The (Cuban-)American Dream of Post-Soviet Era Cuban Émigrés: Perceptions vs. Realities

Veronica Diaz
*Florida International University, diazver@fiu.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd](https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd)

Part of the [Latin American Studies Commons](https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd), [Migration Studies Commons](https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd)

**Recommended Citation**
[https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/4905](https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/4905)

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the University Graduate School at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.
FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE (CUBAN-)AMERICAN DREAM OF POST-SOVIET ERA CUBAN ÉMIGRÉS:

PERCEPTIONS VS. REALITIES

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

GLOBAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL STUDIES

by

Veronica Diaz

2021
To: Dean John F. Stack, Jr.
    Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs

This dissertation, written by Veronica Diaz, and entitled The (Cuban-)American Dream of Post-Soviet Era Cuban Émigrés: Perceptions vs. Realities, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

_______________________________________
Michael Bustamante

_______________________________________
Guillermo Grenier

_______________________________________
Kevin Grove

_______________________________________
Jorge Duany, Major Professor

Date of Defense: September 30, 2021

The dissertation of Veronica Diaz is approved.

_______________________________________
Dean John F. Stack, Jr.
Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs

_______________________________________
Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2021
© Copyright 2021 by Veronica Diaz

All rights reserved.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is in memory of my grandfather, Antonio “Ñico” Domínguez, a Cuban exile who spent his life longing to return home. It is dedicated to my daughters Hailey and Zoey, my parents Mercy and José, my grandmother Eneida, and my brother Yates. Without your infinite love, patience, and support, none of my accomplishments would have been possible.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Throughout my time as a doctoral student, I have received a great deal of support from my mentors, colleagues, and family. I would first like to thank my major professor, Dr. Jorge Duany, whose expertise was invaluable in guiding me throughout the research process and the writing of this dissertation. His unwavering support continues to motivate and inspire to become a better scholar. I would like to thank Dr. Guillermo Grenier and Dr. Michael Bustamante for the guidance and insightful feedback they have offered me throughout the writing process. I would like to thank Dr. Kevin Grove for believing in me and encouraging me as I formulated my research questions. I am eternally grateful for the confidence that he instilled in me.
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

THE (CUBAN-)AMERICAN DREAM OF POST-SOVIET ERA CUBAN ÉMIGRÉS: PERCEPTIONS VS. REALITIES

by

Veronica Diaz

Florida International University, 2021

Miami, Florida

Professor Jorge Duany, Major Professor

Cuban émigrés are among the myriad of immigrants who arrive in the United States hoping to achieve the American Dream—defined as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (Adams 1931, 404). However, powerful tropes of the American Dream obscure the economic and social barriers that impede economic mobility and the sacrifices that individuals make in its pursuit. Unlike Cuban émigrés of the 1960s-70s, émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave (1995-2017) arrived in Miami during more precarious economic times and received fewer financial resources from the US government. Propelled by the scathing economic conditions that ensued following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, their motivations for leaving Cuba are perceived as more economically driven and apolitical. To contribute to the fields of Cuban Studies and Migration Studies, I employed a narrative inquiry approach to examine how Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave conceptualized the idea of the American Dream prior to migration, how the realities of living in the US validate or invalidate their
expectations, the challenges they face while attempting to adapt to American society, and how those experiences influence their cultural identities.

Drawing from the narratives of thirty-five participants, this dissertation uncovers how émigrés from post-Soviet Cuba negotiate the challenges of living in the US, a more diverse and market-driven economy. Significant findings of this research include: (1) immigrants’ attitudes, adaptation experiences, and sense of belonging to the US are influenced by their context of reception; (2) feeling Cuban or Cuban American, or one’s sense of belonging to US society, is not determined by length of time living in the US, feelings of adaptation, or one’s citizenship status, and (3) adaptation does not occur through a progression of stages, or require that one become Americanized, since feeling American will differ according to each person’s feelings and experiences.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPIGRAPH</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Approach</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of the Dissertation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Site: Miami</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment and Sampling</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positionality and Reflexivity</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. IMMIGRANT INCORPORATION IN THE US</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Overview</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canonical Theories of Assimilation</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Pluralism</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiculturalism</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assimilation Is Not a Linear Process</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segmented Assimilation</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revival of the Classical Theory of Assimilation</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racialization &amp; Ethnic Resilience</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transnationalism</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. THE CUBAN DIASPORA</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration Prior to the Cuban Revolution</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Golden Exiles (1959-1962)</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Freedom Flights (December 1965-1973)</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mariel Exodus (1980)</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Balsero Crisis (August-September, 1994)</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Post-Soviet Exodus or “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” Wave (1995-2017)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Mobility</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. THE AMERICAN DREAM VS. LIVED REALITIES</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Is Better Than Expected</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Life Is As Expected ......................................................................................................................... 89
Life Is More Difficult Than Expected .............................................................................................. 91
Those Who Lived Abroad ................................................................................................................ 101
Criticizing Newcomers: Generación Obama ...................................................................................... 107
No Goals, No Worries ....................................................................................................................... 113
The American Dream Depends on Society ..................................................................................... 114
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 117

6. ADAPTING TO LIFE IN THE US .............................................................................................. 120
Challenges ......................................................................................................................................... 121
Miami: A Cuban Colony ...................................................................................................................... 129
Cultural Identity ............................................................................................................................... 134
Discrimination ................................................................................................................................. 146
Negotiating Race and Ethnicity: A Case Study ................................................................................ 149
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 160

7. CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................................... 162
Main Findings .................................................................................................................................... 163
Implications and Suggestions for Future Research ........................................................................... 168

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................................. 170

APPENDICES ..................................................................................................................................... 179

VITA .................................................................................................................................................... 193
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Participant Demographics</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Main Characteristics of the Sample</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Challenges Participants Faced Upon Moving to the US</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Themes That Emerged During the Data Analysis Phase</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Motivations for Leaving Cuba</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: How Participants Feel about Life in the United States</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Length of Time in the US and Cultural Identification</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Cultural Identity and Nostalgia for Cuba</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: Cultural Identification of Participants Who Mentioned That Living in Miami Impacts Adaptation</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: Length of Time in the US and Citizenship Status</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8: Length of Time in the US and Missing Cuba</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EPIGRAPH

Yo bromeo con mis amigos cuando me preguntan por el sueño americano. Yo lo que les digo es que uno aquí, en cuanto llegas a los Estados Unidos encuentras el sueño americano. Yo le digo sí, el sueño americano se consigue desde el primer día que tú llegas a los Estados Unidos porque es un sueño que no se te quita, porque debes tener tres trabajos. Estás cansado todo el día. Entonces tienes un sueño que cuando te acuestas a dormir, duermes por 24 horas seguidas. Eso es lo que es el sueño americano.

(I joke with my friends when they ask me about the American Dream. I tell them that as soon as you arrive in the United States, you find the American Dream. I say yes, the American Dream is achieved from the first day you arrive in the United States because it is a dream that never goes away, because you must have three jobs. You’re tired all day. Then you are so sleepy that if you lie down to sleep, you sleep for 24 hours straight. That’s what the American Dream is.)

—Ernesto, who arrived in Miami in 2016
1. INTRODUCTION

Background

Over 1.4 million Cubans have migrated to the United States\(^1\) since Fidel Castro launched the revolution that took power in 1959 and created the first communist state in the Americas. Escaping social and political unrest, displaced Cubans sought temporary refuge in Miami while awaiting Fidel Castro’s demise. According to sociologist Peter I. Rose (1983, 5), the term “refugee” is a label given to individuals who are “forced to flee from their homelands because of categorical persecution or because they are bystanders caught in the crossfire of war or civil strife.” As a result of Cold War politics, Cuban émigrés arriving in the 1960s and 1970s were labeled as refugees by the US government and granted substantial resources that facilitated their upward mobility and adaptation to US society. For example, the Cuban Status Adjustment Act passed by congress in 1966 “opened a path toward American citizenship for Cuban refugees, who were described as easy converts to American life because of their self-sufficiency, hard work, and anticommunism” (Tempo 2008, 107).

