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Miami Stories

by Jeff Rice

In his song *Miami 2017*, Billy Joel imagined Miami, Florida, as a refuge for an impending apocalypse. In the narrative, or diegesis, Joel builds, Miami is never mentioned. But as Joel describes how dangerous New York has become in this futuristic scenario, the city's citizens, we are led to believe, will once again flee south, just as the song tells us they did almost eight years earlier. Joel sings:

They burned the churches up in Harlem
Like in that Spanish Civil War
The flames were everywhere,
But no one really cared
It always burned up there before.¹

When New York and nearby New Jersey residents, such as my own family, flocked to South Florida after World War II, they were not fleeing a burning city. Instead, they were participating in a mass migration in search of better jobs, cheaper housing, and warmer weather. "In 1959," Jeffrey Gurock writes, "approximately 43 percent of Miami Jews came from New York City, a proportion that slightly exceeded the percentage of American Jews living in New York after the war."² My family, who came from northern

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1. Billy Joel. *Miami 2017. Songs in the Attic*. Sony, 1998.
2. Jeffrey S. Gurock, *American Jewish Life, 1920-1990* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 107-108.

New Jersey and Brooklyn, were among those Jews who left New York for Miami in the early 1950s. Some of those Jews were recent residents of New York; they had, a few years earlier, fled their own devastation, the Holocaust of Nazi Europe. So, too, had Billy Joel's family.

In 1980, I was ten and living in the Miami suburb of Kendall when Liberty City, a neighborhood near the heart of the city, burned and experienced the devastation of a riot. Insurance salesman Arthur McDuffie's death at the hands of several police officers, who eventually were acquitted of murder, set the city ablaze. Our sixth grade classes at F.C. Martin were canceled because of the general fear of danger. If Miami had "burned up there before," to echo Joel, it had not been for twenty years at least, dating to some point in the 1960s when American cities burned in response to other racist beatings, or to the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. During the political turmoil of the 1960s, singer Wayne Cochran was not concerned with racial inequity, but instead, in his canonical song, *Going Back to Miami*, sang about returning to the city for a girl. He was not fleeing New York's devastation, like Joel's anonymous protagonist, but merely trying to get back to his baby. We may never know where McDuffie was going when he was stopped and beaten, and we may never return to the moment when he allegedly fled police. But his brutal beating eventually led to "more than 1,400 riot related arrests" and "\$125 million in property damage and losses."³ Going back to a baby, heading South, these responses pale in comparison to the damage that racial discrimination generates when a man is murdered for speeding. When asked by *The Miami News* to respond to the rioting, Muhammad Ali, a former resident of Liberty City in the 1960s, too, fell short of grasping the totality of McDuffie's murder, but noted that, "This is a heavy thing. It's difficult. It makes my fight comin' up with Holmes looks so easy."⁴ After the riots, Thomas Boswell, Ira Sheskin, and Carroll Truss interviewed residents of Liberty City and other African-American neighborhoods in order to understand local responses to the event. Two thirds of Richmond Heights and over three quarters of Liberty City respondents noted that "it's almost impossible for

3. Jerome Skolnick and James Fyfe, *Above the Law: Police and Excessive Use of Force* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 182.

4. Bill Brubaker, "Ali's Plea to Old Neighborhood." *The Miami News*. May 20, 1980. Front page, 8A.

a black to get a fair trial in Dade County."⁵ In other words, the prevailing attitude was that only those with ethnic membership to a select, white club could get justice.

