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Miami: Mistress of the Americas

Jan Nijman

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Today's most well-known chronicler of Miami's dazzling urban scenes is arguably novelist and journalist Carl Hiaasen. In his praised works of fiction, Hiaasen essentially mobilizes his concerns as a journalist and inhabitant of Southern Florida. Although his novels are often classified as 'thrillers' with an environmental twist to the storyline, Hiaasen's books are above all sardonic reflections on contemporary Miami. He thus habitually describes Miami as the multi-layered urban spectacle that emerges from a unique mix of greedy businessmen, corrupt politicians, dumb blondes, apathetic retirees, intellectually challenged tourists, daft rednecks, opportunistic Hispanic migrants, as well as the odd cynical Robin Hood that is sick of what emerges out of this peculiar melting pot (but nevertheless chooses to stick around as there seems to be an indefinable quality to the place!). As an academic book, Jan Nijman's 'Miami: Mistress of the Americas' (MMA) obviously adopts a somewhat less sarcastic and frivolous tone. However, it does chime well with the key tenets of Hiaasen's work, and it certainly adds analytical depth and structure to our understanding of how Miami became the city it has become.

In MMA, Nijman essentially (1) narrates the (hi)story of Miami's urban transformation, and uses this (2) to explore Miami's contemporary characteristics in more detail. Although not explicitly broached, this twofold objective results in two sets of chapters, i.e. (1) five chapters dealing with key historical periods in Miami's development, and (2) four chapters dealing with some of the distinctive features of contemporary Miami.

Chapter 1 explores Miami's pre-20th century foundations; chapter 2 discusses the impact of the Great Depression (which lingered until the late 1940s in spite of the city's sizable expansion); chapters 3 and 4 detail how Miami rebounded from the 1950s onwards, and how this resulted in a self-accelerating growth machine as from the 1970s; and finally, chapter 5 explains how the ongoing internationalization of the city resulted in Miami's ascendance to a world city from the second half of the 1980s onwards.

The historical background provided in these five chapters can be read as a standalone historical narrative. However, it would be a shame not to continue reading as the overarching themes emerging from this overview nicely feed into the second set of chapters, in which the author assesses Miami's contemporary urban tissue. Chapter 6, arguably the most crucial and interesting part of the book, explores the unusual degree of transience emerging out of the peculiar mixture of very different types of domestic and international migration of variable timespans. Chapter 7 goes on to analyze

the impact of this transience on Miami's urban fabric by connecting it with wider processes of socio-economic segregation and developments in the built environment. Chapter 8 takes a slightly different course by reflecting on the implications for the issue of urban planning, after which the book is concluded by a brief chapter 9 in which Nijman reflects on the future of Miami in general and – given that migration and globalization seem to become more general features of contemporary cities – its implications for other US cities.

In the preface, Nijman (p. vii) asserts – and later on in the book shows – that one of the key characteristics of Miami is indeed its transience: “it has been the city's defining characteristic from the beginning to the present day.” Fittingly, Nijman himself seems to be a prime example of this transience, having moved from the Netherlands to Miami for most of his academic career, while recently moving back to Amsterdam to become Director of the Centre for Urban Studies at the University of Amsterdam. In Japanese, ‘transience’ takes on a somewhat wider meaning: its translation as ‘mono no aware’ more broadly refers to ‘an empathy toward things’ or even ‘a sensitivity to ephemera’. Put differently: in Japanese, the term ‘transience’ is used to more generally describe the *awareness* of impermanence and a gentle *melancholy* at the passing of things. In my reading, this description befits Nijman's own treatise of transient Miami: the book implicitly betrays a deeper engagement with the city than might be the norm in academic research, but the approach taken in MMA most certainly remains distant enough to be rational and systematic.

It should be clear by now that I am very positive about this book: it is at the same time thorough and very readable (almost jargon-free!), and it gives readers an excellent introduction to one of the most extraordinary and striking cities in the world. For urban scholars, perhaps the only caveat emerges from the book's unambiguous focus on Miami's story. In spite of some cursory reflections on other cities throughout the book and in the final chapter, this is essentially a monograph about Miami proper. By this I mean that the book's organization is entirely geared towards the overarching goal of dissecting Miami. The discussion of methodological issues and data handling, for instance, is relegated to the endnotes and/or appendices as to keep the book ‘going’. Similarly, bibliographic info is placed in the endnotes, and if necessary, extended there with a brief explanation of why exactly these writings are pertinent. And finally, although extensively drawing on relevant state-of-the-art literatures, there is little or no critical encounter with these insights: other research is mobilized rather than engaged with.

All in all, in my reading, this implies that the usefulness of the end result likely depends on readers' level of interest in Miami. Anyone looking for new thinking about cities will probably be left a bit wanting. For instance, I can imagine readers who are interested in gentrification, migration, segregation, world city-formation, etc. will find the exploration of the Miami case highly interesting and insightful, but at the same time in need of further theoretical and methodological specification to be directly useful in their own research. However, this is obviously merely a by-product of the fact that this book primarily aims to grasp the extraordinary place that is Miami. And from that point of view, MMA is nothing less than a major achievement. Anyone

interested in a more systematic exploration of Hiaasen's stereotypes will find this a first-rate read.

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