Factors that contributed to the early economic success of exiles in Miami have been a topic of debate for Cuban migration scholars for decades (Amaro and Portes 1972; Duany 1999, 2011, 2017; Eckstein 2009; García 1996; Grenier and Pérez 2003; Pedraza 1985, 2007; Pérez 1986, Portes 1969; Portes and Puhrmann 2015; Prieto 2007). The Golden Exiles, as they came to be known, who arrived between 1959 and 1962, belonged mainly to the upper and middle classes of Cuban society. Economic capital, social

---

\(^1\) Will be abbreviated as US.
networks, and three-generational households helped them to rapidly achieve upward mobility in the US. They transformed Miami into an epicenter of Cuban culture that appealed to the thousands of Cubans seeking freedom and economic mobility in the US and created an ethnic enclave in “a four-square-mile area southwest of the central business district of Miami” that came to be known as Little Havana (García 1996, 86). In Little Havana, businesses and cultural practices were reproduced and cubanidad—Cubanness—was manifested in everyday life (Grenier and Moebius 2015). Successful exiles, transmitting stories of liberty and economic success, inspired friends and family in Cuba to leave the island.

In 1980, the Mariel Exodus, or “Freedom Flotilla,” brought 124,779 Cubans, or Marielitos to Key West, Florida (Duany 2017). Under US immigration laws, Marielitos were not labeled as political refugees or exiles and encountered a more negative reception by US society. Consequently, they experienced more difficulty achieving economic mobility. Examining the difficult experiences of Cuban immigrants who arrived in the US beginning in the 1980s, Alejandro Portes and Aaron Puhrmann (2015, 41) argue that negative modes of reception and hostile attitudes by the general public towards the Marielitos “marked the beginnings of the bifurcation of the Cuban expatriate population into two distinct communities, with significant consequences for the future.” Furthermore, they argue that the continuous influx of post-1980 Cuban émigrés, their “lower average levels of education and occupational skills,” and the lack of access to the resources provided by the enclave, led to a downward trend in median household income among Cuban Americans (48).
As Cuba’s economic crisis worsened following the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Cubans experiencing dire economic conditions chose to risk their lives in desperate attempts to reach Florida in search for freedom on rafts, inner tubes, or makeshift vessels as the Cuban government eased migration restrictions in August 1994. Labeled as economic immigrants, subsequent arrivals were not afforded the same legal and financial privileges as earlier exiles, thus making it more difficult for them to achieve economic mobility. Numerous scholars (Ackerman and Clark 1995; Bach 1980; Duany 1999, 2011, 2017; Eckstein 2009; Fernández 2007; García 1996; Henken 2005; Mesa-Lago 1995; Masud-Piloto 1996; Pedraza 2007; Portes and Puhrmann 2015) have examined how the sociopolitical context during the time of their arrival hindered the ability to successfully adapt to American society.

Researching the processes of disaffection of émigrés from each wave of the Cuban exodus, Pedraza (2007, 16) found that the key experiences that contributed to political disenchantment varied across migration waves “because they represented the different political generations that lived through distinct stages of the revolution.” Her research findings revealed that most of the post-Soviet émigrés in her study left because of economic constraints as well as political problems.

Significant policy changes took place in 2009, when President Barack Obama eased travel restrictions to and from Cuba, making it easier for émigrés to visit relatives and friends on the island; and in 2014, when President Obama “moved away from a sanctions-based policy aimed at isolating Cuba toward a policy of engagement and a normalization of relations” (Sullivan 2021, 22). Unlike the earlier exiles, post-Soviet
émigrés are more likely to support the normalization of US-Cuba relations, so they could maintain transnational ties with family and friends on the island. For instance, the 2020 FIU Cuba Poll revealed that 62 percent of Cuban émigrés who live in Miami-Dade county and arrived since 1995 support the normalization of diplomatic relations with Cuba, compared to 44 percent of those who migrated before 1995 (Grenier and Lai 2020, 19).

Obama’s efforts to normalize US-Cuba relations were circumvented by President Donald J. Trump, who in 2017, “introduced new sanctions and rolled back” Obama-era policies (Sullivan 2021, 1). Cubans hoped, that after being sworn into office on January 20, 2021, President Joseph Biden would reverse sanctions against Cuba. Instead, on July 22, 2021, President Biden implemented new sanctions against the Cuban government for suppressing widespread anti-government protests that began on July 11, 2021, by Cubans expressing frustration over shortages of food, medicine, and other basic goods.

Cuban émigrés are among the myriad of immigrants who arrive to the US hoping to achieve the American Dream—defined as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (Adams 1931, 404). However, powerful tropes of the American Dream obscure the economic and social barriers that impede economic mobility and the sacrifices that must be made in its quest. Recent scholarship suggests that the US economy has transformed into an “hourglass” economy—characterized by a growing number of jobs at both the higher and lower ends of the income spectrum, with fewer in between—as a result of changes in the labor force fueled by the global integration of labor markets and advances in technology (McNamee & Miller 2014). During the last
few decades, the bifurcation of the labor market and immigration policy restrictions have made it increasingly difficult for immigrants to achieve upward economic mobility in the US. To date, most of the research on the Cuban diaspora evaluates socioeconomic markers such as level of education, occupational status, and household income to assess the degree of immigrant integration to US society. Researching the perceptions, feelings, and adaptation experiences of immigrants through narrative inquiry provides a unique contribution to the scholarly literature on migration. Furthermore, this research contributes to studies of Cuban migration since it focused on the adaptation experiences and attitudes of a less explored population, Cuban émigrés who arrived in the US from 1995 to 2017. This research builds on the previous work of other scholars, including Silvia Pedraza (2007) and Susan Eckstein (2009), who have investigated how Cuban émigrés of different diasporic waves have adapted to life in the US, and how their attitudes and experiences have shifted over time.

**Research Questions**

Drawing from thirty-five semi-structured interviews, this dissertation examines how Cuban émigrés who came to Miami from 1995 to 2017 conceptualized the American Dream prior to arrival, how their experiences in the US compare to their pre-migration expectations, how the challenges they face affect feelings of adaptation, and how they negotiate their cultural identities. The study’s research questions sought to uncover:

1. How did Cubans who moved to Miami from 1995-2017 conceptualize the American Dream prior to arrival and what factors influenced the construction of those ideas?
(2) How do the experiences of living in America validate or invalidate the pre-migration expectations of Cubans who moved to Miami from 1995-2017?

(3) How do Cubans who moved to Miami from 1995-2017 describe their adaptation experiences?

(4) Once in the US, how do Cubans who moved to Miami from 1995-2017 negotiate their cultural identities?

Conceptual Approach

In her book, *Political Disaffection in Cuba’s Revolution and Exodus*, Pedraza (2007, 209) argues that “the generational differences in experiences and attitudes between adults, who made the revolution and felt affirmed by it, and their children, who only inherited its problems, are profound. They result in very different reasons for the exodus.” For instance, during an interview with Alejandro Ríos, whose parents had once been loyal supporters of the Revolution, he revealed that in 1992 “they left because they got tired of the madness, the utopia of a socialism that was always constructed in the future, like the horizon that never arrives. They lost hope; they felt betrayed” (Pedraza 2007, 225). According to Pedraza (2007, 206), during the crisis of “the Special Period” in the early 1990s, many Cubans became further disappointed when they realized that their concerns would not lead to any political reforms after openly voicing over one million suggestions for change during the 1991 Communist Party Congress—“Citizen complaints centered on problems of everyday life: on transportation, education, the food supply, services, excessive nonwork-related meetings, and crime, as well as on disillusion with the mass organizations and bureaucratism.”
Combining ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, interviews, document analysis, and evaluation of census and poll data, Pedraza examined the process of political disaffection and of attitudinal changes of Cubans who migrated to the US from 1959-2004 (19-20). Pedraza grouped her research findings into themes that emerged from her participants’ narratives. To reveal her findings concerning émigrés’ motivations for leaving Cuba, Pedraza grouped them into three sections: (1) “those who had very real political motives for leaving, but left due to family considerations; (2) those who had very real political motives for leaving, as they sought to overcome the authoritarian nature of the society in which they lived; and (3) the vast majority, for whom the political and the economic were profoundly intertwined” (209-10).