I have not been back to Miami in 15 years. And I do not care to go back, a declaration that my wife, who loves the South, finds mysterious, particularly since I have spent the last nine years living in climates where snow is frequent in the winter. My reasons have nothing to do with weather, migration stories, or the continuing problems of racism, but are more likely connected to an internal representation that I hold, but cannot fully express. As Roland Barthes might ask, "How do you describe something that does not represent anything?"⁶ Such a moment, thing, or memory possibly only can be expressed. In the memory that I have of some placed called "Miami," I can create what Michel de Certeau calls a spatial story by revisiting Miami as a series of associations that I return to for the purpose of invention, and not for purposes of representation. In that sense, I am exploring a way to write about the city that I grew up in, in a way that does not, as Fredric Jameson requires, always historicize⁷, but instead fleshes out patterns and associations as a narrative. In the age of new media, associations replace logical argumentation as a method of persuasion, and offer alternatives to historical accounts and representation. These associations may appear as networked moments, fragments, and isolated details juxtaposed into a larger narrative. In a series of associations that begin with this preamble of movement, race, and death, I am not trying to persuade a reader to believe in something called Miami, Florida. Instead, as Gregory Ulmer might note, I am trying to present a feeling as text. The basic premise of Ulmer's digital diegesis is the concept of the felt; the moment of feeling that weaves together a variety of ideas.⁸ Miami, for me, is a train of associations, thoughts, and movements. It is a type of feeling, not a representation nor an argument. That feeling begins with a pop song and a moment when I was 10.

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5. Thomas D. Boswell, Ira Sheskin, and Carroll Truss, "Attitudes, Causes, and Perceptions: The 1980 Black Riot in Dade County (Miami), Florida," *The Florida Geographer* 20 (1986) 1-15.
 6. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 61.
 7. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).
 8. Gregory Ulmer, *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy*. (Boston, MA: Longman, 2003), 36.

In 1963, James Brown, known for declaring more than once that he's "got the feeling," begins a live performance of his single "Night Train" by introducing his list of cities that the night train visits with the declaration, "Miami, Florida." The song "Night Train," and in particular, this shout-out to Miami, is what Mark Winegardner's gangsters hear in the novel *The Godfather's Revenge* (2006), as they are about to be killed by the mob.⁹ The mob and Miami have a specific and commonplace connection: 1963 Miami. Four days before being assassinated, John F. Kennedy visited Miami. Four days later, Kennedy would be dead, and there would be no rioting. 1963 is a year that I know well. 1963 was the focal point of my book *The Rhetoric of Cool* (2007), which critiques my discipline's (rhetoric and composition) commonplace understanding of the field's rebirth narrative. A commonplace indicates a site of already known knowledge; it circulates a topos. To immediately invoke Kennedy's assassination in a discussion of 1963 would be to call upon a familiar point or meaning. In my book, I did not write about the Kennedy assassination. Instead, I focused on a club-like mentality that viewed writing in narrow terms, one that opted to historicize this narrow vision as contemporary pedagogy by neglecting other spaces of meaning already in circulation in 1963. A rigid temporal historical reading, I showed, failed to account for, or represent other, associative, temporal moments. Historical readings can be, I demonstrated, too inclusive and exclusive.

Miami's commonplace might be sunshine or tourism. The commonplace moment from 1963 is Kennedy's assassination. Few speak of Kennedy's Miami visit outside of conspiracy theorists who claim Kennedy was supposed to be killed in Miami by the mob. Had I known about the visit or the conspiracy when I was writing my book, I might have included it in *The Rhetoric of Cool* in order to exemplify another missed, compositional moment (i.e., conspiracy as a form of writing). *Digital Detroit* (2012), my second book, deals with the concept of secrecy (a form of conspiracy) as central to networked rhetoric (in one chapter, Detroit's Maccabees building is explored for its historical basis of The Maccabees secret society). The devastation felt after Kennedy's death is, no doubt, equitable to what Billy Joel describes occurring in 2017. Despite the nation's feeling of loss in 1963, I ask, what is the secret of Kennedy's visit as a

9. Mark Winegardner, *The Godfather's Revenge* (New York: Putnam Adult, 2006), 488.

moment of writing, even if that moment is not historical writing but rather the practice of invention? Like all secrets or conspiracies, that answer could be devised by a formula: 2017 minus 1963 = 54. Whatever 54 means, it could help serve a type of writing whose focal point is not just juxtaposition (a rhetorical principle I proposed in *The Rhetoric of Cool*), but mystery, secrecy, and conspiracy. Uncover the meaning of 54, we might say, and you have performed, instead of a historical writing about a city, a secrecy writing. Such would be the conspiracy method of figuring out an answer, much as conspiracy theorists claim to know Kennedy's death by a series of formulas or equations that supposedly equal logical reasoning.

