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Between Encounter and Experience: Florida in the Cuban Imagination

by Louis A. Pérez Jr.

The antecedents of the relationship between Florida and Cuba reach deeply into the sixteenth century, almost with the inception of European colonization. The peninsula loomed large in the imagination of the island. The enduring facets of this connection assumed discernable patterns early, principally in the form of successive waves of migration northward, spanning centuries, first by such personalities as Pánfilo Narváez and Hernando de Soto and most recently Elián González. It is perhaps worth recalling that there was a time when Florida was once a dependency of Cuba, populated and subsidized from the island.

There was a point in the past when the geopolitical imperative of the middle latitudes of the New World cast Florida as the northern defense perimeter of Cuba and what lay beyond to the south. It was to be a matter of time when the pendulum of power swung northward and converted Cuba into the southern defense perimeter of Florida and what lay beyond to the north.

Migration developed into the central motif by which *La Florida* entered the Cuban imagination, certainly as a place of promise, a place of possibilities for re-invention, perhaps rejuvenation—if only the Fountain of Youth could be located—a place to find peace even while preparing for revolution. Over the last two hundred years, Florida has filled so many Cuban needs: a place to invest and a

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place to shop, a site of honeymoons and vacations, a place to study and a place to live, and of course a site of expatriation of all types.

Florida insinuated itself deeply in Cuban historical sensibilities and was early incorporated into those realms by which Cubans came to define their well-being. In profoundly existential ways, Florida came to belong to Cuba. The history of the island cannot be written without obligatory acknowledgment of the ways that the drama of Cuba was played out in and/or by Florida—and, it should be added, the history of Florida could hardly be imagined without the presence and participation of Cubans.

Cubans migrated to Florida in search of respite from past adversity and future uncertainty. The displaced and the dispossessed arrived continuously, together with the unemployed and the unemployable, men, women, and children, black and white, young and old, of all social classes, sometimes as entire families but just as often as shattered households. They reconstituted themselves into new communities throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, along the Gulf coast and on the Atlantic seaboard.

The nineteenth-century émigré communities in Florida assumed a conspicuous presence. Much in the struggle for *Cuba Libre* was enacted in communities across Florida: in Cayo Hueso (Key West), in Ybor City and West Tampa, in Martí City (Ocala), in Jacksonville.¹

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1. The most informative accounts of these communities include Rolando Alvarez Estévez, *La emigración cubana en Estado Unidos, 1868-1878* (Havana, 1986); Gerardo Castellanos y García, *Motivos de Cayo Hueso* (Havana 1935); Manuel Deulofeu, *Heroes del destierro. La emigración. Notas históricas* (Cienfuegos, 1904); Gerald E. Poyo, "With All, and for the Good of All:" *The Emergence of Popular Nationalism in the Cuban Communities of the United States, 1848-1898* (Durham, N.C., 1989); Gary R. Mormino and George Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City* (Urbana, Ill., 1990); Armando Mendez, *Ciudad de Cigar: West Tampa* (Tampa, Fla., 1994); Diana Abad, "Las emigraciones cubanas en la Guerra de los Diez Años: Apuntes," *Santiago* 53 (March 1984): 143-84; José Rivero Muñiz, "Los cubanos en Tampa," *Revista Bimestre Cubana* 74 (January-June 1958): 5-140; Durwood Long, "The Historical Beginnings of Ybor City and Modern Tampa," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 60 (July 1966): 31-44; Gerald E. Poyo, "Key West and the Cuban Ten Years War," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 57 (January 1979): 289-307; idem, "Cuban Patriots in Key West, 1878-1886: Guardians of the Separatist Ideal," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 61 (July 1982): 20-36; Louis A. Pérez Jr., "Cubans in Tampa: From Exiles to Immigrants," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 57 (October 1978): 129-41; L. Glenn Westfall, "Martí City: Cubans in Ocala," in *José Martí in the United States: The Florida Experience*, ed. Louis A. Pérez Jr. (Tempe, Ariz., 1995), 81-93; Susan D. Greenbaum, "Afro-Cubans in Exile: Tampa, Florida, 1886-1984," *Cuban Studies/Estudios Cubanos* 15 (winter 1985): 59-72; and Susan D. Greenbaum, *More than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa* (Gainesville, Fla., 2002).

Filibustering expeditions destined for the fields of insurgent Cuba routinely departed from isolated coastal locations of Florida. The American Expeditionary Army of 1898 set sail out of Port Tampa. It was out of the rural landscape of central Florida that in 1892 José Martí obtained the metaphor by which to designate the new generation of liberation:

Suddenly the sun broke through a clearing in the woods, and there in the dazzling of the unexpected light I saw above the yellowish weeds, proudly rising from among the black trunks of the fallen pines, the flourishing branches of new pines. That is what we are: new pines."²

"*Pinos Nuevos*"—an entire generation came to define itself through an allegory inspired by the Florida brush.

