

NARRATING THE NATION: Heterotopian Struggles for Self- Representation in the Cuban Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

Miami's sizeable Cuban diaspora has long used museums and galleries to produce and preserve their sense of community, united through the loss inherent to exile. Recent influxes of migration from Cuba (and beyond) are increasingly interpreted as a threat to the cultural forms many consider an "authentic" preservation of something now lost to Castro's Revolution. Drawing upon fifteen months of ethnographic research within several of these organizations, this article argues that a recent proliferation of new museum spaces and their physical distribution across the city indicate growing anxieties and conflicts between diasporic cohorts. Drawing upon Foucault's concept of *heterotopias*, the article maps these conflicts onto other measures of difference, such as ethnicity and socioeconomic class. The article concludes that hegemonic and normative public spaces are being weaponized in a diasporic struggle over Cuban identity, while newer arrivals are responding in kind through the inauguration of counter-spaces of cultural representation. [museum, theater, diaspora, exile, heterotopia]

Le pays même émigre et transporte ses frontières.
(The country itself emigrates and transports its borders.)

—Jacques Derrida

In November 2018, the City of Miami unveiled a new flag for the Little Havana neighborhood, comprising a rooster atop the merged flags of the USA and Cuba, with 22 other Latin American flags around the border, and the words "Little Havana, U.S.A.: the one with freedom" (*la que tiene libertad*) written in capital letters across the bottom (Figure 1). The flag was (apparently) designed by a local city commissioner, and, in his own words, was meant to symbolize a banner of "inclusivity" to represent the whole community of Little Havana. The move was met with opposition on many fronts, however, with one local film director

tweeting "Miami politics is just a big dumb crooked cockfight." The commissioner then launched a return attack, declaring these critics admirers of Fidel Castro, and adding, "it's amazing that a simple phrase that speaks of freedom brings all the rats out of the sewer" (Pentón 2018). Within days, the discussion had exploded, as decades-old Cold War-era feuds were resurrected across the city's social media networks and newspapers.

In the wider political context of Miami, this hardly seemed surprising. The city has long been a fractured place, especially along ethno-racial and socioeconomic class lines (Aja 2016; Grenier and Stepick 1992; Portes and Stepick 1993), with many migrant groups feeling marginalized or disenfranchised along lines of class, race, or political inclination. The city is frequently characterized as being "south of the South," the "capital" of Latin America, a "city on the edge," where life is experienced "on the hyphen" (Pérez Firmat 2012; Portes and Stepick 1993; Stepick 1994; Torres-Queral 1998). In her landmark text theorizing border culture as *mestizaje* (or cultural mixing), Gloria Anzaldúa describes the US border with Mexico as "*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (Anzaldúa 1987, 3); Miami is a site of similar wounds. Miami, and perhaps most especially Cuban Miami, is "a city in pain, a place where the dead are never far from people's minds, and in which the past and the present are constantly being elided" (Rieff 1993, 22), forming an axis of transnational and diasporic arrivals and departures.

Despite this, or perhaps—as this article will argue—*because* of this, there has also long been a rhetorical attempt to present the Cuban diaspora within Miami as a unified community. Belonging neither to the United States nor wholly to Cuba, the exile community, centered in a neighborhood called Little Havana, long ago turned inward in their struggle to define their group identity, uniting around prevailing ideologies of *la lucha* (the struggle) of exile and *el tema* (the much politicized and often heated discussion) of return. This exile community is predominantly formed of Cubans who fled the island in the 1960s–1970s during the earlier years of the Cuban Revolution, and most have never returned to their homeland. Subsequently, several newer "diasporic waves"



Figure 1. A not particularly diverse selection of Miami City and Little Havana community representatives unveil the neighborhood's new flag, November 30, 2018. (Image Source: City of Miami Twitter Account.)

(Berg 2011) or cohorts of immigrants have arrived from Cuba, and the more recent arrivals to Miami differ substantially, both demographically and ideologically, from their older Cuban diasporic counterparts (Aja 2016; Duany 1999; Grenier and Stepick 1992). More alarmingly (in the eyes of the exile generation), they have brought with them alternative conceptions of what constitutes “Cuban” culture, or *cubanidad*, which grate against the exile generation’s formulations of their cultural heritage uncomfortably, and even painfully.

The Cuban diaspora in Greater Miami is now around two million strong (and growing), comprising an enormously complex assortment of social, economic, political, educational, religious and ethnic backgrounds, and is the largest Caribbean diaspora in the United States (Zong and Batalova 2019). The constant confrontation between diasporic generations across the decades has led to a variety of interpretations of *cubanidad*, forming an ideologically charged battleground in Greater Miami. The need to define a Cuban “essence” predates the Revolution and its aftermath by a long way: Fernando Ortiz, the famous Cuban lawyer and anthropologist working in the first half of the twentieth century, wrote extensively on the subject. He defined *cubanidad*, or the characteristics of being Cuban, through a now much-cited metaphor, drawing on a type of Cuban stew called *ajiaco* (Ortiz 1940). As Stephan Palmié explains, the most characteristic feature of this stew (which is explicitly composed of various ingredients of European, African, and Indigenous origin) is that

it is never finished, but rather is in a constant state of cooking, “an incessant bubbling of heterogeneous substances” (Palmié 2013, 98) that eventually all boil down into a thick sauce. Inside the *olla cubana* (the Cuban pot), ingredients cannot be separated out, and there is a constant process of ingredients decomposing (as they cook) and recomposing into something new. Nonetheless, the different generations of Cubans now resident in Miami have consistently sought to single out and legitimize certain “ingredients” and clarify what exactly should be included in “the recipe” for *cubanidad*. Lines have been drawn, many times over, excluding others according to political position, religion, race, place of birth, language, and so on. Although Cuban identity had already been a topic of discussion and definition for several decades after Cuban independence from Spain (in 1898), the need to reinforce and distill a particular version of *cubanidad* became particularly important for some of the earlier exiles who fled between the 1950s and 1970s, as they looked for ways to remember and conserve the past, reinforce their feelings of nationalism, and assert a distinct identity in the United States.

