**Trans\* America**

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When Cynthia Weber described the United States as “daggered with a queer dildo harnessed to its midsection”[[1]](#footnote-1) as it faced a Cuba newly under the control of Fidel Castro, she was describing a United States struggling with its (lost) masculinity given its combined desire for and inability to impose its will on Cuba. As Weber explains, in the Cuban Revolution “a masculinized United States ‘lost’ its Caribbean reward …-the feminized Cuba, its symbolic object of desire.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Weber argues that Revolutionary Cuba mixed Cuba’s “iconic femininity” (its subject position in relation to the imperial US) with Castro’s revolutionary “hypermasculinity,”[[3]](#footnote-3) (which challenged US imperialism in Cuba and in the Caribbean more broadly). It was this mixed figure of Revolutionary Cuba that the US – as a self-perceived, straight, hypermasculine Western hemispheric hegemon – continued to woo, “even once its mistress had grown a beard”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

It is the conundrum of confused, crossed and confounded national and international codings of sex, gender and sexuality in US-Cuba relations that Weber traces in *Faking It*. Weber argues that it is only through a framework that takes into account what she calls queer figures and queer performativities that US-Caribbean relations begin to make sense.

Yet the US continued to misread Cuba as feminine “even once its mistress had grown a beard”[[5]](#footnote-5) because the US as the otherwise self-perceived straight and hypermasculine dominant power in the Western hemisphere found itself attracted to what Weber theorizes as a queer object of desire – the mixed masculine and feminine body politics of Revolutionary Cuba - which the US continued to define as feminine because it did not have a conceptual framework for dealing with the coincidence of queerness and empire.

Given this contradiction, the United States’ Cold War attempts to conquer and seduce this bearded mistress were frustrated. In the face of Cuba’s change from the feminized prize of the Spanish-American War to a revolutionary communist state, the United States could choose between facing its “symbolic castration” from the loss of a ‘feminized’ object of desire, or facing its nonnormative or queer desire for the other-gendered Cuba.[[6]](#footnote-6) Weber describes the US’ hostile treatment of Cuba as a result of a struggle to “reclaim normalized hegemonic masculinity,”[[7]](#footnote-7) “insisting on not seeing itself as castrated or the queer compensatory strategies that enable it to appear ‘straight.’”[[8]](#footnote-8) As a result, towards Cuba and more generally, the US had been “’faking it’ – ‘it’ being straight/normalized masculine hegemonic identity and phallic power.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The ‘fake’ US was “costumed for international action” as a hegemonic, masculinized, straight state.[[10]](#footnote-10) The result, Weber describes, is the “American body … in drag … doubly marked by both the presence of the phallus (this is a man who has a penis and therefore could wield the phallus) and the absence of the phallus (this is a man in a dress).”[[11]](#footnote-11) As Weber notes, this conflates homosexuality and cross-dressing, but so did the United States at the time, where “male transvestites” were “very often … called fags, a term connoting a dephallusized other.”[[12]](#footnote-12) To avoid the ultimate humiliation of recognizing its own dephallusization, Weber explains that the US “seems to accept its symbolic castration and proudly displays the ‘adjustment’ it has made that readies it for international action.”[[13]](#footnote-13) This dildo display, however, remains limited: “it is critically important what the American body politic’s acceptance of its symbolic castration does not accept, what a rephallusized United States must not recognize – the queerness of its ‘member.’”[[14]](#footnote-14) In plain language, the United States was at once operating with a metaphorical strap-on and in denial that it was indeed a strap-on, believing it to be a ‘natural’ male sex organ. In her 1999 intervention, Weber looks to confront the United States with “the horror of its own lack and strapped-on queer accessory”[[15]](#footnote-15) to demonstrate the nonsensical nature of both US foreign policy generally and the then-forty-year old US feud with Cuba.