It was not all hyperbole when Cubans advanced a claim to Florida as a place properly and entirely within the historical realm of the island. As early as 1897, while visiting Tampa, Carlos Trelles could not conceal his astonishment: "He who passes along Seventh Avenue or 14th Street, would not believe that he is in the United States, for such is the large number of Cubans that one meets and the many business establishments of all kinds that one sees in which all signs are only in Spanish."³ More than fifty years later, in 1955, the Havana daily *El Mundo* affirmed: "Tampa is linked to our history. . . . Our parents emigrated to Tampa in search of wider horizons of liberty; our men settled in Tampa in search of work; our youth traveled to Tampa for their education. That Tampa has the meanings that it has for us today is due to the fact that its prosperity was obtained by the sweat of our workers and the bones of our émigrés." And *El Mundo* again in 1956: "For Cubans Tampa is Cuban. Tampa revealed itself to the Cuban immigrant as a piece of land offering refuge and work. It was also a place in Florida at the disposition of Cubans in search of security. . . . Tampa is for Cubans a page in the history of Cuba."⁴

2. José Martí, "Discurso conmemorativo," 27 November 1891, in José Martí, *Obras completas*, ed. Jorge Quintana, 5 vols. (Caracas, Venez., 1964), 1: 40.
3. Carlos M. Trelles, "A Tampa," *Cuba y América* 1 (1 July 1897): 4. This article was reprinted as "Tampa: Documentos cubanos raros o inéditos," *Bohemia* 47 (26 June 1955): 132, 137-38.
4. (Havana) *El Mundo*, 29 March 1955, A-6; 16 October 1956, A-6. Other articles celebrating the historical connection between Tampa and Cuba include



José Martí, ca. 1891, Key West, Fla. *Courtesy of the Centro de Estudios Martianos, Havana, Cuba.*

Mariblanca Sabas Alomá, "Tampa cubanísima," *Carteles* 13 (30 June 1929): 12, 56; Herminio Portell Vilá, "Cuba y Tampa," *Bohemia* 46 (26 June 1955): 10, 112; Gervasio G. Ruiz, "Tampa conmemora el centenario de su fundación," *Carteles* 36 (3 July 1955): 32-33, 108, 113; "Tampa es la ciudad de la emigración," *El Mundo*, 30 April 1955, D-4.

Cuban emigration to Florida in the nineteenth century assumed fully the proportions of a diaspora and transformed the economic demography of Key West, Tampa, and Jacksonville, anticipating by nearly a century the Cuban impact on Miami. These were Cubans introducing capital, industry, and technological innovation into the United States, assembling the material and human resources to promote economic development and material well-being. The cigar factories in particular, first in Key West during the 1860s and 1870s and later into Tampa, Ocala, and Jacksonville during the 1880s and 1890s, transformed the local economies of communities across Florida. Nearly two hundred factories were operating in Key West by the late 1880s, employing an estimated eight thousand workers. Key West grew from a population of less than seven hundred residents in 1840 to more than eighteen thousand by 1890 as the value of cigar manufactures in Key West increased from \$20 million in 1882 to \$100 million in 1892. In Tampa, the total value of the 150 factories surpassed \$17 million, employing a labor force of more than ten thousand workers, generating an average weekly wage of \$200,000, representing 75 percent of the total city payroll.⁵

These same cigar magnates also introduced industrial innovation and improvement. In Key West, Francisco Marrero developed commercial and residential property. Eduardo Hidalgo Gato organized the Key West Street Car Association which established the first trolley system in Key West. Most local banks were organized by Cubans. The most important, the Bank of Key West, was owned by Hidalgo Gato. Cubans established the first municipal fire department and introduced gas lighting. Commented the U.S. Consul in Havana Ramon Williams in 1892: "In fact, Key West has been built up by Cubans. . . . The people here [in Havana] look upon Florida as so much a part of their own country that very often they come here and say 'I want to go to the Key,' just as in Baltimore they would say, 'I am going over to Washington.'"⁶

5. See U.S. Congress, Senate, *Proceedings of the Cuba and Florida Immigration*, 52nd Cong., 2nd Sess., Report No. 1263 (Washington, D.C., 1893); U.S. Congress, Senate, Immigration Commission Report, *Immigrants in Industries: Cigars and Tobacco Manufacturing*, part 14 (Washington, D.C., 1910); A. Stuart Campbell, *The Cigar Industry of Tampa, Florida* (Gainesville, Fla., 1939).

6. U.S. Congress, Senate, *Proceedings of the Cuba and Florida Immigration*, 52nd Cong., 2nd Sess., Report No. 1263, 3, 5.



