Miami's Colored Over Segregation: Segregation, Interstate-95 and Miami's African-American Legends

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COME WITH ME:

Cab Calloway stands center stage smiling as his orchestra plays in the background. He lowers his hand, palm down. and the band rhythmically descends to a whisper. He steps up to the microphone and he looks over the Black audience focusing on familiar faces. The large doors to the rear of Colored Town's Lyric Theater are open and he can just make out the swaying coconut palms in the distance as the soft South Florida winter breeze washes through the room. He snaps his head to toss his conked hair from his eyes and says:

"It's Great to be in Miami"

The audience roars!!!

Within this narrative, both real and imagined, is the essence of Miami's legendary African-American community. As the winter home for a sophisticated season society, South Florida is always quick to glamorize itself. From its inception Miami's African-American community participated as willing partner in the bustling tourist village that would emerge to become the center of one of the largest metropolitan areas in the South East of the United States. "Colored Town" was the name taken for the segregated Black community and in this article also refers to the legends and spaces of segregation in this Southern City. It was the historic Center of the African-American community dedicated to the housing, commerce and cultural exchange for that population and still fosters strong memories.

Colored Town was also a product of viscous labor. rank opportunism and inconspicuous manipulation. It emerged as an essentially quarantined community whose physical area failed to grow proportionally to the dense growth of the population as the city boomed. Ironically, Colored Town is both product of the segregated city that existed in the first fifty years of Miami City, a time when segregation was etched deep in the daily lives of all SouthFloridians. However, Colored Town is also dismantled and destroyed by the affects of desegregation and the tremendous physical and cultural changes that occur.

Today Colored Town is officially known as "Overtown" and in this article Overtown refers to the community that formed in the same physical place within contemporary Miami. Overtown survives despite neglect, African-American migration and the execution of the Federal Interstate System (I-95) directly through its center. Colored Town survives as a legendary space and time through selected narratives that evoke proud identification of a once vibrant community. Today, Overtown sits central to Miami-Dade County and within twenty minutes drive of two million people. Currently there is an effort by politicians, community elders, governing officials and developers to reconstruct Overtown. Some with reverent adherence to the legends and myths of Colored Town, others approach the reconstruction with complete ignorance of the community's history and most approach the reconstruction with a cautious combination of community respect and developmental opportunism. The healthy evolution of Overtown and the African-American community, with an appropriate understanding and exemplification of Colored Town, depends on the honest examination of historic and current conditions.

For e xample, by accepting the historic conditions of segregation and facing the current condition imposed by the interstate, a more balance proposal to the future can be achieved. As segregation was the bane that existed in the first Fifty years of Colored Town, I95 is a similarly interloper and strongly effects all conditions in Overtown. Segregation in Colored Town and I-95 in Overtown are parallel external impositions which sustain and restrain Miami's African-American Community. This paper primarily examines the legendary imagery of the African-American community in Miami's Colored Town, and also examines the current conditions of the African-American community in Miami's Over Town, its progeny, with special attention accorded to I-95. This paper also illustrates how these two seemingly unrelated conditions unwittingly conspire to constrain, project and define the future of the AfricanAmerican community .

THE IRONY OF SEGREGATION AND VITALITY

In the first half of the 20th Century. Jim Crow legislated ghettoizing segregation by concentrating the black community, as Colored Town, combining all trades and classes. As a result of this condition Colored Town was vibrant and thriving. In the rosy light of retrospect, these years seem golden. Miami's Black community experienced a sweet era of prosperity under the oppression of segregation. It is ironic that even with segregation that Miami was known as an escape destination heralded for its winter weather, tropical flora and tranquillity.

Miami changed radically in its second fifty years. Several major events occur between 1947 and 1967 that caused specific turbulence in the Black Community and collectively define the transformation of the city.
1. The Florida supreme Court strikes municipal segregation(1947)
2. The Interstate System [I-95] in Miami City(1955-1968)
3. Significant increase of Cuban Immigration (1960's)
4. Black consciousness comes to south Florida(1960's)
5. Civil Right's laws are passed nationwide (1960's)

These events redefined the landscape and texture of the city by changing the nature, interaction, and characteristics of the physical place and the population of South Florida. Within a short generation the legal infrastructure that maintained Jim Crow was dismantled both on a state and national level, the cultural/ethnic identification of the population changed completely and the interstate highway system significantly altered the urban infrastructure. The reverberating effect of these events had a direct impact on the quality of buildings, the texture of streetscapes, the cloistering of neighborhoods, image of cities and the urban vision of the larger community. The construction of the physical fabric of Colored Town/ Overtown, its destruction in mid-century and its recent reconstruction as legend, illustrates both the endurance of the Black Community and the ironies of its identity in the face of legislated abuse.