Recently, that feud has thawed. In July of 2015 for the first time in 54 years, a Cuban embassy opened in Washington, DC, and in August, an American embassy opened in Havana. Critics (why now?) and fans (why did it take this long?) alike were confused by the timing of the easing of tensions. Aside from timing questions, news coverage of the events has ranged from derogatory (“an ephemeral effort at ‘legacy-burnishing’”[[16]](#footnote-16)) to praiseful (“potentially positive effects of US influence on Cuba”[[17]](#footnote-17)) to puzzled (“opening embassies ends an anomaly: why maintain a continuing quarrel …?”[[18]](#footnote-18)). The puzzled reaction, for example, from Hamish McRae in *The Independent*,[[19]](#footnote-19) misses what Cynthia Weber figured out in the 1990s: the maintenance of the quarrel was not *about* the quarrel, but about its central place in the gendered identities of both states. So has Cuba changed genders again, this time from Castro’s hypermasculine revolutionary state back to a feminized tourist attraction? Or the US come to terms with its symbolic castration and/or its nonnormative desire? Or both? And why isn’t anyone asking those questions about U.S.-Cuba rapprochement?

This brief piece argues that the US reading of Cuba’s gender presentations *has* changed again to a different, genderqueer form; that the US in 2015 deals its nonnormative desire very differently than the US in 1975 or 1995, and that Weber’s analysis shows a number of crucial, but crucially neglected, dimensions of US-Cuba rapprochement.

The first argument, that the US reading of Cuba’s gender presentations have shifted again, is fairly straightforward: the change in control of Cuban government from Fidel Castro to Raul Castro mattered for the foreign policy identity Cuba performed, and for the US’ reading of it. The confusing, hypermasculine nature of Cuba to the US – Cuba’s ‘beard’ – was personified in Fidel Castro. Raul Castro certainly had a direct role in a substantial amount of brutality in Revolutionary Cuba, but his public persona and mannerisms have always been very different than his brother’s. If Fidel Castro is known for animated speeches, hard lines, and unrelenting poker face, Raul Castro has always worked quietly behind the scenes, carefully read and written speeches, and been known for discretion. As Raul Castro took over the administration of Cuba, he became quietly less aggressive in the Cuban government’s posturing, both towards the United States and generally. Raul Castro’s Cuba – the Cuba the United States is ‘making up’ with – is no less a “mistress with a moustache” than Weber read it in the 1990s. Its “moustache,” though, is not a hypermasculine, aggressive, resolute masculinity, but a quiet, non-descript masculinity. While Cuba’s combined femininity and hypermasculinity under Fidel combined to make it a hybrid, its non-normative gendering now remains but has transformed into a different form of queerness. Raul’s Cuba has one foot in a dead revolution and a long-defeated communist ideal, and another an uncertain and uncharted future. For a United States looking to seduce *this* Cuba, s/he is much more approachable, much less scary than the Cuba that the s/he that the United States could not conquer, could not seduce in the 1950s and 1960s. This Cuba, however mixed its gender signals, *could be seduced.*

Still, twenty years ago, the United States would not have seduced its bearded mistress in public even were s/he available for seduction. This brings us to the second argument: that the US deals with its own queerness, and Cuba’s queerness, very differently now. In 1999, Weber tells a story of an intensely homophobic American foreign policy being fueled by an intensely homophobic *America*. In denial of the trans\* or genderqueer nature of Cuba, the United States attempted to seduce a non-existent *feminine* Cuba. Failing at that because of Cuba’s hypermasculine side, the United States then turned to a phallocentric aggression to shape policy. This phallocentric aggression looked to contain and destroy Cuba: the inability to fuck it (because men don’t fuck men) led to a need to *fuck it over.*

Within this framework, it is hard to imagine US-Cuba rapprochement being possible in a world in which homosexuality remained a taboo in the United States. Instead, part of what makes 2015 Cuba *seducible* is a rising comfort among Americans that men, women, and people who are either/or or neither/nor have a wide matrix of sexual preferences and desires. Where the United States in 1995 had to hide the that its (literal and symbolic) phallus was a strap-on because masculinity was strictly linked to normative sexuality and ‘appropriate’ genitalia, 2015 is different. In 2015, the popular culture of the US treats genderqueer identity as a fad. Television shows Caitlyn Jenner’s fashion,[[20]](#footnote-20) trans\* parenting tips,[[21]](#footnote-21) and Krisin Beck’s bravery,[[22]](#footnote-22) while the United States Secretary of State engages in ‘pinkwashing’ all around the world.[[23]](#footnote-23) The 2015 United States, under the Obama administration, is looking to project both externally and internally the image that queer and proud of its queerness.[[24]](#footnote-24) Being queer and trans\* tolerant is part of a new liberalism in the United States.[[25]](#footnote-25) The new US, which I call trans\* America, wields progressive policies on gay marriage, gay military participation, and trans\* acceptance as weapons to demonstrate its superiority to the backwards states it invades and destroys – real states treat their queers well; real states *are* their queers.[[26]](#footnote-26) The argument for the liberal rights of queer citizens, both as a human rights contention and as a claim of homonationalism, has salience in the US of 2015.