The Martínez Ybor Cigar Factory, Tampa, Fla., ca. 1890s. *Courtesy of Special Collections, University of South Florida, Tampa.*

It was precisely within these communities that José Martí summoned the vision of the ideal of nation: cigar workers organized in peculiarly North American small-town form—Key West, Tampa, Jacksonville, and Ocala: townships of Cubans of all classes, black and white, men and women, united by a vision of nation, governed by officials elected from among their own ranks. It was in this environment in Tampa and Key West that the Cuban Revolutionary Party was founded in 1892 and served to give institutional structure and political form to the liberation project.⁷

But Florida—or perhaps more correctly, the idea of Florida—seized hold of the Cuban imagination in far more contemplative ways, with far reaching consequences. Precisely because Florida dwelled in the Cuban field of vision as an extension of Cuba, because Cubans could presume familiarity with Florida—with its fauna and flora, its factories, its climate (there were after all Cuban communities the full length of the state)—the state developed as a

7. See Juan J. E. Casasús, *La emigración cubana y la independencia de la Patria* (Havana, 1953); Néstor Carbonell y Rivero, *Tampa: Cuna del Partido Revolucionario Cubano de José Martí* (Havana, 1957).

parallel universe of Cuba, something of a counterpart, as a standard by which to take measure of the Cuban condition.

It was in this sense that the experience of emigration was decisive to the ways Cubans arrived at nationality and identity. It suggested adaptation as a means of survival, of borrowing as a means of becoming. The deployment of migratory energies propelled vast numbers of Cubans into Florida, to chart new territories and explore new possibilities, but mostly to survive change and change to survive. Emigration provided distance from the old and proximity to the new, an occasion to decipher meaning and determine purpose, a time of transition from past to future. It was an occasion to discard the old and adopt the new, to leave behind old identities and assume new ones: often to acquire new canons of conduct, new modes of self-representation, new methods of self-actualization.

Florida served as the subject of Cuban ruminations all through the closing decades of the nineteenth century. In Raimundo Cabrera's partly autobiographical novel *Ideales* (1918), the protagonist Tomás returns to Cuba in 1885 after several years of residence in Key West. The experience is telling and clearly has affected the normative hierarchies by which Tomás experiences the world. He is horrified by the backward state of a provincial city in Cuba and in this instance it is Key West that serves as the standard by which Tomás takes measure of the Cuban condition. He reflects: "The streets of the town were virtually deserted. . . . The streetcar, the popular vehicle of urban transportation, was conspicuous by its absence; the coming and going on the streets that ordinarily attest to activity and movement in large cities were replaced by a monotonous silence." And there was more: "The pavement of the streets was gravel—uneven, full of potholes, with deep and open ruts in the middle of the road. Off to the side, on streets without sidewalks, weeds had spread everywhere, like debris. The fronts of houses were in disrepair. The tiles on the roofs were hanging in rickety fashion, supported by four wooden posts driven directly into the ground, without foundation or shafts." Tomás murmurs disapprovingly under his breath: "Such backwardness! Such backwardness!"⁸

These experiences in the nineteenth century were defining, of course, as Tomás's comments suggest, for what occurred signified

8. Raimundo Cabrera, *Ideales* (1918; reprint, Havana, 1984), 232-33.

a transformation of consciousness by which vast numbers of Cubans acquired the vantage point from which to see themselves and/or their world in the condition of the Other. The Florida experience served as both source of change and the effect of change.

In many important ways, the communities fashioned by cigar workers in Key West, Tampa, Ocala, and Jacksonville were nineteenth-century phenomena: products of specific needs, under specific historical circumstances. It is true too that the centers of the Cuban emigration, and particularly Tampa, would continue to play a part in the drama of the new republic. All through the early years of the twentieth century, a bond of uncommon vitality connected Tampa and Havana, as friends and families continued to travel back and forth between both cities. Cigar workers on strike in Havana often migrated to Tampa for work, and vice versa. Trade unions in one city provided financial aid and moral support to strikers in the other.

But the days of the cigar industry in Florida—that is, the cigar industry as it had flourished in the nineteenth century—were numbered. Mechanization dealt one blow. The Depression delivered another. Households scattered, neighborhoods broke-up. Many families headed northward—mostly to New York—in search of a new livelihood and a better life. World War II hastened the dispersal of the Cuban community. Urban renewal dealt the final blow to the old Cuban neighborhoods. Ybor City and West Tampa passed into decline. Eventually, too, successive generations of *Tampeños*—as they increasingly called themselves—passed over into the mainstream of the larger world outside of Ybor City and West Tampa. By the mid-twentieth century, Key West and Tampa had developed into sentimental tourist sites for Cubans on the island. Tampa in particular was actively promoted by the Chamber of Commerce as place for Cubans to connect with their history: the stairs of the Martínez Ybor cigar factory from which José Martí spoke to the cigar workers in 1892, the home of Paulina Pedrosa, the old Cuban Club, and Martí Park.

