Elizabeth Campisi

Escape to Miami: An Oral History of the Cuban Rafter Crisis. New York: Oxford University Press. 2016. xii + 214 pp. (Cloth US\$29.95)

As I read Betsy Campisi's *Escape to Miami*, which describes the ordeal of Cuban rafters detained at the U.S. Naval Station at Guantánamo Bay in 1994–96, I flashed back on many of my own encounters with rafters as they left Guantánamo and arrived in Miami. One recollection repeatedly scrolled across my consciousness. I remember standing in a checkout line in a Sedano's supermarket in Miami in 1995 behind a young customer who had visible, recent scarring on her forearms—a common result of clinging to a raft for days on the open sea. The cashier looked askance at her arms and asked if the young woman was "*recién llegada*." The customer struck a Rosie-the-Riveter pose, flexing her scarred arm, and said, "*No me llames recién llegada, soy balsera, soy fuerte y estaré siempre orgullosa de ser balsera!*" (Don't call me "recently arrived." I'm a rafter. I'm strong. I'll always be proud to be a rafter.)

Like that proud but scarred young woman, Campisi has captured both the triumph and the trauma of what is surely an indelible identity within the Cuban diaspora. Having worked for a year at Guantánamo during the crisis, she is uniquely positioned to analyze the situation in terms of both the phenomenon as a whole and the experiences of individuals who lived through it. She first contextualizes the rafter exodus of 1994 within the history of U.S.-Cuban relations and prior surges of sea migration. Although the 125,000 Cubans who came through the 1980 Mariel boatlift were the first to be denied presumptive refugee status under the Cuban Adjustment Act, they were nevertheless admitted directly to the United States. In 1994, the 35,000 rafters were the first Cubans since 1959 to be excluded from entry and held in isolation at a place where they could be denied legal rights. Campisi records and analyzes their commentary.

Campisi's unique contribution is the detailed picture she gives of the consequences of the rafters' liminal status. She convincingly demonstrates that it was damaging in multiple ways—first because it was an unexpected outcome; second because the trauma of being held in unsanitary and chaotic living conditions in the rudimentary camps was layered immediately upon the trauma of near-death at sea; and third, because they were detained in a state of uncertainty for nine months before a clear resolution of their situation was announced. The book provides a nice balance between historical context and oral testimony on each of these points. Readers will come away with a clear sense of daily life in the camps and the personal consequences of systemati-

cally abridged human rights. The complexity of detention for women is given special attention.

On the other hand, the book sets out a series of factors that allowed the rafters to cope in adaptive ways. Ironically, the cooperative behavior learned through coerced participation in revolutionary mass organizations in Cuba (which they wanted to escape) facilitated their mutual aid in the camps. At the same time, solidarity provided by the Miami exile community improved their material and psychological circumstances as well as providing advocacy for political resolution. The book also refutes claims that the raft exodus was grounded in purely economic considerations. Campisi gives ample testimony that a deeply felt need for political liberty topped the list of motivations. And she confirms prior studies citing the rafters' wish to shed a double face of political conformity on the one hand and interior dissent on the other; the necessity of breaking the law to survive in a world of chronic shortages; and the inability to tell who was a government informant from those who weren't as major sources of discontent that motivated exit.

Escape to Miami also reveals previously unreported aspects of the situation. For example, detainees describe abusive military retaliation following rioting in the "overflow" camps located in Panama. The incident foreshadows the humiliation and ritual abuse of prisoners from the Iraq War that was revealed at Abu Ghraib and then at Guantánamo. Because the incident in Panama has never been investigated, the extent to which it was officially sanctioned, and by whom, remains unknown. At Guantánamo the abuse is described as "system-wide if not systematic" with a lack of positive top-level leadership cited as the enabling factor. Reviewing the cumulative negative effects of U.S. handling, Campisi sees the need for a national apology.

Although *Escape to Miami* is a strong study, it falls short on conclusions. Readers are left wanting to hear, at least in summary, what has happened since 1996 and what the rafter crisis portends for future surges of this type. Recent reports of an uptick in sea exits make the book especially timely. It would lend itself to graduate and undergraduate classes in ethnography, migration, oral history, global health, Latin American and Caribbean studies, and Cuban studies.

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