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Orange Empires: Comparing Miami and Los Angeles

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The papers that make up this special issue of the *Pacific Historical Review* come out of a conference held in February 1998. "Orange Empires: Miami and Los Angeles" featured a dozen scholarly investigations of the history, politics, and culture of these two remarkable cities. As we all discovered, there is much to compare between Los Angeles and Miami, and, as with any comparative angle, features of one city's past, present, or future can be made to stand out when placed alongside those of another. The conference, sponsored by the Huntington Library (where it was held), the Southern California Studies Center at the University of Southern California, and the Getty Research Institute, represented but a small start in the comparative analysis of Miami and Los Angeles, and it is our

The conference "Orange Empires: Miami and Los Angeles" was generously supported by the Research Division of the Huntington Library (special thanks to Director of Research Robert C. Ritchie), the Southern California Studies Center at the University of Southern California (special thanks to Director Michael Dear), and the Getty Research Institute (special thanks to Associate Director Michael Roth). Eight of the conference's dozen papers have been selected for publication in this issue of *Pacific Historical Review*. We would like to thank Janet Abu-Lughod, Jan Nijman, and Allan Sekula for their contributions to the conference. Our appreciation as well to Carl Abbott and David A. Johnson for their invitation to publish these essays in the *Pacific Historical Review*.



Orange crate label, circa 1900; held in Ephemera Collection, CL 18, The Huntington Library. This item is reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

hope that publication of the following essays provokes additional studies, essays, and conferences.

Miami and Los Angeles have rarely been viewed in tandem. Though they are situated a continent apart, Miami and Los Angeles are perhaps more like each other than like other American cities. At the same time, they retain obvious individual identities. In these “orange empires,” urbanization occurred later than in other great American cities. The growth of Los Angeles and Miami was propelled by an unusual combination of agriculture, industry, and postindustrial services. Both cities have become noted for their atypical multiethnic populations, yet both have been sites of tragedies revolving around that most central American racial tension between black and white. Every bit as much as Los Angeles, Miami (to borrow Mike Davis’s provocative phrase) exists in a natural and social “ecology of fear.”¹ What is more, in looking out to the Pacific Rim and South/Central America rather than Europe, Los Angeles and Miami symbolize an important shift in the American gaze. Their differences from other cities, and their similarities to each other, have resulted in claims for each as the model for the twenty-first-century American and global city. Such expectation, of promise or simple demographic eventuality, can and does represent urban burden as much as urban promise.

We evoke the imagery of oranges in our title because the orange has played an important role in the commercial history of the two metropolitan regions, and an even larger part in defining the two cities to the rest of the nation and the world. Whether or not promoter Julia Tuttle sent railroad tycoon Henry Flagler a box with orange blossoms to induce him to build a railroad from Miami to central Florida, her tenacity and vision exemplified a determined drive for growth, and his enterprise conjured Miami, at least metaphorically. Similarly, when William Wolfskill sent the first railcar of oranges from Southern California to St. Louis in 1877, he could not know if they would arrive in good shape. They did, and his act set one foundation for the rise of the region and its foremost booster claims: “Oranges for Health, California for Wealth.” The orange became the literal fruit of prosperity in South Florida and Southern California, the figurative

1. Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York, 1998).

fragrance of imagined, and soon real, cities. People sitting in the cold of a Midwestern winter or the mud of a New England spring were warmed by the thought of places apart, away from the routines of industrial production, places seemingly so different from the smokestack districts of another urban America.

Businesses used the orange not only as a product but also as an advertisement in boosting land and development in Florida and California. Miami, incorporated in 1896, is a relatively new city, younger by 115 years than Los Angeles, which was founded as a Spanish pueblo in 1781. But Los Angeles was a small outpost in the same empire that first brought Europeans to Southern Florida in 1567 to establish the Jesuit mission of Tequesta. Neither city amounted to much prior to the current century. As late as 1880, Los Angeles had a population of 11,000, and Miami was even slower to emerge. Ironically, their rise echoed with the sounds and language of their pasts. Products of the American Century, Miami and Los Angeles have represented a gradual national reorientation toward the world. Together, the Vietnam War, the Cuban boycott, changing relationships with Panama and China, demographic shifts in American immigration, and NAFTA have forced the American gaze to turn, if still only slightly, from Europe to the Pacific Rim and the Americas south of the Rio Grande. No two cities serve as springboards to these previously ignored regions more clearly than Miami and Los Angeles.

