

January 1999

Documenting Cuban Exiles and the Cuban American Experience in South Florida

Esperanza B. de Varona
University of Miami

Diana Gonzalez Kirby
University of Miami

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

de Varona, Esperanza B. and Kirby, Diana Gonzalez, "Documenting Cuban Exiles and the Cuban American Experience in South Florida," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 17 no. 1 (1999) .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol17/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

Documenting Cuban Exiles and the Cuban American Experience in South Florida

Esperanza B. de Varona and Diana González Kirby

When Fidel Castro rose to power on 1 January 1959, Cubans left their Caribbean island in a mass exodus with hopes of returning in the near future. Miami, Florida's geographic location made it the logical point of entry into the United States. Today, forty-two years after the triumph of the Cuban revolution, Miami-Dade County contains the largest concentration of Cubans living in exile, approximately seven hundred thousand. With Hispanics comprising 49 percent of Miami-Dade County's population, Cubans by far outnumber all other Hispanics and are a majority across more than half the county's residential areas.¹ Along with demographic growth and occupational mobility, many members of the Cuban American community made the Hispanic presence evident in local politics. Over the past twenty years, residents of Miami, South Miami, Sweetwater, Hialeah, and Coral

¹"South Florida's Evolving Ethnic Diversity," *Miami Herald*, 17 March 1991, Viewpoint.

Gables have elected candidates of Cuban origin to prominent positions in city and county governments. Cuban Americans represent Miami's districts in both the state legislature and the U.S. Congress.

The University of Miami, located in Coral Gables, enjoys a cooperative relationship with its Caribbean and South American neighbors that dates back to its charter. When the university opened its doors in 1926, its motto was "North American culture for the Latin Americans and Latin American culture for the North Americans."² That motto exemplifies the relationship the University of Miami has sustained with its neighbors in the Caribbean and, more specifically, Cuba. By virtue of its location in Miami, the "capital of exile," and through the efforts of Cuban exile librarians who helped build the collection, the University of Miami Library's Cuban Heritage Collection (CHC) is one of the largest repositories of information on Cuba and the Cuban exile experience. This essay explains the development of the Cuban exile collections at the University of Miami, highlights some of the principal holdings in the Cuban Heritage Collection, and gives an overview of the CHC's role in the university's contributions to the Cuban community.

Development of Cuban Collections at the University of Miami

The University of Miami Library's Cuban collections have grown to reflect the socioeconomic and political impact of the Cuban American population on the local community. The library began acquiring materials on Cuba, the Caribbean, and Latin America in 1930 to support the curriculum. During the following decades, the library's holdings expanded to keep pace with

²Esperanza B. de Varona and Ana Rosa Núñez, eds., *University of Miami, Otto G. Richter Library, Cuban Heritage Collection*, revised by Diana G. Kirby (Miami: Daytona Printer, 2000), 1.

the rapid growth of the university, and in 1962 the Otto G. Richter Library was built.

Although the library began acquiring Cuban materials by 1930, the direction of the collection development policy shifted when two librarians, Rosa M. Abella, and the late Ana Rosa Núñez, who arrived in the Cuban exodus of the early 1960s, began obtaining materials that dealt with or were written by Cuban Americans. During the early 1960s, the collections diversified to include an increasing number of books and periodicals that dealt with Cuba and the Cuban exile experience both from the perspective of American scholars observing the Cuban community and from the viewpoint of Cuban Americans writing about life in exile. Over time other librarians took up the cause, including Esperanza B. de Varona and Lesbia Orta Varona.

The collection has grown consistently over the years through both purchases and gifts. It is now recognized internationally as one of the largest repositories of information on Cuba and the Cuban exile experience. In 1980 Professor Esperanza B. de Varona was appointed the curator of the Cuban Archives, a special collections unit within the archives and special collections department of the Richter Library. Under the direction of de Varona, the Cuban Archives were organized and processed. In 1998 the Cuban Heritage Collection (CHC) was established as a separate division within the Richter Library.

The CHC reflects the five distinct time periods that roughly correspond with the major historical developments of Cuba: the Colonial Period (from the discovery through 1898), U.S. Occupation (1898–1902), the Republican Era (1902–1958), Communist Cuba (1959 to the present), and Exile (1959 to the present). The collection strives to bring together in one place many types of materials that pertain to Cuba or its people. Printed holdings comprise approximately forty thousand rare and contemporary volumes and periodicals, including newspapers, maga-

zines, journals, and newsletters from the colonial period to the present published in Cuba and abroad. More than just an organized assortment of books and magazines, the CHC also holds correspondence, photographs, manuscripts, memorabilia, posters, and other primary source materials that the library has acquired through donations or purchases in order to document and safeguard the written record of Cuba's history and culture up to and since the government of Fidel Castro.