My research builds on Pedraza’s work since it examines pre- and post-migration attitudes and experiences of Cuban émigrés living in the US, including their motivations for leaving Cuba. Like Pedraza, I grouped my findings into themes that emerged from my participants’ narratives. However, my research focuses on émigrés’ attitudes towards the US and not on their political views as part of their motivations to migrate.

In her book, *The Immigrant Divide: How Cuban Americans Changed the US and Their Homeland*, Eckstein (2009) employed a historically grounded approach to examine how the divergent pasts and life perspectives of Cuban émigrés impact their ability to adapt to US society. Instead of dividing the exodus into waves of distinct socioeconomic characteristics perpetuated by landmark events, she breaks them down into only two main cohorts: the Exile Cohort and the New Cubans. Members of the *Exile Cohort* came of age before the revolution and began to flee when Castro assumed power in 1959. Eckstein argues that their uprooting was politically driven and that their outlook “was filtered
through pre-revolution lenses, to the point that many of them continued committed to their generational battle against Castro and his supporters” (3). Contrarily, the cohort of New Cubans came of age during the revolution and experienced the economic crisis caused by the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the loss of Soviet subsidies after 1991. According to Eckstein, “most new Cubans left their homeland to improve their material living standards, even when also politically disillusioned” (3). Unlike most migration scholars, she excludes the Marielitos as a separate group from her comparative study since “variations in ages led to varying experiences, making them an ‘eclectic’ cohort” (3).

My research focuses on émigrés of the post-Soviet exodus, specifically those who arrived from 1995-2017, as part of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave.\(^2\) However, instead of examining how pre- and post-migration experiences impact adaptation, my research documents if Cuban émigrés’ experiences in the US validate or invalidate their pre-migration expectations, and why they feel they have or have not adapted to US society.

Since the participants in Eckstein’s study arrived in the US from 1959-2002, and Pedraza’s arrived from 1959-2004, my research contributes original findings because it

---

\(^2\) Also referred to as the “Post-Soviet Exodus,” the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave consisted of Cuban émigrés who arrived in the US from 1995 to 2017. Implemented by the Clinton Administration in 1995, the “Wet Foot, Dry Foot” policy required the US Coast Guard to repatriate Cubans intercepted at sea while allowing those who reached US soil to stay and pursue permanent residency after a year. In January 2017, President Barack Obama suspended the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” policy following a series of measures aimed at reestablishing diplomatic relations with Cuba. Since then, Cubans who try to reach US soil without a visa have been subject to deportation. Not all Cubans who arrived in the US from 1995 to 2017 used the “Wet Foot, Dry Foot” policy to remain in the US, since thousands of émigrés came through legal means, mainly as a result of the US-Cuba migration accords of 1994-1995. See Duany (2017).
documents the experiences of post-Soviet émigrés who arrived from 1995-2017, extending the time frame of their samples.

Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1, “Introduction,” explains the broader context of the study, presents the research questions, and the conceptual framework used to guide the research. Chapter 2, “Methodology,” focuses on the research methods employed to structure and execute the research, as well as my positionality as a researcher/narrator. Chapter 3, “Immigrant Incorporation in the US,” and Chapter 4, “The Cuban Diaspora,” review the relevant literature that focuses on immigrant adaptation, and the history of Cuban immigration to the US, respectively. Chapter 5, “The American Dream vs. Lived Realities,” and Chapter 6, “Adapting to Life in the US,” present and discuss the main findings of my research. Lastly, Chapter 7, “Conclusion,” highlights the recurring themes that emerged from my findings, the implications of the research, and suggestions for future research.
2. METHODOLOGY

This chapter begins by providing justification for employing a narrative inquiry approach for my research design, followed by an explanation for the selection of the research site. It will then describe the sampling methods used to recruit participants, the data collection process, and a detailed description of how the data were organized and analyzed. The chapter ends with an explanation of my positionality as a researcher and techniques applied to reduce interviewer bias.

My initial research plan was to conduct thirty-two in-depth semi-structured interviews of participants in two different sites: twenty in the US, and twelve in Cuba. My comparative study was designed to (1) reveal the pre- and post-migration attitudes of Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave who arrived in the US from 1995-2017, and (2) examine how individuals in Cuba envision life in the US and whether those ideas influence their desire to emigrate. I had planned to travel to Cuba to interview participants in two distinct locations: Havana and Santa Clara. However, due to travel restrictions imposed to stop the spread of Covid-19, I was unable to travel to Cuba to conduct research there. Consequently, my research plan had to be modified, as detailed below.

Research Design

I employed a narrative inquiry approach to better understand the pre- and post-migration experiences and perspectives of Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave. In Using Narrative in Social Research, Jane Elliot (2005, 4) states that a narrative can “be understood as a device which facilitates empathy since it provides a form of
communication in which an individual can externalize his or her feelings and indicate which elements of those experiences are the most significant.” Consequently, internal validity is improved since participants are forced to reflect and “make sense” of their experiences, as they become “empowered to provide more concrete and specific details about the topics discussed and to use their own vocabulary and conceptual framework to describe life experiences” (24). Elliot argues:

Contextualized personal narratives not only “provide an insight into individuals’ experiences and the meanings they make of them, but because their form tells us something about the cultural framework within which individuals make sense of their lives, then the close analysis of narratives produced by a relatively small sample of individuals may produce evidence that is considered to provide an understanding of the intersubjective meanings shared by the whole of a community (28).

During the analysis phase, researchers implementing a narrative inquiry approach interpret and compare narratives looking for social patterns but do not produce generalizable findings. My goal as the researcher in this study was to evaluate the participants’ attitudes towards the American Dream, how they mediated adaptation challenges, how their experiences informed their cultural identity, and to determine if patterns emerged from their collective responses. For instance, my findings suggest that Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave may experience similar feelings or challenges when attempting to adapt to their working conditions in the US, since many had not been accustomed to working long hours while living in Cuba. According to Elliot (2005, 26), qualitative research “often adopts what we might call a common-sense view
of generalizability such that the reader is left to make up his or her own mind as to how far the evidence collected in a specific study can be transferred to offer information about the same topic in similar settings.” Since émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave were exposed to similar socioeconomic and political conditions while living in Cuba, patterns of behaviors, expectations, ideas, sentiments, or shared experiences emerged from the data collected.

**Research Site: Miami**

Since the 1960s, Miami’s proximity to Cuba has made it the prime destination for immigrants from the island seeking refuge or economic mobility in the US. As of 2019, 1,589,455 Cuban Americans were living in Florida, with the majority (993,363) living in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach metropolitan areas (US Census Bureau 2019a). Because Miami has such a large population of Cuban residents, my study focused on Cuban émigrés who settled in Miami-Dade County, upon arriving to the US. Of the thirty-five participants in my interviews, only one eventually left Miami and moved to Washington, DC. Ten participants left Cuba to a European country prior to moving to the US (see Appendix A).