Both the way Americans understand the world and the way the rest of the world imagines America have shifted. At the same time, competition between Los Angeles and Miami has intensified. Early on, citrus farmers were joined in this competition by civic leaders trying to entice manufacturers, tourists, and retirees. Competition between the cities did (and does) help define them, taking the shape of similar struggles between American cities before and since. The origins of the tug of war span the twentieth century. By the 1920s the parameters of the competition were clear. In 1925, for instance, Eberle and Rigglesman's Economic Service, a Los Angeles consulting firm, engaged its readers in a serial debate regarding "Florida Competition and Los Angeles Business."² Topics included million-

2. See Eberle and Rigglesman's Economic Service, *Weekly Letter*, 2 (Sept. 7, 1925) and *ibid.* (Sept. 14, 1925).

aire leadership, the real estate boom, building activity, land inflation, and a boom psychology. A summary letter sketched out the “Present and Future Effects of Florida Competition” for Los Angeles, predicting serious consequences for Southern California. Florida, it stated, had captured the public’s imagination with an extensive advertising campaign that will

appeal for year-round residents, farmers, and industries. In view of this condition it is believed that Los Angeles and southern California should immediately inaugurate and carry out a campaign which will at least cause the public to give California as much consideration as it does Florida.³

As several of the following essays reveal, the essential narratives for these campaigns were structured according to Edenic tropes, paradise gained (or at least attainable) for a low down payment and easy monthly installments. These landscapes of leisure and pleasure—or feasting, as Deborah Dash Moore and Dan Gebler amply document—were intentionally cast as a place apart, exotic locales where one could enjoy a “foreign” adventure without leaving the country. Citriculture and railroads, especially their intertwining in promotionalism, industry, and tourism, played a crucial role in this process. Tourists became the return haul freight for rail lines; once in South Florida and Southern California, these visitors supported hotels and other service industries. If converted to seasonal or year-round residents, they contributed to the exploding real estate industry.

These exceptional narratives have had a power exceeding their authors’ intentions. Over time, analysts have perpetrated these myths either as Whig, booster histories or by adopting, whole cloth, claims that these city-centered regions are somehow exceptions to North American urban history. On the one hand, this has led to simple exclusion. Not long ago, courses in urban studies would run a semester without ever mentioning Los Angeles or Miami. On the other hand, we continue to find scholars and pundits mimicking the boosters when they construct theoretical and imaginative frameworks that fix these cities as unique and as harbingers for the future.

3. *Ibid.*

Two examples illustrate the point. The first, from the introduction to a special issue on Miami in the design journal *Metropolis*, portrays the city through contrast and irony. “Miami is a paradox. It is an intensely artificial city . . . not even a city really, but a series of resorts, a television show, a giant shopping mall, a Latin rhythm, a place to retire, a gangster-ridden frontier town.”

The article continues, exploring the meaning of the contrasts and considering the complexity that is Miami and its possible importance to America:

All of this is true, but at the same time, Miami is a profoundly complex city; despite its striking uniqueness, it may well presage the fate of other American cities. If Miami comes to terms with the problems before it, it may serve as a model; if not, it will surely self-destruct and be held up as a warning. . . . Miami’s plight is the country’s. And so, in the end, this is not just the dream of a new city, but of a new America.⁴

Self-destruction or city of the new century? Clearly, the stakes are high in the hyperbolic prose that surrounds these cities.

In the preface to the recent book, *Rethinking Los Angeles*, Michael Dear observes that the Los Angeles region is increasingly used as a prototype (for good or ill) of our collective urban future. “Popular perceptions,” he writes, “rely on the exaggerated images promulgated by television and movies and by print media predictions of the impending Southern California apocalypse.”⁵

The apocalyptic prose reached a climax in the early 1990s when fire, riot, flood, and drought combined to suggest that plagues and anarchy were on the verge of destroying Los Angeles. But Southern California rebounded, reawakened, was reborn, at least in the metaphoric language of an imagined future. “Southern California is undoubtedly a special place,” Dear writes, “and the world is facing the prospect of a Pacific century in which Southern California is likely to become a global capital.”⁶

4. “¡Welcome to Miami! A Short History of a Young City,” *Metropolis*, 15 (1995), 46–49, 70–73.

