentiment among his fellow *brigadistas* (Young 1992b [1972b], 209–10). A year later, Young participated in a forum between the Gay Liberation Font and the *brigadistas* who had returned from the second Venceremos Brigade. Tensions began to arise between the two groups, as the gay liberationists grew impatient with their comrades' silence on the Cuban government's anti-homosexual activities, and erupted in a hostile confrontation in the summer of 1970 when New York City's Elgin Theater accidentally double-booked two benefit showings, one for the Venceremos Brigade and one for a Stonewall commemoration. When GLF members refused to cancel their event, they were verbally attacked and physically threatened by the *brigadistas* (Kissack 1995, 124).

In the discussions between the Front members and Brigade leadership, several GLF activists decided to join the third contingent to Cuba. However, Jim Fouratt, a prominent spokesperson for the gay liberation movement who had helped to organize the first *Venceremos* Brigade, was prohibited from joining the third contingent because the committee decided that his ambition to organize gays and lesbians there would antagonize their Cuban comrades (Duberman 2019, 295). On the third trip, the gay and lesbian *brigadistas* were harassed and intimidated, and soon after the National Committee of the *Venceremos* Brigade issued a new recruitment policy that banned any lesbians and gays from participation unless they agreed to remain silent about their sexuality (Lekus 2004, 60). There was a concerted effort on behalf of Cuban officials and the brigade organizers to remove all gay liberation activists from future contingents, leading to a rapid deterioration of relations between the *Venceremos* Brigade and the GLF. These conflicts also inflamed irreparable political divisions within the Liberation News Service (LNS). The organization was banned from attending a journalism conference in Havana after deciding to distribute a letter written by an anonymous group of gay Cubans that expressed criticism of the Cuban government's treatment of homosexuals. Despite their sympathetic stance toward gay liberation, the LNS stopped short of challenging fundamental aspects of the Cuban revolution. Allen Young, who Stonecker (2012, 112) has referred to as "the driving force behind LNS internationalism," did not relent in his reproval of the collective. Ian Keith Lekus (2004, 77) has argued that, over the course of the Brigades, "the GLF *brigadistas* practiced their own form of foreign policy." The poet Allen Ginsberg would later affirm that "the confrontation with the repressive, conservative bureaucracy in Cuba [...] was one of the most useful things that gay lib did on an international scale" (Young 1981, 23).

#### *Cuba's Articulation of the International*

There are remarkable parallels between the Cuban state discourses on homosexuality during the gay liberation era and the postcolonial state discourses that liberal LGBTI movements encounter today. The gay and lesbian *brigadistas* were continuously framed as agents of a corrosive, imperialist project to impose Western homosexuality upon Cuban society. The Cuban state adopted its theories of homosexuality both from the Freudian model that probed its origins in psychological pathology and from the Stalinist model that characterized it as an eradicable symptom of capitalism, decadence, and idleness (Lekus 2004, 73). Homosexuality was also regarded as incompatible with the militant image of manhood that was promoted as key to the successful fight against imperialism and against the social vices of prostitution, gambling, and drugs (Young 1992b [1972b], 213–14). In its official statement banning self-avowed lesbians and gays from participation in the *Venceremos* Brigades, the National Committee referred to gay liberationism as "a cultural imperialist offensive against the Cuban Revolution" that was "imposing North American gay culture on the Cubans (for example, parading in drag in a Cuban town, acting in an overtly sexual manner at parties)" (*Venceremos Brigade* 1997 [1972], 411). The policy defined homosexuality as "a social pathology which reflects left-over bourgeois decadence and has no place in the formation of the New Man which Cuba is building" (*Venceremos Brigade* 1997 [1972]). Exemptions from the ban would only be made for those who were intent on "respecting Cuban culture"—that is, remaining silent about their homosexuality

(*Venceremos Brigade* 1997 [1972], 412). The document relied on a strict demarcation between Cuban national culture and American capitalist culture. The *Venceremos Brigade* (1997 [1972], 411) maintained: "This position was formulated by the Cuban people for the Cuban people. It was not formulated for the US, or any other country. Cuba is for Cubans [...]." Many of the narratives found within Cuban state discourse were repeated by the liberationists' fellow New Left *brigadistas*, for whom homosexuality "represented either bourgeois decadence, a vestige of capitalism that required eradication, or a joke worthy of derision, dismissal, and harassment" (Lekus 2004, 60). Members of the Third World caucus condemned homosexuality as a "white man's disease" (*Alternate U Forum* 1992 [1970], 235).