The launch of this new flag, then, was yet another incident to spark the ire of these various cohorts of the Cuban diaspora in Miami, and it touched a raw nerve: the use of the word “freedom” (*libertad*) is a particular touchstone within this long-standing (frequently ideologically grounded) debate, as we shall see later. Over the decades, this ongoing project of constructing a unified Cuban community has taken

form through various traditional arenas of national (istic) expression, including not only a proliferation of flags but also numerous physical sites of cultural representation (Anderson 1983; Kolstø 2006). This article argues that such struggles for self-definition, which I here call *la lucha por cubanidad* (the struggle for Cubanness) serve as a means of future orientation through the mobilization of an “imagined” or nostalgized coherent experience of the past. Through three specific examples of a museum/gallery space, a community grassroots project, and a theatrical production, I show how such claims and contentions surrounding what it means to be Cuban in Miami are in turn centered and realized in numerous normative and hegemonic spaces of cultural representation and (re)production across the city, including theaters, television shows, cultural festivals, and museum exhibition spaces, which exclude as much as they include.

The recent proliferation of such spaces and their physical distribution across the cityscape in turn reveal the growing anxieties, internal fractures, and cultural battlegrounds at work behind the preservation (or production) and reification of a Cuban culture within the diaspora, particularly in the face of current waves of migration from the island itself, as well as from other regions of Latin America and the Caribbean (Aranda et al. 2014). This article situates these spaces of cultural representation within a wider struggle for dominion over normative definitions of identity—which in kind turn on an axis of socioeconomically derived notions of “distinction” (Bourdieu 1984) and of “difference,” akin to Foucault’s notion of *heterotopias* (Foucault 1986)—to consider the degree to which these cultural and countercultural spaces are “weaponized” to determine inclusion or exclusion as “Cuban” in Miami.

PRESERVING CUBA FROM THE OUTSIDE

The first formal museum dedicated to Cuban culture and the Cuban experience of exile in the United States was inaugurated in Miami in 1974 and can be understood broadly as part of a larger movement across the United States to establish institutional representation through museums and other cultural venues for Latino groups (Dávila 2008, 119–38), who in turn had been emboldened by the Civil Rights Movement. New York, for example, saw the inauguration of El

Museo del Barrio in 1969, while San Francisco became home to The Mexican Museum in 1975. Unlike other Latino museums that “in their very founding rejected the construction of Western culture as mostly white and Euro-American-centric, the Cuban Museum was not founded in an effort to challenge North American cultural hegemony but in opposition to a different ideology” (Cerejido 2018, 545)—namely, that of post-revolutionary communist Cuba. The museum’s goal from the outset was “not so much to insert Cuban culture within the dominant American framework or to assert its distinct cultural independence from it,” but rather to recreate, in a newly formed exiled diaspora, a culture and thus “a representation of a version of the Cuban nation that had been lost to communism” (Cerejido 2018, 545). This project drew largely on feelings of loss, and the need to reconstruct what the exiles saw as having been stolen from them. Arguably, the position of Miami as an emerging “frontier” or border zone—a liminal space between “Cuban” culture and “American,” as well as other incoming groups from across Latin America—also heightened the sense of “otherness,” which fomented a desire to conserve culture in museum form. Such desires to cement cultural forms in the face of constant interaction with the “other” have also been documented in museums along the Mexican border (Barrera 2010; Bustamante 1992), where similar anxieties around defining cultural identities have developed.

In the case of Miami’s new Cuban Museum, such an objective was politically fraught, and in the 1980s there were several outbreaks of violent protest, including bomb threats, at the prospect of the inclusion of artwork by artists still living on the island. This was seen by many at the time as direct support of a regime that had forced many into exile, the living proof of which were the many thousands more Cubans who fled the island for Miami in the Mariel boatlift in 1980 (Portes and Jensen 1989). Nowadays, conflicts over cultural representation in Miami are not quite so violent as to include bomb threats, but, as we shall see later in this article, they remain energetic and heated to this day. The museum as an institution quickly became a central battleground in Miami in the 1970–1980s for competing political ideologies over cultural representation, articulations of cultural legitimacy, and claims of patrimony for the Cuban exile community. Interviewed in the local

Spanish-language newspaper, for example, several local artists declared the function of the museum to be:

to exhibit, research and document the historical and cultural reality of a free Cuban nation. We understand “free Cuban nation” to be the exile community and all Cubans who are living in Cuba after 1959 and are not committed to the [Castro] dictatorship. (*El Nuevo Herald* 1988, author’s translation)

The museum eventually closed for good in 1999, and its collections were donated to the Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami; the substantial archives of historical documents and materials gathered from the Cuban exile community over the decades was bequeathed to the Cuban Heritage Collection, also at the University of Miami.

Numerous other museums and cultural institutions have opened over the subsequent years across Miami, all dedicated to cataloguing and showcasing a somehow more “legitimate” Cuban culture corresponding predominantly to that of the exile group that first fled Castro’s Revolution. The museums tend to focus on an “untainted” version of cubanidad, which predates the numerous changes that were enacted on the island in the aftermath of the Revolution. The recent proliferation of such spaces has overwhelmingly coincided with two major factors, which many of the older Cuban diasporic cohort that I interviewed throughout my fieldwork felt put the very heart of their culture at risk of “erosion.” Firstly, since the 1980s, several new waves of Cuban immigrants have moved to Miami, and especially in the past 5–10 years; many of these Cubans take a much less ideological stance towards Cuba. This newer cohort of Cubans has primarily migrated to Miami for more pragmatic reasons—namely, to earn money and remit back to family and friends on the island—rather than due to any particular ideological stance on Cuba’s government. Moreover, these newer cohorts of Cuban immigrants come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and include more Afro-Cubans, as well as more Cubans of working-class origins (Aja 2016; Cearns 2020; Eckstein and Barberia 2002; Scarpaci 2015), the likes of which jars somewhat with the versions of cubanidad memorialized by earlier diasporic cohorts.¹ Secondly, Miami is

increasingly a major hub for immigration from across Latin America and the Caribbean, and it has recently seen a particularly large influx of Venezuelans fleeing economic crisis in their homeland (Alvarez 2016; Rivera 2019; Stepick 1994). This, combined with the fact that many of the first wave of Cuban exiles in Miami are now becoming elderly explains the growing anxiety that, with them, the last “truly free” rendition of Cuban culture will die too (de la Torre 2003; López 2015). Similarly, such anxieties have been observed amongst Mexican diasporans on the border between Mexico and the United States, where, “in a moment where the most proven form of being rooted is a form of nomadism, there is an increase in the interest about tactics of resistance and adaptation” as well (Monsiváis 1993, 515, author’s translation).

