

STUDENT RESEARCH

"There is not a Government on Earth that doesn't Oppress Lesbians:" Searching for Mariel Lesbian Migrants in the U.S. Lesbian Press

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The Mariel Boatlift is well known for having included an unprecedented number of queer Cuban refugees. But while the stories of gay male Mariel migrants have been widely studied and documented—in part because media at the time sensationalized hypervisible expressions of their sexuality—the stories of the lesbian Mariel migrants prove harder to piece together, as their experiences left few written traces. This exploratory paper begins to fill the gaps by turning to the U.S. lesbian press, one of the only sources at the time to report on lesbian Cuban migrants, albeit through testimonies and reports that are often difficult to corroborate. Using articles and interviews from several activist publications, and critically interrogating their intentions, this paper explores how the criminalization of lesbian sexuality was a prominent motivation for leaving Cuba. So, too, did the lesbian migrants face multiple forms of ostracism once in the United States, and in turn U.S. lesbian organizations stepped up to try to situate and support them by forming networks of solidarity. Far from purporting to answer all questions about the topic, this article suggests that it is ripe for further research.

Keywords: lesbian; Mariel; Mariel migrants; Cuban LGBTQ history; queer history; immigration; Cuban-American history

The Mariel Boatlift was the first Cuban migration where the politics of sexuality were at the forefront. Infamously, the Castro government framed the boatlift as an opportunity to get rid of Cuba's "scum," which loosely meant criminals, counter-revolutionaries, and homosexuals. While novel as a strategy for denouncing would-be Cuban migrants after 1959, the inclusion of homosexuals in this trifecta was in fact a natural outgrowth of the particular way that homosexuality had been stigmatized as a threat to revolutionary values and persecuted on the island since the 1960s.¹ Consequently, one of the ways to secure permission to leave Cuba via the port of Mariel in 1980 was to go to a police station and claim to be a homosexual. Many gay Cubans used the Mariel Boatlift as an opportunity to escape the repressive, homophobic climate in which they had been raised.² In the United States, some found forms of freedom but also endured detention and discrimination; the media and press sensationalized expressions of male gender-nonconformity among Mariel migrants.³ The presence of gay "Marielitos" was thus a persistent part of the stigma attached to the boatlift in both Cuba and the United States.

In telling the story of Mariel, scholars like Susana Peña and Julio Capó, Jr. have focused considerable attention on the experiences of homosexual men and the way they were treated under U.S. immigration law and in U.S. media discourses. However, there is a parallel story that has not been explored in as much detail. Some historians have noted the presence of lesbians in the Mariel Boatlift, but the research about their lives and trajectories is comparatively thin. Academic texts that do acknowledge the presence of lesbians in the

¹ See Lumsden.

² See Capó p. 83.

³ See Peña pp. 59–60.

boatlift tend to note their experiences in passing. Capó's seminal 2010 article, "Queering Mariel," is a good example, as its references to lesbian Mariel migrants are in fact sourced from testimonies by gay men. It is as if these experiences were simply not recorded, or not recorded independently.⁴

In some limited cases, lesbian Mariel migrants have recounted their experiences publicly. Carmen Díaz's "The Recurring Dream," for example—from the 2003 essay collection *By Heart/De Memoria*—tells the story of her journey from Cuba to the United States during Mariel as a lesbian. In it, she shows how she used the fact that she was a lesbian to leave Cuba.⁵ The William Way LGBT Community Center in Philadelphia has collected some oral history interviews with queer Mariel migrants, including one named Ana Fernández, a lesbian who came to the United States with her family when she was seventeen. Interestingly, Fernández notes in her interview that she felt like she could only really come out and begin life as a lesbian upon coming to the United States.⁶ Yet, despite the importance she assigns to sexuality in her migration story, hers is one of the few testimonies of Mariel lesbians that is easy to locate.

