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The Others in My I

By JORGE OLIVARES

ON 21 OCTOBER 1993, I WAS ASKED to deliver the inaugural lecture of the Allen Family Chair in Latin American Literature, which I hold at Colby College. Given the celebratory nature of the event and the fact that people of diverse backgrounds and disciplines would be in attendance, I did not want my lecture to be a typically dense scholarly presentation, but rather one in which I combined the personal with the professional. Moreover, my lecture, which I titled “At Home in Exile,” was also a way of introducing myself to Leon and Karen Allen, the generous donors of the endowed chair whom I met that day for the first time. My lecture, then, had two parts: it began with a reflection on my own exile (part one of the present essay) and was followed by a discussion of the Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas (1943-1990), who had died recently in exile, focusing in particular on Before Night Falls, his posthumously published memoirs. In this second part of my lecture, the longer of the two, I openly discussed Arenas’s gay sexuality.

When I recently reread “At Home in Exile” to consider its possible inclusion in this collection, Other Identified: Issues of Alterity in Hispanic Literature, I was disappointed, but not surprised, by an absence—a queer absence—in the text. I say “queer” because it is precisely my “queerness” that I excluded from the section in the lecture about my own otherness (although it certainly underlies some of my remarks about marginality). Why did I exile my gay sexuality from “At Home in Exile”? Why is it that now, in this special issue of the Colby Quarterly, I feel compelled to welcome it home and not just let it roam anymore, as I did in 1993, on the margins of a narrative about my life? That I chose three years ago to talk about myself in the context of a discussion of an openly gay writer without any references to my own sexuality strikes me now as a rather glaring omission. And especially since I was already “out” as gay to many in the Colby community, which explained my uninhibited reference in my opening remarks to my then lover, also a Latino in exile, as “more than a friend.” Uninhibited reference? This circumlocution (“more than a friend”), which at the time I thought was quite a daring and official coming-out statement at Colby, is emblematic of a reticence, when speaking publicly about my
sexuality, with which I am no longer comfortable. “The Others in My I,” then, is an attempt to fill in a crucial gap in “At Home in Exile.”

At Home in Exile

Not long ago I bought a pair of winter gloves at the Coach store in Freeport (the one in Maine, that is, not the one in the Bahamas), and as I was handing over my credit card to the salesclerk, he asked me where I was from. Without giving his question much thought, I told him I was from Waterville. From the look on his face, I instantly realized that this was not the answer he wanted. For him I clearly was, in the words of one of my Cuban friends from Miami, “a strange element in L. L. Bean Land.” I was decidedly from “away,” as they say here in Maine, and this particular “away” was much farther away, farther south, than Massachusetts. I detected a sense of relief in the salesclerk when, rephrasing his question from where was I from to where was I born, I said that I was born in Cuba. His uneasiness quickly dissipated, but mine resurfaced for the nth time. What had begun as a commercial transaction had turned, for me, into an existential negotiation. For, after all, what was the true answer to the question posed to me by the salesclerk in Freeport, Maine? Where am I from?

Let me also share with you what I read in a recently published book by David Rieff titled The Exile: Cuba in the Heart of Miami. Among the many Cubans Rieff interviewed, we find a physician who had long lived many miles north of tropical South Florida before finally settling in Miami, which—in terms of population—is actually Cuba’s second largest city. Explaining her relocation to Rieff, the physician said that “in Pittsburgh there was almost no one who spoke Spanish and, in any case, I just never felt that Cubans were meant to live in snow. When they do, they somehow stop being Cubans” (54). If I could not call myself a Mainer to the Freeport salesclerk, neither could I call myself a Cuban to this Miami doctor. She would have been horrified at seeing me so gladly buy a pair of winter gloves as part of the yearly shopping routine I perform before the start of classes. And that I have been doing this for a decade and a half without particularly longing for a suntan would probably, in her view, justify stripping me of my cubanidad, my Cuban identity. If I ever crossed paths with this woman in Miami, she might consider me, at best, an exile who had come in from the cold.

If not from Maine or from Miami (or, by extension, from the United States or from Cuba), then where am I from? It seems that it all depends on where I happen to be and who my interlocutor is at that particular time. But in either case (be it from the point of view of the salesclerk in Freeport or that of the Cuban physician in Miami), what to me seems most obvious is that I am not one of “them.” I am seen and treated as an “other”; I am swept to the margins,
relegated to the periphery. I am an “exile,” a condition of which I have been continually reminded ever since my immediate family (an upper middle-class family from the provinces that had supported Fidel Castro on his way to power) left Cuba for the United States on 20 May 1962 as part of a second wave of Cuban exiles disenchanted with Castro’s Revolution. I remember thinking, as I climbed the stairs to the Pan American Airlines plane that would fly us away from our country, that sixty years before, on that very day, Cubans had won their independence. On that morning (almost two years to the day after my father’s death) when my mother, brother, and I flew from Havana’s José Martí Airport to Miami International, I began a long one-way journey in search of a home away from home.

