



When South Is North

Lydia Martin

“Southern” is a lot more than a geographical condition. It’s a state of mind.

To a Cuban girl growing up in Miami, it was an entirely foreign notion.

Miami may be a part of the Southern United States, but it resonates with a very different accent. Where there should be magnolias, there are royal palm trees. Where you might expect banjos and fiddles, you find the pounding beat of conga drums. If you want to find the South from here, there is only one way to go — and that’s north.

Of course, it all depends on who’s defining North and South. To my Cuban family, Miami was the North: El Norte, where we headed when we left Havana in 1970. Never mind that it was way short of the Mason-Dixon line: Miami was as much El Norte as Yonkers, New York, and Chicago, and Flint, Michigan, where we later lived.

By the time I was thirteen, we had returned to Miami, chilled by the North but seeking a very different South.

If Miami was anything to my family, it was the Havana of the North, the closest to the real thing that exile had to offer. Miami was the place where the radio blared news of Cuba in Spanish, where white-haired men played furious games of double-nine dominos under the bloom of mango trees, and where down-home cooking had more to do with golden *arroz con pollo* and yucca smoldering in garlic oil than with grits and corn bread.

I grew up in the micro-climate of Little Havana and attended Miami’s first high school, Miami Senior High. It might have had a fine Southern tradition when it opened in the 1920s, but when I enrolled there sixty years later, it was known as Havana High.

My first meeting with a true-blue Southerner happened there. Our principal, Mr. Knowles, was an old-stock Miamian, which meant his parents were from Georgia. Every morning over the public address system, he spoke with pride of his Mi-a-mah Hah. It was Mr. Knowles who trained my ear to a Southern drawl.

Eventually, I learned this is the way to tell the old-timers in Miami. They call the place Mi-a-mah, the few of them who are left.

Before it was Little Havana, the neighborhood where I grew up was home to lower-middle-class Southerners from Georgia and the Carolinas and later to Jews, who emigrated from the Northeast after World War II.

Back then, the neighborhood was known as Riverside. As we built our own community, delicatessens and diners

gave way to Cuban restaurants, record stores, and super-

markets. Even the names were transplanted.

Centro Vasco restaurant, El Oso Blanco grocery store, La Tijera five-and-dime were all recreated in our version of El Norte.

Today, as Cuban exiles move away to the suburbs, Little Havana becomes less Cuban. The neighborhood now embraces immigrants from Nicaragua, Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico. It is being transformed into a rainbow-hued Latin Quarter, vibrant with its own traditions of a new South.



A spirited game is played at a city-owned domino club at Maximo Park on Calle Ocho in Little Havana, Miami.

Photo by Sarah J. Glover

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