In one circulated photograph of Kennedy's Miami visit, Kennedy is riding in an open convertible (as he did in Dallas four days later) and a woman extends a hand for him to shake. The handshake, among other things, suggests the presence of secrecy or secret handshakes, as in secret clubs whose meanings are often based on how one shakes a hand for entrance. In Miami, we might call this the "old boys club" mentality, a way of thinking that stretches from Carl Fisher's development of the city in the early 20th century to politics and criminal activity. In the book of short stories *Miami Noir* (2006), Tom Corcoran's contribution, "One Man's Ceiling," describes a group of gangsters who set up in a two bedroom apartment in Kendall and call their home "The Old Boys Club."¹⁰ Famous mobsters, such as Al Capone and Meyer Lansky, led old boys club lives and lived in Miami in not so secret lives. Lansky, it is said, favored the pastrami at the Jewish deli Wolfie's. So, too, it seems, did actor Mickey Rourke, who claims that he would eat there after amateur boxing matches he participated in as a kid. Gangsters may not have created boxing in Miami, but according to the documentary *Muhammad Ali: Made in Miami* (2008), the city and its image of organized crime played a pivotal role in Cassius Clay's transformation into Muhammad Ali. In 1964, Clay surprisingly beat Sonny Liston in Miami Beach. Shortly afterward, Clay changed his name to Ali. Some people have questioned whether the fight was fake or legitimate (i.e., a conspiracy so Liston could bet on himself and pay off a debt to the mob). In one particular photo from the Miami 5th Street Gym where Clay trained prior to the fight, Clay raises his hands as a sign that, in the club like mentality of boxing,

10. Tom Corcoran, "One Man's Ceiling," in *Miami Noir*, ed. Les Standiford (New York: Akashic Books, 2006), 119.

he is the greatest. Ali's secret was his ego. At the weigh-in for the Liston fight, Ali made his ego clear and yelled, "I predict that tonight somebody will die."¹¹

During his first afternoon in Miami in 1968, as detailed in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago: An Informal History of the Republican and Democratic Conventions of 1968* (1968), long time Ali admirer Norman Mailer strolls the hall of the Republican National Convention and imagines an old boys club whose members include John Wayne, Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, and Richard Nixon. Mailer, as egotistical as Ali, imagines himself as the centerpiece of any club he writes about. "That evening at the Fountainbleau," he writes, "on the night before the convention was to begin, the Republicans had their Grand Gala, no Press admitted, and the reporter by a piece of luck was nearly the first to get in."¹² Mailer found himself within a specific club mentality of politics, but also of being on the "inside," of knowing the metaphoric handshake of access. Jackie Gleason, too, represents this Miami club mentality. The non-Jewish Gleason moved to Miami just as the northern migration of the 1950s ended. Gleason juxtaposed golf and entertainment as old boy networks that would promote his 1960s celebrity status and TV show. In an October 5, 1962 *Life* feature on Gleason, the celebrity is seen on the golf course, waiving his hand in his canonical "And away we go" gesture. And in a 1969 report published in the *Montreal Gazette*, Gleason is quoted as telling a crowd of 35,000 teens who gathered at the Orange Bowl about another special club, that of Christianity and wholesome living. Gleason tells the teens that "he believed their movement against filth and obscenity would mushroom across the nation, and 'perhaps across the world' saving everyone for eternal life after death."¹³ According to some sources, Miami was an alternative name (from the Chippewa) for the American colonists' preferred name for the people they encountered and later killed. It meant "naked." Vice was in this space from the start, it seems. From Native Americans to Gleason's brimstone warnings.

Mailer enjoys the old boy club convention center and the political vices it offers. While training in Miami, Cassius Clay was denied the right to *try on shirts* at Burdines (an act which would have

11. Original Muhammed Ali vs Sonny Liston Weigh in. 1964. VHS <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaTbr5TrnHA> [accessed July 4, 2011].

