

Review: *Diasporic Generations: Memory, Politics and Nation among Cubans in Spain*

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Mette Louise Berg, *Diasporic Generations: Memory, Politics and Nation among Cubans in Spain*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2011. 240 pages. ISBN 978-0-85745-245-0

Most of the literature on Cuban migration since 1959 has focused on the Cuban community in the United States, particularly on the ethnic enclave in Miami-Dade County. Berg's book, on the other hand, is the first to offer a full-fledged exploration of the thousands of Cubans who have settled in Spain since the coming to power of the socialist revolution. This study on migration from the island prior to the 2013 migratory reforms meant to ease the émigrés' departure and return is an opportune and well thought-out contribution to Cuban Studies.

Though small, the number of Cubans who have arrived in Spain since the 1960s is not negligible. In 2009, there were 56,734 Cuba-born persons officially registered in this European country (12). This is the second-largest population of Cubans outside Cuba behind the United States. At the time of writing, Berg predicted thousands more would arrive as a result of the Law of Historical Memory, which gives the descendants of Spaniards who fled their country during the Spanish Civil War the right to apply for Spanish citizenship. Many of the potential migrants may end up in the United States where they are likely to have relatives or friends, as Cubans with dual nationality who own a Spanish passport may enter the U.S. without a visa.

Drawing from extensive, multi-sited fieldwork, the book addresses the impact of the settlers' considerably different social and historical backgrounds on their adaptation to new surroundings, their cultural and national identities, and their memories as well as their relationship with the homeland. How is an "other" identity understood in a nation that, unlike the United States, perceives itself as not being a nation of immigrants? Does the quality of the relations between the government of Cuba and of the host country make a difference in the life of émigrés, especially in the life of those who maintain their ties to the island nation? Why is the Cuban population united around ethnicity in the U.S., but so fragmented in Spain? What function does speaking the host society's official language have on the lives of migrants? These are questions that scholars on the U.S. side of the Atlantic may have pondered at one time or another.

Addressing these and many other questions, Berg brings a fresh perspective to the study of displaced Cubans. Following sociologist Rubén G. Rumbaut's classification of the first, second, and third generation in exile, most

studies of the Cuban community in the U.S. have sought to describe the process that Cuban Americans experience in the road toward assimilation.¹ Gustavo Pérez Firmat's influential book *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*, for example, dwells on what he dubbed the "one-and-a-half generation" (generally understood as the second generation) so as to call attention to the bicultural identity of the children of the exile generation.² This is the only cohort for whom cultural identity is a balancing act, as they are both insiders and outsiders to Cuban and U.S. cultures. The previous generation held onto their Cuban traditions while the subsequent generation is, according to Pérez Firmat, Cubans in name only. I agree with Berg that the distance between this interpretation and what Renato Rosaldo has critiqued as a "hydraulic" view of cultural adaptation is too close for comfort.³ It is not always the case that as one culture decreases the other intensifies. A good number of displaced peoples now have the option of maintaining their ties to the home country, as studies of transnationalism have demonstrated.

It is best keeping in mind, however, that the transnational option was not available to Cuban émigrés until 1979, when they were allowed to return for family visits. The fact that Cuban migration to the U.S. took place in fits and starts, as if controlled by a faucet that is turned on and off, as Guillermo Grenier and Lisandro Pérez have noted, partly justifies Rumbaut's generational proposal.⁴ There have been distinct waves over time: the first cohorts of exiles through the early 70s, then the Marielitos in 1980, followed by the balseros in 1995, and in the new millennium the group that Susan E. Eckstein (whose work Berg acknowledges as an inspiration) calls the "new Cubans" or "new Cuban immigrants."⁵ It is possible, then, to examine one of these waves across generations. Rather than conflicting among themselves, the two frameworks complement and enrich each other.

Berg, too, focuses on three generations, but these are grounded not on age, but rather on the historical circumstances that produced migration as well as

¹ Rubén G. Rumbaut, "Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the First and Second Generation in the United States." *International Migration Review* 38.3 (2004): 1166 et passim.

² See Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban American Way* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 15.