**Recruitment and Sampling**

For this study, I used three types of sampling methods: convenience sampling, snowball sampling, and purposive sampling. I began recruiting participants through convenience sampling by reaching out to my network of friends and colleagues who I knew had migrated from Cuba. My first participant was a colleague who arrived in
Miami in 2000. After completing the interview, I asked if she could refer me to potential participants who met my sampling criteria—Cuban émigrés who arrived in the US from 1995-2017, at ages 18 or over. Once she confirmed that they were willing to participate, she sent me their contact information so that I could contact them to schedule the interviews. After the completion of each interview, I used snowball sampling by asking each participant if he or she could refer me to individuals who also met the sampling criteria. I soon become aware that snowball sampling makes it difficult to diversify a sample because individuals tend to recommend friends or family members with similar backgrounds. Consequently, I attempted to recruit participants of different social circles from my formal and informal networks. The social distancing restrictions implemented to reduce the spread of Covid-19 prevented me from going out to interact with individuals in the local community. For instance, to diversify my sample, I would have visited business establishments in the Little Havana neighborhood of Miami to meet and potentially recruit participants of Cuban descent who met my sampling criteria. Additionally, about halfway through the data collection phase, when I realized that I had more female participants in my study, I employed purposeful sampling to increase the number of male participants. In total, I recruited thirty-five participants who arrived in the US from 1995-2017, at ages 18 or over. Eighteen of the participants identified as female and seventeen identified as male. I had hoped to recruit a more racially diversified sample but found it difficult since an overwhelming majority of the Cuban population living in Miami identify as White.\footnote{According to IPUMS, 93.4\% of Cubans living in Florida described themselves as White in 2019 (Ruggles et al. 2021)} Table 1 summarizes the participants’ demographics.
Table 1.

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 and more</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year of Arrival</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-2000</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2010</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2020</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Identified Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

Prior to the onset of Covid-19, I had intended to conduct thirty-five in-person semi-structured interviews at the preferred date and time of each participant. However, because of the social distancing restrictions implemented due to Covid-19, I had to amend my research methods to include the use of mobile devices to communicate via phone or video conferencing apps such as WhatsApp or FaceTime. At the end of each interview, I asked the participant if he or she could connect me with friends, family members, or colleagues who met my sampling criteria. I kindly asked the participant if he
or she could reach out to their contact to request permission to share their mobile number with me. If the contact agreed, I would call them to schedule a convenient interview date and time to meet via a video conferencing app. Meeting via a video conferencing app allowed me to establish better rapport and evaluate nonverbal cues throughout the interview sessions. In cases where a participant was unable to connect via facetime or WhatsApp, the conversation took place via telephone. Ultimately, four interviews were conducted face-to-face, twenty-two were conducted via video conferencing apps, and nine were conducted via telephone. The four face-to-face interviews occurred prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Before beginning each interview session, and to establish rapport, I introduced myself as a doctoral candidate, instructor, and second-generation Cuban American, and asked each participant how he or she has been coping during the global pandemic. To establish trust and rapport I jokingly apologized for my imperfect Spanish and explained to them that I speak “Spanglish”\textsuperscript{2} instead. Most participants giggled at the comment and complemented my ability to speak Spanish. My comment usually prompted participants to ask about my heritage and upbringing. After establishing a reasonable level of comfort with the participant, I proceeded to describe the purpose of my research and read the verbal consent form to obtain consent to proceed. Additionally, I obtained permission to use an audio-recording device to record the interview sessions. Upon obtaining permission to record the conversation, I turned on the recording device and asked the participant to choose a pseudonym to protect his or her identity and confidentiality.

\textsuperscript{2} A fusion of the English and Spanish languages, common among Miami Cuban Americans and other US Latinos.
Afterwards, I asked him or her to provide basic demographic information before proceeding with the semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix B). Most of the interviews (33) were conducted in Spanish using a translated version of the semi-structured interview guide since most of my participants did not speak English fluently or did not speak English at all (see Appendix C). The open-ended format of my questions allowed my participants to reflect on their experiences and provide me with narratives that revealed how their perceptions and attitudes towards the US evolved. Unlike structured interviews that use standardized questions to elicit responses from participants, a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was used to “produce data that are more accurate, truthful, or trustworthy” (Elliot, 23). The length of each interview depended on the details offered by the participants and ranged from approximately forty-five minutes to two hours.

The interview guide included five broad domains:

(1) Background information (life in Cuba)—to establish the pre-migration context of the participants
(2) Learning about the US—to probe how participants perceived the US prior to migration and factors that influenced the construction of those ideas
(3) Leaving Cuba—to reveal why participants decided to leave Cuba
(4) Life in the US—to document experiences and challenges those participants faced after arriving in the US
(5) Realities of Life in America—to explore if the experiences of life in the US and engagement with economic conditions lived up to pre-migration expectations
Although participants could speak freely with minimal redirection, probing questions were asked if additional information was needed. Since participants’ interpretations of the “American Dream” were a key component of my research, the term was not operationalized at the beginning of the interview. Instead, each participant was allowed to define the term according to their own perspective.

During each interview session I took notes of participants’ nonverbal behaviors and emotional responses to the interview questions. For instance, some participants cried, took long pauses, or held back tears when asked about the friends and family they left behind in Cuba. I also engaged in memo writing to record significant themes as they emerged. For instance, some participants stated that living in Miami may be impeding their ability to adapt to US culture. When I noticed that multiple participants shared similar sentiments, I noted “Miami as a factor” as a potential theme to be added as a code during the analysis phase.

**Data Analysis**

Prior to conducting an analysis of the interviews, the data were organized into four different phases. During phase I, each audio file was transcribed into a Word document and saved into a folder, titled “Phase I,” using the participant’s chosen pseudonym. The thirty-five audio files produced 397 transcribed pages of data. During Phase II, each Word document was translated from Spanish to English. Relevant excerpts were organized into the themes outlined in the semi-structured interview guide and saved into a folder titled, “Phase II.” During Phase III, the thirty-five translated files were uploaded into Nvivo11 for open coding. During the coding process, several themes
emerged. For instance, as I coded each document, I noticed that participants who had previously traveled to a European country while residing in or after leaving Cuba offered unique perspectives concerning the American healthcare system and pace of life. I will expand on this point in my discussion of the research findings. Lastly, during Phase IV, I entered demographic and relevant data into an Excel chart for further analysis in a folder titled, “Phase IV” (see Table 2).

Table 2.
Main Characteristics of the Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Year of Arrival</th>
<th>Length of Time in US</th>
<th>Cultural Identity*</th>
<th>US Citizen?</th>
<th>Highest Level of Education in the US or in Cuba</th>
<th>Current Occupation</th>
<th>Estimated Annual Gross Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jorge</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12th grade-Cuba</td>
<td>Handyman</td>
<td>$16,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>23 years</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>University-Cuba</td>
<td>Assistant project manager</td>
<td>$68,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercedes</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Master’s degree -US</td>
<td>Higher education coordinator</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12th grade-Cuba</td>
<td>Dancer, choreographer, and business owner</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Master’s degree-US</td>
<td>Higher education administrator</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luz</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12th grade-Cuba</td>
<td>Medical center employee</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paolo</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>12th grade-Cuba</td>
<td>Handyman and subcontractor</td>
<td>$40,000-$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luisa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>18 years</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Master’s degree-US</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>$75,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aimé</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>Associate degree-US</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Years</td>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Education/Occupation</td>
<td>Salary Range</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberto</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Yes University-Cuba, Pet grooming business</td>
<td>$30,000-$31,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argelina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>No 12th grade-Cuba, Nail technician</td>
<td>$23,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastián</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>No response Master’s degree-US; working towards PhD</td>
<td>$80,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yenny</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Yes Master’s degree-US, Nurse practitioner</td>
<td>$105,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubén</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>No University-Cuba, Social Worker</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>No University-Cuba, Musician</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yanet</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>No 12th grade-Cuba, Travel agent and realtor</td>
<td>$26,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Yes 12th grade-Cuba, Unemployed</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Yes Associate degree-US, Surveyor</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allen</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Yes Vocational program-US, Aviation Mechanic</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modesto</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>No response University-Cuba (did not indicate if completed)</td>
<td>$150,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reyna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Yes Bachelor’s degree-US (in progress)</td>
<td>$65,000-$80,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anabel</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>No response Associate degree-US (in progress)</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna María</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>No University-Cuba, Hospital cafeteria server</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandro</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>No University-Cuba (did not complete), Uber driver</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Years</td>
<td>Cuban or Cuban American</td>
<td>Education/Training</td>
<td>Occupation/Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>Cuba Unemployed</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>University-Cuba (did not complete)</td>
<td>Realtor</td>
<td>$60,000-$64,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raquel</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Completed university-Cuba</td>
<td>Behavior therapy tech</td>
<td>$43,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleo</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>12th grade-Cuba</td>
<td>Patient care assistant</td>
<td>undisclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernesto</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Master’s degree-Cuba</td>
<td>Social worker and dept. store associate</td>
<td>$60,000-$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree-Cuba</td>
<td>Educational services, business owner</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luisito</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>12th grade-Cuba</td>
<td>Medical technician</td>
<td>undisclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcos</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>University-Cuba (did not complete)</td>
<td>Discount auto parts store associate</td>
<td>$12,000-$13,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricardo</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>12th grade-Cuba</td>
<td>Electrician</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>12th grade-Cuba</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>María</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>12th grade-Cuba</td>
<td>Fast food restaurant worker</td>
<td>$30,000-$32,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Participants were asked whether they identify as Cuban or Cuban American. Participants who did not provide a clear response were assigned the category of “other.”