Drawing on coverage of the Mariel Boatlift in the U.S. underground lesbian press, this essay probes the possibilities of filling the gaps in our knowledge of Cuban lesbian experiences during and after that crucial episode in 1980. In doing so, it contributes to the broader challenge of recovering and preserving lesbian Cuban history, regardless of era. Lesbian Cuban history has not been as thoroughly studied as gay Cuban history.⁷ Lesbian Mariel history is no different. The role of homophobia in motivating some lesbians to leave revolutionary Cuba in 1980 should be studied alongside the ways homophobia impacted prospects for their resettlement in the United States. Overall, the comparative lack of visibility of Cuban lesbians within the boatlift meant that they were not singled out in the same way as gay men. But that does not negate the challenges they faced. The Cuban lesbian experience merits its own scholarly treatment regardless of similarities or differences with the experiences of gay men.

U.S. lesbian newspapers from the 1980s provide a window into the experiences of Cuban lesbians in a way that traditional media sources do not. In part that is because mainstream media outlets primarily focused on more visible expressions of gay male sexuality among the migrants, especially those in detention camps on U.S. military bases. But it is also because activist lesbian organizations and journalists did the work to *seek out* the stories of lesbian participants in the boatlift and became key channels for resettlement assistance, community-building, and solidarity. Lesbian newspapers actively pursued interviews with lesbian Mariel migrants, organized to find them sponsorships (which were necessary to win release from detention camps), and advocated for their rights. Rather than reading their plight within a Cold War frame as an indictment of one ideological system, they connected their struggles to institutionalized lesbophobia around the globe. As one article for *Lesbians Rising* noted, "Hearing about the experiences of Cuban lesbians has reminded us again that persecution of lesbians is international ... We're in a unique position that there is not a government on the face of the earth that doesn't oppress lesbians" (Deirdre et al. 8).

When using the U.S. lesbian press to attempt to reconstruct Cuban lesbian experiences from the Mariel Boatlift of 1980, it is important to keep in mind these sources' limitations. At the turn of the 1980s, the LGBTQ movement in the United States had entered a phase of consolidation but was still far from mainstream.⁸ Lesbian newspapers like *Plexus*, *Lesbians Rising*, *LATTITUDES*, *Thursday's Child*, *Out and About*, and *Big Apple Dyke News* dedicated to queer issues, feminism, and political organizing were thus run primarily by volunteers and relied on funding from the community to operate.⁹ Moreover, many of the articles in these publications dealing with Mariel were written with the goal of fundraising, raising awareness, or trying to locate sponsors for Mariel lesbians. That is, they were designed to be calls to action rather than thorough investigative journalism. Thus, often the information cited in the coverage is hard to verify, and this problem is compounded by the fact that these publications tended to rely on each other for material rather than always engage in independent reporting. Interviews often appear to be condensed. Nor is it always clear how writers affiliated with the publications located or came into contact with lesbian Mariel migrants in the first place.

⁴ See Capó pp. 89–90.

⁵ See Díaz pp. 122–123. In a more recent oral history interview conducted by Lou Aldamkhi that has been shared with me, Díaz recounts her experiences living in Cuba as a lesbian in more detail.

⁶ See "Ana Fernández oral history interview conducted by Rachel Reyes."

⁷ See Lumsden; Bejel; Peña; Young.

⁸ See Kaiser.

⁹ See Baim and D'Emelio pp. 11–12.

Nonetheless, these sources offer valuable perspective on and testimonial evidence of a still largely untold history. And they point to a research agenda—including the need for more oral histories—that exceeds what this essay alone can achieve. Cuban lesbians have important stories to tell about the less-widely known stigma surrounding, and criminalization of, their sexual identities in Cuba, not to mention the challenges they faced with resettlement and sponsorship in the United States. Revisiting the U.S. lesbian press shows initial efforts to tell these stories in 1980 and can inspire scholars of the future to build on their efforts.