Where as post-phallic power was once a shame that required symbolic or actual dephallusization, it is now another tool in the toolkit of the rebranded-as-queer ‘tough but tender’ masculine state of 1990s fame.[[27]](#footnote-27) The queer US, like its queer citizens, is permitted a wider variety of sexual desires than it was twenty years ago: homoeroticism no longer means you are a fag, and homosexuality does not come with an assumption of dephallusization. At the same time, the expansion of the matrix of acceptable desires has not, with it, expanded the matrix of acceptable genders for the US. Instead, in place of homophobia, the US deploys homonormativity and homonationalism. Homonormativity preserves traditional gender roles, family structures, and personal presentations present in straight behaviors even as an actor experiences and fulfills queer desires. Homonationalism wields queers in the service of national culture, which declares its allegiance to queers within the hegemonically masculine structure of state governance.

Previous to U.S.-Cuba rapprochement, United States President Obama was talked about as “both feminized and masculinized” in policy presentation.[[28]](#footnote-28) The now-“out” queer United States, privileged, in Judith Butler’s terms, by the availability of “outness” in a unipolar world, then, remains the masculine pursuer rather than the feminized prize.[[29]](#footnote-29) But the 2015 United States, rather than punishing its bearded mistress for her non-normative sexuality by wielding his/her lavender dildo in anger and power-projection, invites him/her to ‘come hither’ to play with it.

It is in this context that I use the term trans\* America – not only to denote an America where gender norms and gender presentations are changing, but also to describe an America *of* gender(ed) ambiguities. To say the United States is comfortable with its queerness because of its queer attraction to a Cuba of uncertain or mixed gender is certainly an overstatement. But to stay that it is comfortable with a particular *version* of its queerness – one steeped in traditional masculinity but permissive of a wider variety of desires – is not only accurate, but crucial to understanding U. S.-Cuba rapprochement.

There are those who will ask – why do you need gender and sexuality to explain US-Cuba rapprochement? Is it not simple enough to say that time has passed, Raul is different than Fidel, and Obama is different than his predecessors? I argue that those changes *are an incomplete explanation* because they neglect the gendered and sexualized dynamic that Weber pointed out, and cannot explain the exact timing of the rapproachement – either why the conflict so far outlasted the Cold War or why it ended when and how it did.

The shift from homophobia and queer-baiting in the US to pinkwashing and homonormativity roughly coinciding with this change between the US and Cuba is not random. Instead, the US’ ‘outness’ in the discourse of this queer seduction is both implicitly and explicitly a motivator of the policy. Indeed the “positive effects” of the rapprochement that some news articles discuss are a part of “the Obama Administration’s efforts to promote gay rights around the world.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Analyst Olivia Marple cites as an example “the act of American clergy blessing gay Cubans.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Where queerness made the United States shy of seduction and aggressive/violent towards the object of its affection in 1975 and 1995, it constitutes a dimension of relationship chemistry in 2015.

In other words, shifting gender presentations and gendered readings of the United States and Cuba leave them in the same place as twenty years ago in some ways (a male/female prize with a queer masculine suitor), but in a very different place in other ways (where Cuba’s masculinity and the United States’ queerness have both changed shape). These changes are permissive causes of US-Cuba rapprochement, and account for both its timing and many of the peculiarities of interaction that led both states to this place.

So, why, then, is U.S.-Cuba rapprochement not talked about in these terms more often? When it was announced, why was I one of few people who went to pick up *Faking It* to explain the policy change? In 1999, IR – even feminist IR – undervalued both the importance of Weber’s account of US.-Latin American relations and the discipline’s need for queer theorizing. In 2015, the first remains true, though attention to queer theory is (finally?) on the upswing.[[32]](#footnote-32) At the same time, IR’s (limited) attention to queer theory seems to be trending in many of the same ways as the US’ (hegemonically masculine) queer desire – it is a sanitized, well-behaved, discipline-facing queer theory that receives attention, rather than an unrestrained, fully free, queer manifesto like *Faking It.* I picked up *Faking It* to understand the US and Cuba in 2015 not only because its observations about United States-Cuba relations foreshadow rapproachment, but also because of the theoretical richness and explanatory *tour de force* that give the book that lasting quality. *Faking It* has staying power, and recent changes in the key relationship it analyzed just serve to demonstrate that all the more definitively.

