

Differing aims: The hostilities between the U.S. and Cuban governments have produced an especially difficult and volatile situation for Cuban emigres here, influencing the politics of the Cuban-American community and its relationship to the "mainstream" political situation. The following three articles express some of the positions that have grown out of the U.S.-Cuban schism.

The Easy Convenience of Cuban Homophobia

By Lourdes Arguelles & Ruby Rich

Living in the United States and trying to understand issues of Cuba and homosexuality can be a puzzling, difficult, or irritating experience. Information is scarce and frequently dependent either upon the unreliable accounts of Cuban gay dissidents here or the official accounts of nongay Cuban officials there. We have both made our own studies of this subject over the past few years: one as a Cuban lesbian growing up in Miami, getting married and coming out, and finally traveling to Cuba a number of times since; one as an experience of life on the island.

The exodus from Cuba of gay men and lesbians to the U.S. and other capitalist countries since the revolution has always been interpreted, particularly in academic and left circles in the U.S. and Europe, as stemming entirely from the homophobia of the Castro regime and its virulent persecution of homosexuals. This partial, and misleading, explanation reflects both an ignorance of political background and the homophobia of the U.S. press which, as always, is comfortable about oversimplifying the motivations and homogenizing the differences of lesser mortals (i.e. homosexuals) in its spotlight. Its acceptance as fact by so many of our peers has served, too often, to neutralize critical support for Cuba and legitimize the presence, in liberal circles, of many of the most reactionary forces of the Cuban emigre establishment.

The United States may well be the most ethnocentric country in the world: we know pathetically little about other cultures or peoples, yet we readily compensate by projecting ourselves onto the truth of their lives. In the interest of this special series then, we offer the following points of consideration.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy for Cuban gays was the failure of any leadership to emerge in the open, fluid days of 1959-1960. If anyone has chosen to remain behind, if any remaining had chosen to speak, then it is possible that Cuba could have then had an attitude toward homosexuality not unlike the open acceptance in the early years of the Soviet revolution.

Instead of any such presence, though, there was absence. Cuba had never had a real gay culture, even pre-1959, in the way that many other Latin American countries (Mexico, Brazil, maybe Argentina) had. The historian can't find a gay sensibility in Cuban literature, music or theater; rather, gay life was privatized (for the rich) or commodified in prostitution (for the poor).

What followed 1959? The Bay of Pigs fiasco and its consequences: the fiasco of paranoia, counterrevolutionary vigilance, and internal security measures that led to the most shameful episode in Cuban history, the camps in which

hundreds of homosexuals were imprisoned in the early to mid '60s. For the many working-class lesbians and gay men who were not-imprisoned and tried to integrate themselves into the revolution, it was a hard time of lying low and waiting for better conditions to come. It was a period of "Stalinization" of sexual attitudes and severe repression that has since been denounced in Cuba as much as abroad.

When Cuba opened its borders (1979) and encouraged family reunification through visits from the Miami cousins, many Cuban gays (and straights) heard seductive stories of this land of opportunity, with sexual freedom and unlimited consumer goods waiting just across the water. And later, when an incident at the Peruvian Embassy led to President Carter's opening of U.S. borders to an unprecedented number of Cubans, many gays (mostly male) joined the Mariel emigration. The kind of immigration laws which, in the same year, barred Canadian lesbians from the Michigan women's music festival were utterly suspended in favor of '80s cold war priorities.

This was not the first time that gays emigrated out of Cuba, nor was it the first time the U.S. immigration laws were relaxed. There are precedents for both. Migration had always been a feature of gay life in Cuba: working-class gay men and lesbians migrated out of the small towns or provinces of Cuba to Havana for greater life-style freedom (though they often ended up supporting themselves in the casinos, prostitution, and bars of the tourist industry); middle-class lesbians sometimes married men moving to the capital, or became the mistresses of the city's ruling class; rich gays migrated out of the island for extended periods to cosmopolitan centers elsewhere in the world. With 1959, the gay intelligentsia tended to flee abroad while many working-class gays followed their Mafia employers to Miami where the old Havana scene could quickly reproduce itself. Of course, this migration became political—just as it did with Mariel. And, like the gay Marielitos, the original gay emigrants of 1959 found U.S. immigration shelving its homophobic entrance laws in order to provide cold war shelter for any sexual preference in flight from socialism.

Within the U.S. gay communities, the stories carried by many of the gay emigres were equally powerful fuel to local Cubaphobia. We heard of repression, suppression, and persecution of gays simply for being gay; of imprisonment; of discrimination; of hideously circumscribed lives. Some of these stories were undoubtedly true... at least in part. But it is important to remember the facts of life for the refugee. Under U.S. law, refugee status depends on proving that the would-be refugee suffered political persecution in the home country and would so suffer



if returned there. Cubans have only to look at the example of the Mexican or Haitian immigrant to know the pitfalls of being classified as a merely "economic" arrival. For the Cuban gay, then, gayness became the requisite ticket of no return. The word was out in the refugee camps: stories developed a formulaic correctness.