Demographics

Let us start with a basic question: how many lesbians came to the United States from Cuba during the Mariel Boatlift, and does the U.S. lesbian press offer any clues? Perhaps unsurprisingly, precise statistics are hard to come by—and not only because of the inherent challenge of counting members of a marginalized group who might have been misunderstood, mislabeled, or preferred to go unnoticed if they possibly could. Upon arriving in the United States, Mariel refugees were placed in various refugee camps, often on military bases, to be processed while they awaited sponsorships.¹⁰ For those who had family waiting to claim them in the United States, this wait could be very short, or nonexistent. But for those that did not, it could last months.¹¹ Moreover, at the time, as Julio Capó, Jr. has explored, declared or suspected homosexuality was a criteria for exclusion from the United States under U.S. immigration law, until the Carter administration effectively waived the policy in September 1980.¹² As time passed, therefore, and especially by the fall of 1980, those still remaining in detention included a significant number of openly queer, mostly male refugees who, even if not technically allowed to enter the United States, were harder to find sponsors for due to their sexuality. It is in this context that some estimates of the number of lesbians also in the migration began to emerge.

According to some accounts appearing in the U.S. lesbian press, there were 500 self-identified lesbians who came through Mariel in need of sponsoring in the refugee camps. This number seems to have originated in an article published in *Plexus* in September of 1980, but it is unclear how the author of the piece obtained this figure or how accurate it may be.¹³ Indeed, numbers that circulated within queer activist communities were often conflicting. In a January 1981 article for *Thursday's Child*, for example, Vandi Linstrot noted that an issue of *Update* published in that same month claimed that all lesbians had been placed with sponsors while there were 260 gay men who still needed sponsors. This statistic, in turn, was sourced from Church World Services (CWS), one of the volunteer agencies that assisted the U.S. government with resettlement of Mariel refugees and through which many gay and lesbian refugees eventually found sponsors (albeit not without problems, as discussed below). Yet Linstrot noted that different representatives of CWS had given varying and inconclusive information. One also wonders whether CWS had classified the refugees based on appearance or other signifiers (an inherently problematic proposition) or whether their statistics referred to self-identification.

Linstrot went on to claim that more accurate information on the refugees could be found from the Cuban Lesbian Refugee Project (CLPR) based in the Bay Area, whose members had recently travelled to Fort Chaffee to try and determine the number of lesbians there, and only found one self-identified lesbian.¹⁴ Unfortunately, this was the only mention of this project in the run of press outlets surveyed. By this point in time, all the unsponsored Cuban refugees from Mariel had been consolidated in Fort Chaffee.¹⁵ Nonetheless, a Winter 1981 article from *Lesbians Rising* claimed that seventy-five lesbians "signed up" at the Fort Indiantown Gap refugee camp, though what they signed up for is unclear.¹⁶ Perhaps this figure referred to a time in the past before all refugees were consolidated at Fort Chaffee. The unknown methods of arriving at these figures and the unknown time frame for the numbers cited makes them hard to verify.

Zooming out at the broader picture of the boatlift provides further perspective on the problem of demographic accuracy. It is safe to assume that there were more gay men than lesbians in the Mariel Boatlift, as almost 70 percent of all Mariel migrants were men.¹⁷ Yet even though much more attention was paid to the gay men coming through Mariel, it is also hard to get a handle on their numbers. Estimates range from as

¹⁰ See Lipman p. 68.

¹¹ See Lipman p. 72.

¹² As Capó shows, this prohibition would not be formally removed from U.S. immigration law until 1990.

¹³ See Williams p. 2.

¹⁴ See Linstrot p. 1.

¹⁵ See Lipman p. 72.

¹⁶ See Ruíz and Hernández p. 6.

¹⁷ See Fernández p. 605.

low as 1,000 to as high as 20,000 of the 125,000 Mariel migrants overall.¹⁸ This is in part because one of the ways around the prior exclusion of homosexuals under U.S. immigration law was to not require Mariel refugees to explicitly answer questions about their sexuality.¹⁹ With lesbians much less visible and receiving much less attention, let alone not necessarily required to declare their sexuality explicitly, no wonder it is difficult to estimate how many there were.

Demographic imprecision, however, does not mean that the coverage lesbian newspapers provided on Mariel is devoid of value, or can be accused of inventing an issue where there was none. To the contrary, articles in *Big Apple Dyke News*, *Lesbians Rising*, *LATITUDES*, *Out and About*, and *Thursday's Child* make compelling cases that the experiences of the Mariel lesbians they interviewed deserve to be more widely known. All publications relied on information predominantly gathered through conversations with lesbian Mariel migrants. And when publications did not have direct access to the refugees (as was the case with *Valley Women's Voice*), they drew upon information from other reporters at other newspapers who had done interviews. It is to these testimonies—difficult to verify as they also may be—that I now turn.

