

PREFACE

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HEAD FOR THE BEACH

There is everything for you here. There is nothing for you here. As much can be said, and has been said, about a city like Miami in a state like Florida. The same might be said for this book. The logic of the case study requires evaluation and reward. (Why does this thing merit our attention? What sets it apart?) Its specialness separates it from the rest. If we can get out of that logic—*what's in this for me?*—there might be something else entirely given, here, in that place and in this book, that isn't bound up with taking or a summary “takeaway” from the local. What may be given is hospitality, a hardy encouragement to stay for a minute, even when it feels unfamiliar and disorienting, and especially when it resists easy import into your own story. Visits of any duration are most welcome to *The Florida Room*. To hold a reader's attention in the humidity of residential particulars is the challenge of writing about place for those who have not been there. The experience of reading will likely require more rest stops. For the initiates, it is the how and the mode of assembly of place in this book that might delay and make different the familiar and orienting. This may require other forms of refreshment. Miami, Florida, is a place that will never be clearly or fully written about. It will not offer neat arguments about something or someplace else. This is the difficult beauty and wonder of its laboratory. It is also what offers assurance: surely there is something for you here.

The Florida Room is a method, a spatial imaginary, a vestibule, an addition to the main house of writings about place. The chapters are temporary rooms for connectivity between seemingly disparate things and people, and thus make necessary movement between history, theory, biography, and—most of all—music. Music's making and magic make possible the geographic thought experiment and peopling of this book. For the ways it compresses place, time, communities, and their creative play, music allows *The Florida Room* to hear Miami as a place of and from many. We hear the

Micosukee as founding its rock-and-roll aesthetics. There are more than a few archipelagic island groupings sounded here: the Lucayan that built it and the Caribbean, notably Cuba, Haiti, and Jamaica, that further contoured it. The mainland is here, too, especially southern Georgia, brought by those who moved in reverse of the Great Migration to “the bottom,” as it is colloquially known. Miami’s attachment to northern capitals such as New York and Philly is most palpable in music in recorded and live forms. If any consistent critique can and should be made of Miami studies, it is that it is always incomplete. Who and when is here partly reflects my generational experience and those whom I grew up with. Its datedness is an argument. Its partialness is an argument too: this place needs hundreds of theorists and storytellers, old and young. What is offered here is not an encyclopedic mission to include everywhere and everyone but an invitation to revel in its small reveal of how many versions can be told about this place.¹ In this book it may be even hard to detect how certain details tell Miami. They find subterranean company with others that have long resisted the appeal for Miami’s spectacular inclusion as a modern metropole. Their subtle narrative tread grounds fantasies by those interests, from real estate to the arts, that would deny the histories of those who made and make it a place to live and do beautiful things.

Miami is saturated with torn experiences. Its myriad painful stories of separation, survival, and infuriation strongly tell over and over, despite its more than a century-long promise to a very select few of paradise and all that goes with it. Miami is a city considered foregone and far gone.² Much like New Orleans, rising sea levels have set the terms of its engulfment. It has long been primed for environmental disaster. The rapacious investments to make the land *settle*, to force its marshy volatility solid, and to insist that narratives about the city do the same have made Miami an experience sold in three speeds: fast, slow, stuck. Fast for the fever pitch of its development, slow for those left behind. Stuck, perhaps the most difficult gear, when trying to find other ways to live in and through it. The given Miami has never been stable. Its porous foundations have it in constant movement.³ The enduring exploitation of this moving given to make a comfortable place for some has made disposable and displaceable a great many. They have been inconvenient obstacles for Miami’s total development and amnesia for well over a century. This book adamantly lives in their stories told, broken and outright, whether in song, in paint, in writing, in conversation. Miami’s environmental devastation is real, and it is urgent. Of co-terminous urgency is the telling of those lives and all that living and making

that have long been refused recognition. To dismiss Miami as forgone and far gone is to enact a double violence: a giving up on its fragile ecologies and a willful forgetting of its under-told stories. *The Florida Room* hopes to switch up the speeds of the city's telling: to stop the impulse to possess, to make fast and furious inscription of Miami's erasures, to break open the cemented resignation of no past and no future. It soaks pages heavily with the area's unremembered.