Even as the Cuban connection with Key West and Tampa was passing into spheres of sentimentality, Miami was beginning to capture the attention of a new generation of Cubans. Miami loomed large in early twentieth-century Cuban narratives on nation and nationality. From the outset, a special structural relationship developed between Miami and Havana. Both cities were

shaped by similar forces and acted upon each other in ways that were at once defining and definitive. They developed as representations of one another, a complex relationship that was at one and the same time complementary and competitive, a relationship that assumed fully the characteristics of a border culture, much like the reciprocal interactions of cities located along both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border.

Miami was itself, in part, a product of the vogue of things Cuban in the United States during the 1920s and bore distinctive markings of its origins. Developers chose a Spanish colonial style, inspired largely by the urban landscape of the Cuban capital. Miami developers and architects visited Havana frequently during the early 1920s in search of ideas to incorporate into the new urban design of south Florida. Havana was fashionable, and this fashionableness insinuated itself into the vision of Miami: foreign, tropical, exotic, through Spanish-language usage and landscaped with Royal Palms—with more than slight insinuations of sex and sensuality—always as ambience and circumstance. New subdivisions were named in Spanish, with intimations of Cuba in street names and in the names of hotels. Construction materials were imported from Havana. This was nothing less than instant antiquity as weathered and worn building materials were incorporated into new constructions. Miami developers paid top prices for old clay barrel roof tiles, floor tiles, hardwood doors, cabinets, and hewn stone obtained from Cuba. Havana landlords razed entire buildings for construction material to sell to Florida contractors. An odd symbiotic imperative linked Havana and Miami in an inexorable relationship: Havana aspired to modernity; Miami invented itself in antiquity.⁹

Havana itself was appropriated as a Miami tourist attraction, as local travel agents organized daytrips to Cuba from the Atlantic coast. As early as 1920, the Havana-American Steamship Corporation inaugurated direct service between Miami and Havana. Affirmed the *Miami Herald* in 1934: “Havana now is definitely a part of our tourist appeal.”¹⁰

9. Kenneth Ballinger, *Miami Millions* (Miami, 1936), 22; Ann Armbruster, *The Life and Times of Miami Beach* (New York, 1995), 38-41; Miguel A. Bretos, *Cuba and Florida: Exploration of an Historic Connection, 1539-1991* (Miami, 1991), 111, 113. The phenomenon of Spanish street was especially pronounced in Coral Gables. For a very informative history of this process, see Joaquín Roy, *The Streets of Coral Gables: The Names and their Meanings* (Coral Gables, Fla., 1989).

10. *Miami Herald*, 3 February 1934, 6.

The presence of Cubans in Miami expanded slowly during these years. Miami entered the realms of Cuban awareness as a place of refuge and residence: it was readily accessible, the cost of living was reasonable, and most of all it was vaguely familiar. A city conceived by local developers as a version of Havana could not fail but to feel familiar to Cubans. The small Cuban community expanded during the 1920s, made up principally of workers, musicians, and entertainers whose presence was related to local "color" in the rendering of Miami as tropical. It was in this setting that Desi Arnaz made his debut before an American public in the 1930s. The south Florida tourist economy increasingly developed around the proposition of Miami as "foreign." Nightclubs and cabarets filled with Cuban orchestras and *rumba* dancers, all part of the tropical ambience designed to confer on Miami its "Latin" appearance.

The Cuban presence increased steadily during these years, largely in the form of political exiles implicated in political upheavals, first as opponents of the Gerardo Machado government and subsequently as supporters of the fallen Machado government. By the late-1930s, an estimated six thousand Cubans lived in Miami.¹¹

In the years that followed, Miami filled with Cubans who had fallen from power and out of grace, former officeholders and future ones. Each change of government, whether by ballot or by way of the barracks, produced personnel turnovers, a succession of dismissals and discharges, retirements and resignations, and inevitably a new cycle of migration to Miami: through the 1930s, after the presidential elections of 1940, 1944, and 1948, during the years following Batista's military coup in 1952, and of course, especially after the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959.

During the 1940s and 1950s, too, Cubans arrived to Miami increasingly as tourists, on short holidays and long vacations, on daytrips and weekend excursions, as sightseers and honeymooners. The 22-year old Fidel Castro and his young bride Mirta Díaz Balart were among the many thousands of Cuban newly-weds to honeymoon in Miami after World War II.

Cuban travel to Miami was both cause and effect of changes

11. Jess Losada, "La contrarrevolución de cerca," *Carteles* 20 (14 January 1936), 36.

over-taking the Florida tourist industry. Post-war Miami was expanding into a year-round vacation site, extending the traditional "high" winter season into the "low" summer one. Increasing numbers of hotels and vacation apartments remained open, offering attractive economy summer rates. That summer vacations in Miami could be considered at all was in large measure made possible by the advent of air conditioning, providing welcome respite from the blistering south Florida heat.