The Cuban government represented homosexuality in terms of bourgeois deviancy and pathology, and defended this representation through the language of anti-imperialism. This position is deeply ironic considering that the very association of homosexuality with degeneracy and perversion was a product of nineteenth-century Western empire building. Problematizing the claim that homosexuality was an invention of Western modernity (a claim found within queerphobic state discourses and queer studies alike), Ann Laura Stoler (1995) has illustrated how such sexual chronologies bracket histories of "the West" from the sexual discourses of race and empire through which bourgeois sexuality in "the West" was founded and produced. According to Stoler (1995, 7), tracing the emergence of the West's modern discourse of homosexuality within the West alone, "misses key sites in the production of that discourse, discounts the practices that racialized bodies, and thus elides a field of knowledge that provided the contrasts for what a 'healthy, vigorous, bourgeois' body was all about." In other words, Stoler posits that modern discourses on sexuality in the metropole and the colonies comprised a single field. Neville Hoad (2000) has also influentially argued that theories of modern homosexuality were forged within an imperial landscape, as the category of the male homosexual in the West emerged coded by the racial grammars of Darwinian evolutionary theory. He finds that the knowledges produced about the modern homosexual figured homosexuality as a form of degeneracy and decadence, and homosexual sex as more primitive than heterosexual sex. These evolutionary tropes connote a temporal distancing, assigning male homosexuals to an early stage within an imperial developmental narrative and treating this distance as evidence of deviance, perversion, or arrest. Sexual and racial knowledges were in this sense mutually constitutive. Hoad (2000, 134) writes: "Knowledges of the sexual practices of colonised people [...] provided crucial evidence for nearly all parties engaged in turn of the century debates around what increasingly came to be called *homosexuality*." Evidence of the existence of same-sex practices in the colonies justified the further pathologization and criminalization of homosexuality within the metropole.

What these analyses illustrate is that the Cuban state's discourse on homosexuality, while legitimated as an anti-imperialist stance, in fact stemmed directly from the ideologies of sexuality that were developed through the process of empire building. Consequently, "the homophobia [the gay and lesbian *brigadistas*] encountered trying to support Castro's revolution, homophobia which the Brigade organizers justified as a defense against further North American cultural imperialism, recommitted the remnants of the New Left to the sexual ideology of empire" (Lekus 2004, 79). In short, the Cuban government articulated a dualistic



conception of the international that presumed a radical separability between so-called Western and Cuban sexual culture, as well as the possibility of identifying the origins of those sexual cultures within their respective spheres. As such, the state was able to frame US sexual culture, distorted and perverted by the decadence and excesses of American capitalism, as threatening a unique Cuban sexual culture. This dualistic articulation of the international obscures the extent to which the association of American homosexuality with degeneracy and pathology that they represented as a cultural imperialist offensive was in fact generated through the very process of Western empire building. The naturalization of a reified distinction between “Western” and “non-Western” sexual cultures therefore reproduces the ideology of empire—and is all the more pernicious when parsed in the terms of anti-imperialism.

It is worth pausing here to note the extent to which the cultural imperialism model within contemporary scholarship has reproduced, rather than rejected, many of the premises within these state discourses. Due to its dualistic conception of the international, it, too, has conceived of transnational sexual movements as a form of cultural imperialism that has the power to destroy non-Western (same-sex) cultures. This conspicuous ideological affiliation between theories of cultural imperialism and queerphobic state discourse is worrying. The former implies that the only way to counter the notion that transnational sexual movements are inherently imperialist would be to have recourse to a universal sexual epistemology, as evidenced by the strategies pursued by mainstream transnational LGBTI movements. This final section shows, however, that the transnational activities of the gay liberation movement neither presumed the universality of one sexual epistemology nor sought to impose their particular sexual culture onto Cuban society.

