The Butter was Better:
A Preliminary Study of Nostalgia and Cuban American Identity

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Abstract: Nostalgia for pre-Communist Cuba was found to have an important influence on the identity of three American born Cuban Americans.

Three young adults born in the United States to Cuban parents described themselves: I am "first generation American, with Cuban heritage," I am "Cuban-American" and I am "second generation Cuban. My parents are actually the ones born in Cuba." These twenty-something residents of Miami, Florida are recent graduate students in education. Their responses provide a glimpse into the richness and complexity of Cuban/American cultural identity. There is a need for educators to better understand those who came to the US from Cuba, as well as to better understand people who are from other communities that identify themselves as exilic, diaspora communities.

Method

The interviews were conducted primarily in English, and were tape-recorded. Transcripts were shared with the participants. During the one to one and a half hour individual interviews, the researcher, whose background is in cultural studies and qualitative research, listened as Ernesto, Carla and Isabella (pseudonyms) recounted ways in which being part of Miami's Cuban exile community informed their sense of who they are. This research explored the patterns of differences and commonalties in the constructions of identity of these Miamians of Cuban heritage, focusing on the pain of experiencing "Paradise Lost"--a theme identified in previous research (Alvarez & Bliss, 2001).

Theoretical framework

Identity is understood as a psychosocial product influenced by external social factors interacting with needs of a psychological or internal nature (Erikson, 1950/1963). The concept of identity is interpreted as a dynamic, multidimensional, as well as integrative process that can serve to answer the basic question, "Who am I?" One's "identity from below" is always in negotiation with our "identity from above" as society supports or rejects this particular construction of who we are (West, 1992). Within these particular power relations, our affective needs to belong and be affirmed are met by our membership in groups. Individual and group identities are always intertwined.

Ethnic identity, such as Cuban, or Cuban American, is recognized to have both instrumental and ascribed elements establishing and crossing boundaries. It is often transnational. Individuals mobilize around *ethnic*, or group associations based on claims to a common heritage usually bound to a particular place, to help achieve aims, from basic survival to political and economic advancement. Specifically concerning the cultural identity of migrants from Cuba and their children, "these two states developed policies that, while seemingly at odds with each other, have had the mutual effect of fueling a Cuban *exile* identity and political culture in the United States" (Torres, 1999, p. 178). To be part of a group in exile today is to be an individual within a diaspora community.

Diaspora community is defined here as a group of people living outside what they consider to be their homeland. In 1991, William Safran identified six characteristics of diasporic communities, noting that the term has expanded from the original meaning. As he wrote: The Diaspora has long meant "the

exile of the Jews from their historic homeland and their dispersion throughout many lands, signifying as well the oppression and moral degradation implied by that dispersion" (p. 85). Now it is a "useful metaphoric designation for several categories of people – expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities..." (p. 85). My interpretation of data used these six characteristics written below in italics, with data from the study following each one.

Characteristics of Cuban American identity as reported by participants

1. *They or their ancestors have been dispersed from a specific, original center to two or more foreign regions.* Miami is one such region for Cuban Americans; the rest of the United States is considered another region. The former has sufficient numbers to differentiate it.

2. *They retain a collective memory, vision or myth of the homeland, including its physical location, history and achievements.* The participants spoke of the stories of family, and especially mothers as reinforcing a collective memory. Stories included specific trials and tribulations after the beginning of communism. The vision of Cuba as untarnished was reinforced with publicly and privately displayed photographs such as bucolic photos in a funeral parlor, photographic calendars inside kitchen cabinets and a "Cuba wall" used to display crafts and photos from Cuba. The myth of the homeland included how much better everything was there, even the butter. Remembering everything as better is one of the most complex and rich characteristics of the collective memory, partly because they are now able to visit the (Communist) homeland.

3. *They believe that they are not, and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host country.* The participants saw themselves as partly separate and insulated from Americans. Even Ernesto, who proudly identified himself as a first generation American, was planning to give future children his wife's non Hispanic last name, so that things would be easier for them in the United States. Overall, though it was the young women who more often mentioned the conflict, they felt about wanting that acceptance. Being American would grant them greater independence than the traditional Cuban family allowed. They often speak nostalgically about the closeness of the Cuban family. Torres points out, "Nostalgia helps create a collective sense of identity and helps ease the pain of loss" (1999, p. 38) while helping to challenge efforts by the host country to erase the exile community's connections to its home country and the host country's "ambivalent acceptance of the group" (p. 38).