BEGINNING

Following a destructive freeze during the winter of 1894-95 in Northern and Central Florida the Entrepreneur and railroad magnate Henry M. Flagler decided to build a hotel and extend his railroad South to the mouth of the Miami River. Sensing an opportunity Flagler, Julia Tuttle-a local land baroness, and other business leaders conspired to incorporate the area as the City of Miami and in subsequent years to move the Dade County seat to the young city. A large population of Black laborer was employed to extend the railroad, clear land, and build his hotel. By 1896 a semi-permanent encampment that housed the Black laborers and their families formed upriver from the hotel and West of the railroad line. Flagler and his colleagues were successful on both tasks and relied heavily on the Black population, many of whom were registered voters who loyally supported the interest of the railroad magnate. In the same year that the City of Miami was founded,

1896, the Supreme court ruled on Plecy vs Fergeson, the landmark case essentially legalizing segregation and so called Jim Crow Laws. As the growing population of Black laborers and Black Business formed, a defacto segregated community formed out of that original encampment and came to be known as Colored Town.

Colored Town was a community of professionals and laborers living, playing and creating community in South Florida. Stories from that era tell of individuals like Nat king Cole and Ella Fitzgerald returning to Colored Town, leaving a segregated Miami Beach after evening performances in the "Whites Only" beach clubs, for After hours shown in the clubs and hotels in the Colored Town section of Miami city. Known as Little Broadway, in 9th Street clubs, the performers entertained late into the night with lively reception. In the morning a young Cascious Clay (Mohammed Ali) jogged from the Mary Elizabeth Hotel located in the heart of Miami City's Colored Town to Miami Beach in a workout routine for a fight. The Lyric theater, developed by a Black entrepreneur for vaudeville performances, entertained the Black community. Colored Town also offered the best education Black youth could attain in South Florida through Booker T. Washington High School, the only school offering a full high-school education. Many of the professionals in this community enjoyed fine homes, clustered around schools, churches, and businesses enterprises owned by and catering to the Black community. The powerful, and mythic tales of Black Miami emerge from these legends and hold the reality of its past, present and future hostage. In effort to praise its history these legends project a place that never was or that exists only by isolating less desirable images of Colored Town.

From the 1920's until the 1950's Colored Town remained the center of Black culture in Miami. Slowly the community crept South to Perine. West to Brownsville and North to Liberty City through controlled strategies such as redlining narrow bands of development prevent Blacks from buying in Non-Black neighborhoods. Yet even with these parameters, these expansions were always marked by the violence of bombing black homes, timidity of black local migration and cynical developer interests seeking to falsely inflate rents and maximize density in the few neighborhoods accommodating local Black migration. Colored Town remained the central and most prosperous Black community in the area. The name was officially changed to Over Town in reference to the common comment of "going over to town" as contemporary sensibilities changed. In the segregated city of Miami; when Blacks referred to "going over to town," they meant going to Colored Town, the commercial, cultural and educational center of Miami's Black community. The real and imagined history of Miami's Black community is defined by a benign mythology through these narratives.

Colored Town was a paradox. It contained the best Miami could offer Black culture and also sustained the worst of conditions and contradictions imposed on the Black community in the city of Miami. While Colored Town offered fine homes for the wealthy yet it was also a warehouse for the least

desirable urban housing stock in South Florida. Within the boundaries of the segregated city the population was always held at or above capacity and expansion was constrained to maintain density. When the population growth of the community increased, the old wooden shotguns houses were replaced with narrow concrete apartment tenement buildings. These concrete bunkers vented poorly, were designed to minimized apartment size, and oriented to maximize unit numbers rather that than minimize heat exposure. The rents and taxes for these buildings were inflated by demand yet public services from the city were minimal, poor or non-existent. Density often meant the destruction of the existing tree canopy for the sake of built area. A system of canals that ran through Colored Town, placed to service other areas of the city often to the detriment of Colored Town itself.

The education of this population was not a priority of Miami either, nearly 25 years after the founding of the City and long after a The all white Miami High School was built: Booker T. Washington High School was built to accommodate the black population. Booker T. Washington was criticized as an unnecessary expenditure and literally bombed during its construction, further delaying its occupation. The stifling heat, poor services and unsanitary conditions in the summer created health problems for the population. Countering the tales of lively night clubs and a sophisticated cafe society are the continual indignities endured by the population from the local authorities. For example, the city police department was known for its brutality of the population, often large groups of untrained officers were sent in the community to 'control' the population. There were also curfews and ordinances that controlled the daily activities of the Black population including one that prevented Blacks from driving through certain neighborhoods, forcing them to leave their cars at the city edge. The indignities of the Jim Crow South are numerous and are often forgotten amongst sympathetic yet sincere rhetoric which seeks to model history solely on the most positive of memories of a community.

