Anthony P. Maingot


To write a history of Miami is to enter a treacherous swamp. There is the constant risk of being sucked into one of the sensational narratives of the city’s explosive growth and its differences from other North American metropolitan areas, tales of tropical paradise, cocaine cowboys, beach bodies, a global city of the future, political corruption, and Miami Vice. However, eschewing such glitzy or sordid storylines carries its own risks; official Miami Beach historian Seth Bramson was recently informed that City Manager Jimmy Morales rejected the manuscript, commissioned for the centenary of Miami Beach, saying that “rather than unite the community in celebration, this book will divide the community and rehash ugly chapters of the past” (Miami Herald, March 13, 2015). In the context of such a battle over how to represent the past of what is now the fifteenth most populous metropolitan area in the Americas, the goals that Anthony Maingot announces for Miami: A Cultural History are actually bolder than they might appear: “To avoid flippant critiques, odious comparisons, and exuberant boosterism” (p. xxi). For the most part, Maingot, professor emeritus of sociology at Florida International University, succeeds admirably in a comprehensive, well-written, and informative book pitched at nonacademic readers. Some, however, might question how “cultural” this cultural history ultimately is.

Although he does not use the term “imperialism,” Maingot establishes from the outset that Miami owes its existence as a modern city to the expansion of U.S. territorial, economic, and cultural influence in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico since 1800. The three Seminole wars of the first half of the nineteenth century made Florida a U.S. territory and brought American military outposts and then white settlers to the mouth of the Miami River, as the Seminole holdouts retreated to the Everglades. The War of 1898 turned Cuba and Puerto Rico into U.S. territories, de facto and de jure respectively; Maingot argues that the Gulf Coast and Florida East Coast railroads were developed at the turn of the twentieth century because of “the opportunity of one day incorporating Cuba” into the U.S. transportation network (p. 13). The result was that subtropical Miami, surrounded by swamp, with barely any topsoil, situated on “the shortest commercial river in the US” (p. 29), grew rapidly because of its strategic location on the frontiers of the early twentieth-century U.S. empire.

Maingot is sometimes overly enamored of the trope of the visionary individual—he claims, tendentiously, as an “undisputed universal fact” that “the forces of historical conjuncture create opportunities which only men and women of
vision and passion take full advantage of” (p. 27). But he also portrays the subordinated groups who did the hard work of deforesting, dredging, quarrying, and building urban South Florida and then occupied the low-wage service-sector jobs that have sustained this city with no manufacturing history but a great many hotels, hospitals, and homeowners looking for people to cut their grass and renovate their kitchens. At first those workers were mostly African Americans and Bahamians. Maingot tells their story well, and emphasizes the fact that the legal and vigilante segregation that forced them to live in a few impoverished neighborhoods remains the central demographic and economic feature of a contemporary Miami that is one of the poorest and most racially segregated metropolitan areas in the United States. Maingot also stresses the important role played by working-class Puerto Rican migrants in the early twentieth century, an aspect of Miami’s cultural history often forgotten, given the significance of post-1959 Cuban migration to Miami, and all the more important to remember now that the formerly Puerto Rican neighborhood of Wynwood is being radically transformed into a gentrified zone of art galleries and hipster boutiques in a city marketing its visual art institutions as proof that the long-heralded fate of Miami to be a “world-class city” has finally arrived. Such boosterism shows how hard it is to write a cultural history of Miami, when culture is a mobile, heterogeneous, and complicated concept, capable of being deployed as part of official branding with little concern for actual production on the ground.

Should an author focus on culture in the narrower sense—the arts, literature, music, and so forth? Maingot does some of this, although he seems generally unimpressed with the literary output of the city, focusing on its crime fiction, and noting that two of the more interesting Cuban-American writers of the post-Mariel period, Reinaldo Arenas and Heberto Padilla, could not find a home or much of an audience in Miami. For Maingot, architecture and music are brighter spots in South Florida’s cultural firmament, although in declaring that “music in Miami now means Latin music” (p. 190), he gives short shrift to African American musical traditions and to Ultra, the annual outdoor festival of electronic dance music that draws hundreds of thousands to downtown Miami each year.

Should an author focus on culture in the anthropological sense, looking at foodways, customs, patterns of family life, and so forth? Maingot mostly avoids this tack, except for a brief foray into “Cuban culture” and “Miami cuisines” (pp. 183–90), perhaps wary of mischaracterizing the various demographic groups that have made up Miami, all of which are themselves divided internally along class, race, and gender lines and are understandably sensitive about ethnic stereotyping in a place still routinely characterized in the rest of the United States as a “banana republic.”
The result is that there is little to quarrel with in Maingot’s book, but some readers might wish for a little more culture, in both the narrower and the broader senses, in this cultural history. The rich history of Cuban (and other Spanish-language) theater in Miami, for example, is passed over in a fleeting reference to Little Havana’s Tower Theater. Maingot gives careful attention to the “Cuban miracle” that transformed the city economically and demographically in the 1970s and 1980s, balancing the entrepreneurial aspects of Cuban Miami against the fact that many business owners got their start through the U.S. Cuban Refugee Program and loans from the Small Business Administration. Much less space, however, is given to the more recent influx of Venezuelan, Brazilian, Nicaraguan, and Argentinian migrants and the ways in which Miami neighborhoods and cultural patterns are being transformed once again by Latin American people and capital.

As contemporary political events once more put Cuba near the center of U.S. foreign policy, Miami’s location on the strategic edge of the greater Caribbean region will reanimate the dream of incorporating Cuba fully into the U.S. sphere of influence (an outcome that the people of Cuba will undoubtedly shape far more than most U.S.-based commentators seem to think). The BBC reports (May 6, 2015) that “U.S. Approves Ferry Service between Cuba and Florida,” recalling the 1950s advertisement featured in Maingot’s book (p. 90) for a “romantic overnight cruise” to Havana with “three round trips from Miami every week!” (The fact that these trips were offered by a British shipping company shows how much Miami’s place in the greater Caribbean brought it into European as well as U.S. imperial networks. Maingot emphasizes the role of the pre-independence Bahamas in alcohol smuggling and banking during Prohibition and the organized crime periods of Miami’s early history.) Miami: A Cultural History provides a useful roadmap—or perhaps, rather, shipping route—to understanding how Miami came to occupy its current position at the crossroads of the Americas.

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