Encyclopedia of Southern Culture

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Gays

Poverty and religion, both so prevalent in southern life, have molded homosexuality and society's reaction to it. The sexual attitudes of the poorer classes result both in widespread bisexual experimentation and in a violent reaction against such behavior. Often nominally justified by religion, this reaction is actually based on paranoia over the threat that effeminacy poses to the masculinity cult of the poorer classes. Thus, in the South some teenage boys go through a phase as amateur prostitutes with homosexual customers, yet the region has had more than its share of witch-hunts against homosexuals. Florida's homosexual witch-hunts since 1945 include the notable Anita Bryant "crusade" of 1977.

Religion, however, has been a comfort to southern homosexuals, who originated the "gay church" movement. The concept of homosexuality as a "sexual orientation" or a "sickness" tends to be replaced in the South by an attitude that the basic division is not between homosexuals and heterosexuals but between those who are active/masculine and those who are passive/effeminate (an idea widespread among the poorer classes throughout the world, whereas "sexual orientation" tends to be a middle-class concept). The southern attitude is that homosexuality is not a condition or a sickness but a sin of which (according to evangelical doctrine) anyone is capable. The idea of orientation suggests that homosexuality is limited to a small group of unusual people, but if it is seen (as it is in the South) as a sin, it will be seen more as habit than as condition, and by no means limited to a small in-group. The evangelical idea that "all men are sinners" can be used to suggest that all men are able to practice homosexuality. Universal sin is translated into universal bisexuality.

Half of the 34 states that have not decriminalized sodomy are in the South. The sodomy laws in Arkansas and Texas apply to homosexuals only, and the laws in the remaining southern states apply to both homosexuals and heterosexuals. Sodomy is a misdemeanor in Florida, Texas, and Arkansas, but is a felony in nine other southern states. Lesbian acts are specifically included as a felony in Georgia. In the South the punishment for sodomy ranges from a $500 fine in Texas or a maximum 60-day jail term in Florida to a maximum 15-year jail term in Tennessee or a 20-year term in Georgia. In July 1986 the Georgia sodomy law came to national attention when it was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in a case involving homosexual partners. Although the Georgia statute applies to any sodomy, the court's majority opinion addressed only the state's right to prohibit homosexual acts, a move seen as a direct threat by gay rights activists.

Many homosexual men move from small towns to cities, such as Atlanta, New Orleans, and Key West, which have large homosexual subcultures. However, many small towns have a "town queer" who is the focus of the covert bisexuality of the local youths. Many of these youths know only the word queer without ever having heard the words gay or homosexual. On the other hand, the homosexual subculture is so developed in the cities, especially in New Orleans, that homosexuality tends to be associated with the artistic and literary elements in the South more than in other sections. There is a long tradition of homosexual transvestism associated with Mardi Gras. But even middle-sized towns such as Pensacola, Fla., and Jackson, Miss., have well-organized homosexual subcultures. When interracial homosexual relations have taken place, it has been traditional for the black partner to play the active/masculine role and the white partner to play the passive/effeminate role. This role-playing derives from social class, as well as racial factors. American concepts of masculinity are associated with the proletariat, and most concepts of effeminacy are associated with the middle classes. Sexual role-playing involves imitating the behavior of one class or the other, so that it is really class role-playing rather than anything sexual, and yet is linked with sexual relationships.

The literature on homosexuality in the South is rather meager. Negative views include the interviews with policemen in The Partisan Jungle: America's Sexual Underground by Sara Harris (1969), and the official pamphlet Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida (1964). Sociologists can read Sex in Prison: The Mississippi Experiment with Conjugal Visiting by Columbus B. Hopper (1969), Scottsboro Boy by Haywood Patterson and Earl Conrad (1930), and "The Social Integration of Peers and Queers" by Albert J. Reiss in Hendrik Ruitenberg's The Problem of Homosexuality in Modern Society (1963).

James Kirkwood's American Grotesque: An Account of the Clay Shaw-Jim Garrison Affair in the City of New
Orleans (1970) deals with political persecution of homosexuals, while Mississippi writer Jere Real’s cover article, “Gay Rights and Conservative Politics” [National Review, 17 March 1978] urged political restraint on sexual issues. Southern writers such as Tennessee Williams [in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Suddenly Last Summer, and Small Craft Warnings], Truman Capote [in Other Voices, Other Rooms], Carson McCullers [in Reflections in a Golden Eye and Ballad of the Sad Cafè], Charles Henri Ford, and Erskine Lane have discussed homosexuality, as have some biographies and autobiographies (Craig Claiborne’s autobiography Feast Made for Laughter is one such work). Mississippi playwright Mart Crowley studies a homosexual Mississippian living in Manhattan in his drama The Boys in the Band (1968) and that same character’s adolescence in his later Breeze from the Gulf (1973) and in his Remote Asylum (1970). Edward Swift’s 1978 novel, Splendoros, is a comic tale of sexual confusion in a small Texas town. Florence King’s Southern Ladies and Gentlemen (1975) has a satiric chapter on southern homosexuals. The national gay news magazine Advocate has done extensive reportorial accounts of gay life in various southern cities and states.

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