Large numbers of Cubans have lived in the United States for more than three decades, yet our exilic existence persists. Countless Cubans, mostly those of my parents’ generation, still see themselves as political exiles, not as immigrants. They cannot bear the thought of dying in a place other than Cuba. Cuba is always on their minds. This, to the surprise of some, is not my case, which explains why I have shifted my possessives in the preceding sentences. After referring to “our exilic existence,” I immediately say that “Cuba is always on their minds.” Why do I simultaneously include and exclude myself from the Cuban community in exile? Simply, because Cuba is not always on my mind, or on the minds of many Cuban-born Americans, for some of us came too young to this country to share our parents’ unrelenting nostalgia for Cuba. We have, in essence, exiled ourselves from exile. For, among other reasons, many of us do not accept the sociopolitical conservatism that dominates that community. But I should hasten to add that this separation from our exiled parents does not necessarily imply our assimilation into American culture. If there is a distance between Cuba (both the one in the Caribbean and its twin in South Florida) and myself (and others like me), there is an equal distance between our adopted country and ourselves. While some days I feel like eating arroz y frijoles negros [rice and black beans], others I crave a juicy Big Mac. Although I still balance my checkbook in Spanish, I balance myself during step aerobics at the local health club to the sounds of Madonna and Michael Jackson. We are neither completely Cuban nor completely American. Or are we perhaps both? Hence the appropriateness of the term “Cuban-American,” which aptly describes the interstitial nature of my generation, the generation of those who came to this country too young to be Cuban, too old to be American. We belong to what has been called the one-and-a-half generation: the generation between our parents and the younger American-Born Cubans, the so-called ABC generation.1

1. For a sensitive discussion of Cuban-Americans, from which I have substantially drawn, see Pérez Firmat.
In his recently published book on Cuban-Americans, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, while agreeing with some sociologists that “the 1.5 generation is ‘marginal’ to both its native and adopted cultures,” proceeds to argue that “the inverse may be equally accurate: only the 1.5 generation is marginal to *neither* culture,” for they find it possible to move more freely between Cuban and American cultures (4; his emphasis). Cuban-Americans, Pérez Firmat explains, “are no more American than they are Cuban—and vice versa. Their hyphen is a seesaw: it tilts first one way, then the other” (6). Cuban-Americans lead what he calls a “life on the hyphen.” I have been performing this balancing act on the hyphen for over thirty years, and I can assure you that it is rough at times to slide from one end of this hyphen to the other.

But there has been a significant change since 20 May 1962, when I first came to this country. If by calling me a “Spic” my North American classmates at Coral Gables Senior High School kept me in my place, by now calling me a “Cuban-American” my North American friends and colleagues seem to be welcoming me into their (or is it *our*?) space. I am generally—albeit at times reluctantly—seen and accepted as one of “us,” but with a measure of difference, a difference of which I am constantly reminded in subtle—or not so subtle—ways. Perhaps unintentionally (and that is the crucial difference between my high-school classmates and the people in my present universe), I am still being kept in my place, in exile. And this happens from both sides of the hyphen: the Cuban side from which at times I feel estranged, and the side of the hegemonic culture, which at times makes me feel like a stranger. But, for me, the major difference between the 1960s and the 1990s is that now I can enter into and exit exile almost at will. And, frankly, I like living on the hyphen, moving back and forth between my (yes, *my*) two cultures. I am, and always will be, a permanent resident in exile, living the exilic—and perhaps idyllic—existence which the hyphen in the term “Cuban-American” emblematizes.

Maybe if I had called myself a Cuban-American at the Coach store in Freeport, Maine, the salesclerk would not have looked at me so disconcertingly. But why didn’t I do so? Did I feel more “American” than “Cuban” or “Cuban-American” that day? Was the hyphen tilting north instead of south? Was it because I was buying winter clothes? Perhaps I wanted to spite the man? I do not have an answer, only the question that constantly brings home my otherness: Where am I from? I don’t know where I am from, but I have come to feel at home in exile.

*An Other Exile*

*Waterville, Maine, has been,* for the last fifteen years, my home away from home (Miami) away from home (Cuba). But geographic distance will not bring about forgetfulness, as I am constantly reminded by the sappy lyrics of “La
barca," one of many boleros that habitually fill the air of my typical New England house in rural Maine where I listen almost exclusively to Latin American music in an attempt to hold on to my ethnicity. In fact, the farther away I am from Cuban Miami, the more Cuban I feel, the more Cuban I am made to feel. And it is this constant reminder of my ethnic otherness so many miles north of my tropical roots that has provided me with a context to explore, and accept, my sexual otherness. But if in New England I can be an openly gay Cuban-American man, an ethnic and sexual being, in Miami, were I to go public about my sexuality, I would be reduced to a maricón, a faggot, a classification that strips me of the rights to my gender and nationality. For how can a Cuban man be attracted to other men? In a machista culture, I am made to reside in a no-man’s land, in fairy land; there is no room for me in macho land. I am made to feel that I can only have sex (if at all) in exile—in New England, far, far away from my Cuban home. Once out, a gay Cuban man can’t comfortably go home again.