#### *Gay Liberationism's Articulation of the International*

It is gay liberationism's historical materialist mode of analysis—which brings the relational character of homosexuality and the dialectic of the international to the fore—that created possibilities for them to oppose the Cuban state discourse without reproducing its presuppositions or resorting to liberal universalisms. Rather than search for the “essence” of Cuban homosexuality, the gay and lesbian *brigadistas* probed the structures that produced the conditions of homosexual life in Cuban society. In his political biographies, Allen Young (1981, 4–6) outlines the factors that were considered central to the constitution and control of homosexual life at the time. These included the centrality of the nuclear family as the basic unit of society; the prevalence of particular forms of sexism—machismo and male chauvinism—present within the Hispanic world; the consolidation and expansion of state power in the aftermath of the revolution; the “prerevolutionary status of Havana as a ‘sin city’” due to the colonial restructuring of its economy around prostitution, gambling, and narcotics (Young 1981, 9); and the adoption of Soviet theories of homosexuality (Young 1981, 15–18). Similar explanatory accounts of the production of Cuban homosexuality in relation to postrevolutionary structural adjustments and developments can be found in articles within various gay liberationist papers, including Guy Nassburg's exchange with Martha Shelley in *The Detroit Liberator* (1970, 5–6) and Keith Birch's (1975, 8–9) extensive investigation “Gays in Cuba” in the British journal *Gay Left*. For the purposes of this article, whether or not the *content* of these analyses

is convincing or plausible is secondary. What is notable, rather, is their *form*. The conceptualization of homosexuality as a *relation* to structures of power brackets the question of essences and sidesteps the search for a universal identity.<sup>3</sup>

The remainder of this article demonstrates that the liberationists refused to think of homosexuality non-rationally—either by positing its universal, pre-social essence or by separating its particular cultural instantiations from the processes that produce them. They did not universalize one sexual epistemology or fetishize the diversity of sexual epistemologies they encountered. Instead, they sought to reveal how homosexuality was positioned in a categorical relation to various institutions, from the nuclear family to sex work—a contingent positioning that varied according to sociopolitical context. While the Cuban state propagated the notion that it was possible to identify an isolated national Cuban sexual culture, my argument is that the gay liberationists regarded the apparent separation of “American sexuality” and “Cuban sexuality” as emerging from the imperial ordering of the world. The Cuban state's rhetoric, by reifying the divide between these two separate sexual spheres, obscures the extent to which the appearance of such a divide is created through the project of empire building.

The liberationists conceived of both Cuban and US sexual formations as constituted in relation to the same systems of social organization—primarily, sexism, capitalism, and imperialism. It is worth noting the congruence between this conceptualization and how Rosemary Hennessy (1994, 90–92) characterizes historical materialism's systematic treatment of global systems of oppression. To ventriloquize the liberationists in Hennessy's voice, while these systems are certainly totalizing as they persistently organize social lives across specific contexts, they are nevertheless geopolitically and historically inflected. It is possible to account for specific, differential cultural articulations of Cuban and North American sexual formations *and* their integration in international political, social, and economic relations simultaneously. Firmly rejecting the Cuban state's insistence on a local, revolutionary Cuban sexual culture that is endangered by the influences of gay and lesbian North American *brigadistas*, Allen Young (1981, 86) writes: “For a regime that makes such a fuss about ‘cultural imperialism,’ [its] dependence on Eastern Europe for intellectual ideas and communication is contradictory and unfortunate.” In this pithy remark, Young reveals the impossibility of demarcating a “local” Cuban sexual culture that is prior to, resistant to, or discontinuous with globalized sexual discourses. The particular manifestation of homosexuality within the Cuban society is constituted through international systems of power. There is no “local” Cuban sexual culture that exists outside of the imperial organization of the world. It is for this reason that Young refrains from delineating the local from the global determinants in the production and regulation of Cuban homosexuality, or from granting analytical primacy to either side. On the one hand, he maintains that the policies of “US government and business [...] cannot and should not bear the entire burden” or

<sup>3</sup> Some discussions of homosexuality in Cuba did show an awareness of the historically and geopolitically varied constructions of same-sex desire. For instance, in his biography Allen Young (1981, 25) explains that homosexuality in Cuba was defined in terms of sexual acts rather than sexual object choice, so that a man who performs an active role during sex is not considered “a homosexual in the eyes of Cubans.” Nevertheless, the liberationists did not display much ambition to produce anthropological accounts of non-Western forms of same-sex desire and experience. They were more determined to discern the processes that generate variegated sexual cultures yet are mystified as those seemingly disparate cultures acquire a fetishized character.

be used to silence critics of the Cuban state. On the other hand, he insists that the policies of the Cuban government cannot be properly understood as “domestic” factors since “centralized male-dominated governments ultimately have more in common with their ruling counterparts elsewhere” (Young 1981, 90–91). His analysis reveals a dialectical view of the international. For Young, the international is not simply the neutral and objective field on which transnational politics occurs—a field composed of pre-constituted sites onto which discrete sexual cultures can be mapped—but rather a field that is produced and remade through an emergent imperial order and the struggles for its abolition.