It is not just Miami's coastal position or its strange geographic contours that unsettle any sense of stability. The differences (peopled and placed) pressed into Miami's relatively short history have paradoxically primed it for lazy assessment. It is too often celebrated for an easy, suntanned brand of multiculturalism that ignores the deep inequities that run the city. It is outright dismissed as a bad object in national events, particularly elections, which makes its myriad populations, and even the populations within those populations, into a singular mass.⁴ Miami thrives as an impossible heterogeneity that makes it an anomaly of the United States. And yet it is for many, as you will be told over and over again, a place without culture or aesthetic traditions. This repeated eradication of indigenous ingenuity and the contributions of Miami's Black and immigrant populations finds sanction in too many places. This book hopes to augment important historical studies of Miami with a plunge into its steadfast and brilliant cultural work as its basis, not as its afterthought. You will find guides for context in the notes section rather than the main body of the text because this book wants to lead with artists' stories, the things they make, the places they imagine. In Miami this is an activity that is always just beginning. The opening stanza of Lorna Goodison's poem "Deep Sea Diving" offers an invocation for both hearing and living it:

For the rare ones, the pieces only glimpsed at in dreams,
it is essential that you dive deeply.

On the surface all that you will see are objects discernable
to anybody, in colors between everyday and ordinary.

What a splendid spectrum ranges below for those
who dive deeply.⁵

The local offers its own models for critique; it doesn't need an outside apparatus. It does not require outside curators to bring it up to speed or to invite imposed rubrics in from the cold. What is already here, I ask, that wants to be *here* a little differently? How to hear the "splendid spectrum"?

Along with the Florida room as a locally articulated architectural phenomenon, the book insinuates other given models for its writing. The reading of each chapter requires willing entry into a mangrove tangle. The mangrove's shoots make it impossible to unravel neat lines of origin and influence. The details of their connectivity, somehow and miraculously, hold together and make home for a lot of life. They hold up in the fiercest of storms. Even when they are forcibly removed, the mangrove's propagules renew, somewhere else, perhaps close by their former home.⁶ Other eco-conceptual models abound in here. *The Florida Room* borrows from their forms, demands, resilience, and especially their transitions. Severo Sarduy once called the thin bands that separate songs on long-play records *playas* (beaches). For Sarduy the spaces do not signal alienation but instead carry the warmth and salinity of the shore and offer a place for "a homage to the naked body and to the beachside panoply." With Sarduy we may hear these *playas* as thriving with activity, as transformative spaces between where and when one song ends and another begins. They are full of searches for aesthetic forms, for temporary partners, and the bands "have no final outcome."⁷ Songs on the record object circle in parallel, and the beaches that link them help to make other kinds of connections between ensembles. I invite you to imagine the breaks within and between chapters as *playas*, as places for you, the reader, to bring what you need and leave what you don't.

Florida, with all its particulars, can't be told enough times. It's strangeness to the United States has long been a national given. "South America, take it away," Bugs Bunny famously said right before he animatedly sawed it off from the mainland. Some will pick up this book and hope to find "Florida"; others may want to go directly to "Miami." The writings on and around either are often kept apart, as are their authors. Here they share room. Throughout these pages, place will exceed official city limits and cross counties, sometimes for a longer ride, say to the Everglades. Places farther out and across time require other forms of transport, such as a record, radio, or drum. Because its precolonial and colonial histories do not align or are cut off from various critiques of the Americas, Florida demands other lexicons, adaptations, and, no less important, *styles* for its telling. *Write it*, as more than a few of my formative teachers used to say to encourage me to put together, in my own words and ways, what I thought was going on. The constant unrelenting education that is music, from remembered songs played on the school bus to the new worlds of cabaret performances in Miami's here and now, is my idiom. While music makes exquisite forms of camouflage, I insist on hearing the real decisions

made by musicians and all those who in one way or another had some hand in their training. And therefore, a lot of biographical detail is laced throughout this book. The biographies included here are not told in full but in glimmers that tell a fullness of living. There is a lot of movement made in them, geographic and imaginative, and they cue capacious approaches to concepts of the settled and the arrived. By listening to their migrancy and to what gets picked up and left behind while on the move, I hear techniques of making-do with the at-hand and how this making do is aesthetically mobilized by the dispossessed. Although the book depends upon oral histories of some of its players, it thrives in the complexities of their creative worlds that are often unverifiable. People's partial stories in *The Florida Room* were either shared with me directly or left behind in interviews with others. The richness of their fragments carries the stakes of births and deaths, migrations, teaching, love. At times in direct relation to my own experiencing of these things, there is thus a lot of maternity in these pages that is often, though not always, suggested through biography. To honor all them and all there in *The Florida Room* is my written refinement of a deep love of where I am from.