Mette Louise Berg


Mette Louise Berg’s _Diasporic Generations_ offers a historically grounded and well-documented ethnographic study of Cubans living in Spain. The book’s subtitle refers to a contested terrain in which all three terms—“memory, politics, and nation”—are contingent and contextual, expressed and interpreted in diverse ways within the individual stories of Berg’s informants. Thus, through its sensitive analysis of the narratives of Cubans in Spain and their families and friends back in Cuba, the text unravels conflicting memories, contrasting political experiences, and different understandings of nation and belonging. In so doing, it challenges the notion of diaspora as representing an ethnic “community” connected through shared experience and links to a common homeland. Rather, by tracing the stories of different “generations” of diasporic Cubans, the text points to the “multiplicity of diasporic experiences” (p. 10) and the importance of “grounding diasporic subjects historically” (p. 11). In comparison to the culturally and politically visible Miami-based Cuban diaspora, the book reveals how Cubans in Spain represent a fragmented and diverse group, characterized by conflicting memories and experiences of both homeland and living in “diaspora.”

Berg adopts the concept of generation to distinguish between the various “historically situated trajectories” (p. 40) of the Cubans in her study. These divergent trajectories, she argues, gave rise to distinct “modes of remembering” (p. 40) and divergent transnational practices and relations to homeland. Rather than biological age or type of migrant—factors typically used by migration scholars to categorize migrants—Berg suggests that “generation” offers a more useful way of conceptualizing the experiences of Cuban migrants with regard to both their departure from Cuba and their arrival in Spain. Since the book traces the complex formation of the Cuban diaspora in Spain from the 1960s to the early 2000s—a period marked by profound social and political changes in both Spain and Cuba—Berg makes the crucial point that over the years these different “generations” departed from a very different Cuba, but also arrived in a very different Spain (p. 165). While Spain saw the transition from dictatorship to democracy in 1975, Cuba experienced the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989, and the gradual relaxing of its economic and migratory policies. A generational approach, it is argued, allows for a deeper analysis of the “culturally and historically specific” (p. 8) subjectivities and memories of diasporic subjects.

Mindful of the potential overlaps between them, Berg thus usefully divides the Cuban “community” in Spain into three “generations”: the “Exiles,” the
“Children of the Revolution,” and the “Migrants.” Each “generation” is distinguished from the others by the circumstances in which they left Cuba and arrived in Spain, which shape their diasporic experiences and memories. The Exiles, many of whom were effectively return migrants or descendants of Spanish émigrés, were predominantly white, middle-class people who left Cuba soon after the revolution and regarded themselves as political exiles. Berg suggests that what was striking was the Exiles’ disinterest in contemporary Cuba. They had no aspiration to return there and it was kept alive only in their memories. The memories of the Children of the Revolution, predominantly intellectuals who arrived in the 1990s, were shaped by their experiences of communism and revolutionary Cuba. Having become alienated in Cuba they, unlike the Exiles, also felt alienated in Spain and embraced “cosmopolitanism” (p. 117). Finally, the Migrants, many of whom came from the poorer provinces as opposed to Havana, emigrated more recently in the context of greater migratory freedom from Cuba but a more precarious migration situation in Spain. Unlike the previous generations, they defined themselves as economic migrants, maintaining much closer contact with their families back in Cuba.

While Chapter 2 provides readers with important social and political background, the following three chapters draw mainly on in-depth interviews collected during Berg’s extensive ethnographic fieldwork—primarily in Madrid, but also in Barcelona, Havana, and Miami. By juxtaposing the political and historical contexts with migrants’ narratives, the book teases out some of the ways the personal and political become closely intertwined in the diasporic imaginations of Cubans in Spain. This interweaving of the personal and the political is also revealed in Berg’s thoughtful reflections on her own positionality during her interactions with her informants and the hostility she faced from those who believed she was working for the CIA or the Cuban government.

The final chapter of the book, “Gender, Diaspora, and the Body,” draws out some of the “continuities and disjunctures” (p. 23) within the stories of each “generation,” with a particular focus on narratives of the body. It points to the way the historical and political contexts overlap with migrants’ own subjectivities, shaped by factors such as race, gender, class, and stage in the life cycle. Yet the subsections of this chapter are put together in a somewhat fragmented way, jumping between the personal and the political, as opposed to subtly tying them together, as is so successfully done in previous chapters. Despite this minor drawback, it contains some fascinating points including, importantly, a comparison of identity discourses among Cubans in Spain and the Miami-based diaspora.
The journalist, poet, and writer José Martí is described as a figure whose legacy is claimed by all: “a proto-socialist for the government, a conservative nationalist for Exile groups and an early postmodern thinker for Cuban-American academics” (p. 49). Paralleling the conflicting “versions” of Martí in Cuba and beyond, the stories in this book reveal starkly conflicting “versions” of Cuba, imagined and re-created from afar. As well as providing a unique and fascinating case study of Cubans in Spain, Diasporic generations makes a highly significant contribution to the study of diasporas through its insights into the complex workings of memory and the way these intersect with politics, history, and individual subjectivities.

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