After the data were organized and coded, narrative inquiry was used as an analytical device to evaluate and interpret participant narratives. Working systematically, I created a Word document for each individual theme that emerged during the coding of the data. For instance, I transferred excerpts from participants who described experiencing bias or discrimination on account of their race or ethnicity onto a Word
document for the theme, “Discrimination,” and proceeded to summarize and interpret their stories. I then referred to the Excel spreadsheet (see Table 2) to compare their characteristics and look for patterns by using the filter option to review the race of six participants who experienced discrimination in the US. Of these participants, four identified as White, one identified as Black, and one identified as mixed race. Throughout the process of analyzing the narratives, recurrent themes and patterns emerged that represent shared experiences of Cuban émigrés who arrived in the US from 1995-2017.

**Positionality and Reflexivity**

My grandparents and mother left Cuba in August 1965 on a Freedom Flight. As a second-generation Cuban American and daughter or exiles, I grew up witnessing the hatred that my grandfather, and his fellow members of the Masonic lodge José M. Avila Acosta, felt towards Fidel Castro and other revolutionary leaders. My grandfather was adamant that he would only return to Cuba if the communist government faltered. Yet, even if he were alive today, he would still be waiting for that moment. As I reflect on my past and on the memories of my grandfather, my only regret is that I never asked him questions about Cuba. I never inquired into his past, his stories, or the deep secrets he carried. I wonder now if he would have shared them with me. As I got older, wiser, and more knowledgeable, I began to explore my heritage. Because by the time I started asking questions about Cuba my grandfather was no longer with us, I decided to read as

---

3 Fraternal and social organization established by Cuban exiles in Miami in 1959 to represent the ones they were forced to abandon when they left Cuba. Masonic lodges in Miami continue to serve as meeting spaces for its members, or freemasons, to discuss matters concerning Cuba. Paradoxically, the Cuban government did not ban Masonic lodges after consolidating power and have allowed them to function as nongovernmental organizations.
much as I could to learn about my family’s history. Years later as I was getting a manicure, I asked my technician if she believed in the American Dream and became surprised by her response: “American Dream? You mean American Nightmare!” This defining moment motivated me to research the plight of recent Cuban émigrés and expand existing knowledge in the fields of Cuban studies and migration studies.

My background as a Cuban American residing in Miami presented me with several advantages for this research. First, I live in Miami-Dade County, a predominantly Hispanic/Latino community including the largest Cuban-American population in the US. Second, I am bilingual and bicultural, and have access to formal and informal networks of Cuban Americans, some of whom were able to refer me to prospective participants.

Sharing a cultural heritage and common language with my Cuban and Cuban-American participants positioned me as an “insider” and helped us to establish a trusting relationship. However, as an insider, I had to practice reflexivity to avoid making unwarranted assumptions about the data. According to Marilyn E. Asselin (2003, 99), for a researcher who is a member of a group under study, “there is a tendency to believe one knows the culture, limiting the researcher’s ability to probe for deeper meaning or understanding of the phenomenon under study.” As a granddaughter of exiles who fled Cuba in 1965, I learned about their hatred for Fidel Castro and hopes of reclaiming their homeland. While growing up in Miami, I watched news about the émigrés who arrived during the Mariel Exodus, the economic crisis that intensified after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, and those who died attempting to cross the Florida Straits on makeshift rafts during the Balsero Crisis of 1994. To reduce research bias, I approached each interview without any expectations of what I might learn from the participant. I allowed
each participant to tell their story without redirecting the conversation. For Bruce L. Berg and Howard Lune (2012, 205), reflexivity “implies a shift in the way we understand data and their collection. To accomplish this, the researcher must make use of an internal dialogue and repeatedly examine what the researcher knows and how the researcher came to know this. To be reflective is to have an ongoing conversation with yourself.”

Although I could be perceived as an insider because of my cultural background, having been born and raised in the United States also made me an outsider. Having unlimited access to numerous sources of information related to Cuba’s history, revolution, and diaspora, and my detachment from a homeland I only visited once allowed me to maintain distance from the topic of this research. Additionally, since narratives are “methods of presenting social and historical knowledge” (Elliott 2005, 13), it was important for me to practice reflexivity during the writing process since researcher bias could impact the way the data are interpreted and presented. For instance, instead of only presenting the themes that I felt were more significant or unique, I created categories to represent the viewpoints of all the participants in my study.

**Conclusion**

In this qualitative study, I employed a narrative inquiry approach to encourage participants to provide contextualized personal narratives of their immigration and adaptation experiences in the US. Because of the mitigations put in place by state and local governments to thwart the spread of Covid-19, I was only able to interview four participants face-to-face. The other thirty-one interviews took place via mobile video conferencing apps or by phone. With the use of a semi-structured interview guide, I
collected, transcribed, organized, coded, and analyzed the data. This chapter concluded with an explanation of my positionality as both an insider and insider, and how I mitigated researcher bias to maintain objectivity during the interview and writing process.
3. IMMIGRANT INCORPORATION IN THE US

Millions of immigrants arrive in the US hoping to improve their lives by achieving the American Dream, an idea that is inextricably tied to social and economic mobility. Social scientists have developed various theories of immigrant incorporation to explain the processes or stages of immigrant adaptation, and the challenges that hinder upward mobility. This chapter reviews the major theories of immigrant incorporation in the US used to inform my research. A historical overview will be followed by a discussion of conceptual frameworks in the following order: (1) canonical theories of assimilation; (2) cultural pluralism; (3) multiculturalism; (4) non-linear assimilation; (5) segmented assimilation; (6) revival of classical assimilation theories; (7) racialization and ethnic resilience; and (8) transnationalism. This chapter will conclude with an explanation of how my research contributes to the literature on immigrant incorporation in the US.

Historical Overview

German, Scandinavian, British, and Irish immigrants were the first to arrive on the east coast during the early nineteenth century. After the discovery of gold on the West Coast of the US in 1848, American corporations needed laborers to work in the mines. In search of cheap labor, they sent contractors to China to recruit workers. In the 1860s, labor recruitment intensified as railroad companies sought Chinese workers to help construct the nation’s transcontinental railroad. In the 1880s Japanese immigrants arrived in Hawaii to work as cane cutters for the largely US-owned sugar industry. Xenophobia, fear of losing jobs to immigrants, and racist sentiments led to the passing of the Chinese
Exclusion Act of 1882, the California Alien Land Law of 1913, and its revision in 1920. While Asian labor decreased as a result of nativist backlash, Mexican workers were encouraged to work in farms and ranches of western states, thus significantly increasing the flow of Mexican immigration after 1910 (Portes and Rumbaut 2014, 2-13).