MAPPING POWER

Spaces of cultural representation—such as museums, galleries, or the theater—are places where, through performative mediation, observers participate in structures of cultural identification and thus become subjects in their acquiescence to normative hegemones. In this regard, mediated cultural performance is analogous to Michel Foucault’s technologies of the self (Foucault 1988; Hetherington 2011; Lord 2006), along with his definitions of a *heterotopia* (as opposed to a *utopia*). *Heterotopias*, or “other” spaces (*hetero-* meaning ‘other’ and *-topia* meaning ‘place’ in Greek), are places designed into the very institution of society in which all other emplacements of a culture are at the same time mirrored and countered. Foucault continues,

there are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (Foucault 1986, 24)

Like hospitals, prisons, and schools, museums serve as instances of structural power within the built environment, and a means of institutionalizing cultural

representation. Thus the curation of “heritage” as presented and performed in museum spaces becomes a “tangle of ideology and expectation; an analytic term and a tool of governance” pointing to the power dynamics involved in the selective recognition of identity as mediated by material form (Geismar 2015, 72).

Given the acute anxieties and preoccupations with defining what it means to be Cuban in Miami in an age when the term is becoming increasingly diffuse in its reference, it is perhaps unsurprising that Miami should have so many museums or cultural preservation spaces dedicated to the performance and assertion of this “Cubanness,” each mirroring and at once countering the other in an attempt to truly “get at” some legitimate Cuban cultural “essence.” At the time of my fieldwork (2017–2018), seven different museums had been established to preserve or “shelter” the core of Cuban culture in Miami, which was considered by some to be so at risk of erosion by socialism on the island itself or from influxes of new migrants that they might somehow represent the “wrong” kind of Cuban in Miami.² Two more museums were set to open within a year of my departure.

All of these sites of cultural performance and preservation were within a few miles of one another and promoted themselves as physical spaces in which authentic modes of Cubanness would be presented, faithfully, through material artifacts of mediation. All of them also operated according to mission statements which belied the “tangle of ideology” (Geismar 2015) at work behind curations and performances of cultural heritage. For Michael Herzfeld, cultural essentialism is just “another word for reification, and reification is all about making something material” (in Byrne 2011, 156). It is therefore precisely through the performative declaration of material objects in their capacity to mediate ideologies that museum and exhibition spaces in Miami become battlegrounds in which diasporic Cubans from various generations and cohorts stake out their claims for inclusion or exclusion within a sense of cubanidad.

The very presence of so many spaces within such proximity, all purportedly seeking to promote similarly specific (and narrow) notions of Cuban identity, is evidence of such anxiety, as is the positioning of all these spaces within prominent and powerful institutions or locations within wealthier neighborhoods of the city (Figures 2 and 3). None, however, were in (or

even near) Hialeah, a working-class neighborhood where the majority of more recent Cuban arrivals have settled from the 1990s onwards, and to which we will return later in this article. An important point for Gilles Deleuze (2013; Hetherington 2011) in his interpretations of Foucault’s formulation of a “diagram of power” is the way this brings us towards a new understanding of power as something visible, alongside the more discursive elements of power discussed in Foucault’s earlier work (Foucault 2002). Such power dynamics can be tracked not only within the museum space itself, but also across the wider cityscape, which in turn is arguably a larger “diagram of power” (de Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1991; Reynolds and Fitzpatrick 1999).

Whether housed in major universities, the financial center of Miami, or the cultural diasporic heartland of Little Havana, all of these museums stake out their central position both ideologically, discursively, and indeed physically, in delineating *what* it is to be Cuban in Miami, and *where* such claims are to be asserted. These museums as performative *lieux de mémoire* are “not what is remembered, but sites where memory is at work; not tradition itself but its laboratory” (Nora 1989, 1997, 18), and the very distribution of these “laboratories” across the city is, I argue, in itself revelatory of power structures and imbalances over contested cultural identity categories.

By the time I left the field, the long-awaited Cuban Exile History Museum was still in the process of being constructed, but the plans had been approved and a site located, right on the bayfront next to several other prominent museums and gallery spaces in the most visited part of Miami (labeled no. 2 in Figure 2). This museum will chronicle the events leading up to the Cuban “Exodus” and, echoing Psalm 137, will exhibit the “contributions made by those who left their homeland for the Promised Land,” serving as a “beacon of freedom.” Insofar as it represents the island of Cuba itself, the museum’s position is clear in mobilizing the past as an idealized motif to unite a present-day diaspora (Figure 4). It’s *Cuba Libre* (free Cuba) exhibition, for example, invites visitors to “step back in time and experience Cuba the way it was—Its beauty, its energy, its music, its dance, its food, its art, its people” (from the museum’s website).

Moreover, in the plans for the museum, the mobilization of physical space and infrastructure will

