Marketing the “Tropical Playground”: Issues of Exclusion and Development in Miami’s Imagery

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ABSTRACT

Miami’s marketers have a long and successful history of creating and recreating imagery that draws visitors towards the ‘magic city’ or the ‘tropical playground.’ This paper investigates Miami’s marketing from an historical perspective by examining the role and legacy of various discourses emanating from powerful city actors over the past century. Spatial analysis including spatial autocorrelation and Local Moran’s I are conducted to investigate further Miami’s geographical segregation. The findings suggest that unequal, segregating and exclusive discourses have become so normalized within Miami’s marketing and political structure that change is becoming increasingly difficult as attitudes institutionalize further. Using a discourse analysis set around a framework of social exclusion and adverse incorporation, and semi-structured interviews, this paper also examines the current spatial formation of the city with insights from leading figures in Miami’s marketing industry to suggest that the right to the city is still a distant dream for Miami’s other neighborhoods and populations.

Keywords: Adverse Incorporation, Marketing, Miami, Othering, Race, Segregation, Social Exclusion, Social History

INTRODUCTION

As Miami becomes increasingly influential in the globalized world, with ever more connections to Latin America, Europe, and the rest of the United States, the manner in which the city markets itself is central to the prolongation of any such success. Miami’s various marketers have had a long (at least relative to the age of the city) and successful history of creating a desirable image(ry) for the city which has been central in its growth from little more than a swamp in the late nineteenth century (Miami Dade County’s official population count in 1880 was 257) to, arguably, the most important economic and cultural hub of the Americas (Nijman, 2011). This imagery is crucial as what Miami portrays, who decides on this portrayal, and who stands to benefit from the portrayal are questions at the heart of this paper. In order to address these questions the historical effects and legacies of segregation will be spatially
examined, together with a discourse analysis, in order to assess the extent to which Miami’s marketers, politicians and planners exclude certain elements of the population from their marketing.

Miami’s image as a ‘tropical playground’ has been manufactured, much like the city itself, to attract various forms of investment from throughout the United States and the world. The creation of such an image requires strong and successful marketing campaigns which, in turn, choose elements of the city to promote or ignore. When Alonso (2007) argues that the tropicalized ideal of Miami is less marketed than in the past he is not referring to the palm trees, the heat (neither the temperature nor the utilization of Miami’s ‘tropical’ image in naming its basketball team, the Miami Heat) or the beaches, but rather that “the working-class immigrants who give the city its contemporary ‘tropical rhythm’ – and on whose labor the tourism industry depends – are mostly left out of the image” (Alonso, 2007, p. 164). Miami’s ‘working-class immigrants’ consist overwhelmingly of African Americans, Caribbean people and Latinos, who together have played a vital role in the city’s creation and, according to the 2010 Census, constitute almost 85% of the population today. Such overarching racial classifications ignore however the high levels of variability and inequality that exist within any such grouping and that are hugely prevalent in Miami itself. This inequality led the United Nation’s State of the World’s Cities Report 2008/9 to conclude that Miami, along with four other US cities, has “the highest levels of inequality in the country, similar to those of Abidjan, Nairobi, Buenos Aires and Santiago.” The report concludes that this inequality in Miami, as elsewhere in the United States, is predominantly determined by race, whereby “the life expectancy of African Americans in the United States is about the same as that of people living in China and some states of India, despite the fact that the United States is far richer than the other two countries.”

**DATASETS AND METHODOLOGY**

The geographical study area for this paper is broad-based and inclusive as the terms Miami, city and county will be used interchangeably in reference to a Greater Miami which we will define as Miami-Dade County minus the four largest and most rural census tracts (345-8) which fall mainly in the Everglades or Biscayne National Park (the vast majority of which is underwater). Figure 1 illustrates the geographical location of Miami-Dade County as well as highlighting the City of Miami (together with South Beach which is part of the separate City of Miami Beach) and a number of neighborhoods within the city that will be mentioned.

Given the need to progress beyond dualistic interpretations that solely consider inclusion or exclusion and normal or abnormal as counter positions and which oversimplify each of these issues and therefore undermine what Du Toit (2004, p. 1005) refers to as, “a responsive understanding of the consequences of the always specific and concrete ways in which people are included and excluded”, this paper will therefore utilize a multifaceted mixed-methods approach including a qualitative socio-historical analysis alongside a quantitative assessment of demographics and ethnic clustering in Miami in order to retain a ‘specific and concrete’ approach.

As a means of analyzing segregation and tourism in Miami, data will be drawn from the last four censuses (1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010) in regard to population demographics; specifically the proportion of the population, at a census tract level, of Miami’s Black, White and Hispanic communities. Income per capita data in Miami-Dade County will also be gathered for 2009 and this information will be combined with data illustrating the percentage of the adult population living below the poverty line (aged 19-64). It is important to realize that poverty data are only available for the 2000 level (the last available census) and so must be analyzed with this in mind.
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