This is not to say that stories of discrimination are untrue: Cuba was and is a profoundly homophobic society. But people don't get imprisoned simply for homosexuality; they get imprisoned for common crimes, primarily theft. However, undoubtedly, it's easier to get imprisoned if you're gay. Justice in every state, communist or capitalist, is discretionary. Just as it's easier for blacks to get imprisoned for common crimes under a racist state, so it's easier for gays to suffer the same attention under a homophobic state. The important thing, for U.S. gays, is to understand that refugee testimony and coming-out stories are two very different oral traditions.

They constitute opposite strategies: refugee testimony begins with personal gay experiences and manufactures them into an official version of history, while the coming-out story begins with an official falsification of history and shatters it with the facts of personal gay experience.

When the increased family visits and relaxation of travel bans began to have a political effect on the Cuban emigre community—creating a long absent live-and-let-live policy toward Cuba that threatened the ambitions of the anti-Castro sector—the Cuban rightist activists and terrorists began to use the twin charges of communism and homosexuality against any progressive Cubans who dared to advocate a recognition of the Cuban revolution's inevitability. For gay Cubans promoting exchange of communication with their homeland, tragically, their sexuality became their biggest political liability. The Cuban right seized on the issue to capitalize on their community's homophobia as a ploy for harming progressives' credibility, thus pioneering gay-baiting Cuban-emigre style. (One of the authors of this article, for instance, had her sexuality announced and denounced in the ultra-right *La Cronica* when she dared to undertake anti-terrorist work. When a friend of the authors traveled to Cuba as an open sympathizer, her Cuban mother got a note threatening her *tortillera* daughter.) Thus progressive Cuban gays in this country have been forced into the closet, not by Castro, but by the emigre anti-Castro right.

Frozen in the attitudes and mores

of 1959, mistrustful of change, still imbued with a patriarchal value system, the Cuban emigre community holds to the same homophobic principles that guided life in the old country: the sexism and intense homophobia of Spanish culture; the domination of village life by the Church; the social pressure and ostracism of small towns; and most frequently, the casting of any obvious gay into the role of "village queer," the homosexual version of the village idiot. In this sense, growing up gay in Miami today is not as different from Batista's Havana as you might expect (nor is the drug traffic in Miami today all that different from the racketeering of the old Meyer Lansky crowd). The gay *Marielitos* thought they were coming to a promised land of sexual freedom. Instead, they disembarked into a Dade County still fresh from Anita Bryant's righteous campaign. We can learn from the irony.

And there is a further irony. With the beautiful symmetry of fanaticism, the same right-wing Cubans who denounce their progressive countrymen as gay also keep busy denouncing Cuba as fag-bashing—it's the Fidel-hates-faggots tactic. And U.S. leftists, many with a spotty record on gay rights, work off guilt by correct-lining Castro. As a result, knee-jerk responses have become the norm—but they're of little help to gay brothers and sisters in Cuba, who can draw little support from a community bent on judging their life by a yardstick of ignorance.

Meanwhile, the new Mariel generation of right-wing intellectuals are mobilizing to use the issue of Cuban homophobia as Cold War ammo. It should be useful to watch the reception of the documentary film on Cuban gays currently in production by Orlando Jimenez-Leal and Nestor Almedros with this in mind.

Cuba today is certainly suffused with homophobia. Just as certainly, it is suffused with homosexuals. In all walks of life and professions (especially the arts) and at all levels of the official hierarchy, there are known and recognized gays and lesbians but their lives are closeted ones—not unlike the lives of U.S. gays pre-Stonewall, gays today in isolated regions or working-class communities, gays in the professional world (actors, doctors, politicians), not unlike the lives of many gays and lesbians elsewhere in Latin America. For Cuban lesbians, indeed, the gains made for women by the revolution may well outweigh the effects of homophobia (always less severe for lesbians because of the traditional invisibility of female sexuality) and may explain the relative absence

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of lesbians in the Mariel emigration. - Cuba still suffers the effects of ongoing homophobia. The situation is better than fifteen or twenty years ago. The camps have been denounced there; more progressive books on sexuality have been published; and the Family Code, by encouraging male housework and female education (for example), has pioneered more fluidity in gender roles. But we have to emphasize that Cuba still has a very long way to go before gay men and lesbians can enjoy the full benefits of the revolution.

For the U.S. gay community in the heating-up 80s, it is crucial to understand how charges and countercharges of Cuban homophobia play into a dirty political war. Until we do, we'll be strengthening the right in this country and reinforcing Cuba's chronic state-of-siege mentality, doing little good, and ending up as pawns ourselves. ■

This supplement has generated many more pieces than could possibly be accommodated in one issue. As a result, we will be running a special series on Latin gays for several issues to come.