This discussion returns us to the liberationists’ representation of gayness as inseparable from the political consciousness that is forged through a collective struggle against the totalizing systems that produce and regulate (historically and culturally varied) conditions of homosexuality. Reflecting on his tour of Cuba, Young writes: “Some people, straight and gay, think that gayness is defined by what you do in bed, but my contact with Cuban gays taught me in myriad ways how gayness is shared experiences based on the uniqueness of gay love plus the struggle to resist the oppressions of a sexist society.” This articulation of gayness as a political stance is present within the Gay Revolution Party’s response to a declaration by the Cuban National Congress on Education and Culture, which outlined the state’s view of homosexuality as a pathology and deviation. The *Gay Revolution Party* (1971, 12) announced that “the creation of gayness,” defined as “mutuality and equality of human relationships,” was “inherent to the development of a true socialist society.” Inversely, “the only way to ensure a straight Cuba is to re-establish capitalism” (*Gay Revolution Party* 1971). In this response, the gay liberationists clarified that they were not fighting for the recognition of Cuban homosexuals as a minority group, or for their equality under the law. These reformist positions would have required the liberationists to identify and naturalize a particular conception of homosexuality that could be recognized by the state and codified within juridical discourse. By refusing this injunction to minoritize gayness, they bypassed the essentialist trappings of the reformist approach. Instead, they affirmed that they were not “call[ing] upon any straight male government to change its policy or reform its laws, whether it is in Cuba, the United States, or the Soviet Union” (*Gay Revolution Party* 1971). In a response to the same declaration, published in the newspaper *Fag Rag*, the Gay Committee of *Returned Brigadistas* (1971, 12) encapsulated it thus: “Gay people owe allegiance to no nation.” The activist Wayne Pierce (1970, 5), adding his voice to the discussions about experiences of the gay and lesbian *brigadistas*, also reiterated that gay liberationism was not a fight for “a society with ‘good leaders,’” who would extend recognition and guarantee protection to an objective, empirical group of individuals called “homosexuals,” but for a society “where the power is really in the hands of the people” to achieve a total transformation of the sociopolitical order, including its governing regimes of sexual and gender intelligibility.

The Los Angeles Research Group, a group of self-avowed lesbian communist liberationists, wrote a pamphlet in 1975 that tackled widespread Communist proclamations on homosexuality. In a quotation worth citing at length, they counter the assertion that “gayness is a ‘response’ either to decaying imperialism or male supremacy”:

[I]t is a mistake to focus on response and label it negative. Take for instance, the historical phenomena of capitalism and imperialism. Class struggle and wars

of national liberation are “responses” we support and participate in. Class collaboration is also a “response”; it is a response to be isolated and defeated. Thus it is insufficient to dismiss a phenomenon as a “response” and as such to label it negative. What is key is the form it takes, whose class interests it advances.

(Los Angeles Research Group 2018 [1975], 119–20)

This quotation demonstrates the significant differences between contemporary mainstream LGBTI organizations’, the cultural imperialism model’s, and the gay and lesbian liberationists’ answers to the abiding discourses that frame homosexuality as an aberrant invention of Western capitalist decadence and degeneracy. Transnational LGBTI movements have dismissed these discourses wholesale, insisting on the universality of LGBTI identities and experiences through the language of human rights. Proponents of the cultural imperialism model have forcefully critiqued those LGBTI movements for their universalism, accusing them of assimilating diverse sexual cultures into a Western sexual epistemology. In so doing, however, they concede that LGBTI identities are indeed a product of Western modernity that impose themselves in an imperialist manner on the sexual cultures of non-Western localities. This introduces an analytical and political conundrum. First, can we identify a “local” sexual culture that is independent from or external to the global imperial order in which it arises? Second, is every transnational sexual movement thus condemned to the charge of imperialism, as it would entail the universalization of a particular sexual epistemology?