Memories of Persecution and Marginalization

Lesbian newspapers involved in reporting on Mariel did so within the context of trying to raise funds or gather sponsorships for Cuban lesbian migrants. As a result, they often published interviews in conjunction with a call for support either through monetary donations or volunteering. In this way, an activist politics imbued the way the newspapers reported on experiences of lesbian life in Cuba and in the refugee camps. Articles attempted not so much to contextualize the broad reasons all Cubans might migrate in 1980, but to impress the urgency of the situation faced by the specific demographic that they were keen to support. But this does not mean these interviews cannot be mined for important, genuine sources of testimony. While many of the details are hard to confirm, the narratives all have the common thread of persecution, whether it be forms of day-to-day harassment or experiences of imprisonment. The need to seek sponsorships aside, these experiences would have been of intrinsic interest to readers curious about the state of lesbian rights (or the lack thereof) in a nation abroad.

Indeed, persecution of lesbians in revolutionary Cuba seems to have gone beyond dealing with social forms of discrimination in public or the home. Many Cuban lesbians interviewed in the U.S. lesbian press reported having experiences with Cuba's penal system and otherwise having their identities criminalized. In the Winter of 1981, for example, *Lesbians Rising* published "Interviews with Five Lesbian Cuban Refugees," an article that featured the testimonies of Hilda Ruíz, Barbara Villa Pino, Caridad Hernández, Josefa Rivera, and María Rodríguez, all of whom had been sponsored and released from the refugee camps already. Out of the five, four—Villa Pino, Rivera, Hernández, and Rodríguez—reported having been arrested in Cuba. And while Ruíz had not been arrested, she spoke about how the police would harass and threaten her when she gathered with other homosexuals. Interestingly, these women came from varied backgrounds: Ruíz was working class and described herself as a prior *fidelist* (or supporter of Fidel Castro); Hernández had been part of her local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution; and Rodríguez claimed to have been a member of a counter-revolutionary organization called, enigmatically, the "Fua-Fua"—though the existence of such an organization has proven impossible to confirm. Still, each relayed anecdotes that suggest the degree to which lesbian relationships were not just looked down upon, but actively policed. Hernández, for example, reported leaving Cuba after being arrested for being a lesbian and being told that she could either join the boatlift or be imprisoned in Cuba. Rodríguez, in turn, claimed that officers had offered her a position on the beach to arrest other lesbians after she was released from jail in 1964. (She does not specify why the beach would be the place to find other lesbians). When she declined, their consistent harassment caused her to move from job to job until she saw an opportunity to leave via Mariel over fifteen years later.²⁰ How common were these experiences? Were they part of wider patterns of policing sexuality on the island? Even as some lesbians in Cuba escaped imprisonment, the threat of it still loomed over their heads and defined their daily lives up until their departure through Mariel.

Similar testimonies in other publications provided not just further detail about the policing of lesbian identities, but also rare windows into lesbian incarcerated life. For example, in a 1980 interview for *Plexus* reprinted in *Thursday's Child* in 1981 under the title "Cuban Lesbians Seek Aid," Josefa Rivera (again) and

¹⁸ See Capó p. 90.

¹⁹ See Capó p. 96.

²⁰ See Quin pp. 4–6.

a woman named Ramona both claimed to have been arrested specifically for being lesbians. Rivera even described how in her prison there were two floors full of lesbians and how prison officials would try to get them into trouble by forcing two prisoners to get "married" and putting it on the record (Quin 5). (Unfortunately, she did not go into any further detail as to what this entailed or what she meant). For her part, Ramona corroborated that lesbians faced targeted harassment in prison. She claimed her small-town prison isolated lesbians from other prisoners so as not to "taint" them, and further relayed a rumor that an entire building was reserved for imprisoned lesbians in Havana. Further, she noted that, in her prison, heterosexual prisoners called "morales" spied on the lesbian prisoners with the threat of solitary confinement if they were caught doing anything that could be considered lesbian activity. "Re-education" programs attempted to convert the women into heterosexuals, and many reportedly played along to get out faster.²¹ The interviewees also claimed that officers threatened to inform their families of the real reason for their detention, as many of the families were under the impression that they were arrested for political dissidence. Whether the bulk of the women were actually involved in political dissidence against the Cuban government prior to their arrests is unclear.