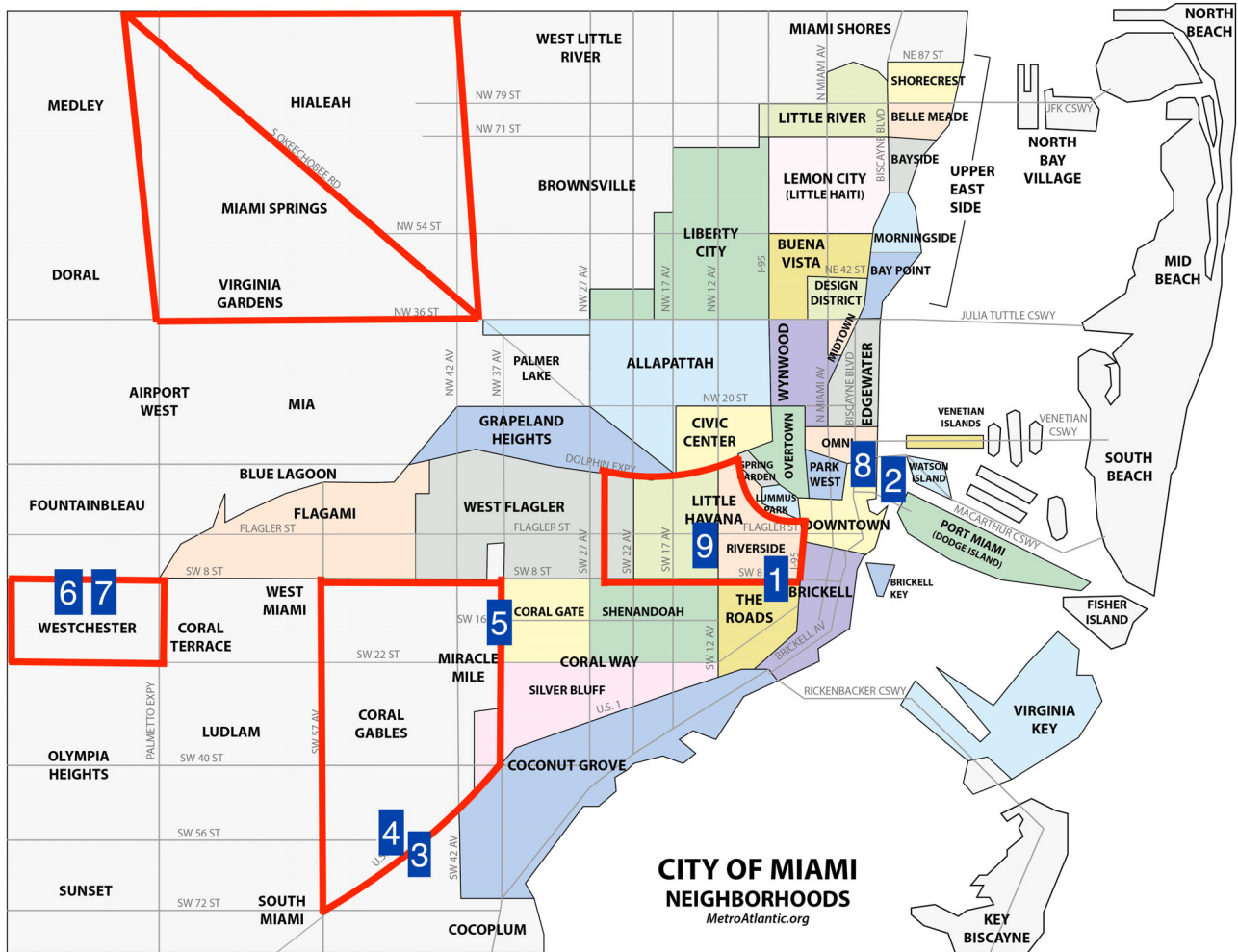


Figure 2. Map showing location of Cuban museums within Miami (blue numbers), and predominantly Cuban neighborhoods where I carried out fieldwork (outlined in red). They are all clustered around universities, financial centers, or relatively affluent neighborhoods. There are notably none in Hialeah or Miami Springs (to the north of the map shown), which are the most densely Cuban-populated neighborhoods in Greater Miami.

evidently serve as a further means of curating and performing a specific notion of Cubanness. The preliminary design of the building is presented as

an artistic expression of freedom exemplified by a close connection to water views, natural light, long vistas and ocean breezes. . . the design of the museum building will be reflective of a walk-through sculpture that guests will experience both physically and visually as they tour the dramatic history of the Cuban Exiles via interactive exhibit spaces. (from <http://cehmuseum.com/information/>, accessed June 22, 2022)

The Cuban Exile Experience & Cultural Legacy Gallery was also set to (re)open towards the end of my fieldwork, after a long period of closure, a little

further down the road. It was to be housed in the “Freedom Tower,” which is itself an iconic building in downtown Miami (labeled no. 8 in Figure 2), and was the “sorting house” (equivalent to Ellis Island in New York) for incoming immigrants from Cuba in the 1960s and 1970s. Thanks to the financial support of the (right-wing) Spanish-language Miami newspaper *El Nuevo Herald*, the building has recently reopened to the public with exhibitions narrating this story of exile and “the American Dream.” Meanwhile, in what could perhaps be read as a counter to the opening of these two museums, Miami’s foremost public university (Florida International University), which is home to a growing number of Cuban students who recently migrated from the island, and which is positioned in a part of the city that is home to this emerging demographic (see westernmost

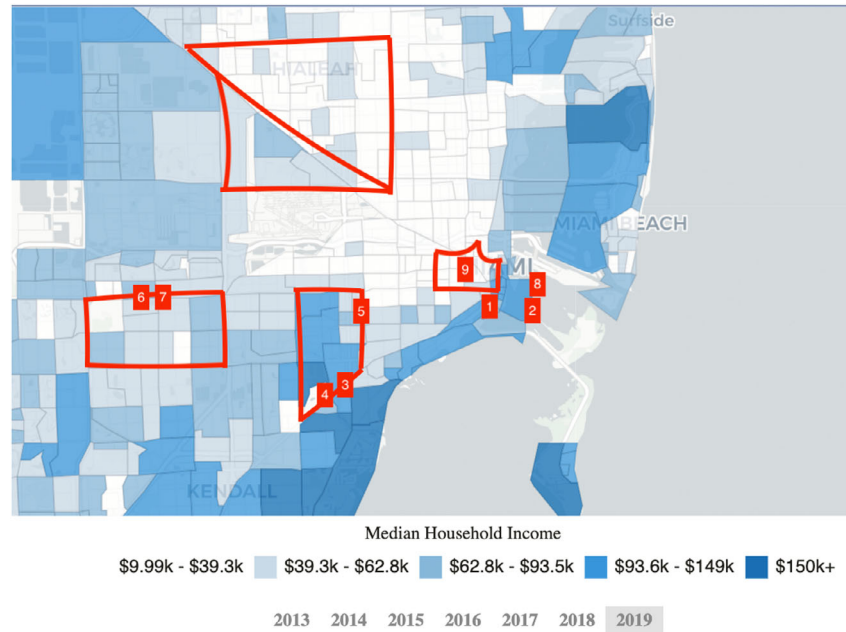


Figure 3. Map plotting Median Household Income across Miami–Dade County (Source: Census data, 2019), and including the locations of fieldwork and of the museums discussed in this article.