Description of Holdings

Cuban Exile Periodicals

One of the landmark collections in the CHC is the Cuban Exile Periodicals Collection.³ Cuban exiles edited, directed, or published these tabloids, magazines, bulletins, and newsletters from 1959 to the present. This is the most comprehensive collection of Cuban exile periodicals in the world with approximately nine hundred titles representing about one hundred thousand issues. Most of the periodicals first appeared and proliferated in the city of Miami, which is the heart and soul of the Cuban American community. While some titles are still in circulation, many were short-lived and some were issued only once.

Through these publications, Cuban refugees since the early 1960s have expressed their views on the political changes taking place in Cuba. Topics are polemic and political in nature within the context of national and international news. In a general sense, subject matter reflects the various facets of the Cuban exile experience, including political ideology and activities. Almost always the guiding force behind the editorials and articles

³Esperanza B. de Varona, *Cuban Exile Periodicals at the University of Miami: An Annotated Bibliography*, Bibliography and Reference Series, 19 (Madison: Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials, 1987).

is the implicit or explicit expression of a strong desire to return to a free and democratic Cuba. In sum, these small and sometimes ephemeral publications provide a vehicle for transmitting the desire of the Cuban exile community to fight the Communist regime, to try to reestablish democracy in Cuba, and to maintain and promote Cuban tradition and culture.

Since the early days of the Cuban exodus, the periodicals have been printed in Spanish to reach primarily a Spanish-speaking audience. Over time, the audience grew and diversified, from the refugees of the early 1960s to today's younger, bilingual and bicultural Cuban Americans. The periodicals are distributed usually in retail businesses in Hispanic neighborhoods and are available at no cost or by subscription, depending on the publisher.

Many of these publications consist of newspapers, magazines, bulletins, and newsletters published by the "Asociación de los Municipios de Cuba en el Exilio," which represents the towns, cities, and municipalities that existed before Castro rearranged and renamed the country's geopolitical composition. Known as "municipalities-in-exile," these exile associations have given rise to a vast network of civic organizations that promote social cohesion, cultural heritage activities, and socioeconomic support. The publication and dissemination of news and activities is one way in which their members accomplish these goals.

To better understand the role that the periodicals play in the lives of exiles, one should travel back in time to 1994, when there was a mass exodus from the island, as Cubans took to the sea on inner tubes and in homemade rafts. The American government, in an effort to avoid another Mariel Boatlift, intercepted and detained over thirty thousand rafters at Guantánamo, the United States Naval Base in Cuba, until decisions regarding their refugee status could be determined. During their nearly twelve months in Guantánamo, the Cuban rafters published several newspapers, including *Exodo* and *El Futuro*. *Exodo*, published in the

“Kilo” and “Charlie” camps from 20 November 1994 to 10 September 1995, contains original watercolor, ink, pencil, tempera with acrylic gloss, and crayon drawings made by several Cuban refugees. It has news and articles about the Cuban economic and political situation as well as horoscopes and comics. The twenty-five issues that were donated to the CHC by editor Rigoberto Barroso are the original manuscripts that were copied and distributed in the camps at Guantánamo base.

El Futuro was published in the “Golf” camp from 26 March to 20 September 1995. The fourteen issues, donated by editor and director Jorge del Río, are original manuscripts that contain illustrations, news, and articles about Cuba and Cuban refugees as well as literary pieces and articles about athletic activities held in Guantánamo base camps. Through articles published in *Exodo* and *El Futuro*, the rafters expressed their hopes and anxieties while waiting for the U.S. government to decide their immigration status.

The exile periodicals preserve and continue a sense of identity and community among the exiled population. As Gastón Baquero, the former editor of Cuba's premier newspaper, *Diario de la Marina*, once explained, Cuban exile periodicals are “examples of heroic journalism, not only in terms of the financial hardships which most of the publishers have had to surmount in order to be published, but also with regard to the very nature of the exiles' desire to be one people, once again, in a free Cuba.”⁴ The Cuban Exile Periodicals Collection preserves and communicates to future generations the history of Cuba and the exile experience. With the passage of time, the historical value of Cuban exile periodicals will increase, as newspapers like *Exodo*

⁴Gastón Baquero, “El periodismo heroico del exilio,” *El Miami Herald*, 4 November 1985, Spanish ed., 9.

and *El Futuro* become significant historical records for research on the Cuban Diaspora from the refugees' points of view.