Advances in European industrialization and the restructuring of society during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries propelled thousands of Europeans to migrate to the United States in search of economic security. As the demand for cheap manufacturing labor increased, American companies actively recruited individuals from central, southern, and eastern Europe, especially Italy and Poland. From 1880 to 1930 the arrival of over twenty-three million immigrants further transformed the traditional social, economic, and cultural fabric of the US. Anti-immigrant sentiments and scientific racism influenced the establishment of a national quota system outlined in the Immigration Act of 1924 (Ngai 2004; Portes & Rumbaut 2014). Notwithstanding nativist sentiments, the dislocations produced by the Great Depression in the 1930s drove US leaders to market the American Dream as a way of encouraging Americanization and to propel national development. Despite continuous efforts to restrict immigration and expedite the cultural assimilation of immigrants, restrictionist laws could not erase the cultural pluralism that had begun to permeate a predominantly White Anglo-Saxon Protestant American society.

Since the early twentieth century, sociologists have proposed theories to explain how immigrants adapt and “assimilate” to American society. Influenced by the significant ethnic and racial diversity of Chicago, urban sociologist and founder of the Chicago School of Sociology Robert E. Park, along with colleagues, introduced the concept of immigrant assimilation. The term will be defined more precisely below, but it
was generally used to refer to a process in which a minority group integrates into a new country by assuming the values and behaviors of its majority group. Later, sociologist Milton Gordon provided a broad conceptual framework outlining seven stages through which assimilation into the majority group proceeds (Milton 1964; Alba & Nee 1997). Criticized as a form of Eurocentric hegemony, the assimilation paradigm prevailed until the 1960s, when it “could not explain the persistence of racial inequality and conflict, and the ‘resurgence’ of ethnicity,” perpetuated by the influx of immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean (Heisler, 2008, 84). Consequently, new theories emerged to challenge, revise, and ultimately displace the assimilationist model.

**Canonical Theories of Assimilation**

According to Park and Ernest Burgess (1924, 363), assimilation is a gradual “process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life.” Despite being able to accommodate to novel situations with rapidity, the process of modifying attitudes can take a considerable amount of time (363). Later, in *Race and Culture* (1950), Park argued that cultural traditions diminish in mobile societies where individualization and competition take precedence. For instance, ethnic minorities in the US inevitably shed their distinctive cultural characteristics and become members of the American mainstream (12). They progress through a “race relations cycle” that consists of four stages: “contact, competition, accommodation, and eventual assimilation,” leading to the unavoidable amalgamation of races and cultures (150).
Building on the work of Park and his colleagues, Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole, in *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups* (1945), examined the adjustment to American society of eight ethnic groups living in Yankee City (Newburyport, MA): Irish, French Canadians, Greeks, Jews, Italians, Armenians, Poles, and Russians. They used the term *ethnic* to characterize individuals born in foreign countries or US-born who participated in everyday activities of a particular minority group. They studied the history of each group from their time of arrival in the US to learn about their social and economic developments, distinct group tendencies, and adaptation to internal organizations (32). According to Warner and Srole, “each group enters the city at the bottom of the social heap (lower-lower class) and through several generations makes its desperate climb upward” (2). They generalized their findings to the experiences of other ethnic minority groups living in the United States, and explained how American schools, political institutions, economic forces, community associations, and family and class systems function to eliminate the remnants of a minority culture (283-84).

In this comparative perspective, groups were ranked on account of their ethnic and/or racial differences with the dominant White population of the US. Drawing from research conducted in Newburyport, MA, as well as on black groups of the South and the North and on Spanish Americans and “Orientals of California,” Warner and Srole created an “ethno-racial scale of differences between the dominant White American host society” (287) and other ethnic and racial groups, where White or light-skinned Caucasians were on one end and Blacks on the other. They then created a ranking system to measure (1) “the degree of subordination and social distance; (2) the strength of the racial and ethnic subsystems; and (3) the forms of American rank” (288). They created a “timetable that
predicts the approximate period necessary for the assimilation of each racial and ethnic group” (289). Thus, the degree of religious and racial differences from the majority group either enhanced or stunted upward mobility.

For example, English-speaking and light-skinned Protestant Irish, Canadian, German, and Scandinavian immigrants were expected to assimilate faster than English-speaking Catholics and non-Protestants. Additionally, immigrants of darker skin (e.g., Armenians, Sicilians, Portuguese, and Chinese) experienced a moderate to slow pace of assimilation (290-91). Additionally, Warner and Srole argued that, unlike physical attributes, members of a group can “unlearn what they have been taught and successfully learn the new way of life necessary for full acceptance into the host society,” like in the case of the Catholic Irish (285). Individuals with bodily traits such as “dark skin, the epicanthic fold, or kinky hair,” belonged to groups that were assigned inferior status: “The Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos of California, the Spanish Americans and Mexicans of the American Southwest, and American Negros” (285). Individuals having traits of both an ethnic and racial minority ranked lowest, thus experiencing greater subordination, and requiring a longer period of time for the “slow and usually painful” process of assimilation (Warner and Srole, 1945, 285-86).

In his book, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (1964), sociologist Milton Gordon examined how immigrants changed their “sense of peoplehood” and the conditions of its attenuation through prolonged intergroup contact (23-24). Gordon developed a conceptual framework for the study of assimilation and its systematic analysis. The seven sub-processes or stages of assimilation include (1) cultural or behavioral (acculturation); (2) structural; (3) marital; (4)
identificational; (5) attitude reception; (6) behavior reception; and (7) civic (Gordon 1964; see also Alba and Nee 1997). During each stage of the assimilation process, the minority group moves in the direction of the majority group or conforms to its standards. For instance, cultural assimilation, or acculturation, occurs when a minority group adopts the dominant cultural norms or patterns of the host society. Gordon argues that, though acculturation is likely to take place before the other phases, it does not guarantee acceptance into the primary institutions of the majority group, potentially slowing down the assimilation process (71-78). Furthermore, Gordon (1961, 279) hypothesizes that, notwithstanding the high rate of acculturation of immigrants in the US, structural assimilation—“the entrance of the immigrants and their descendants into the social cliques, organizations, institutional activities, and general civic life of the receiving society”—has not been extensive throughout American history.

However, Gordon cites Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy’s “triple melting pot” thesis as an exception. In her article “Single or Triple Melting-Pot? Intermarriage Trends in New Haven, 1870-1940,” Kennedy argues that structural assimilation ensued as members of major (White) religious groups—Catholics, Jews, and Protestants—merged with each other through intermarriage (1944, 280). An examination of marriage records of residents living in New Haven, Connecticut, from 1870 to 1940 revealed that the merging of various European nationalities was influenced by religious affiliations and that individuals were more likely to marry a partner of the same faith. She found “Protestant British-Americans, Germans, and Scandinavians intermarrying mutually; Catholic Irish, Italians, and Poles forming a separate intermarrying group; and Jews remaining almost completely endogamous” (331). These findings led Kennedy to reject the idea of an
indiscriminate blending, or a “single-melting-pot” theory, which will be further examined in the following pages.

Gordon (1961, 1964) evaluates and critiques three conceptual models developed for the systematic analysis of assimilation following the influx of immigrants arriving in the US since the late nineteenth century: Anglo-Conformity, the Melting Pot, and Cultural Pluralism. Once in the US, migrants were expected to relinquish their cultural values and norms and to adopt the core values of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority. Anglo-Conformity, the dominant ideology of assimilation throughout American history, covers a broad range of viewpoints that “assume the desirability of maintaining English institutions, the English language, and English-oriented cultural patterns as the dominant standard in American life” (Gordon 1961, 265). Immigration was either welcomed or restricted throughout different junctures of American history, such as the establishment of a new nation, westward expansion, the post-Civil War era, the “Americanization” movement of World War I, and World War II. Upon arrival, self-contained immigrant colonies provided a communal space for newcomers to “decompress” and ultimately acculturate into American society. For the children of immigrants, or second-generation immigrants, the assimilation process was facilitated by the public-school curriculum and the mass media (Gordon 1964, 106-8). Those considered to be of a “superior” race had an easier time assimilating than those who were considered to be “inferior breeds whose presence in America threatened, either by intermixture or supplementation, the traditional American stock and culture” (Gordon 1964, 97). According to Gordon, the strength of prejudice and discrimination against
marginalized groups (e.g., Blacks, Native Americans, and Latin Americans) reinforced group separatism and stunted acculturation (108-9).