Welcome and Bienvenidos CUBAN EXILE HISTORY MUSEUM

The Cuban Exile History Museum will showcase the dramatic story of the Cuban Exiles—From Tyranny to Freedom

The Cuban Exile History Museum is a dream on the brink of becoming a reality. *The museum will serve as a legacy to all of those who fought for freedom and sought freedom at any cost. This is not solely a Cuban story; it is the quintessential American story of a people who lost their freedom and their dreams and found them once again on the shores of the United States of America. Our vision is to unite the Cuban Exile story and the American Dream to honor and preserve the gift of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”*

“A Tribute to Freedom: Everything that is really great and inspiring is created by the individual who can labor in freedom.” Albert Einstein

Figure 4. Screenshot of the museum’s online “welcome message.” (Source: <http://cehmuseum.com/>, accessed November 2019.)

fieldwork area highlighted in Figure 2), has also announced the imminent opening of yet another museum and cultural center dedicated to the Cuban diasporic community, to be named CasaCuba (“Cuba-House,” no. 6 in Figure 2). The plans for this cultural center explicitly conceive of it as “truly a home where we can all find our roots and envision a shared future as one people,”³ which might be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile some of the increasingly different factions who lay claim to cubanidad.

Perhaps of all these new institutions opening across Miami, the most notable is the American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora, which, after many years of attempting to find a premises, was finally opened during my fieldwork in Miami. It is located in

an affluent area of the city in a building that had previously housed the Florida Grand Opera (no. 1 in Figure 2). Unlike the other museums dedicated to Cuban heritage, “the Cuban,” as everyone was encouraged to call it, had been made possible by public funds granted by the Miami–Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, the mayor’s office, and the Board of County Commissioners. The museum was theoretically dedicated to hosting artistic events, such as musical evenings, as well as providing exhibition space to both prominent and up-and-coming diasporic Cuban artists. However, throughout my fieldwork, the museum itself remained largely shut, due (according to my conversation with the director) primarily to the cost of hiring a security guard for the

front entrance. Throughout 2017–2018, the museum was only open for a few hours every Sunday and very little was actually being exhibited inside. Arguably, the shift in name, with a new and explicit reference to being “American,” would “announce changes in how this new iteration of the museum understands the community it aims to represent, while also staking a claim in the broader American context” (Cerejido 2018, 569), yet the museum’s mission statement posted on its website continued to evoke this unifying sense of *lucha* or “struggle” in exile as central to its purpose:

The Cuban Diaspora left family, livelihood and culture to flee from an oppressive government to try to find the hope of opportunity. Through art and expression, the Cuban diaspora have vocalized their grief for past lives and their struggle for new ones. We aim to give a space and voice to these groups that have endured the journey for a better life.⁴

“THE CUBAN”

Over the first few months of my fieldwork in Miami, I had become fascinated by a grand, Spanish-colonial-style building with neoclassical white pillars on a busy intersection between Little Havana and the financial district. Nobody went in, and nobody came out; in fact, the whole place looked completely closed, except for occasional lights on inside and the appearance, a few months into my fieldwork, of a large banner down the front of the building reading “THE CUBAN,” which of course piqued my interest. Another month went by and I eventually decided to go in and introduce myself, only to be met by a security guard who informed me that despite this being a new public museum funded by the county, I unfortunately couldn’t go in as the museum was only “partly open.” Eventually, by chance, I met a senior board member of this new museum at another cultural event, and she explained how, after many years of trying to procure funds to get the museum off the ground, they had finally officially opened the new museum, but currently had nothing to exhibit inside. For this reason, the museum would only be open for a few hours every Sunday for the time being.

Roberta,⁵ a woman in her seventies who had fled Cuba with her family as a young child and later

became a museum director in New York, had moved “back” to Miami (she used the word “back” even though she had actually hardly lived in Miami before, but felt it was the closest she could get to going back to Cuba) ten years earlier. Her daughter Andrea, an interior designer in Los Angeles at the time, had also moved “back,” and together they had started lobbying local funding bodies for money to create a museum dedicated to the Cuban diaspora in the United States. They had recently succeeded in winning a bid for \$10 million granting them their new premises and were in the early stages of forming a board and planning their opening exhibition. In other regards, though, neither entirely fitted the stereotype of a Miami exiled Cuban; both seemed more comfortable in English than in Spanish, and both strongly identified as Democrats—Andrea was quick to tell me she had in fact campaigned for Hilary Clinton in the recent election.

Their decision to form a new museum to promote the diasporic experience had met with mixed opinions in the wider Cuban community across Miami:

you put up a sign saying “Cuban” around here and you’re going to get opinions, you know? That’s why we have the security guard and why we’ve had to keep the museum closed through the week for the time being. We can’t just have anyone wandering in, things might get ugly.

Andrea said this the first time I was invited into the museum itself, alluding to the not-so-distant threats of bomb attacks made by right-wing Cuban activists against various galleries and exhibition spaces just a few decades earlier. The smell of fresh paint and new carpet still dominated the space, although the initial exhibition of Cuban diasporic art had already been mounted on the walls for some weeks. “I get so many messages, these people find me on Facebook and call me up, shouting ‘what do you know about being Cuban?!’” she recounted, rolling her eyes at me. Andrea had never been to Cuba, nor did she have any desire to go, but she felt strongly that, as the daughter of one of the early exiles from the Revolution, she had a strong claim to this identity marker, and moreover that this, combined with her acquaintance with American culture from having lived all over the country (as opposed to solely in Miami), left her well-positioned to manage a new museum on Cubanness in America.

Over the following months I dropped in from time to time, usually to volunteer my services at folding brochures and sealing donation envelopes, and would chat with Andrea and her mother about their sense of what “should” be in a museum such as “The Cuban.” “I think it’s important to preserve a sense of the real Cuban character,” Roberta told me. “Nowadays you see all these new Cubans with their lack of morals, they go back and forth to do business on the island, it’s not honest work. So someone needs to really narrate our story, that story of loss and suffering but also of creation, of what we have built here.” By this point, the museum had been open to the public on weekends for a while, and a limited number of feedback forms had been deposited in the box by the front door. “I couldn’t feel my Cuba here” (*aquí yo no podía sentir mi Cuba*) read one comment slip. “I guess that’s one of our other challenges,” Andrea noted to me as I read it out, “what with the fact we work from public money and private donations, there’s a lot of opinions out there on whose story we should be telling.”

Andrea’s off-hand comment to me, it turned out, had been prescient. A year later, a large scandal erupted in the local press about the use of public money in the project. In January 2019, the chairman of the museum’s board of trustees publicly announced that both Roberta and her daughter Andrea (who had by then moved to Miami permanently to assume the role of head of Communications and Design) had been fired amidst claims of unpaid debts, allegations of nepotism, and a “nasty split” in its leadership. The chairman was promptly contradicted by another trustee, however, who in turn filed a lawsuit claiming he had acted without authorization by firing them. Events escalated to the point that the chairman (allegedly) broke into the museum, setting off the burglar alarm, to procure documents in support of his case.