³ See Renato Rosaldo, "Assimilation Revisited," SCCR Working Paper No. 9 (Stanford: Stanford Center for Chicano Research, 1985), 12.

⁴ See Guillermo Grenier and Lisandro Pérez, *The Legacy of Exile: Cubans in the United States* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003), 22.

⁵ See Susan E. Eckstein, *The Immigrant Divide: How Cuban Americans Changed the U.S. and Their Homeland* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 31 et passim

the conditions encountered by migrants in the host country. Berg calls the three generations the Exiles, the Children of the Revolution, and the Migrants, each of which faced a different turning point. Fleeing Cuba, they arrived in Spain at various moments when disparate internal conditions influenced their reception. Moreover, each of these generations has its own set of memories and expectations as well as a unique understanding of time and space. Analyzing how each generation narrates its memories of Cuba and how these memories are linked to discourses circulating around them is another goal. What it means to be Cuban is the outcome of the interplay of official Cuban discourse, the understanding each generation has of Cubanness, the existing discourses on Cuba, and finally the stereotypes of Cuban subjects in the Spanish public sphere. The variety of experiences among Cubans living in Spain brings diversity to the fore, a welcoming change to the monolithic portrayal of the Cubans who left for exile. For this reason, Berg purposefully avoids using the word community.

After considering the theoretical underpinnings of the book, Berg devotes a chapter to each of the three generations. The first generation, the Exiles, left Cuba between the early 1960s and about 1980 as a result of government policies that alienated them, such as the nationalization of businesses. They had a similar social background. It is interesting to note that many of the Exiles were either Spanish migrants who had settled in Cuba or the descendants of such migrants, and were thus acquainted with Cuba's former colonial power. A homogeneous group, they were suspicious of those who left years later fearing them to have collaborated with the revolutionary government. Additionally, they were nationalistic and politicized to the point of seeming to be the mirror image of many Cubans committed to the revolution who had remained on the island.

The second generation, the Children of the Revolution, arrived in Spain in the 1990s. These were the children of Cubans who had supported the revolution and had benefitted from its social policies and the opportunities afforded by joining the socialist bloc. However, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ensuing economic crisis, the horizon of possibilities diminished and the children of the revolution became disillusioned. After all, they were supposed to have been the new men and women for whose benefits so many sacrifices had been made. Building on arguments regarding the shared experiences of each generation, the author highlights in this section key sites that shaped those experiences, such as the Lenin School in Cuba and *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*, the cultural magazine published in Madrid between 1996 and 2009. Lamenting how political polarization had hijacked the discussion about Cuban culture, the writers behind the journal sought to create, at least in principle, a third space fostering a more nuanced interpretation of events on the island. They also sought to untether nationality and territoriality. Embracing a diasporic

consciousness, the Children of the Revolution are leery of totalizing narratives and nationalist symbols.

The third generation, the Migrants, arrived in Spain from the mid 1990s onward. They see themselves as economic migrants and would hope to be able to travel back and forth as needed. While the previous two generations were mostly “white” and middle class, this is a multiracial group. Many are struggling to hold on to a job and find themselves in low-paying positions. Some defected when they arrived in Spain, others have overstayed their work permit, and still others married Spanish citizens and moved to Spain. They came of age during the “Special Period,” as the Cuban leadership euphemistically called the deep economic crisis that unfolded after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Distrustful of Cuban politics, they nevertheless continue to be involved in their families’ lives in Cuba. These Cubans identify with the neighborhood where they lived rather than the nation.

Observations about the differing narratives around such subjects as migration, politics, consumer items, and national symbols punctuate the narrative, highlighting the also different historical backgrounds, experiences and motivations that impelled these Cubans to leave their homeland. What emerges is a complex picture of Cuban émigrés in Spain, one that takes into account race and gender issues. Sidestepping blanket statements about the conservative politics of Cuban exiles, the book shows the tensions that pervade the relationship among the various generations of Cubans in Spain. There is no single ideology that drives the Cuban “community,” just as there is no common array of memories capable of transcending the intricacies of historical contexts. Berg’s historically informed approach skillfully foregrounds this diversity.