At least one contributor to the U.S. lesbian press also sought out Cuban lesbians in refugee camps to speak about their experiences of persecution in Cuba. In the summer of 1980 Brooke Jones from *LATITUDES* went to Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania to speak to the unsponsored women there. While the women she spoke to were in a more desperate situation than the aforementioned interviewees who had already been sponsored, the experiences they shared were broadly similar. Jones noted in the article that she had trouble finding lesbians at first, as Cuban women tend to be affectionate and there were few visual tells on which she could rely.²² She was able to find the self-identified lesbians by asking a few refugees if they were lesbians, or if they knew of any lesbians, until they pointed her in the direction of some. Many of these lesbians—as distinct from the testimonies cited above—shared with her that they had been arrested in Cuba for crimes unrelated to their sexualities. Nevertheless, Rosa, one of the lesbians who reported being arrested after stealing at a party, recalled that lesbians received worse treatment in Cuban prisons, although in her case the guards did not know she was a lesbian despite having a lover while incarcerated. Dolores, another lesbian, shared a similar experience. These women were young and aged seventeen to twenty-five, according to Jones.²³ Like most Mariel Cubans in the refugee camps, they were tired, anxious, and eager to start their lives in the United States.

Admittedly, the narratives cited here are somewhat scattershot. They are short on details and all the contextual information one might like. Nonetheless, these sources—though representing a small selection from a few newspapers and hard to corroborate with documentary evidence—are also broadly consistent with one another and raise pertinent questions for further research. It seems clear from the testimonies of incarcerated women—arrested either for being lesbians or for other crimes—that there was a distinction made in revolutionary Cuba between lesbian prisoners and heterosexual prisoners. Whether this was employed in all prisons across Cuba, and for how long, requires further study. But the fact that Ramona's small-town prison, having more limited space than one in a larger city, still found a way to separate lesbian inmates, suggests that it was a widely extended practice. Likewise, recurring details like the mention of specific efforts to get Cuban lesbians to leave in the Mariel Boatlift of 1980 point to the ways lesbians endured persecution and hostility in revolutionary Cuba for being non-heteronormative subjects, and thus why many sought to leave during Mariel in the first place. In the same way that gay men left Cuba through Mariel to escape persecution, it seems that lesbians did as well.

Sponsorship And Settlement Troubles

After arriving in the United States, lesbian migrants—like many others in the Mariel Boatlift—did not automatically find a road to personal freedom and fulfillment. Just as for gay men, the sexuality of Cuban lesbians posed problems for their efforts to find and maintain sponsors. As noted above, finding a sponsor—whether an individual's family or an aid organization willing to accept financial responsibility for resettlement and one's integration into American life—was required for Mariel migrants in detention to be released. However, sponsors were not necessarily obligated to keep supporting those they sponsored in perpetuity. Thus arose the problem of sponsorships breaking down, condemning the migrant to re-detention, homelessness, or

²¹ See Kehoe p. 2.

²² See Jones p. 5.

²³ See pp. 14–15.

worse.²⁴ As occurred for gay men, not all prospective sponsors were willing to sponsor lesbians, and in cases where lesbian migrants initially kept their sexuality a private matter, discovery or disclosure could put their sponsorship at risk. Relatively few articles in the U.S. lesbian press focused on this side of the equation—that is, the experiences of Cuban lesbians in the United States after arriving through Mariel. However, the ones that did offered an important perspective concerning the ways sponsorships were more tumultuous for lesbians than for heterosexual women.