The museum cancelled its next exhibition, and the building appeared to go dark for several months. An ongoing audit is trying to establish how \$550,000 of public money has been spent over the past year, and what proportion of the museum’s income should be privately raised going forward. The chairman publicly accused Roberta and her daughter of “kidnapping” the museum and its direction of travel, arguing that this (alongside other matters) was tantamount to mismanaging the institution (Vigliucci and Moreno

2019). As of late 2019, the museum remains open-yet-closed with no permanent staff, in a continuing saga of controversy surrounding museum presentations of “Cubanness” in Miami stretching back over decades.

¿QUÉ PASA, U.S.A.?

At much the same time as some of these museums were opening up, posters also started to go up in the main overtly “Cuban” hangouts in town advertising the return of a much-loved television drama from the 1970s, this time as a staged play which would be performed in a major cultural center in central Miami. *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* was America’s first bilingual sitcom, aired on Public Broadcasting System (PBS) stations from 1977 to 1980, taped in front of a live audience at Miami’s PBS station. The show explored the trials and tribulations of a Cuban-American family living in Little Havana as they adapted to a new country and language, and to this day, it remains cherished by many Miamians as a vibrant portrayal of “life on the hyphen” in their both resented and beloved “city on the edge” (Pérez Firmat 2012; Portes and Stepick 1993). In fact, when I first arrived in the city to conduct fieldwork, several newly acquired friends insisted I should watch the entire series as my own cultural induction to the city, and as a useful lens onto Cuban humor and the “Spanglish” malapropisms so commonly encountered in Miami.

This theatrical production, entitled *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A. Today? 40 Years On*, was to be an update on what had happened to the familiar cast of characters as their lives had continued over decades of considerable cultural and economic change in Miami, and it would see the original cast return to fill the same roles, forty years on. Billboards promoting the show were placed along the prominent arterial highway of I-95, and community meeting points for the “old exile crowd,” such as Café Versailles,⁶ hung up adverts for the show (Figure 5), which in turn was sponsored by a quintessentially Cuban American coffee brand.

My Cuban American friend José and I joined what felt like the whole of Cuban Miami on the opening night, which was completely sold out. As I looked around the auditorium, I saw that whole families were attending together, with grandparents and young children alike hanging over the balcony rail to



Figure 5. Poster advertising the upcoming show placed in Café Versailles, a Cuban American “spiritual home” and coffee center in Little Havana, near where the original show was based. The Spanish phrase *ponte las pilas* (literally: put your batteries in) means something akin to “hurry up” or “get your skates on!” (Photo by the author, April 2018.)

catch a glimpse of these much loved characters, who for many felt like old family friends or relatives with whom they hadn’t had the opportunity to chat for many years. As the curtain went up, an enormous cheer erupted across the audience; the actors came on stage, and we learned what had happened to them in the intervening forty years. The show’s central character was returning to Little Havana after twenty-five years living away, only to find that many of her old Cuban haunts in Miami had themselves gone bust and shut down in her absence.

The audience was hanging onto the actors’ every word; the couple seated in the row behind me was lost both in waves of hysterical laughter and gentle sobs into their jacket sleeves. The outpouring of emotion from an almost entirely self-identifying Cuban-American audience (who had lived in Miami for many decades, and most of whom remembered or had since watched the original series many times over) for these old familiar characters was almost tangible. The play lent itself to its audience as well, comprising an hour-long tribute to the nostalgia so embodied and projected by a particularly loud faction

of the exile community in Miami. At the mention of Café Versailles, the audience spontaneously erupted into applause which lasted for a full minute.

But the play also reflected upon the changes experienced by the Cuban community (*la comunidad*) in Miami over the intervening decades; one character drily remarked on how 8th Street (the center of Little Havana) was now almost entirely made up of funeral parlors and cemeteries. The play also addressed the recent influx of Venezuelan migrants to Miami; when the grandmother character announces she is inviting an older Venezuelan man round to visit, the rest of the family immediately quizzes him to gauge if he has communist leanings or not. In this way the play spoke to palpable tensions and divisions within the expanding Cuban and Latino communities in Miami; indeed, many of the subtle jokes and references in the script could only have made sense within Miami itself. As an “updated” contemporary version of the same show presenting old characters alongside new generations (in the form of their children), the play spoke directly to the anxieties felt by a generation now aged around sixty, as well as the experience of their American-born children and grandchildren fretting about whether or not they “qualify” as “Cuban.” At one point in the play, the adolescent character Joey answers the door to a Spanish-speaking pizza delivery guy, who presumes he’s American and proceeds to speak in broken English. Joey replies (in Spanish) “no, I’m Cuban!”, prompting the delivery guy to ask where he was born. “I was born here, but in my spirit and my soul I’m Cuban,” Joey replies fiercely, prompting a wave of applause, cheers, and cries of “*eso sí!*” (yes!) from the audience.

¿QUÉ PASA, HIALEAH?

Valeria is in her mid-thirties and was born in Hialeah,⁷ just a year after her parents arrived from Cuba (via Venezuela) in the 1980s. Her father had in fact already been working in Miami as Cuban intelligence, and in the process had met a Jewish community group that helped to get him and his pregnant wife to the diaspora by leveraging their Ukrainian Jewish roots.

I’m pretty sure my Dad then went into the drugs trade when he got here, because I remember we used to have this concrete safe under the rug on

the living room floor, but then after my Mom got ill and died he went back to Cuba and remarried there. Then he got real sick, but wouldn't come back to Miami for treatment because we couldn't get his second wife a visa to come too.

Valeria had really hated growing up in Hialeah; it was suffocating, and incredibly boring. She also found the pervasive Cubanness of Hialeah to be oppressive, combined with her father's interrogation-style techniques of questioning where she had been, and with whom.

It was like there was no option to not be Cuban! I was never really into Spanish music, I wanted to listen to Nirvana, and I couldn't wait to get away. I wanted to move up to New York for college, but then my Mom got sick. Then the same year as my Dad died, I got a divorce, and finally ended up going up to New York to tend bar for a while and take a bit of a break, before eventually coming back and re-training to be a teacher.