In 1965, one year after Gordon presented his seven stages of assimilation, the Hart-Celler Act induced a large influx of immigrants from Africa, Latin America, and Asia to the US. Accordingly, the elimination of the immigrant quota system drastically changed the ethnic and racial composition of the US. Gordon’s assimilation model could not anticipate how future immigration trends might redefine the traditional concept of American culture. Classical, or “straight-line” (as cited in Gans 1992) assimilationists, presumed a linear trajectory where minority groups adopt the cultural norms of the dominant group. However, they failed to consider how minority groups influence or converge with each other.

Instead of envisioning assimilation as a one-way process, the Melting-Pot Theory depicts American society as a mosaic of “blended” cultures and nationalities. The idea of a blended society first emerged in 1782 when J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur elaborated the concept of the American “new man,” which he defined as “individualistic, self-reliant, pragmatic, hard-working, a stolid man of the land free to pursue his self-defined goals…” (1). The Melting-Pot Theory gained momentum following the open-door immigration policy of the early to mid-nineteenth century. Later, in 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner presented a paper titled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” where he theorized that the process of expansion taking place in the western frontier influenced the shaping of American institutions, promoted democracy, and the formation of a composite nationality. However, Turner’s version of the American melting pot embodied characteristics of the “old” immigrants of Northern and Western
Europe, whose cultures, languages, and appearances to some degree resembled those of Anglo-Saxon Americans. In contrast, Israel Zangwill’s play, The Melting-Pot, first performed in 1908, depicts Russian and Jewish immigrants hoping to blend into a composite American society. According to Gordon, Zangwill’s play revised Turner’s conceptualization of a blended society to include new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe (120).

Gordon (1964) describes the “single melting pot” theory as an illusion and utilizes his systematic framework to examine its validity. He challenges the idea of an equal intermingling of cultures and draws attention to various groups’ “proportionate influence depending upon the size, power, and strategic location of various groups” (124). Thus, according to Gordon, due to “the numerical dominance of the English stock, and the cultural dominance of Anglo-Saxon institutions, the invitation extended to non-English immigrants to ‘melt’ could only result, if thoroughly accepted, in the latter’s loss of group identity” (129). Although he implies that cultural blending is inevitable, the rate of structural assimilation depends on the ethnicity and race of immigrants. Citing Kennedy’s “Triple-Melting Pot” theory, Gordon highlights the ease of structural assimilation of the old immigrants into the White Anglo Protestant sub-society. For instance, it was possible for Germans and Scandinavians to structurally assimilate quickly, while “Negroes, Orientals, Mexican-Americans, and some Puerto Ricans were prevented by racial discrimination from participating meaningfully in either the White Protestant or White Catholic communities” (129). Thus, instead of a single pot, multiple “pots” or sub-societies—religious groups, intellectuals, marginalized racial groups, and segregated ethnic groups—exist, with some blending and some remaining structurally separate
Consequently, the theories of Anglo-Conformity and the Melting Pot posit that immigrants lose their cultural distinctiveness to adopt or merge into the dominant American culture. Appreciation for cultural diversity is absent from the canonical theories of assimilation that position acculturation as a one-way process and Anglo-Saxon values as superior to those of other cultures. Although Gordon acknowledges the ways in which immigrants have transformed American culture through “agriculture, industry, the arts, and the sciences,” he maintains that its essentially English outlines and content remain clear (1964, 110).

**Cultural Pluralism**

The theory of Cultural Pluralism that emerged in the early twentieth century advocated for the preservation and appreciation of the cultural heritages of diverse immigrant groups in the US. Angered by the doctrine of “Americanization” and sentiments of White superiority that intensified during World War I, various intellectuals advocated for the cultural preservation of minority groups as an alternative to Anglo-conformity. Horace Kallen introduced the concept of cultural pluralism in an article published in 1915 in *The Nation*. He argued that the American nation benefits in two ways from the cultural contributions of distinct ethnic cultures: “as ethnic groups contribute elements from their cultural heritage to the total national culture, making it richer and more varied; and indirectly, as the end product of the competition, interaction, and creative relationship of the later arrived ethnic cultures with the Anglo-Saxon culture and with each other” (209-10). Later, in 1916, while giving a speech concerning American public schools before the National Education Association, John Dewey argued
that schools were responsible for fostering respect of diverse cultures. In the same year, Norman Hapgood encouraged his Jewish audience to preserve its cultural heritage by refusing to merge with the larger American society (Gordon 1964, 140), and philosopher Randolph Bourne (1916) wrote about a “transnational nation” made up of distinct groups, and the failure of the melting-pot. Gordon (1964, 1961) argues that the aim of cultural pluralism is the maintenance of sub-societal separation to preserve group identities while also abiding by the civic responsibilities of a democratic nation (158). However, Kallen and other liberals failed to acknowledge the intermingling and cultural exchanges between groups (Alba and Nee 2003, 26), and failed to address the continued existence and perpetuation of racial inequality in the US.

During the contentious 1960s, a more consistent spotlight was cast on the idea of a dominant and superior Anglo-Saxon mainstream. For instance, in response to the exploitation and oppression of Black American groups, sociologist Robert Blauner (1969) developed the theory of Internal Colonialism. According to Blauner, the relationship between Whites and Blacks in the US is akin to that of colonizer and colonized. He defined “colonialism as a social system in order to isolate the common features in the experience and situation of Afro-Americans and the colonial peoples” (393). A colonization model, or process of social oppression, arose when African peoples were forced into slavery, thwarting the “natural process of contact and assimilation,” and transforming or destroying their “indigenous values” and way of life (396). The abolishment of slavery did not eliminate the political, social, or economic oppression of Blacks in the US. For instance, Black communities remain under the control of mostly White social workers, policemen, educators, and politicians (407). Blauner criticized
scholars for conflating the experiences of African Americans with those of other immigrant minority groups, particularly the idea that relocating to the northern United States would lead to upward mobility (394-403).

From this critical perspective, scholars advocating for cultural pluralism failed to acknowledge and address the perpetuation of racism and racial inequality by members of the dominant society, and barriers that impede structural assimilation. Consequently, *Multiculturalism* emerged to promote equality in an ethnically and racially diverse society.

**Multiculturalism**

As immigration from “White” European countries decreased after 1924, the very idea of “race” was subjected to close scrutiny in the US. In *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New Your City*, Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan reject the melting-pot metaphor, focusing instead on how the rise of ethnic communities provide a source of protection for individuals where cultural patterns are perpetuated and retained, even after the loss of their home language (1963, 17). For instance, they found that the Jewish community in New York established institutions (i.e., schools and universities) and newspapers to reinforce its own identity (294). They argue that the emergence of ethnic communities is not necessarily a consequence of discrimination. However, for Blacks “compulsion and limitation are felt more strongly than the free decision to come together” (59). Unlike Gordon, who focuses on assimilating into the American “old stock,” Glazer and Moynihan bring the concept of ethnicity into the forefront and posit that, even in the third generation when immigrants’
language and customs are typically lost, ethnicity is continually recreated and helps facilitate upward mobility despite institutional barriers (17).