For example, "Cuban lesbians arrive in Seattle," in the January 1981 issue of *Out and About*, followed the experiences of Lucía and Alina after their arrival in the United States. Neither had been arrested in Cuba, but they both reported leaving due to harassment for being lesbians, and they had difficulties in the camps because they claimed the lesbians who had been in prisons were too violent and unstable. (This problematic or generalizing distinction—between "violent" lesbians who had spent time in jail versus those who had not—also seems worthy of further dissection.) Among the relatively fortunate, Alina spent just thirty-six days at Eglin Air Force Base in Pensacola, FL, while Lucía had been detained at Fort Chaffee for only two weeks. Both connected with relatives in Miami, where they began to spend time together. However, the high rents in Miami combined with the prejudice against so-called "Marielitos" in general made them housing-insecure. They moved from their relatives' home to live with gay friends of theirs who "became violent to them" and then felt forced to leave (Cuban Lesbians arrive in Seattle 4). It is not clear from Lucía and Alina's description what this specifically meant.

Things got worse for Alina and Lucía before they got better. When they rented a hotel room, the homophobic owner began harassing them after developing a fixation with Lucía. Moreover, the jobs they found in Miami were scarce and low paying. Whatever jobs they found, they claimed, they found from other Cubans, as the government was not much help. Finally, when they went to a government office to inquire about relocation assistance (which office was not specified), they were put in another hotel, this one without cooking facilities. The office told them finding sponsors for lesbian refugees was difficult, and they had to pass up offers from religious or conservative families for whom they would have had to act heterosexual. Finally, they were sponsored in Seattle through the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC)—a gay-friendly congregation active in finding sponsors for Mariel refugees that in turn located an individual lesbian sponsor from an organization called the Cuban Women's Support Group (Cuban Lesbians arrive in Seattle 4). According to *Gay News*, the Cuban Women's Support Group was a Seattle-based organization that focused on finding sponsors for lesbian Mariel migrants and helping them get settled by finding them food, clothes, financial assistance, and directing them through social service and educational agencies. Unfortunately, it is unclear whether other cities had branches of this organization or if it was exclusive to Seattle. No trace of it appears to exist elsewhere. But the mention of its role suggests that, despite limited options for sponsorship, housing, and employment, lesbian Cuban migrants did benefit from the support of LGBT-friendly organizations and communities in the United States.

Indeed, solidarity between U.S. lesbians and Cuban lesbians from the boatlift appears to have been instrumental in some of the latter's ability to find their footing in a new country. In an article titled "United States Offers No Refuge" in *Valley Women's Voice*, for example, Cate Bellow described how lesbians were relying on each other and their networks to find sponsors for the Cuban lesbians that had arrived in the summer of 1980. She was referring both to U.S. lesbians supporting the Cuban lesbians and the networking that previously sponsored Cuban lesbians engaged in to help find sponsors for those remaining in detention or otherwise vulnerable situations. Interestingly, in this piece the Metropolitan Community Church, which had come to Alina and Lucía's rescue, came in for criticism, as Bellow described the MCC as focused almost entirely on gay men. Lesbian activists, she argued, had to go personally to the camps to work out sponsorships and contacts. It is unclear whether her criticism referred to a specific branch of the MCC or to the organization as a whole, as it had a presence in many cities. Regardless, Bellow also stressed the need for U.S. lesbian solidarity in response to the Cuban migration by giving examples of Cuban lesbians that had been rejected by their heterosexual sponsors. One sponsor had tried to take a lesbian's baby away, she relayed, and when that lesbian found a new sponsor, the sponsor wanted a sexual relationship with her (See Bellow p. 5). Once again, these are brief accounts but nonetheless point to a pattern of lesbian conflict with sponsorships—not unlike what gay men experienced, but unique in its contours.

In addition to difficulties with sponsorships, the criminal justice system could also pose a barrier for Cuban lesbians attempting to find their way in the United States. The *Lesbians Rising* winter 1981 edition,

²⁴ See Peña pp. 61–62.

for example, reported on a case in which fifteen women were being held in a New York City federal prison for allegedly participating in a riot in an unspecified refugee camp.²⁵ Interviewed for the piece, Hilda Ruíz claimed that she knew the women and that the riot started because a guard kicked a pregnant woman. Moreover, three of those fifteen women, Ruíz claimed, were lesbians who had in fact only been arrested for refusing to sleep with detention camp guards.²⁶ In November of 1980, the New York Civil Liberties Union filed a suit on their behalf. According to *Lesbians Rising*, the case was resolved in their favor, and the three lesbians were released and subsequently connected with members of a wider U.S. lesbian community for support.²⁷