It was only once she had left and then returned to Hialeah that Valeria started to feel a sense of connection with the wider community she had grown up in. "I think I've always had a love-hate relationship with the place, but I also always end up coming back," she added wryly, "and now that I've lost both my parents, there are so many questions I'd want to ask. I'm starting to reconnect more with my Cuban identity, I'm definitely Cuban-American, and if I have children I definitely want them to speak Spanish and know what it means to be Cuban." But she was also adamant her kids wouldn't grow up in some "post-traumatic-stress-disorder household with survivors' guilt." "I think what it means to be Cuban in Miami is evolving," she once said to me, sipping her coffee:

If you think about it, everyone was an immigrant at some point, and there comes a time when they start calling themselves American. So I want to preserve some of that Cuban culture, but I don't want it to be all-defining like it has been for many people here. There are so many people that would never leave Miami, or even Hialeah, because realistically it doesn't mean anything to be Cuban outside of here. The entire economy of Hialeah is devoted to Cuba, and it's

so efficient that the slightest change in Cuba and we're all so keenly aware of it here. It was really interesting to be in New York for a while, where being Cuban or Hispanic just meant something totally different.

Upon her return to the Miami area, Valeria started campaigning for Obama in his presidential reelection, going from door-to-door helping people register to vote.⁸ "I would have all sorts of really intimate conversations with them on their doorsteps, and that's how I decided to set up *¿Qué Pasa, Hialeah?* as a community group to try to get the community's voice, or maybe I should say voices, to be heard in local decision-making." Valeria's name for the community group conspicuously echoed the famous sitcom *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?*: "that show was all about cultural translation and finding your way in an alien world, and that still resonates with lots of Cubans here in Hialeah, who feel really disenfranchised from America but also from the exile community in Miami in general."

Valeria's community group started off by organizing a bike ride across Hialeah to help locals feel engaged in their community once more. Soon after, they began to apply for public money and grants for public art and to create some dedicated "hip spaces" to promote local culture. The result was the Leah Arts District, which includes several large public murals and some new art studios showcasing local artists and musicians, and is fast becoming an alternative locale for tourists to the Miami area seeking "authentic" Cuban and Hispanic culture. "That's something a lot of my generation want to cultivate more of in Hialeah," Valeria told me. "We're young, Cuban, and also American, and we wanted to create a space for all those other versions of identity that I certainly experienced myself as a teenager. You can be Cuban and like Nirvana!" One of Valeria's friends, for example, is in the process of setting up a *brujeria* (witchcraft) market, selling artisan local items, tacos, and craft beers. Another has recently founded an art studio to showcase art reflecting what it's like to be a first-generation American in an immigrant family in Hialeah:

I would probably be a huge disappointment to my parents if they were still alive because I'm in my mid-thirties and I'm single and I don't have

any kids. It's difficult being the first generation; there's a lot of pressure and sometimes you want to go in two directions at once. The older I get, the more interested I am in my cultural roots, but there are lots of different versions of Cuba, and all of them are played out and imagined here in Miami. There are people who completely lose themselves in it, who define their whole lives by a sense of loss, so I see what I do as a more positive way of embracing some of that and creating something from it. I've already had a lot of grief in my life, so why would I choose to find more?! Hialeah is a lot of different things to different people, and I wanted to celebrate that uprootedness through the cultural events and spaces we co-curate together.

It is also striking that many of the Cuban artists and curators opening up spaces within this emerging district also fall outside the normative designations of what "counts" as Cuban, as presented in many of the more formal museum institutions discussed earlier. If, as has been argued in this article, museums take shape as Foucauldian *heterotopias*, or institutionalized spaces that mirror and distort our world, so too can marginalized or disenfranchised groups weaponize public understandings of what constitutes a museum or gallery space in order to challenge normative definitions of cultural belonging. Indeed, given the warlike turns of phrase so often cited by some of the older exile generation (and duly repeated throughout this article), it seems hardly surprising that younger generations see fit to weaponize these very cultural terrains in an act of countercultural resistance. In this regard, I consider Valeria's efforts within the working-class diasporic center of more recent waves of Cuban migration to be akin to laboratories that rework tradition from the margins, comparable to Pierre Nora's ideas about *lieux de memoire* (1989) as potential spaces with where history and cultural narratives are forged, rather than merely presented. Projects such as Valeria's Leah Arts District are conscious moves to challenge from within what constitutes the diaspora, and ultimately, who gets to define what "Cubanness" means. While the Leah Arts District may appear more ephemeral than the museums or the play mentioned earlier in this article, it is just as tangible an assertion of the

struggle (*lucha*) to define and come to terms with one's identity.

CONCLUSION: GATEWAYS, HETEROTOPIAS, POLYTOPIAS

As James Bradburne so articulately points out, in "a Heideggerian sense, culture comes into existence when it breaks—when it is confronted with that which it is not—otherwise it is completely invisible" (Bradburne 1999, 380).⁹ Culture, like accent, is a measure of distance as much as proximity: no one has an accent at home; the entire concept of accent, like culture, has meaning only when it confronts difference. This line of argument echoes Spinoza's "dual aspect" (Nagel 2005) in what Martin Holbraad, Bruce Kapferer, and Julia Sauma call "the co-implication of emergence and negation in times of rupture" (2019, 1). Here, rupture is not only an inherently negative moment of breakage but also a positive or dynamic impulse; discontinuity and renewal hold one another in mutual constitution, as becomes evident through ethnographic studies of diasporic and migrant communities, and most especially in border or frontier places. Miami—as a transnational and in some regards almost liminal place that bridges chasms between social worlds for migrants across Latin America—is a constantly refreshed manifestation of this discontinuity and renewal. It is a city that marks arrivals and departures, openings and closures, in the lives of millions of migrants. It is a place where many people are still "feeling their way," staking out the life they are moving towards, and, in the case of many Cubans, the lives they have left behind, a place where—to echo Anzaldúa's phrase—different cultures "grate" and "bleed."

If one thing seemed to link all my interlocutors across their differences, it was their vehemence that Cuban culture (however they defined it) was unique, special, unparalleled. "Life on the hyphen," a "city on the edge": various apt images have been proposed to encapsulate the everyday lives of the betwixt and between of Cuban and American cultures as experienced in Miami (Pérez Firmat 2012; Portes and Stepick 1993), yet most have also presented this sense of rupture as a loss of or breakage from some core element of identity (Pérez 2015; Rieff 1993), the "natural" locus of which remains centred on the island of Cuba, and in a now archived, pre-revolutionary past. Descriptions of the Cuban American experience have

this in common with wider discourses on diaspora and migration, whereby “routes” and “roots” still point to an origin of departure (Clifford 1994), a point disappearing over a horizon.