12. Norman Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Signet, 1968), 31.

13. Malcolm Balfour, "Gleason Predicts Increasing Decency," *The Montreal Gazette*, March 25, 1969, p. 43.

briefly exposed him as naked), and thus is exposed to the old boy club mentality of 1960s racism, a racism that, as Miami founder Carl Fisher desired, once forbid Jews from living in the city. This issue of clubs and exposure begs the question: why was Kennedy left naked (exposed) as he toured Miami? Kennedy, of course, was not a part of James Brown's imaginary "Night Train," but rather, traveled in an unprotected motorcade. Exposure, too, is a mystery for what it leaves out, for what is missing in the narrative we try to tell about a city or some other representation. In argument, no matter what we try to prove, something is always missing. In the *Miami Vice* episode "Missing Hours," James Brown plays Lou DeLong, a figure who mysteriously appears during an alien encounter and claims to represent a group called Astrolife. At one point in the narrative, the character Trudy, still searching for her missing husband, sings to Brown's "I Got the Feeling" as it plays in the background. Astrolife is a club for UFO conspiracy theorists. Astrolife, as the Brown character argues, promises members "to get the total truth."¹⁴ That total truth—what is out there—continues to intrigue and shape how we write about given spaces. What more is there to this text or space, we ask? What does this city mean? What else is out there about this city that I can say or write? Our project has been indebted for too long to hermeneutics. The responses we create as to why or how we interpret are often not satisfying. We act as if we know what some totality or total truth means, or that we can argue for or against some force and thus change policy. But our work more likely resembles a minor headline on a 1962 *Miami News* front page: "Ho, Hum Time at Canaveral."

"With the launching of Walter Schirra this morning," the article notes about the astronaut's launch, "manned space flight made the transition from science fiction to routine fact—dangerous and pulse quickening, but still routine."¹⁵ Argument. Interpretation. These, I note, are routine gestures in any kind of writing. My exigency, explored briefly in this essay about a Florida city, is secrecy; it is the Miami secret as writing moment, a moment that finds patterns in temporal dates and various terms. I do not imagine a totality called Miami. There is no totality, as de Certeau or Barthes¹⁶ might say, at stake in a series of associations of Miami that work off of one

14. *Miami Vice*. "Missing Hours," November 19, 1987.

15. Al Volker, "Ho Hum Time at Canaveral." *The Miami News*. October 3, 1962, front page.

16. Barthes; Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

another. While interpretative or argumentative gestures as moments of exigency may feel dangerous—as Lloyd Bitzer famously declares in “The Rhetorical Situation’s” first sentence—they are now nothing more than routine.¹⁷ Ho Hum moments of rhetorical expression. Interpretation is no secret. It is a commonplace.

If there is a secret to Miami, it might not be, then, a conspiracy motivated 54, but rather something akin to Mailer’s insistence that the writer is the centerpiece of any type of reporting. For me to write about Miami, for instance, I cannot ignore growing up in Kendall or that despite whatever I may write or say about Miami, I am likely to be the centerpiece of that discussion. “I am the reference of every image,” Barthes declares about representation.¹⁸ My rationale for being the centerpiece is neither argumentative nor causal nor even egotistical. I feel that I want to perform this type of exploration because I cannot separate myself from the representation I compose. My rationale, therefore, is a felt one (emotional and textual weaving). This is the secret or conspiracy of writing. What will associations lead to in a given writing? I do not know, so I weave them.

I feel, for instance, that I need to conclude by mentioning one particular Miami disaster, Hurricane David. In 1980, the hurricane stormed through our suburban neighborhood and flooded our streets and canals. We lived in a subdivision owned by a golf country club. At one point, the center, or eye, of the storm passed over our neighborhood. I got out of bed in the middle of the night and saw the water rise and flood the street as it, no doubt, had done many times before, during many previous, devastating hurricanes. Standing at the window, I felt exposed. Against the bars on my bedroom window, the bars my parents had instructed me how to open in case of flooding, the bars I needed to open so that I would be exposed to the outside and so I would not die in a flooded house, I placed my hand. This final gesture is my secret (like a handshake or a raising of the fist) that a pattern, from a childhood memory to a spatial moment to a city’s historical fragments, motivates any kind of writing. The challenge, as I am faced at this moment, is to shape that pattern into this spatial story here as well as in future ones I will compose, explorations of the patterns and moments of any diegesis that resists interpretation and favors invention in its place.

17. Lloyd Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. 1 (January, 1968), 1-14.

18. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections of Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 84.