4. *They believe that they should collectively be involved in trying to help restore their homeland to a position of safety and prosperity.* Participants saw themselves as wanting the restoration of Cuba. Two were concerned that traveling to Cuba supported the present regime financially and emotionally, and therefore hindered this restoration. The participants also, unprompted, brought up supporting Elian Gonzales's staying in the United States as a move that would be both beneficial to Elian and detrimental to the Cuban status quo.

5. *They regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and the place for eventual return when conditions are right.* None of the participants spoke about going to live in Cuba. The desire, instead, seemed to be to visit Cuba, and perhaps to maintain a second home there. They wanted to be re-connected with family still there and to see where they came from. However, it was not their ideal home, even though it had often been their parents'. The "myth of returning" seems to be transmuting into a generalized emotional attachment to the ancestral homeland.

6. *They continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland. Diasporic community solidarity is defined by that relationship, rather than by building lives in the new place. The new place is a host, not a home.* In contrast, the participants relate closely to Cuba, while asserting that they <u>are</u> at home in the United States. They resist defining themselves in ways that force them into a "dichotomized identity" (Torres, 1999, p.186). Ernesto's "head" may be norteamericano, but his

"blood" and his "heart" are Cuban. And yet, he is not Cuban. He cannot "go back" to Cuba, because he has never been there. His American mind realizes all this, and is saddened.

Ernesto

Ernesto spoke at length about his struggle with the burdens of exilic memory. Ernesto, that "first generation American with Cuban heritage" did not want to be identified in first grade as one of those kids who lived in a home where a language other than English was spoken. While he resisted being identified this way because it seemed somewhat unAmerican, he also told several stories to emphasize the importance of Americans remembering their heritage saying:

> Look, I remember my heritage. Maybe you bunch of Americans don't. Maybe you bunch of Americans forget that maybe three generations ago somebody came from Poland, hungry as a dog. And now that you consider yourselves, "Americans", you've got to remember your heritage. I mean, look at the Cubans. They're your great-grandparents. From another country, but you've got to look at it.

At the same time he urges each American to "remember your heritage," he reports that he wants to put his Cuban heritage at a distance from him because it is too painful to keep close.

> It's too painful to go there [Cuba]. Because, (pause) es difícil, it's hard, because if I go there, what do I have? What sense of identity do I have? Zero. . . . for example, my fiancée, she's American. She's fourth generation, or fifth generation American. She's got German blood in her, Irish, Scandinavian. What I've told her before; you can get a passport and go to Germany and do your family roots in Germany, in peace. . . . You can walk whatever is left of the cobblestones of where your great-grandparents lived – or whatever, six or seven generations back. You can go to Scandinavia . . .and . . . to Ireland and see what of your roots are there. And without any shame to your parents. Without any shame looking at your parents.

Why does Ernesto feel such shame <u>to</u> his parents? To visit Communist Cuba would be to spit in the face of "a couple of old people who love you very much" who had once lived in Paradise. He would be supporting those who had destroyed that Paradise and caused them to be expelled. He also talked about the shame <u>of</u> his parents. They are part of the Cuban people, and the Cuban people turned on each other and destroyed the good and lawful society they had created. He is "chained" to a heritage that is itself "in chains." He longs to visit Cuba, to see where his heritage is based, but he dares not. He longs to be American, living away from Miami, released of his burden of memory, but he dares not. His sense of nostalgia for paradise holds him fast.