The theatrical production, art exhibition, and museum collections discussed in this article have all demonstrated hegemonic or counterhegemonic spaces in which voices from the Cuban diaspora reverberate with proclamations of what “counts” as Cuban. Returning to Fernando Ortiz’s *ajiaco* (stew) metaphor, this article has shown the deep-set concerns of so many Cubans in the diaspora in teasing out specific ingredients that define inclusion or exclusion in the “true” recipe of cubanidad. As new diasporic flows have migrated to Miami, anxiety has increased about the erosion of cultural “authenticity,” yet this is also further evidence of what I conclude in this article—that the cultural fermentation caused by ongoing ruptures within the Cuban community on and off the island is generating new cultural forms, the likes of which progress what it means to be Cuban, to the detriment of those who see themselves as sidelined from the direction of travel.

Setha Low has written of the anxieties and struggles experienced by those living within gated communities to assert boundaries of belonging and create feelings of security and unity for those within. Gated community residents mobilize the very gates they erect as a means of creating the new community they were searching for; this boundary creates self-definition through its affordance to simultaneously include and exclude, to create place and nonplace. In this sense, *heterotopia* describes a place

where there is a blurring of public–private distinctions, a conceptual or physical border or boundary separating heterotopia from everyday life, a regiment of rules and practices that are distinct within heterotopia and a sense of sanctuary or safe haven such that a special kind of community develops expressed in inclusion/exclusion or insider/outsider distinctions. (Low 2008, 158)

There is also constant monitoring of the gateways into these communities, guarding and patrolling the parameters of communal inclusion, which in turn draw from class- or status-based anxieties broadly manifesting as “us” and “them” (cf. Bourdieu 1984).

It is this same anxiety that is so apparent in what I have presented as the “battleground” or “struggle” over Cuban identity. As repositories of ideologies and formulations of culture, museums (and similarly institutionalized public spaces) become normative collections of symbols that serve to exclude as much as they include, and reinforce stratification along lines of socioeconomic class, ethnicity, and diasporic generation. These spaces are the gated communities of culture, if not of residents and their homes. In particular, the earlier Cuban museums in Miami were founded in response to a newfound “otherness” that the exiles experienced upon leaving their homeland. These museum spaces can be considered *heterotopias* insofar as they are sites where culture is represented, contested, and inverted as part of a political project.

Yet this excludes newer waves of Cuban diaspora, especially those living in working-class neighborhoods more disenfranchised from the broader hegemonic construction of Cuban diasporic identity across Miami. Their response has been to create what perhaps constitutes a counter-museum or -gallery space, carving out a new space for self-expression in the process by reformulating the idiom to their own ends. In Valeria’s grassroots arts district, the very concept of a “museum” space or a theatrical production that one peruses in “leisure-time,” which is so at odds with the numerous socioeconomic constraints keenly felt by many of Miami’s more recent immigrant arrivals (Coffee 2008), is contested by a different mobilization of public space. By building their own heterotopias, or perhaps “polytopias” would be more apt here, for they are simultaneously asserting “otherness” in reference to wider America culture *and* to a specific earlier “version” of Cuban diasporic culture, these newer generations of Cubans in Miami are also creating spaces which are “absolutely central to a culture but in which the relations between elements of a culture are suspended, neutralized, or reversed” (Lord 2006, 1; also see Dehaene and de Cauter 2008).

Through the lens of heterotopia, we can arguably see the three cultural spaces I have outlined in this article as situated in direct dialogue with each other, posing different designs for “gateways” into the community they seek to conserve and guard. By creating their own institutionalized public spaces, emerging marginalized groups of diasporic Cubans are thus adopting the idiom of choice for cultural

representation in Miami—the museum (broadly understood as a site of material cultural performance)—to contest and respond in kind to a cultural landscape that has otherwise largely excluded them.

NOTES

1. Classifications of “class” are difficult in the context of Cuba, where socioeconomic class was theoretically expunged by the socialist revolution of 1959. The reality of modern-day Cuba, however, is that there is great socioeconomic diversity, and this clearly also maps across lines of race and the rural/urban divide. Very broadly speaking, the earliest exiles to Miami were the upper classes, who had the most to lose from the Revolution; more recent arrivals from the island generally represent greater racial and socioeconomic diversity in relation to earlier diasporic cohorts.
2. Broadly put, ideas about the “wrong” kind of Cuban map directly onto socioeconomically derived lines of “taste” (Bourdieu 1984), whereby the music, clothing, slang, and general mannerisms of newly arrived Cubans are equated with working-class or somehow “uncouth” behaviors.
3. <https://ignite.fiu.edu/give-now/giving-opportunities/units-and-divisions/office-of-the-provost/casacuba/index.html>, accessed June 28, 2022.
4. Originally published on the museum website (accessed April 11, 2021), and currently available at <https://www.miamianbeaches.com/business-resource/american-museum-of-the-cuban-diaspora/6657>, accessed June 28, 2022.
5. All names have been changed to protect the identities of research participants.
6. Café Versailles is a Cuban American restaurant in the heart of Little Havana, which has become a spiritual and symbolic headquarters for the exile community. As such, it is also the chosen locale for campaigning politicians, including George Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, anxious to secure the Cuban vote. The café is synonymous in Miami with a specific (conspicuous) faction of exiled and nostalgic Cubans and Cuban Americans.
7. A working-class neighborhood of Greater Miami, of which 90% of the residents were born outside the United States. It is also home to most of the more recent waves of immigration to Miami from Spanish-speaking countries. See the northernmost outlined area in Figure 2.
8. In this regard alone, Valeria is already distinct from most of the older exile generation located in neighborhoods further to the south of the city, which remain predominantly Republican to this day owing to a lifelong opposition to “communist” or left-wing politics (see Girard et al. 2012).
9. Heideggerian in the sense of his arguments around *Dasein* (“being there”), whereby our cognizant abilities to think are only realized upon confrontation with the more engaging “being-in-the-world” of the realm of experience. He argues for the importance of authenticity in human existence, involving a truthful relationship to our “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*) into a world with which we are always already concerned (Heidegger 1962).

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