Summer was also the traditional vacation season in Cuba, and Florida had much to offer Cuban visitors. Florida provided access to many more public beaches than were available in Cuba, where many of the best beaches had been withdrawn from public use by hotels and private resorts. Certainly, too, budget summer rates placed Miami vacations within reach of growing numbers of Cuban middle-class families, often at far less cost than comparable facilities on the island.

Transportation also improved. Service increased, costs decreased. Steamship service expanded, and by the early 1950s, the cost of round-trip travel was less than \$40. Automobile ferry service between Key West and Havana expanded. But it was the remarkable development of air services that consolidated the link between Miami and Havana. The Miami-Havana route quickly became one of the busiest international connections in the world. During the 1940s and 1950s, National and Pan American Airlines scheduled an average of nearly forty flights daily and during peak periods often had departures every twenty minutes. Air travel was not only convenient—forty minutes between Havana and Miami—but it was also economical. The standard round-trip fare during the 1950s was \$30. Special tour packages often reduced costs even further.

Cuban visitors arrived by the tens of thousands: 40,000 annually during the 1940s increased to an average of 50,000 a year during the 1950s. The Cuban tourist business in 1948 was sufficiently brisk to keep 225 of the total 338 Miami Beach hotels open all year. Reported *Newsweek* in 1949: "In the summer planes from Havana wing in, bringing Cubans by the thousands: rich Cubans, poor Cubans, clerks, professional men, skilled workers, even domestic servants. . . . The Cubans are leaving their mark on Florida. . . . Last summer it sounded as if as much Spanish as English was being spoken on Miami streets. Shops hired Spanish-speaking clerks and

the city broke out with a rash of signs reading ‘*Se habla español.*’” By 1957, one observer concluded that “Spanish is fast supplanting English in Florida.”¹²

Miami tourist promoters systematically targeted Cuba as the principal market of summer tourism. During the spring and summer, the travel sections of Cuban newspapers and magazines filled with advertisements for Miami: from hotels, motels, and vacation apartments, restaurants, cabarets and nightclubs to airline carriers, steamship companies, bus lines, and auto rental agencies. Miami was advertised as an extension of Cuba, similar and familiar, where no effort was spared to arrange conditions to accommodate Cuban needs. Such hotels as the Blackstone, the Clyde, the Saxony, the Columbus, the Sands Commodore, and Versailles were among the many to include in their advertisements: “*Se habla español.*” The Miami Beach Sands Hotel publicized the availability of “Spanish speaking personnel.” The Hotel Whitehart spoke Spanish but also offered “free English lessons.”¹³

An environment so fully flavored with things Cuban created opportunities of other types. In time, Miami became Cuban in more than atmosphere and ambience. Cuban investors contributed to the post-war economy of south Florida. Numerous small Cuban-owned businesses of all kinds—retail shops, restaurants, and tourist-related services—expanded throughout the 1950s, designed in large measure to serve the growing Cuban tourist presence. Cuban real estate investments also grew. Hundreds of millions of dollars were invested in south Florida, principally in apartment houses, hotels, and office buildings. Commented *El Mundo* as early as 1948: “Cuba has conquered Miami without firing a shot.”¹⁴

In fact, many of these investments were of dubious origins. Much of this cash flow was generated by the rampant corruption and official malfeasance that dominated Cuban political life during the 1940s and 1950s. Public officials at all levels of government, from presidents, cabinet ministers, senators, congressmen, and judges to army officers and police officials lived off bribery,

12. Pan American Airways, Miami, Box 357, Cuba Folder, University of Miami Library, Coral Gables, Fla. I am grateful to Catherine M. Skwiot for bringing this material to my attention. *Time* 52 (29 November 1948): 43; *Newsweek* 34 (4 July 1949): 36; *Times of Havana*, 11 July 1957, 9.

13. Advertisements appeared in *El Mundo*, *Diario de la Marina*, and *Bohemia* (1951-1957).

14. *El Mundo*, 24 April 1948, 5.

Havana and Miami closed in on one another, shaping and being shaped by each other in constant interplay. Bankers, real estate agents, and developers actively pursued clients in Cuba. Miami retailers and department stores routinely advertised in Havana newspapers. The University of Miami advertised special English-language summer classes.