Recognizing the unique, historical value of these materials, the University of Florida George A. Smathers Libraries recently completed a project to catalog and microfilm many of the rare Cuban exile community newspapers. With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Smathers Libraries staff cataloged nearly 200 Cuban titles and filmed 122 titles (124,505 exposures).

Personal and Corporate Papers Collections

In addition to Cuban exile periodicals, another important resource in the CHC are the Personal and Corporate Papers Collections. The papers in these collections weave a rich tapestry in which every thread tells the story of personal hardships, frustrations, and accomplishments of individuals and groups comprising the different segments of the Cuban exile community.

One example is the María Gómez Carbonell Collection. Attorney Gómez Carbonell was the first woman who served in the Cuban congress. In exile, she founded the Cruzada Educativa Cubana, an advocacy group that promotes the transmission of Cuban culture through education of the young. Her collection contains correspondence and photographs. Another, the Pedro Pan Collection, chronicles the lives of fourteen hundred children who were secretly transported out of Cuba in the early 1960s, through collaborative work by the United States government, Catholic Relief Community Services, and prominent members of Cuban society working undercover on the island.

Two important collections that shed light on the history of the early Cuban refugee experience are the Juan Clark Collection and the Cuban Refugee Center Collection. Clark, a sociologist, historian, and professor at Miami-Dade Community College, has studied and written extensively about the Cuban exo-

clus. The Juan Clark Collection consists of the working papers and photographs for his 1990 book, *Cuba: Mito y Realidad*,⁵ a leading work on life conditions in post-Castro's Cuba, as well as the research materials for his dissertation, which was a sociological analysis of the Cuban immigration, 1959–1974.⁶ Included in the Juan Clark Collection are 55 boxes comprising the Cuban Refugee Center Collection. Clark obtained this collection when the Cuban Refugee Center closed its operations in the 1980s. The Miami-based program was authorized by the president of the United States in 1961 to provide assistance, child welfare services, and medical care for nearly three hundred thousand refugees who arrived in the U.S. in 1961–1972. Photographs of Cuban refugees arriving in Miami's International Airport during the Freedom Flights of 1965–1973, receiving aid from the U.S. government program headquartered in downtown Miami and planning their resettlement to other states, together with a vast assortment of newspaper clippings organized chronologically to facilitate the sequential study of the Cuban exodus, provide ample primary and secondary source material on the history of the Cuban exile experience.

Concern for human rights violations in Cuba and the plight of political prisoners have figured prominently in the Cuban American consciousness. Two collections pertain to these topics: the archives of the Asociación por la Paz Continental (ASOPAZCO), a humanitarian and advocacy group for human rights in Cuba concerned with the plight of Cuban political prisoners from 1979 to 1993, and the archives of the Truth About

⁵Juan Clark, *Cuba, Mito y Realidad: Testimonios de un Pueblo* (Miami: Saeta Ediciones, 1992).

⁶Juan M. Clark, *The exodus from revolutionary Cuba (1959–1974): a sociological analysis* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, 1975).

Cuba Committee, Inc., the first and one of the most significant groups to be formed in exile. Another early collection that provides a wealth of information about significant events during the cold war, such as Castro's revolutionary movement, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the anti-Castro underground movement, is the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil (DRE) Collection, which contains documents, correspondence, photographs, and publications pertaining to an organized group of former Cuban university students exiled in Miami. These materials provide a glimpse into the activities of an early underground movement against Fidel Castro's government.

Examples of the literary accomplishments of Cuban Americans living in exile abound in the CHC. Two of the more salient collections are the Enrique Labrador Ruiz Collection and the Lydia Cabrera Collection. Labrador Ruiz (1902–1991) was a journalist, novelist, essayist, short story writer, and poet who received numerous awards for his literary works. Known for revolutionizing the language and format of the narrative, he also is credited with creating a new literary genre, "cuentaría cubiche" (Cuban-style storytelling), which first appeared in his collection of short stories entitled *El Gallo en el espejo* (1953). His collection consists of writings by and about him, including manuscripts and publications. The collection also contains correspondence, illustrations, and ephemera. One of the most important items in the collection is the manuscript of his last book, *Cartas a la Carte*, published in 1991. His correspondence includes letters to and from prominent Cuban, Latin American, and Spanish literary figures.