Nostalgia is similar to homesickness. Jacoby (1980) points out that *nostalgia's* Greek roots are "nostos" - the return home and "algos" – pain. It is the longing for an idealized past; a past characterized by wholeness, security and harmony. It is longing for an intact "unitary reality" (p.5) that has quite possibly never really been experienced, although the experience of nostalgia is often expressed as one of memory. It is human to long for such a paradisiacal experience. One is more likely to feel homesickness for such a place when one does not feel at home, of course. Jacoby's Jungian analysis emphasizes the longing for the "pre – ego" time when each one of us was "at home" in primal relationship with our mother; when we experienced harmony between our inner wishes and our outer reality. Although he cannot let go of his parents' memories, Ernesto does not envision a time when he might be at home and experience the harmony his parents once did in Cuba.

Torres points out that an emphasis on memory is often a "central force in creating a diasporic identity" (1999, p. 38). Connecting this to nostalgic memories, she continues, "Myths about the past and the future play a powerful role. Memory, remembering and re-creating become individual and collective rituals" (p. 38). Ernesto and the others have learned the myth of Cuba-of-the-past as Paradise by numerous family rituals. They told us about the stories, WQBA, (a Cuban-centered local radio station) the dinnertime discussions, the adult conversations overheard, the Cuba wall, etc.

Ernesto both embraces this nostalgia, and detaches himself from it. It is too painful to "survive mentally" if he thinks too much about how much his beloved parents and grandparents suffered when paradise fell into lawless ignorance – at the hands of "a bunch of idiots" who had no love of Cuba and no real concept of its laws or government. His shame is that he too is Cuban and that he was neither able to protect his family nor Cuba. This is the heritage with which he struggles. He cannot forget his heritage, but it is a heritage that brings him pain. He carries the "baggage" of a history "of Cubans treating Cubans in a negative way." "When you know everything that happened," it's hard to "stand up and say, 'I'm Cuban' " with pride.

Before this happened, Cuba was a third world country systematically developing into a first world country. Progress toward this goal was stopped, like a river being dammed. Jacoby (1980) suggests that in literature and scripture, paradise has been portrayed as a secure enclosed garden or as an island. For Americanized, progress oriented Ernesto, however, it was a river. He feels that only when those of Cuban heritage become more assimilated into the American society and power structure will they have the power to change American policy to tear down that dam and help restore the pristine, free flowing "Rio Cuba."

Carla

Carla sees herself as an American born "second generation Cuban." Growing up, she learned about a Cuba that was more harmonious than anything experienced by her family in the US. She said:

> My family has always described the way of life that they had there. They would talk about how, like the neighborhoods were smaller and the whole sense of community that they don't have here; like the neighbors all knew each other and things like that. All the families knew each other. Whenever [there were] birthdays, it was like the whole family of everybody went. You know, it's not really like that here – birthday parties are just for the kids or whatever. The family of the children are not really invited.

It was a community-oriented place where everybody knew each other. Carla has also grown up hearing about the more rural, self-sufficient life of her mother. It was a more natural, admirable lifestyle. In many ways it was closer to perfection than life in Miami.

> Of course they talk about the land. My mom lived more towards the country so she would talk about that more, that they got their own things. Like at breakfast time, sometimes she always talks about the butter. She says that the butter here doesn't taste the same as they used to make the butter themselves, with the cream--and that it's different... The impression I got from my mom make it seem more country, more serene, less city-like, like how it is here in Miami...The butter was better. It was pure and it was white, because it hadn't had the color added to it, like they do here when they sell it.

In talking about the closer families there, she said that her mother,

> [F]elt like there was more family involvement. Here, she sees it more like kids, once they get to a certain age, they already kind of have their own life and you don't really know and she says that when she grew up, she says it was just like, that the parents were always involved in everything. They knew. And here, it's kind of like once the kids get to a certain age, the parents are not welcome or something – and that it wasn't like that over there.

Carla and her mother lament the abnormality of life in Cuba now. As long as Fidel is in power, people will not have the opportunities they deserve for a normal, happy life. Like Ernesto, she would feel guilty if she were to visit Cuba now. Like him she also feels resentful that "the situation" and her family's beliefs/values prevents her from visiting. She doesn't even think that it would be a good idea for her mother to visit now.

> It would hurt her to see everything different from how she left it. I guess maybe she wants to look back on it in that like perfect way that she sees it and if she goes back it will probably ruin that for her. I guess that the only thing she has is that memory.