Municipal and state agencies also promoted Florida in Cuba. Daytona Beach designated March 24 as "Batista Day" and proclaimed the Cuban president an honorary citizen. But Miami most actively pursued Cuban tourists, proclaiming July 11th as "Cuba Day," a one-day commemoration preceded by week-long festivities that included dinners and dances, parades and parties, visits by Cuban dignitaries, a courtesy call by a Cuban naval vessel, and a baseball game between the Miami and Havana teams of the Florida International League. The Miami city government advertised an "invitation to our Cuban neighbors: visit Miami soon and often. You are only minutes away. Bring your family. Your children will enjoy their recreation. And a visit to the United States will be educational." The Miami Department of Information struck a similar note in a 1953 advertisement: "In Miami you will feel as if you are in your own home. Spanish is spoken in the hotels, restaurants, shops and theaters. The great department stores and specialty shops of Miami offer summer sales in all types of merchandise, especially in sports clothes and accessories designed for comfort in the tropics."¹⁶

The allusion to retail stores was neither unimportant nor unintentional. On the contrary, it was both product and promotion of what had become one of the principal attractions of travel northward: shopping. The Florida Development Commission advertised in Havana newspapers in 1957: "Florida has the solution to all your shopping needs. Whether you are a businessman buying specialized equipment or a housewife in search of famous wardrobe articles made in Florida or an entire family in search of a marvelous vacation. Florida is the closest place where you can obtain products and services of the U.S.A. And '*Se habla español*' almost everywhere."¹⁷

Shopping in Miami represented substantial savings and must be considered as an important strategy by which scores of Cuban

16. *El Mundo*, 18 May 1952, C-3, 12 July 1953, C-2; *Bohemia* 50 (1 June 1958): 100.

17. *Bohemia* 49 (19 May 1957): Supp. 10.

households sought to maintain living standards. A 4-percent customs duty, as well as a variety of sales taxes and consular fee, together with added transportation costs and local distribution markups combined to raise the purchase cost of American imports in Cuba to exorbitant levels. Shopping in Florida developed into something of a national pastime. During the 1950s, Cuban visitors to Florida were spending an estimated \$70 million annually.¹⁸

Miami slowly developed into a Cuban metropolis. In Miami, commented *El Mundo*, Cubans found the “most famous shops in the world . . . in which to obtain the most exclusive items, the most elegant styles, and a million knickknacks at prices within reach of all pockets.” Columnist Eladio Secades commented perceptively on the Miami phenomenon. “All we Cubans have gone to Miami by now,” he observed in 1957; “Miami is the city of hotels and store windows. . . . The sign is visible in numerous establishments: ‘SE HABLA ESPAÑOL.’ Spanish is spoken everywhere in Miami: in restaurants, in the shops, in the hotels, on the streets. There are moments in which the foreigner could think that what is not spoken in Miami is English.”¹⁹

Retailers in Havana did not mistake the meaning of travel to Miami. The spectacle of Cuban shopping sprees in Miami caused deepening consternation among Havana merchants—and with justification. Havana retailers responded with planned annual sales, timed to coincide with peak summer travel months and designed to compete directly with Miami. One Havana department store announced “a great sale at prices cheaper than Miami.” In fact, Miami prices became the standard by which to characterize sales: the refrain “at Miami prices” became Cuban retailers’ sale pitch.²⁰

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Cubans by the tens of thousands traveled annually to Miami, an encounter that assumed fully the proportions of ritual and was incorporated into the cosmology of Cuban. Miami loomed large in the Cuban imagination, a place to take measure of daily life in the most personal and intimate terms. Without perhaps being entirely conscious of the larger

18. *El Mundo*, 9 March 1949, 1; *Times of Havana*, 8 July 1957, 13; *Newsweek* 34 (4 July 1949): 36.

19. *El Mundo*, 1 July 1951, 31; Eladio Secades, “Ir a Miami,” *Bohemia* 49 (12 June 1957): 151, 160.

20. See for example advertisements in *El Mundo*, 19 July 1953, B-7.

FIESTA EN MIAMI BEACH

7 DIAS
10 NOCHES!
SOLO \$17⁵⁰

INCLUYENDO TAMS DEL
Y AC. AVION O BARCO
POR PERSONA*

OFERTA ESPECIAL HASTA DICIEMBRE 1ro., 1953

Días deliciosos en uno de
los más bellos Hoteles de
Miami Beach

AÑADA EL COSTO DEL PA-
SAJE POR AVION O POR
BARCO, MAS IMPUESTOS.

DOS EN UN CUARTO.
CON BAÑO PRIVADO



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Gestionamos sus pasa-
jes y nos ocupamos de
su Pasaporte y Visas.

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ciones en cualquiera de
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HAVANA FIESTA TOURS
Hotel Toledo
Tel. UO-9541

FARE TOURS
Prado No. 6
A-6565 A-2614 W-5080

A SU DISPOSICION TAMBIEN: Apartamentos en secciones selectas de Miami Beach, de 2 y 3 habitaciones, para 4 ó 6 personas, bellamente amueblados y totalmente equipados (utensilios, ropa, lóza, cubiertos, etc.). Clépticamente ventilados. Alquiler por semana, mes o temporada. Servicio de criados si se desea. Precios módicos. Pida informes en las oficinas indicadas arriba.

