

Book Note

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Cuban Miami (2000) Robert M. Levine and Moisés Asis. Piscataway: Rutgers University Press. 149 pp. Illustrations.

Today Hispanics represent almost 60 percent of the entire population of metropolitan Miami (Miami-Dade County) and Cubans account for about 55 percent of the Hispanic population. In 1960 less than 5 percent of the total population of the county was Hispanic. No other major American metropolitan area has undergone such a significant change in the ethnic composition of its population in only four decades. The impact of this change is so great that it can be argued today that Miami has a greater cultural affinity with Havana than it does with Tallahassee, the state of Florida's capital.

Although a number of books and countless articles have documented the drama of the change that has taken place in Miami since 1959, this book is different because it represents a photo journalistic essay of the way the city's fabric has been fundamentally altered. It attempts to "put a face" on the change that has taken place. It is a photographic record, with more than 180 pictures, of Cuban emigration to Miami. Accompanying the photos is a brief, descriptive, and crisply written text explaining the history of Cuban life in Miami. The authors, one a University of Miami history professor and the other a Cuban American lawyer living in Miami, have expertly interwoven the text with the pictures to successfully convey the emotion and meaning of immigration to South Florida.

The book is comprised of eleven short chapters. The first sets the stage by noting that although Cubans have been moving to the United States for at least 200 years, it wasn't until 1959 that Miami began to play a significant role in this immigration. In the 1950s Cubans were more often associated with New York City, Tampa, and Key West than they were within Miami. By 1965, however, it became clear that Miami had vaulted into prominence. It was close to Cuba, its climate was similar, and many Cubans were familiar with Miami because of shopping trips from Havana. In 1956 a round trip ticket on Cubana Airlines between Havana and Miami cost only \$36.

The second chapter describes what Miami was like prior to the mass arrival of Cubans that began in 1959. It started out as a fairly typical southern city but evolved into a tourist center and began to develop ties with Cuba as the United States escalated its influence in Cuban affairs. Miami was not a particularly tolerant city in those days of the Ku Klux Klan and legal segregation. Still it began to develop a small population of Cuban residents. All this would change shortly after the overthrow of the Batista regime by forces led by Fidel Castro on January 1, 1959, an event that, ironically, did not make the front page of city's leading newspaper, *The Miami Herald*.

The third chapter covers the migration waves from Cuba that took place from 1959 until 1980. In the beginning most Cubans supported Castro's revolution. However, soon it became clear that what he had in mind was much more than the removal of a corrupt dictator, Fulgencio Batista. In 1961 Castro declared that his was a communist regime. This was the straw that broke the camel's back and a torrent of emigration to the United States was unleashed. About 35,000 people left the island in 1959. Within two years about 75 percent of the faculty of the University of Havana also had fled to the United States. By 1962 approximately 195,000 Cubans had left the island. The Cuban missile crisis temporarily ended the massive wave of emigration in 1962. But a new agreement would be reached between the United States and Cuba in 1965 and another 297,000 would emigrate to the United States by 1973. The Cuban Refugee Assistance Program was initiated in 1961 and the Pedro Pan airlift brought more than 14,000 unaccompanied minors to South Florida by the end of 1961.

The fourth chapter covers the explosion of emigration that took place from Mariel harbor in 1980 and the Cuban rafters that arrived in 1994. The Mariel wave resulted in almost 125,000 Cubans moving to the United States, with perhaps 90,000 of them settling in metropolitan Miami. One of the book's few errors suggests that these immigrants were far different from earlier waves because a larger percentage were nonwhite and they came disproportionately from the countryside or urban lower-class backgrounds. The truth is they were not much different from the earlier waves of Cuban refugees. Their reputation, however, was unfairly tarnished by the fact that the Cuban government included almost 5,000 social misfits, people who had been in jail and patients from some of the island's mental hospitals and the book does cover this. The Cuban rafters (called "balseros") resulted in another 40,000 Cubans ultimately immigrating to the United

States in 1994. However, the reaction of the U.S. government was different to the rafters than it had been to earlier waves because an agreement was signed by the U.S. and Cuban governments that did two things: the U.S. agreed to interdict Cubans escaping the island on rafts at sea and return them to Cuba and the Cuban government agreed to regularize the flow of emigrants by allowing 20,000 to leave the island each year.

Chapters 5 through 7 deal with the integration of Cubans into the economy and society of South Florida. They first settled in a section of Miami known as Riverside, a neighborhood that would later become known as Little Havana. Then they spread westward to places such as Westchester and Sweetwater. They also congregated in Hialeah to the north. Many opened small business, some of which existed before by the same name in Cuba. The restaurants of La Carreta, Río Cristal, Havana Vieja, and La Equina de Tejas are modern-day examples, as is the Sedano's supermarket chain. An economic enclave, as well as a cultural enclave, was created. Small-scale Cuban businessmen hired new waves of Cubans and sold their products to the burgeoning Cuban community. Most of the early arrivals started out in menial, low-paying jobs. Often the husband and wife both worked to achieve a lifestyle that would eventually emulate that left behind in Cuba. Former doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, and accountants could not practice their crafts in the United States until they could later become certified, which often required additional education and passing necessary licensing exams. The majority did succeed economically. By the 1980s, the combined purchasing power of Miami's Cubans exceeded the total purchasing power of all Cubans still living in Cuba, despite the fact that the number of those who lived on the island was about nine times that of those who lived in Miami. Today, Miami has emerged as the commercial gateway to Latin America, a circumstance aided in no small measure by the fact that visitors feel comfortable speaking Spanish in Miami and find here a sophisticated Hispanic urban culture.

The final four chapters cover the cultural aspects of Cuban Miami. Those Cuban families that could afford a private education for their children often send them to bilingual schools transplanted from Cuba, such as Belén Jesuit Academy, Carrollton School for Girls, St. Brendan's and to other private schools such as Lourdes Academy, Ransom-Everglades, Palmer-Trinity, and Christopher Columbus. Spanish-speaking religious ceremonies became commonplace in many local Catholic churches and the syncretic faith of Santería,

imported from Cuba and associated with animal sacrifice, also is practiced by some local Cuban devotees. Cuban homes often had religious shrines in their yards, although this is becoming increasingly rare in Miami today. The sounds of Latin music permeates the air of many Cuban neighborhoods and Cuban recording stars are becoming increasingly familiar, such as Willy Chirino and Gloria Estefan. Some observers go so far as to say that Miami has become more like the old Havana than today's Havana. For instance, in Miami, but not in Havana, you can buy a Cuban sandwich, eat Cuban bread, have a Hatuey beer, or sip some Bacardi rum.

This is a very entertaining and informative book. It is not the type that would be suitable for a textbook in a college level class but it would be great on a coffee table. It is easily read in a couple of hours, although careful study of the numerous pictures will take a little longer time. I believe the authors have been successful in their goal of capturing the emotions and feelings of what it means to be a Cuban living in Miami.

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