By acknowledging the strength of a memory of perfection that never existed, Carla thus acknowledges the nostalgia that has such a strong hold on her.

Isabella

Isabella, the Cuban American, has visited Cuba. Her parents are not as unitary in their viewpoint as either Carla's or Ernesto's. While her father entreated her not to visit Cuba, telling her that she would be "a traitor" if she went, her mother, the creator of the Cuba Wall accompanied her. She feels guilty about going against her father's wishes. Isabella's view of Cuba is focused on her family, both in Florida and Cuba. She envisions a time when political differences are put aside, and families are mended. She reminisced:

> I went there and I didn't (sigh)... I wanted to be so biased. I didn't want to be involved in the... I didn't ask too many questions, I didn't... I was just there to enjoy myself, to meet the family I that I had not met, which is my uncle on my mom's side of the family. I know that he never left Cuba. I know that he didn't try to leave Cuba. He's still not wanting to come over here. The exact reasons I don't know why. And I didn't care to ask. I just wanted to meet *my uncle*. I didn't want to know or understand why he wasn't coming over or what his reasons were because I think throughout the periods they change.

She was raised to know that, "Cuba is the best place on earth and Fidel is an SOB for taking it away from them [Cubans], basically." She knew that "there's nothing positive about him or his regime or anything that has to do with him." Her mother has shared many stories about "how wonderful her life was in Cuba" before Castro. Perhaps it is more than Castro who is the snake in the grass in this view of Cuba, because Miamians have rejected her observations that Cuba is still beautiful. The Cuban community in Miami was "insulted" by both mother and daughter's stories about their recent positive experiences in Cuba. Isabella imagines the paradise that could be Cuba – a place where people have the material resources they need and can reunite with family members who are now separated by politics. It is painful for her to even consider herself knowledgeable about politics, despite its

importance to her boyfriend, her family and her community. She looks both back and forward to a harmonious time when politics did not split people apart.

The pain she feels now is three-fold. It is painful to her, not only to go against her father's wishes in order to get closer to her Cuban heritage and family but also because her family members have suffered so much by being on different political sides. They have suffered separation. Her grandmother had to leave "her son, her only son" behind in Cuba when she came with her daughters. Echoing Ernesto and Carla she said, "We love our parents and we feel their pain." The third part is her "personal pain" at the physical separation between her and her Cuban relatives she has grown to love. In response to a question about the role Cuba plays in her life now, Isabella brought up the image of Cuba being the "forbidden fruit" that she has sampled, and thus betrayed her father. Traditional biblical interpretation as well as a Jungian one interprets that fruit as the knowledge of difference – and with this knowledge, paradise is forfeited. It is a helpful metaphor to pursue here.

Forbidden fruit

On one level, Ernesto, Carla and Isabella seem to consider personal knowledge of Cuba (from their being there) to be forbidden fruit. For Isabella, part of this is asserting to her boyfriend, father (and others) that she is truly knowledgeable about the "politics" that's such an important part of Cuban and Cuban American identity. Perhaps her desire to have personal knowledge, to make up her own mind from her own experiences is an example of what she has learned to value while growing up in the US.

On a deeper level, perhaps this internalization of American values is the forbidden fruit for the three of them. Despite expressing a desire to pass on close Cuban family values, Carla does not want to prevent her [hypothetical] future daughter from going away to college and Ernesto wants his future children to take his American fiancée's name. Neither he nor Isabella wants to pass along their pain to another generation. Excluded from their parents' paradise, they feel both sadness, pain and a desire to close the gap; to be redeemed. But to live a life of wholeness is to move forward, not back to "the good old days" that never were.

Paradise past and future

Those who are undertaking this movement and those people who share their lives if not their cultural identities, might take note of the fact that paradise can potentially be both past and future. In both Jewish and Christian traditions, paradise is possible again in human experience.

Being courageous, humble and working to make a more just world are some of the paths to the balance, peace and harmony that characterize paradise. As this research goes forward, this understanding will ground the researcher's quest to better understand these young people. A better understanding of their struggles for a sense of wholeness in their cultural identity is essential in order to better teach them, help them settle conflicts and with them, to move forward and build a sense of community in South Florida.

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