Advertisement for vacation in Miami. *El Mundo*, 12 July 1953, C-3.

implications of the experience, vast numbers of Cubans engaged in a complex meditation on the Cuban condition, setting into motion far-reaching forces that would extend into the next century. Miami became a place of the Cuban familiar, perceived as a representation of things Cuban at their best and appropriated directly as the model of Cuban. Miami was an “extension” of Havana, commented many Cubans, with “the same blue sky and the Royal Palm.” Cubans often quipped that “Biscayne Boulevard [was] merely an extension of Havana’s Prado.”²¹ In fact, in many ways it was.

21. *Bohemia* 26 (4 February 1934): 24-25.

Miami was rendered as the ideal of the condition of Cuban—fashion and style, comfort and convenience—and inevitably subject to appropriation. Affirmed columnist José Montó Sotolongo: “To go to Miami is so common, as if to go to a city in Cuba itself. Sometimes even more so, and in comfort, hygiene, ambience—everything—it is so pleasant and familiar for us. . . . To speak here of Flagler Street, Biscayne Boulevard, Lincoln Road, Miami Beach, the Seminoles, the pools, and the area of Coral Gables, for example, is to talk about our own places.” Commented another Cuban visitor in 1955: “Miami is not simply close to us in kilometers but it is close by way of identification, which everyday becomes more palpable. . . . At this time there are no *Habaneros* in the beautiful Florida city who do not feel as if we are in our own capital. The names of the stores, streets, restaurants, avenues, and bus lines are as well known to the Cuban as those of the capital, or those of the city where one resides.”²²

Miami entered Cuban consciousness as fulfillment of a Cuban ideal, a representation of what Havana could become. It occupied an anomalous place in the Cuban consciousness: a city so near, so similar, but so different in ways that seemed to matter most. Invidious comparisons were inevitable, and inevitably a source of disquiet and deepening Cuban angst. The contrast stood in sharp relief and could not but invite comparison. Things were so different . . .

Miami offered open public access to magnificent beaches, and thereby set in relief that which was unavailable in Cuba. Columnist Antonio Iraizoz gave poignance to the Cuban meditation: “The beach: that clean and expansive beach that appears to us as symbol of a functional democracy. Everyone can bathe on the beach. . . . The beach belongs to everyone and it is for all.” Iraizoz wrote of the annual summer migration to Miami to escape “our unruliness, our disorder, our official torpor, our uncivilized life, our noise, the lack of beaches, the absence of water, the lack of shame of the men who rule in the country that could be the best and provide everything that Miami has—and more!”²³

22. José Montó Sotolongo, “Por los Estados Unidos,” *El Mundo*, 8 July 1956, C-10; “Miami, la cercana,” *El Mundo*, 25 September 1955, C-2.

23. Antonio Iraizoz, “En Miami está el amor,” *El Mundo*, 5 May 1950, 12; Antonio Iraizoz, “Fuga hacia Miami,” *El Mundo*, 2 May 1950, 12.

At almost every turn, there was something that invited contrast and comparison. Miami loomed large in Antonio Patiño's 1957 *Ritmo de la juventud*. The novel's protagonist writes to a friend from Miami: "Everything is clean, everything is cared for. There are no beggars or guides who force themselves on one, or hustlers who make the life of foreigners miserable." Writer Mario Guiral Moreno traveled often to Miami and could not but draw the comparison explicitly: "In Miami . . . the pavement of all the streets are in perfect condition, without the potholes and crevices that are found in Havana. Nor does one find there, like we do here, those huge holes . . . where water gathers and sits after rain. . . . It is likewise true that the sidewalks of all the public streets in Miami are always found clean, because they are scrupulously swept daily, in contrast to what happens in our capital, where the streets—even the principal ones—are seen constantly dirty."²⁴

Havana and Miami were reciprocal formulations, seeming always to reproduce each other, relentlessly, a place where Havana saw its image reflected in imaginings of what Havana could become. The weekly *Carteles* used Miami editorially in 1941 as the standard against which to measure the state of the nation: "Cuba, we have proclaimed many times, with minimum effort, could be the most prosperous and pleasant place in the universe." However, "indolence, apathy, and lack of will" has combined to sap national morale. In Miami, in contrast, a city "that until a few years ago was hardly more than an inhospitable sand pit," visitors are astonished to discover the beauty created by a dedicated citizenry. "In Cuba, things are different: there is no public spirit, no civic pride."²⁵

The dominant discursive structure of the Havana-Miami narrative was contrast and comparison. It perhaps could not have been any other way, for to be in Miami was like being in Havana but more so: the recognition of similarities could not occur without the realization of differences. One columnist described friends who vacationed in Miami and who "upon returning to our capital were rudely shocked by the violent and disagreeable impression, due to the contrast observed in the order, tranquility,

24. Antonio Patiño, *Ritmo de la juventud* (Havana, 1957), 158; Mario Guiral Moreno, "Contraste entre Miami y La Habana," *El Mundo*, 19 April 1950, 12.