5. Michael Dear, preface to Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Schockman, and Greg Hise, eds., *Rethinking Los Angeles* (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1996), ix.

6. *Ibid.*, xi.

[O]ne thing is clear. . . . The city can no longer be regarded as the exception to the patterns of American urbanism. . . . the urban agenda facing Los Angeles has much wider implications. The social contract that brings people together in Southern California is currently being renegotiated; there is reason to believe that if this renegotiation fails in Los Angeles, then it can succeed nowhere else in this country.⁷

A remarkable degree of parallelism between Miami and Los Angeles pervades these assessments. The cities are seen to have similar histories, or at least to have been similarly ignored; they have assumed similar roles as urban bellwethers, for good or for ill; and they are now subject to similar fates either as prototypes of twenty-first-century urbanism or as devastating failures if they cannot overcome current problems. The comparative examples are legion. Both cities are perceived as capital cities. Los Angeles is the “Capital of the Pacific Rim” or “Capital of the Third World.” Similarly, Miami is “Capital of the Americas” and “Capital of the Caribbean.” Both are global cities. Each has been explained as managing to contain the contradictions of coexisting first and third world conditions, and as embodying, in Mike Davis’s phrase, the “double role of utopia and dystopia for advanced capitalism.”⁸

These double roles are most evident in discussions about politics and culture. As essays included here demonstrate, politics are complicated in these cities, where Asians and Latinos join blacks and whites in the struggle for jobs, power, and control of the future. The triadic relationship in Miami, detailed by Guillermo Grenier and Max Castro, may be even more complicated in Los Angeles with its multiple Asian and Latino populations. Both cities are increasingly visible in the scholarly and popular literature largely because of their demographics, as the essay by Roger Waldinger illustrates. This profile is clearly tied to new forms of political expression and action, as Sheila Croucher, Michael Alvarez, and Tara Butterfield here discuss. And, as George Lipsitz suggests, whether in music, food, or theater, new rhythms and new rhymes suggest to many the future of the nation and the world.

7. *Ibid.*, xii.

8. From Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York, 1990), 18.

Yet the complicated relationships of multiethnic populations have not obscured the continuing importance of the older, tragic equation of black and white tensions. The Miami riot of 1980 and the Los Angeles civil unrest of 1992 are two of the more important acts of the politics of race since the 1960s.⁹ Along with the poverty of Liberty City and South Central, they are searing reminders of the past's impact on the present and future. Each came as a surprise to local residents and national pundits. Each began, tragically, with a police officer beating a civilian. Each reflected a failure of civil and civic authority. Neither solved the problems addressed, nor did the people involved believe their actions would.

Thus, for certain urban theorists, Miami and Los Angeles occupy congruent space. The single best way to test such assumptions is to place the two cities into a framework of comparative analysis. This collection of essays begins that task. So much is still left to be done. The list of possible comparisons is long and fascinating. We need to understand better the dynamic histories of growth machines in California and Florida, especially how these coalitions have shaped and continue to shape the regional economies in greater Miami and greater Los Angeles. For instance, the nature of place promotion has changed dramatically in both places. Witness the shift from unidimensional tourist campaigns that Gregory Bush reveals to recent promotions of multicultural tourism by highly coordinated and well-funded visitor bureaus in both cities, as Susan Davis outlines. These endeavors occur at a time when Miami and Los Angeles civic elites struggle mightily to hold together municipalities threatened by secession, as in Los Angeles, and by dissolution, as in Miami. Just as importantly, we need to map (or remap) the politics of urban space, both actual and perceptual, and to consider how this is informed, and in turn informs, the politics of identity. The relationship of identity to the globalization of America's cities, as most significantly represented by Miami and Los Angeles, needs to be better understood. These cities, as John Stack suggests, are links in an international sys-

9. Acknowledging that more Latinos than African Americans were arrested in the civil unrest, the Rodney King beating and the events that succeeded it must still be understood largely as a replay of much older tensions in American society.

tem in which individuals and institutions are simultaneously participants in global integration and local particularities. Just as the orange and other agricultural, industrial, and service products helped foster the empires of Los Angeles and Miami, the global arena offers exciting opportunities as well as worrisome consequences. By continuing to examine them comparatively, historians and other social scientists will better understand their ramifications and implications.