A more balanced examination of the history of this era is necessary to infuse a more realistic understanding of the conditions that exist today. Long after the removal of legal land estate segregation in Florida, (1947) and the Civil Rights Legislation of the 1960's Miami remains a city which consistently ranks high amongst the most segregated cities in the nation. An increasingly diverse area, Miami has erupted in racial riots, including four significant times between 1968 and the present in which the brunt of the destruction has been felt in Over Town and neighboring communities largely African-American communities such as Liberty City and Brownsville. Presently the communities of Over Town, Liberty City and Brownsville are operating as defacto segregated communities fluctuating between the state of their present condition and the mythology of their past, a mythology defined by both the positive and negative aspects of the history outlined above.

Over Town, Liberty City, and Brownsville are physical places, made of streets, buildings, land, etc. The community of people which occupy these places are by contrast extremely economically mobile, and culturally—f not racially—diverse. The population at one point was legislated to be African-American and for a time the physical places, cultural institutions and community of peoples were defined by a specific African-American community. In the past 50 years the legislative and cultural mechanism which held the physical place and the communal population tightly together has been dismantled, however, because the history and the myth of ownership of these places are still joined with that specific African-American community- whether the full spectrum of that community exist there or not- the future is defined by their perception of its past. Their identity is linked to the fate of this place even as they leave Overtown, for the suburbs.

In the winter of 1997 President Clinton formed a special commission to examine a series of suspicious fires at African-American churches. As the media interviewed individuals in the African-American community effected by these incidents, church officials are often heard pointing out that the materiality of the church is not the place or building but rather the true material of the church is in its people. The destruction of the church in its physical presence is not equal to the destruction of the church in spirit nor is destruction of the church in its physical presence equal to the destruction of the people that make the church. Following such a destruction the church often emerges stronger and more resolved to rebuild in that physical location. It is helpful to compare this phenomenon in Miami's African-American urban community by generalizing as follows:

> Legislated segregation created a significant dynamic that artificially maintained the community known as Colored Town. In a segregated Colored Town the diversity of professionals, intellectuals and laborers created a pressurized energy which informs our legendary ideas of the city in that era. In a de-segregated Overtown the diversity living within the community has changed dramatically, yet the attempts to develop and transform these areas are held by the memories of these legends and the strength of the nostalgia they engender. In the community that is Overtown presently, the community in all it nuances which made Colored Town is not there. However, it is this exile community which holds sway and politically controls the perception of development and change in this community. As sympathetic overseers of the community this population has amassed resources to rebuild the community of Overtown by creating a benign patriarchy.

In the 1950's a political, developmental and societal bravado lead to the devastation of this community in the name of progress. For reasons that were at times sincere but often patriarchal and cynical the Dwight D. Eisenhower Interstate system literally ran through the heart this community. Just as it was a partial myth for builders of the interstate system to believe that I-95 would be beneficial to the community, it may

also be a myth for the well meaning elder and exiled community of Overtown to perceive that their visions for the rebuilding of Overtown will re-establish a history that never was. By examining more specifically the decisions and conditions surrounding the of Dwight D. Eisenhower Interstate system the full interaction and impact of Interstate 95 on Overtown emerges. The following is short digression which broadens, contextualize, and illustrates the complexities of infrastructure and landscape in South Florida. It also activates the experience of approaching Overtown on the interstate to accentuate the impact of the highway on this once modestly scaled community.

The wild, wild South Florida has always held a unique role in the South. Planned segregation in the Jim Crow South is hardly exceptional however Coloredtown gains distinction as part of a eclectic context of people, events, and landscape that make South Florida. Relishing a role as the forgotten corner of the nation South Florida has always been a respite for the inconspicuous and the wild exotic edge of the South. While South Florida is sustained by a relatively normative population it is also distinguished a respite for energetic immigrants, modern pirates, low-key transients, sun-happy vacationers and the tacky wealthy. The cultural pluralism that results from migration and immigration attributes to the dynamic nature of the South Florida region. The consistent flexibility and adaptability of the societal infrastructure in South Florida implies both ephemeral and resilient characteristics. As these characteristics go far to explain the persistent transformation of the societal infrastructure they also metaphorically outline the similar conditions which transform the physical environment.