25. "Antitesis criolla," *Carteles* 22 (2 February 1941): 21.

the good education, the mutual respect among residents, and the cleanliness of Miami, with the disorder, the insufferable noise, the misconduct, and the individual egoism of Havana."²⁶

Miami was itself a city in transition, in large part driven by the logic of the Cuban experience and the power of Cuban needs. After 1959, of course, this transformation assumed dramatic dimensions. From its very beginnings, Miami had appropriated the motif Cuban as part of pretension and panache: it fashioned itself as "Latin," traded on mild winter weather, Royal Palms, Spanish colonial architecture, Spanish street names, and night-clubs with exotic names booking tropical acts. Certainly this was a powerful source of appeal to North American tourists.

But Cubans traveled to Miami for many of the same reasons and found Miami sufficiently recognizable, whereupon they proceeded to make it more familiar, more authentic, more to their liking, and inevitably more their own. Powerful economic and cultural forces had set in place the basic structures that would facilitate and indeed foster the vast migration after 1959. The more Miami became familiar, the more it became Cuban. Many hundreds of thousands of Cubans experienced Miami as an extension of home, a process that had antecedents early in the twentieth century.

In the end, familiarity with Florida may well have contributed decisively to the ease with which the Cuban revolution consolidated itself. Tens of thousands of Cubans began what was to be their interminable exile in the belief that their stay in Miami would be hardly more than an extended vacation and shopping trip to south Florida during which unsettled conditions on the island would be resolved, whereupon they would return home to resume life as they had known it.²⁷

Most who departed early expected to return shortly. For vast numbers the most familiar place outside Cuba was Miami, and indeed this familiarity must be seen as a condition central to the process of emigration. The Cuban presence in Miami had expand-

26. El Curioso Parlanchín, "Por el ornato limpieza y embellecimiento de La Habana," *Carteles* 21 (28 April 1940): 72.

27. See, for example, Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy* (New York, 1993), vi; Pablo Medina, *Exile Memories: A Cuban Childhood* (Austin, Texas, 1990), 113; Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Next Year in Cuba* (New York, 1995), 20; Edmundo Desnoes, *El cataclismo* (Havana, 1969), 57, 165; Eduardo Machado, *Once Removed* (New York, 1986), 2.

ed markedly during the 1940s and 1950s. Cubans owned and operated shops and restaurants, apartment houses and hotels, restaurants and retail shops, movie theaters, and nightclubs. As many as twenty thousand Cubans resided in Miami prior to the triumph of the revolution in 1959. Many times that number had visited frequently, as shoppers and travelers, to work and play, to study, sightsee, and invest. The narrator in Juan Arcocha's 1962 novel *Los muertos andan solos* captured the appeal of Miami after the revolution: "At times Carmen also felt the desire to leave for Miami. It was such a pleasant place. She had been there many times on her vacation and always took advantage of the trip to buy clothing at low prices. She was fascinated by the easy life of the tourists, the acquaintances that were made on the beach and in the hotel with people one never saw again. The Americans certainly know how to live well."²⁸

Cubans waited to return. Months turned into years and years into decades. Miami was transformed into Havana in exile, what María Cristina García called "Havana USA."²⁹ Miami began as an imitation of Havana in the 1920s and 1930s, and was imitated by Havana during the 1940s and 1950s, and in the 1960s it was a copy of a copy that was copied.

Many Cubans prospered in the years that followed and became successful as bankers, industrialists, real estate developers, sugar planters, merchants, and shop owners. They revitalized south Florida. Within decades, Cubans owned and operated nearly tens of thousands of businesses, including banks, car dealerships, movie theaters, radio and television stations, supermarkets, travel agencies, and retail stores. Spanish was the requisite language of employment. It was now the turn of Cuban retailers to place propitiatory signs in their store front windows affirming: "English Spoken Here." Miami had become like Tampa and Key West before it. The musings of writer Eladio Secades, who, in 1983, captured the sensation of Cuba in exile in Miami with insight and affection:

Exile in Miami feels less like exile. It has intimate compensations that the Cuban does not find elsewhere. The émigré who goes north will have to adapt. Those who

28. Juan Arcocha, *Los muertos andan solos* (Havana, 1962), 136.

29. María Cristina García, *Havana USA* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996).

have stayed in Miami have formed here a miniature Cuba, marvelous and new. The pain of the lost country is much reduced by the sensation that one lives in a city conquered peacefully. And for the same reason, almost as if it belonged to us. There are so many Cubans in Miami and the manner of living has assumed a tone and flavor so *criollo* that at times we even reach the point of thinking that the North American is a foreigner. We suddenly hear English spoken on 8th Street and we believe that it is an unfortunate tourist who has lost his way.³⁰

It remains to be seen how events in Cuba in the years to come bear on the world of Miami-Havana.

30. Eladio Secades, *Las mejores estampas de Secades* (Miami, 1983), 37.