Religion, which has significantly shaped the values of my Catholic family, has also made locating “home” difficult. When I visit Miami, I am no longer the “good” son that I was before coming out to my family, but the maricón who has stopped loving them because, among other reasons, I am reluctant to attend Sunday mass and large family gatherings such as weddings, events that would require me to leave my sexuality, like a sweater, neatly tucked away in the closet. While in Miami, then, I usually resort to silence for the sake of harmony. A truce has been called to avoid facing the truth about who I am. I am (s)exed out of existence as it were. For, ironically, sex, a word little, if ever, mentioned in a Catholic household, is all my family seems to see of me. Unuttered recriminations betray their disapproval. Maricón. That’s what reverberates in my head while with my family in Miami. They are convinced that hell, given my sinful ways, is where I’ll end up, and they are preparing me for that eventuality.

One Sunday afternoon last summer, while we were having a late lunch at my mother’s house, my ten-year-old niece asked me whether I would be getting married some day. Just imagine what went through my head, and those of the other adults sitting around the table, in the seconds that transpired between my niece’s question and my response. What should I say? What will he say? Will the truth come out? All hell did not break loose, but it felt a little hellish. “No, Gaby, I will not get married.” “Why not?” she wanted to know. “Because I already have you and Alberto Jorge, your brother.” Satisfied with what she

2. See Risech for a suggestive discussion, using the metaphor of cross-dressing, of the multiple identities (national, political, cultural, racial, and sexual) that Cuban-Americans have to negotiate continually. See Monteagudo for some thoughtful recollections about growing up gay in Cuban Miami.
heard, Gaby continued eating her meal. So did the adults, including myself, and there was no need for the Mylanta bottle in the refrigerator. Although I did not mention my gay sexuality to Gaby (in fact, my response to her, I regretfully realize, gave credence to the belief that marriage—hence sex—is solely for procreation), I did manage, however, to convey to her at least that a conventional marriage is not the only option in a man’s life. But it is the accumulation of situations like this one, on a hot Sunday afternoon in Miami, that makes me long for my home in Maine. Exile! What a sweet-sounding word it can also be!

If at times I sound angry it is because I am, an anger directed both at myself and at my family for allowing my sexuality to come between us. Our love for each other is unquestionable; it’s just that for them love and (same-sex) sex cannot have the same home address, share the same space. As if sex had nothing to do with love! I cannot show a lover the memorabilia of my youth that still decorate the walls of my room in my (mother’s) house, nor can I have a lover accompany me when I visit my niece and nephew and swim with them in their backyard pool. Son, brother, uncle. My family sees no other options for me. To exile love from my life: that’s what they would want, but what I refuse.

Exile generally is a traumatic experience. Few survive it without some form of psychological scarring. I am no exception, which may explain why I have caught myself wondering many times what my life would have been like if I had not left Cuba at age twelve and had I lived there as an adult. Not a pretty sight, even when politics do not enter into the picture: I would have been an engineer (like many males in my family, including my late father), married with children, and probably having sex with men on the side (or not, which would have been even worse). Exile, despite its hardships, has ironically been a godsend for me: I am not an engineer; I am not married; and I am happily—and not furtively—having sex with other men. That I am able to be who I am and openly admit it (although, sadly, not in Cuban Miami), even on the pages of a revered publication of the college where I am employed, has been a positive consequence of exile. Need I say that my outlook on exile puts me even more at odds with my family and with the Cuban exile community? I am indeed a rare pajaro in their eyes.3

Maine, for most Cubans since 1898, is the battleship whose explosion and sinking in the harbor of Havana precipitated the Spanish-American War. Maine, for me, a century later, still evokes that historical event—but it is much more. It is also, and primarily, home, where I make love, not war. It has been a long and difficult road home (it took me ten years to relinquish my Florida driver’s license for one from Maine). But it is here, at the northern end of I-95, where this pajaro has finally found his nest, where no one has tried—or dared—to clip his

3. In addition to its standard meaning, “bird,” pajaro also means “faggot” in Cuban slang.
wings. The vast expanse of Vacationland has rescued me from the narrow stretch of the Sunshine State. I don’t think I’ll ever stop flying (why drive when you can fly?) down south, but one thing I do know for sure is that home will remain down East, in Waterville, Maine. The others in my I are very much at home in my northern exile.

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Works Cited


4. I want to express my deepest gratitude to all the friends who read multiple drafts of this essay. They are the ones who indeed make me feel at home in exile.