From the interstate system to the Everglades the general environment of South Florida exists as a collection of "projects." The projects can be as normative as buildings, bridges, highways, lakes, community developments and dams, or as complex as the network of canals installed to first drain the Everglades and much like the diversity in the population the infrastructure elements of South Florida are haphazardly executed and exist with awkward adjacency to one another. South Florida is a completely fabricated landscape. The environment has been drained quarantined and stratified to support inhabitation to such a degree that the determinate qualities of the natural geography are indistinguishable from the artificial.

In South Florida, the highway has become one of the major geographical elements. In a geography that is basically flat the berms, overpasses, interchanges and viaducts that emerge as part of the interstate system stand as stoic and fixed as mountains. The massive draining of the Everglades , the creation of extensive canal systems, flood plains and drainage ways has been used extensively to create artificial boundaries of water and to secure dry land in support of development and urban planning. It is only the man-made objects which break the canopy of trees and redefine the profile of the sunrise, sunset and breezeways. The roadways, bridges, berms, overpasses, interchanges and viaducts contribute to a level of

artifice of the South Florida environment that not only blurs natural and artificial but also confuses the roles of the permanent with the temporal. In turn, the periodic hurricane culls the weak from the strong by forcing this ephemeral and artificial environment to meet the standards imposed by these violent storms. The structures of the roadways survive easily hurricanes and become even stronger symbols of a permanent landscape.

The experience of driving in South Florida is exemplified by the rhythmic lazy certainty of I-95. The interstate straddles a ridge of high land which runs North-South and parallel to the coast. Traveling South from Ft. Lauderdale the interstate charges carelessly through what would have been undeveloped land in the 1950's and slides easily around and over the few geographic elements in its way. The current land developments snuggle quietly next to the roadway as it enters Miami-Dade county. Once in Miami-Dade county the roadway skyrockets over, around and with in a massive interchange called "the Golden Glades." The periodic shift and banking increase in frequency as the road encounters and caresses more populated areas. It quietly bounces through the North side of the county and sways occasionally as it fixes course toward the city of Miami and the Southern end of the most expensive Interstate in the nation which is also the longest North-South interstate.

As the Interstate drops into Liberty City it grudgingly lunges through the fabric of the city resting on the ground and becoming airborne at alternative and sporadic intervals to allow for arterial access and underpassing city streets. It is at this point you can see how the demands of the Interstate and the realities of the city intensify in a continual conflict. At the interchange with Interstate I-195, between Liberty City and Overtown the interstate soars into a web of ramps, some 7 stories high, standing on thin supports over a 1/4-mile field. This Field is occupied by a vapid serene landscape currently being slapped with palms, manicured grass and flowering trees. Following the interchange the Interstate once again drops to the ground slicing a wide the line thorough the terrain and splitting the cities warehouse district and straightens as if to gain momentum toward Overtown.

Just as the roadway once again becomes airborne it veers only yards form Booker T. Washington High School and forms a viaduct which slices through the remainder Overtown and Miami's Downtown business district and then traveling south before it plummets to its end and bleeds in to a four lane tree lined roadway just before Coral Gables, one of the wealthiest Communities in South Florida. The buildings and neighborhoods left in the wake of the interstate often appear awkward, nervous and naked.

HIGHWAY'S ROBBERY

The Federal Interstate Transportation System is often blamed for the fracturing of intact urban neighborhoods. Demographic, governmental and development indirectly and directly conspire to increase mobility and connect downtown central business districts to suburban expansion. The image of six lane concrete highways laid haphazardly though traditionally scaled communities is accompanied by images of dilapidated city fabric destroyed in the wake of "urban renewal." Whether this destruction was intended or not, like severing an arterial blood line the areas in the path of these new roads struggle(d) to survive and are often left abandoned. The most active years of implementation for the interstate system coincided with a general relocation of population along racial, economic and development criteria. The quasi-desegregation of shopping, residential, educational and cultural facilities through both legal and spontaneous actions came on the heels of many Interstate constructions through formerly segregated districts.

In many of these communities the traditional African-American community was unprepared for these simultaneous occurrences and simply could not withstand this onslaught and quickly fell into disrepair. Today many of these neighborhoods slowly and silently withered to less than a shell of their physical selves. These neighborhoods form a landscape sparsely populated with open lots, barricaded businesses, walled in homes and collapsing buildings. A fabricated landscape that has begun to claim permanence and spawn continual expansion. The Interstate is part and parcel to this predicament. As both the symbol for escape from this environment and the symbol for the cause of its distraction I-95 becomes an inseparable yet unwelcome part of the Overtown Community. The insidious and obvious nature of this complicated relationship can be illustrated by observation of this interaction.