Lydia Cabrera (1899–1991) spent her life documenting Afro-Cuban culture and religion. Her papers, bequeathed to the Cuban Heritage Collection, contain ethnographic field notes and artwork, manuscripts, photographs, and correspondence with some of the leading Africanists and artists of the time. To stu-

dents of twentieth-century Cuban and Afro-Cuban, Caribbean, Latin American, and Spanish language literature, the Enrique Labrador Ruiz and Lydia Cabrera collections offer outstanding cultural, educational, and research opportunities.

Cuban Exile Posters

The Cuban Exile Posters Collection chronicles the cultural, political, and economic aspects of the lives of the Cuban exiles as well as their sports activities, music, and art.⁷ The bulk of the collection was donated to the library over the last four decades.

Among the most important posters in the collection are those promoting the Carnival Miami/Calle Ocho, an annual carnival organized by the local Kiwanis Club of Little Havana. The posters reflect the growing economic impact of Cuban Americans in the United States as indicated by the sponsorship of major companies such as Dole, Procter and Gamble, and BellSouth.

Linking the University of Miami and the CHC to the Cuban Exile Community

The University of Miami played an important role in facilitating and providing support for the occupational resettlement needs of the Cuban refugees. From 1961 through the early 1980s, the university established numerous programs to assist newly exiled lawyers, physicians, economists, and teachers to acculturate to life in the United States and to re-enter their professions. In return for this assistance, graduates and alumni of the University of Miami's programs for Cuban refugees have formed a strong

⁷Esperanza B. de Varona, *Posters of the Cuban Diaspora: A Bibliography*, Bibliography and Reference Series, 33 (Albuquerque: Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials, 1993).

basis of support for the CHC. Today, many of these UM alumni help promote the CHC in South Florida's Cuban exile community by making referrals to potential donors through membership in the CHC's friends (AMIGOS) organization and through gifts of books and archival materials to the CHC.

The School of Medicine, for example, established the Cuban Refugee Program to prepare Cuban physicians for the Educational Council for Foreign Medical Graduates. The program became the Office of International Medical Education, headed by Dr. Rafael Peñalver, and a total of 2,346 Cuban doctors graduated by July 1975. In 1961 the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare funded university-training courses for Cuban lawyers. With more than 450 Cuban attorneys registered, the courses, which were in place until 1963, familiarized those attorneys with U.S. laws. The Cuban Economic Research Project also was established in 1961 to conduct research on the Cuban economy before and after 1959.

In 1963 the University of Miami initiated the Cuban Teachers Program, which lasted several years, to train Cuban teachers for jobs with the Dade County Public School system. In 1965 Robert Allen, dean of the School of Continuing Studies, established the Cuban Cultural Center in the Koubek Memorial Center to help recently arrived Cuban exiles adjust to life in the United States. Many refugees participated in the vocational and cultural programs offered at the Koubek Memorial Center. The Federation of Cuban Students was founded in the late 1960s. By 1970 there were approximately fifteen hundred Cuban exile students attending the university.

The impact of these programs on the socioeconomic status of Cuban refugees eventually was felt in the community. As refugees regained their former occupational status, they set up professional businesses and practices in Miami, thereby contributing to the community's economic growth. Businesses thrived,

generating revenue that in turn was invested back into the community. Cubans have tended to live and stay in Miami. Now their children, with families of their own, also prefer to reside in Miami. The area has strong ties to the Hispanic culture; the Spanish language plays a prominent role in local economy; the daily newspaper publishes a Spanish-language edition; and bilingual skills are an asset in the marketplace.

More recently, the University of Miami has created programs to foster a better understanding of all Caribbean and Latin American nations. The university dedicated the North-South Center in 1984 to conduct research and analysis of issues affecting the United States, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Canada. In 1987 the Research Institute for Cuban Studies and the Emilio Bacardí Moreau Chair in Cuban Studies were established within the Graduate School of International Studies (GSIS). This is the world's first endowed chair dedicated to Cuban history and culture and the first chair to be established at GSIS. The information needs of the faculty, researchers, and students from the North-South Center and the Research Institute for Cuban Studies are met by the Richter Library's vast holdings of Cuban and Cuban American materials.

Following an academic restructuring of the Graduate School of International Studies, the university established the Institute for Cuban and Cuban American Studies (ICCAS) in the newly renamed School of International Studies in 1999. The existence and the quality of Cuban information resources in the Richter Library, especially those in the Cuban Heritage Collection, were partially responsible for the creation of the ICCAS. The CHC supports the research and educational needs of the ICCAS. In turn, members of the ICCAS faculty serve on an advisory board that oversees the collection development policy of the CHC.