In these ways, examining the U.S. lesbian press shines a light on not only the experiences of Cuban lesbians in Cuba or in detention on U.S. military bases, but also the importance of the solidarity they received from a wider U.S. lesbian activist movement and community. Lesbian newspapers framed mutual aid as essential to avoiding precarious sponsorship situations for vulnerable Cuban peers. Indeed, it seems lesbian newspapers and organizations were among the only entities in the United States focusing specifically on Cuban lesbians from Mariel and how to support their needs. Organizations such as Cuban Women's Support Group connected Cuban lesbians with American lesbians that were able to give them the resources they lacked. Lesbian Mariel migrants put effort into building networks to support each other as well. For example, at one point Hilda Ruíz agreed to interview with two different newspapers and wrote "An Appeal for Assistance" with Caridad Hernández in *Lesbians Rising* in which they called for unity within the lesbian community in supporting lesbian refugees (6).²⁸ *Lesbians Rising* also helped put Ruíz in contact with a Cuban lesbian named Mercedes, who allegedly had been the only lesbian refugee in San Francisco for a while and needed emotional support that Ruíz was able to provide.²⁹ These powerful stories of organizing, perseverance, and solidarity deserve a more prominent place in the annals of Mariel history.

Conclusion

Newspaper articles from the U.S. lesbian press in the early 1980s help to begin constructing an image of the lesbian Mariel experience. Published interviews provide context for reasons why these women left Cuba, how they fared within and without refugee camps in the United States, and, perhaps most importantly, how they forged networks of solidarity with U.S. counterparts and each other, notwithstanding the many obstacles and difficulties they faced. Still, these sources are imperfect, as their information is often incomplete, and they relied on each other for sources—as part of a national community of lesbian publications—as often as they conducted independent reporting. For example, Massachusetts-based *Valley Women's Voice* took much of the information for its article "United States Offers No Refuge" from "Interviews with Five Cuban Refugees" in New-York-based *Lesbians Rising* and "A New Life For Cuban Lesbians" in Washington-DC-based *LATITUDE*. Likewise, *Thursday's Child's* "Cuban Lesbians Seek Aid," in which Ramona recounted her experiences in prison, was a reprint of an October 1980 *Plexus* article.

Still, we have an ethical responsibility to take these published testimonies seriously—at least as a jumping off point for further research. In the wake of the Mariel Boatlift, U.S. lesbian publications went out of their way to tell the lesbian Cuban experience in a way that other publications did not. This is even more remarkable given the generally leftist orientation of the LGBT activist press in the United States, as taking a stand in solidarity with lesbian (or gay) Cuban migrants in 1980 meant implicitly aligning oneself against portions of a wider U.S. left less disposed to taking a critical view of Cuba at all. For reasons like this, in fact, the relationship between the U.S. left and the broader gay rights movement has hardly been one without conflict since the 1960s.³⁰

Therefore, whatever the activist imperfections and orientations of the lesbian press, its work shows that a lesbian Cuban experience thought invisible compared to the experience of gay men was not so invisible after all, at least not for some. Absent greater disclosure from judicial and police archives in Cuba (not likely in the short term), further oral history may be the best route to further flesh out and corroborate the kind of accounts that this essay has surveyed. And it is not too late. Mariel was forty years ago, but one wonders

²⁵ See Quin p. 8. In 1980, several disturbances occurred at camps where Cubans were detained, out of desperation over the lack of clarity of their status or how long they would have to wait to be resettled. The largest occurred at Fort Chaffee in late May/early June. See Lipman.

²⁶ See Quin p. 4.

²⁷ See Quin p. 8. Attempts to locate more precise information on the suit were unsuccessful.

²⁸ See Quin; Moyano.

²⁹ See Deirdre et al. p. 8.

³⁰ See Lekus; Hobson.

where Hilda, Ramona, and others are now, and what more we could learn if we could record their stories once more.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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