

Sunbelt Diaspora: Race, Class, and Latino Politics in Puerto Rican Orlando

by Patricia Silver

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In *Sunbelt Diaspora: Race, Class, and Latino Politics in Puerto Rican Orlando*, the author Patricia Silver states that “it is oral history’s ability to record the histories that people have made for themselves—in the ways that they remember and forget—that best illuminates how people make meaning of the world around them” (22). Indeed, oral history is indispensable to this ethnographic study that traces and interprets the meaning of Puerto Rican and Latino political participation in metropolitan Orlando. The term *political* refers here to the “variety of responses to the exclusion and marginalization that Puerto Ricans and Latinos have so often encountered in the Orlando area” (14). Hence, throughout *Sunbelt Diaspora*, Silver demonstrates how Puerto Ricans and, more generally, other Latinos have affirmed their presence in spite of their circumscribed political and social positioning in the imagined community of the United States, Florida, and Orlando.

The narrative is divided into three parts across seven chapters, with an introduction, conclusion, and epilogue. In the first part, Silver historicizes Puerto Rican community formation in the Orlando metro area, which, according to oral histories, can be traced to the 1940s. In 1960, the US Census Bureau identified Hispanic or Latino persons for the first time in the area, with 471 who were born in Puerto Rico or who had Puerto Rican parents and 171 who were born in Mexico. By 2017, Hispanic or Latino persons numbered 693,930 in Orlando metro, with the majority, 51 percent, identifying as Puerto Rican. Given this growth, and particularly since 1980, Silver situates Orlando metro, despite being a nontraditional destination, as one of the largest concentrations nationally and thus an important locality for understanding Puerto Rican place making in the diaspora. In the second part, the author draws extensively from oral histories to examine how Puerto Ricans challenged processes of exclusionary inclusion that have “been foundational to the racialization of Latinos more widely” (109). The author does so by examining how Puerto Ricans were able to utilize resources available to them to establish their own visibility and belonging in public space, which, in turn, transitioned to political participation. One example highlighted was the successful election of Robert

Guevara as the first Hispanic commissioner in Osceola County, in November 1996. According to one oral history of Zulma Vélez Estrada, the Guevara campaign was effective because it “worked to evoke island-based political traditions to engage Puerto Rican voters” (118). Another example highlighted was the first-ever Latino mobilization in Orlando called March for Dignity on November 3, 1996, organized by Asociación Borinqueña to counter the hyperinvisibility of Latinos. From oral histories describing this event, the author discerns its significance as “a clear claim to Puerto Rican and by extension Latino belonging and specifically to belonging in Orlando” (121). In the third and final section, Silver describes her fieldwork experience related to redistricting in Orange County after the 2010 decennial census. This one case study serves as a cautionary tale on real challenges to political inclusion at the local level, in contemporary political discourse of diversity and color-blind multiculturalism.

It is notable that the author contributed to the development of varied oral history projects that collectively form the basis of this study. This includes an estimated 150 interviews and oral histories conducted between 2007 and 2012, and following Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria in 2018. The author, for example, worked with scholar Natalie Underberg-Goode to develop one oral history project on Puerto Rican history in central Florida. *Puerto Ricans in Central Florida 1940s to 1980s: A History* was the result of this collaboration, which was undertaken in 2008 and 2009. In 2012, Silver conducted thirty-four semistructured interviews as part of another project, *Cultural Foundations of Puerto Rican Orlando*. Interviews with community members from Asociación Borinqueña and Casa de Puerto Rico are included in this collection. In addition, the author utilizes twenty-one oral histories conducted in conjunction with *Puerto Rican Political Participation and Civic Engagement in Central Florida*. The latter project reconstructs Latino political history in central Florida from 1979 to 2009. In total, the narratives emerging from these interviews and oral histories are critical because they “give a view of Orlando history that is not found anywhere else” (25).

In addition to the use of oral history, the author conducted archival research in Florida, Puerto Rico, and Washington, DC, and analyzed census data as well as mainstream and Spanish-language newspapers and radio programs during the period under study. Applying an ethnographic approach, Silver also engaged in participant observation at various events, including activist community meetings, meetings of professional organizations, public hearings, church activities, and public and private political meetings and events hosted by mainstream and ethnic chambers of commerce. These experiences provided opportunities for the author to engage in informal conversations and interviews with Puerto Ricans, other Latinos, and non-Latino white and Black residents of Orlando, which in turn enhanced her analysis.

The expanse of data collected and examined in this study, combined with an insider-outsider perspective integrated throughout and critiques informed from perspectives in Puerto Rican and Latino studies make *Sunbelt Diaspora* an original contribution to the literature on Latinos in the region and provide a space for this work to engage in dialogue with comparative studies on Latinos in traditional and nontraditional urban destinations.