The interstate is vilified for the destruction of the community that was Overtown. It is blamed even in the face other significant factors, such as civil rights, Black suburban flight, and immigration—many of which more at cause for the dispersion and re-definition of the physical place called Overtown. And as such I-95 becomes an effective whipping boy to stir interest in projects to "resurrect" Overtown in an image controlled by and based on the mythical imagery of a community that no longer lives there. In the 1950's and 60's traveling North along NW 7th Avenue from downtown Miami you would pass through the center of vibrant thriving communities. An unintended effect of the building of I-95 parallel to NW 7th avenue along much of NW 6th Avenue was to sever the urban context east from west therefore amplifying patterns of segregation and reinforce barriers of local migration toward "the beach" (east). In the process the community of Overtown was essentially split and parted out to move certain populations West and expand the neighboring central business district east to the interstate.

The impact and brutality of the Federal Interstate Transportation System is in reality one of a series of systematic factors that define Overtown today. By examining it as another partial element in a collection of effecting elements it may broaden our understanding of the Overtown community itself.

A SYSTEM(S) OF CONSEQUENCES

Systems theory proposes that any system changes and evolves once it is put into practice and that the intentions of the said system fail to predict the totality of the outcome. The system in all cases is open and in Miami the system of the interstate highway interacts with the environmental, social and cultural system(s) to create qualitative and new properties. It is the nature of the new qualities that defines the true systematic functions of the interstate and the communities that they affect. All parties that are involved in the impact of I-95 have implemented systems based on varying degree of noble intentions; however, the ability to control / predict outcome and effectively implement these systems is challenged by the fact that no system operates in isolation and the interaction with other systems cause continual un-intended results. One may read the situation like this:

> The system of interstate highways is initially manipulated by the development community to move and isolate a passive and un-empowered Black community to aid development and expansion of the city center. The community, in turn, actually develops politically, socially and culturally into an organism that excerpts a great deal of control over the areas affected by the interstate highway regardless of legal ownership to become defacto stewards of Over Town. The system of community leaders and activist and concerned citizens seeks to return this neighborhood to a glorified perception of its past or at least stabilize/develop the community in a way more sympathetic to the perceived local community. The actual local community holds little sway over the decision process the development of the community is controlled by a dispersed population that still maintains a great deal of control; forming a sort of socially acceptable patriarchy.

A STITCH IN TIME

As these forces converge on Over town its future is defined by a patchwork of agendas that assert influences and foster opportunities. The projects that do emerge are simultaneously sympathetic to and systematic of the patch work of conditions involved. In fact the community becomes strangely dependent on I-95 both as a major victimizer and as a source/backdrop/excuse for community development projects. For example, at many points along the Interstate, attempts have been made to use rejuvenation projects to in effect stitch the community back together underneath the expressway by reconnect the city East to West and dissolve the vapid open

spaces. Running perpendicular to the interstate the streetscape on 62nd street illustrates this condition with a center island of palm trees connects the business center of Liberty City, West of the interstate, under the interstate with the schools and neighborhoods East toward the bay. In other areas gardens and outdoor theaters are proposed in fields left in the wake of the interstate.

In Over Town a folkloric village is proposed with a pedestrian mall organized to draw the population once again West to East and visa-versa. These urban sutures act to undermine the intended axis of the Interstate and reinstate the fabric of the fragmented street infrastructure. These projects also become symbolic gestures toward the rebuilding of the community affected by the Interstate. These projects ultimately become part and parcel to the interstate both in practice and in use and are developed with a dependency on the Highway. However successful these measures are, it is still unclear whether the African-American community can heal or whether African-American community that both history and legend leads us to understand can and will exist in this area at all.

CONCLUSION

Caught in a dilemma of good intentions, legendary history and political patronage, the goals of reinvigorating the idealized center of Miami's African-American community finds itself dependent on an infrastructure it despises.(I-95) Similarly this community finds itself dependent on aspects of it history it despises as well. The future of this communities lies in the evolution or assertion of a new form of community, based on existing complexities, rather than the resurrection of an idealized past. The richness of the Overtowm community must be inclusive of its complex and contradictory history. The irony is that just as Colored Town is anesthetized to become Overtown, an attempt to forward a history clean of segregation, runs the risk of ignoring the true conditions and needs a contemporary community as well as repeating a patern of detatched patriarchal dictates, despite well meaning intentions.