1. Cynthia Weber, *Faking It: US Hegemony in a Post-Phallic Era* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., p.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Jose R. Cardenas, “The Rapprochement That Never Will Be,” *Foreign Policy* 17 December 2014, accessed 14 October 2015 at http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/17/the-cuba-rapprochement-that-never-will-be/. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Olivia Marple, “A New Revolution: The Progression of LGBTQ Rights in Cuba,” *Council on Hemispheric Affairs* 30 June 2015, accessed 14 October 2014 at http://www.coha.org/a-new-revolution-the-progression-of-lgbtq-rights-in-cuba/. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hamish McRae, “US-Cuba Relations: Their Rapprochement Carries a Message that Should Have Resonance Far Beyond the Gates of a Newly-Reopened Embassy,” *The Independent* 21 July 2015, accessed 14 October 2015 at http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/comment/hamish-mcrae/u...-message-that-should-have-resonance-far-beyond-the-10405646.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Buzz Bissinger, “Caitlyn Jenner: The Full Story,” *Vanity Fair* July 2015, accessed 30 October 2015 at http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/06/caitlyn-jenner-bruce-cover-annie-leibovitz. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Elena Donovan Mauer, “TV in Transition: New Reality Show Features Transgender Parents,” *Parenting* 2015, accessed 30 October 2015 at http://www.parenting.com/news-break/tv-transition-new-reality-show-features-transgender-parents. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ben Terris, “Meet Kristin Beck, a Transgender Former Navy Seal Running for Congress,” *The Washington Post* 22 June 2015, accessed 30 October 2015 at https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/meet-kristin-beck-a-transgender-former-navy-seal-running-for-congress/2015/06/22/299006e4-0b87-11e5-9e39-0db921c47b93\_story.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See, e.g., Jasbir Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45(2) (2013): 336-339. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See, e.g., “Obama Administration Record for the LGBT Community,” accessed 30 October 2015 at https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/lgbt\_record.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See, e.g., Randi Gressgard, “The Instrumentalization of Sexual Diversity in a Civilizational Frame of Cosmopolitanism and Tolerance,” in *Global Justice and Desire: Queering Economy*, eds. Nikita Dhawan, Antke Engle, Christoph H. E. Holzhey, and Volker Woltersdorff, London: Routledge, 2015, pp.99-114. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See, e.g., discussions in Manuela Picq and Markus Thiel, eds. *Sexualities in World Politics.* London: Routledge, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. e.g., Steve Niva, “Tough and Tender: New World Order Masculinity and the Gulf War,” in *The “Man” Question in International Relations*, ed. Marysia Zalewski and Jane Parpart. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Emma Cannen, “Avant-Garde Militarism and a Post-Hip-Hop President: Obama’s Presidential Masculinity in Images,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 16(2) (2014): 255-277; Marc E. Shaw and Elwood Watson, “Obama’s Masculinities: A Landscape of Essential Contradictions,” in *Performing American Masculinities: The 21st Century Man in Pop Culture*, eds. Watson and Shaw, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011, pp.134-152. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* London: Routledge, 1990 for a discussion of the privilege of outness. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Marple, “A New Revolution” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Laura Sjoberg, “Toward Trans-gendering International Relations?” *International Political Sociology* 6(4): 337-354; Laura Sjoberg and Cynthia Weber, eds. “The Forum: Queer International Relations,” *International Studies Review* 16(4) (2014): 596-622; Cynthia Weber, “Why is There No Queer International Theory?” *European Journal of International Relations* 21(1) (2015): 27-51; Cynthia Weber, “Queer Intellectual Curiosity as International Relations Method: Developing Queer International Relations Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks,” *International Studies Quarterly* (2015) DOI: 10.1111/isqu.12212; Cynthia Weber, *Queer International Relations: Sovereignty, Sexuality, and the Will to Knowledge.* New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming; Picq and Thiel, *Sexualities in World Politics.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-32)