In the above quotation, the lesbian liberationists argue that, if gayness is in fact a product of modernity, this need not be a regrettable admission. They equate gayness with other forms of revolutionary conflict, such as wars of national liberation and class struggle, which are also responses to international systems of oppression. This pamphlet therefore highlights that through the politicization of homosexuality, gay liberationists were able to envisage a model of transnational sexual politics that was predicated on neither a universal sexual epistemology nor on the fetishization of non-Western sexual differences. In line with the LA Research Group’s argument, this section has shown that the gay and lesbian *brigadistas* were not attempting to impose their own sexual culture onto Cubans. In fact, they did not hold a purely cultural conception of gay identity, which they could have expected to discover in Cuba. The liberationists considered themselves united in a common struggle with their gay and lesbian Cuban comrades not for the establishment of a common cultural identity, but rather *against* the systems of sexism, imperialism, and capitalism that are productive of gender and sexual categories altogether.

## Conclusion

Sexual politics today finds itself in a bind, trapped between universalized LGBTI citizenship and particularized sexual nativism. In this context, the question of what forms of political solidarity are still available to us becomes increasingly pertinent. This article has argued that the historical materialism of the gay liberationists offers us a conceptual and political inheritance that might prompt a creative escape from this bind. To illustrate how this could occur, it staged an encounter between the gay liberation movement and theories of cultural imperialism. It presented two main arguments about gay liberationism. First, the expansion of punitive and repressive state apparatuses in the postwar era

provoked a politicization of homosexuality by providing a basis for shared suffering and grievance. It was within this context, and amid the wider insurrectionary spirit of the sixties, that lesbians and gays generated new conceptions of sexual liberation. I argued that a significant strand of liberationism conceived of homosexuality as a social relation (rather than a fixed, essential identity) and used the term “gay” to denote a political stance that was established in the struggle to overcome the systems that produce and regulate homosexuality. Second, through their domestic and transnational activities, the liberationists re-envisioned the international dialectically: imperialism creates international structures of dependency and hierarchy, and the negation of imperialism enables the realization of the international as an egalitarian, domination-free realm. This conceptualization of the international did not posit that the identities and experiences of all homosexuals were the same. It acknowledged the differential constitution of homosexual life depending on particular sociopolitical contexts, yet aimed to illuminate (and eliminate) the international systems of power that produced those conditions across different contexts. For the gay liberationists, there was no sexuality outside the long history of Western imperialism, so sexual liberation would only be achieved through the elaboration of anti-imperialist solidarities across geopolitical settings and divisions of the international.

This historical materialist mode of analysis contributes to international studies in at least three ways. First, it enriches efforts within TSS and QIR to interrogate the enduring divisions that determine our categorization of the international—West/East, North/South, core/periphery, etc.—by moving beyond an attempt to unsettle the discursive stability of such divisions to addressing why they exist in the first place. Historical materialism, I have argued, explicates the separation of the international into distinct spheres as developing from the imperial organization of social relations. Adopting this method, the liberationists develop an account of the dualistic imperial order as based upon a sexual division, and present the role of these dualisms in structuring sexual and gender configurations across the postcolonial divide. Second, the history of the gay liberation movement can expand the emancipatory horizons of contemporary abolitionist politics. Their thought and practice enjoin us to reflect on the ways that sexual oppression is entangled with imperial subjugation and to recalibrate both anti-imperialist struggle and sexual politics accordingly. The abolition of sexual and gendered categories is entwined with a postimperial restructuring of the international. Third, this article prompts scholars researching the internationalization of sexuality to consider how their diagnoses and analyses are shaped, and restricted, by their empirical cases. The overwhelming focus on mainstream LGBTI movements and organizations within the field operates as what Sara Ahmed (2006) terms an “orientation device.” The field’s orientation toward institutionalized transnational movements redirects its attention away from other lines of thought and inquiry, rendering them distant or unthinkable. It is therefore instructive to ask what analytical and political possibilities are foreclosed through this orientation, and what openings for thought would be created through an examination of alternative transnational sexual movements, such as AIDS activism, queer migrant solidarity campaigns, or Third World feminism. This article has attempted such a dis-/re-orientation of the field through an exploration of the gay liberation movement.

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