As noted earlier, collections in the Cuban Heritage Collection have been acquired by purchases and gifts. The CHC has accepted numerous items and collections of primary source materials from members of the local and national Cuban exile communities. These materials are the building blocks of the history of the Cuban exiles and will provide the basis for future writings on the Cuban exile experience.

Acquiring resources to fuel the growth of the Cuban collection is a priority of the library. The CHC strives to keep a high profile in South Florida's Cuban exile community by hosting and sponsoring several cultural and fundraising events throughout the year. In 1995 the Richter Library established the AMIGOS [Friends] of the University of Miami Library to promote and increase interest in Cuban studies and scholarship. AMIGOS and CHC staff also have traveled out of state to promote the CHC, most recently presenting papers at professional library and archival organizations, giving slide presentations at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, and meeting with members of Boston's Cuban exile community. In recent years the CHC has received numerous prestigious civic awards recognizing its contributions to the local community; these awards have strengthened the ability of the CHC to attract donations of significant archival collections from members of the Cuban exile community. At present, there are plans to build a pavilion to house the CHC owing to a \$2.5 million challenge grant awarded in 1999 to the University of Miami by the Atlanta-based Goizueta Foundation and a \$1 million gift by Mrs. Elena D. Amos in 1994.

In addition to soliciting materials through participation in local and national fundraising and cultural events, the CHC benefits from the contributions of library and university staff members who regularly donate items to the collection. For example, throughout the recent custody controversy over Elián González, the five-year-old Cuban refugee rescued from the sea

on Thanksgiving Day 1999, the staff of the Cuban Heritage Collection implemented a plan to monitor the local print media and Internet for information about the case. The CHC acquired items from the community, the print media, and other sources for the collection. Staff members created and maintained a vertical file of clippings and articles disseminated over the Internet via emails and listservs. They added locally produced postcards, illustrations, printed ephemera, and memorabilia to the vertical file, which now numbers more than twenty folders; these accessions averaged five to ten items each month. Members of the media, students, foreign researchers, and members from the community-at-large have already used these materials.

Many of the key documents reflect the opinion of the majority of those in the local South Florida Cuban exile population, i.e., that Elián should have remained in the United States. The little boy stood as a symbol for the South Florida Cuban exile community's desire to topple Fidel Castro's government; this desire is the unifying force that binds the local Cuban exile community. By preserving these materials, the cultural and political reality of the exile experience will be documented and available to researchers who are interested in the history of Cuba, Cuban exiles, and Cuban Americans.

Enhancing Access to and Preservation of the CHC

In 1999 and in 2000 the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) awarded the Richter Library two grants to create a digital database of some of the unique materials in the Cuban Heritage Collection. These two grants will improve access to the valuable historical photographs, illustrations, and manuscripts by converting them into a digital format. A web site will be created to enable researchers to view, search, and print files, thereby helping to increase public awareness of these resources while also aiding in their preservation. This virtual library is an

excellent opportunity for the University of Miami to showcase its Cuban Heritage Collection. Materials selected for digitization are representative of the Cuban Heritage Collection, have historical value and significance, and are in need of preservation. For these reasons, one of the primary collections to be digitized is the Lydia Cabrera Collection.

The University of Miami has had close ties with Cuba and its people since its beginnings in the 1920s and continues to foster those ties today, especially within the Cuban American exile community in South Florida. As early as 1926, faculty from the University of Havana taught courses at the University of Miami. The first Hispanic student to register at the University of Miami was a Cuban-born girl from Santiago de Cuba. The two universities also held competing sports events at regular intervals over the years. Therefore, it is only fitting that the Cuban Heritage Collection is housed at the institution whose beginnings were closely linked with Cuba.

Through the CHC, scholars and researchers may study and analyze the evolution of the Cuban Diaspora. The collection provides a window into the growth and development of the region, spanning forty years in the history of Miami. In addition, it will be possible to examine the socioeconomic and historical impact of the Cuban exiles and Cuban Americans in the U.S. by consulting the resources in the CHC. The Cuban Heritage Collection is a tribute to the living hopes and aspirations of the Cuban people in exile: to their struggle to maintain a unity of purpose; to their need to preserve, add to, and transmit a cultural heritage; and to their heartfelt desire to be reunited someday in a free Cuba.

Esperanza B. de Varona is professor and coordinator of the Cuban Heritage Collection Department and **Diana González Kirby** is associate professor of the Cuban Heritage Collection Department of the Otto G. Richter Library, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida.

