

Voices from Mariel:
Oral Histories of the 1980 Cuban Boatlift

By José Manuel García. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018. 177 pp. Softcover.
\$24.95. ISBN 978-0-8130-5666-1.

Voices from Mariel is a collection of oral history interviews about the Mariel boatlift—the six-month period in 1980 during which over 125,000 Cuban refugees left Cuba to come to the United States. Collected during the creation of a documentary of the same name, the interviews in this book complement the 2011 film. García himself came to the United States from Cuba as a teenager during the Mariel migration, and the book includes a lengthy personal essay about his experience, as well as an interview with his uncle.

The book begins with a short introduction to the Mariel boatlift and the historical Cuban context, which provide a useful framework for the interviews that follow. García's story comes next, followed by an interview with his uncle who traveled to Cuba from the United States in an attempt to retrieve his family during the boatlift. The remainder of the book consists of individual oral histories. Eleven "Marielitos" (Cubans who came to the United States during the boatlift) describe their decisions to leave Cuba, the experience of leaving, the voyage from Cuba to Key West, and their arrival in the United States. A few touch on their later lives in the U.S., although the focus is squarely on the experience of the boatlift itself. The final four oral histories feature "Other Voices." These include a Cuban American who lived in South Florida at the time of the boatlift; a Peruvian diplomat; a Peruvian journalist; and a CIA analyst. (The Peruvian embassy in Havana played an important role in the Mariel boatlift, hence the interviews with the diplomat and journalist.) The book concludes with two appendices: a collection of photographs of García and the documentary team in Cuba during the filming of the documentary, and a chronology of events in the Mariel boatlift.

Like many oral history collections, the strength of *Voices from Mariel* is the personal and emotional tone of the subjects' recollections. Historical events such as the Mariel boatlift are often discussed in terms of large-scale social trends or geopolitics; therefore, the concrete stories of individuals' experiences have added weight and importance. Many of the interviewees provide visceral descriptions of the conditions they faced while leaving Cuba that are quite moving. By the last few interviews, there is a slight feeling of repetition, but that repetition is meaningful in its own right, showing the common nature of the individuals' experiences. Of course, oral histories are also subject to the perspectives and biases of the subjects, and the limited number of interviews in this volume cannot show all facets of such a complex phenomenon and how different groups of people experienced it. Nevertheless, the book does include a fairly diverse range of subjects. Additionally, the inclusion of four interviews with non-Marielitos helps provide additional perspectives.

Photographs of each oral history subject, as well as historical photographs from individuals and the State Archives of Florida, illustrate the text. These images intensify the immediacy and personal strength of the oral histories and assist the reader in entering in the stories. One particularly striking photograph is an image from the State Archives of a boat landing in Key West, exactly as an interviewee described. Conversely, the appendix with

photographs of García in Cuba feels disconnected from the main text and does not add appreciably to the book.

García tells us in the introduction that interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, and that he has translated them and made “minor editorial changes” for publication.¹ Information about translation and editing is not provided in the narratives themselves. Given the individual nature of the oral histories, more information about these changes and which interviews García translated would have been preferable; instead, the editorial work remains completely hidden.

Overall, *Voices from Mariel* provides a compelling introduction to the story of the Mariel boatlift and the experiences of the individuals who lived through it. Although it cannot stand on its own as a complete history of the Mariel boatlift, the oral histories within it give great depth and texture to this important historical event. *Voices from Mariel* will be of interest to scholars of Cuba and the Cuban diaspora, as well as those interested in using oral history to document complex historical events.

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¹José Manuel García, *Voices from Mariel*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018), xiii.