Twenty years later, in “Is Assimilation Dead?”, Glazer (1993, 131) further criticizes the assimilation paradigm for its focus on the inevitable assimilation of immigrant groups and for ignoring that Blacks and other racialized groups (like Mexicans and Asians) had been unable to assimilate. Though cultural pluralists criticized assimilation, they too failed to acknowledge the challenges and inequalities of racialized minority groups. However, these issues later became a priority as a large influx of Latinos, Asians, and Caribbean Blacks arrived in the US during the mid-twentieth century and led to the diversification of the American cultural landscape. During World War II, while facing Hitler and his ideology of white supremacy, the US was forced to assess its own treatment towards its minority groups (Glazer 1993, 131-35). This led to the promotion of Multiculturalism, best “understood as a national reconstruction incorporating previously subaltern people into representations of the American nation” (Basch et al. 1994, 44). In the 1990s, many African Americans continued to live in segregated neighborhoods and had low rates of racial intermarriage, despite “thirty years of effort, public and private, assisted by antidiscrimination law and a substantial rise in Black earnings” (Glazer 1993, 135). Glazer views multiculturalism as a way to resist the traditional processes of assimilation in a non-inclusionary society. Glazer asks, “Why should not multiculturalism, in the form of the examination of group history, characteristics, problems, become compelling as one way of understanding one’s situation, perhaps overcoming it?” (135).
**Assimilation Is Not a Linear Process**

In “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America,” Gans predicts that instead of weakening during the processes of acculturation and assimilation, and eventually disappearing as immigrants blend with one or more other subgroups, *symbolic ethnicity* will “persist into the fifth and sixth generations” (1979, 15). For instance, he found that third- and fourth-generation children of European immigrants were often concerned with a revival of their ethnic identities, such as the need to “feel” Jewish or Italian (1). According to Gans, symbolic ethnicity “is characterized by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior” (15). Furthermore, Gans challenges the “straight-line” approach of Warner and Srole by arguing that assimilation is a two-way street, particularly “since acculturating generations are once more being partly replaced by new immigrants from many of the countries that fed the 1880-1925 influx who then have an overall impact on the ethnic culture” (44). Thus, immigrants and their American-born children may adapt to the changing circumstances without linearity. The “bumps” represent numerous adaptations or new traditions in an ever-changing environment (44).

Notwithstanding his criticism of classical assimilation theory, Gans does not reject the idea that assimilation is inevitable, instead arguing that it continues to take place.

Drawing from Gans’ work, Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou argue that while some immigrants experience upward mobility, others encounter social contexts that create “vulnerability to downward assimilation” (1993, 83). Portes and Zhou examined the experience of members of the second generation, or children of immigrants, to reveal the
challenges they face while adapting to American society. They introduced the term *segmented assimilation* to describe alternative trajectories of immigrant incorporation. They argue that classical theories of assimilation, focusing on European immigrants, were no longer adequate for the study of post-1965 immigration. For instance, while “over 85% of children of immigrants in 1940 were born to Europeans,” “approximately 77% of post-1965 immigrants are non-Europeans,” and consist of Hispanics (47%), Asians (22.4%), and foreign-born Blacks (7.6%) (77).

For recent immigrants, the economic opportunities available in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century declined “following a rapid process of national deindustrialization and global industrial restructuring” (Portes and Zhou 1993, 76). Furthermore, the political, economic, and social context of the host society influences the social adaptation of second-generation immigrants. Portes and Zhou identify three features that create susceptibility to downward assimilation: skin color, location, and absence of mobility ladders. Skin color becomes crucial as immigrants and their children encounter a host society with heavily prejudiced views against non-White people. Upon arrival, immigrants tend to congregate in cities where a large number of native minorities reside (83). Thus, location increases vulnerability as the majority conflates immigrants and the native poor as one marginalized group. Location also “exposes them to an adversarial subculture developed by marginalized native youths to cope with their own difficult situation” (Portes and Zhou 1993, 83). Finally, the new “hourglass economy, created by economic restructuring” presents insufficient economic opportunities that inhibit upward and intergenerational mobility in a postindustrial society (Portes and Zhou 1993, 84).
Immigrants from English-speaking Caribbean countries, who arrived in the US in the late twentieth century, were largely categorized as Blacks and discriminated against by the White majority. For instance, deprived of protection of a large coethnic group at the time of their arrival, most West Indian immigrants settled in black inner-city neighborhoods where the second generation was at risk of “downward assimilation,” or assimilating to the underclass\(^1\) (Portes and Zhou 1993, 92).

This has not been the case for most Cuban immigrants settling in Miami. The large post-1959 influx of Cubans established an ethnic enclave with many economic opportunities for future immigrants. Unlike other immigrants from the Caribbean, individuals from the first wave of Cuban immigrants (1959-62) were mostly light-skinned, received financial incentives from the US government, and brought with them economic and/or human capital. Thus, their ethnic enclave “provided resources for the adaptation process of the second generation” (Portes & Zhou 1993, 91). However, the Cuban case has been considered an anomaly since a large wave of skilled and semi-skilled Cubans arrived in Miami after the onset of the revolution, and “crowded into a narrow set of occupations and industries” where they hired and worked alongside other Cuban Americans (Waldinger 2001, 265), and forged a political consciousness aimed at undermining and overturning Fidel Castro’s regime. I will detail the experience of recent Cuban immigrants in Miami in later chapters of this dissertation.

\(^{1}\) Defined by Merriam-Webster.com as “the lowest social stratum usually made up of disadvantaged minority groups.”
Segmented Assimilation

Segmented assimilation, as a theory, was validated by the results of a longitudinal study conducted by Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut to examine the adaptation process of second-generation students, including those of the 1.5 generation (those who arrived in the United States prior to adolescence), living in South Florida and Southern California. In *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) present the main findings of their *Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS)*: the second generation is “undergoing a process of segmented assimilation where outcomes vary across immigrant minorities and where rapid integration and acceptance into the American mainstream represent just one possible alternative” (45). In 1992, a survey was given to over 5,000 second-generation immigrant students in the eighth and ninth grade, and a follow-up survey was given in 1995 to examine the adaptation outcomes during the school-to-work or school-to-college transitional period, and to establish causal forces (22-23). Portes and Rumbaut found four variables that may either hinder or facilitate the adaptation process and economic mobility of immigrants and their children: modes of incorporation, rate of acculturation, cultural and economic barriers, and immigrant social capital. Modes of incorporation include (1) state policies established to exclude, limit, or influence immigration; (2) the way in which the host society receives newcomers; and (3) the existence or non-existence of a community of co-nationals (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 45-48).

Portes and Rumbaut outline three categories of acculturation (operationally defined as learning English and the cultural norms of the host country). The first, *dissonant acculturation*, occurs when children lose their native language and cultural
lifestyle faster than their parents as they learn English and adopt American norms.

Consonant acculturation occurs when both generations simultaneously learn English and adopt American norms while abandoning their home language and culture. However, “consonant acculturation does not guarantee success because parents’ and children’s striving for acceptance into the American mainstream may be blocked by discrimination” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 54). Thus, those who experience “role-reversal” (loss of parental authority) through dissonant acculturation, and/or face discrimination, may be at risk of downward assimilation as individuals may form alliances with other marginalized peers in response to racial hostility and social and economic marginalization (59).

Finally, selective acculturation, the most desired outcome, occurs when “the learning process of both generations is embedded in a co-ethnic community of sufficient size and institutional diversity to slow down the cultural shift and promote partial retention of the parents’ home language and norms” (53-54). Thus, downward assimilation may be circumvented by “cultivating ethnic ties in their ethnic communities to develop forms of behavior likely to break the cycle of disadvantage and to lead to upward mobility” (Zhou 2003, 91).

Despite a high degree of acculturation, contemporary immigrants and their children face three major challenges to assimilation in the US: racial discrimination, a bifurcated labor market, and a growing marginalized population in inner cities (55). According to Portes and Rumbaut, “segmented assimilation emerges from the different ways in which second-generation youths approach these challenges and the resources that they bring to the encounter” (62). The social capital of immigrants can either help or hinder the assimilation process. For instance, those with high human capital (e.g., a
college education) can provide resources to their children while they negotiate the aforementioned challenges to educational attainment and mobility.

A follow-up survey conducted in 2002 supported Portes and Rumbaut’s original findings. Although the second generation continued to progress educationally, a substantial number was still falling behind, particularly Black second-generation young adults who were unemployed, living in poverty, in jail, or on probation. For instance, in South Florida, evidence of downward assimilation was evident among the children of non-White immigrants, reflecting the enduring consequences of low parental human capital (for Haitians) and of a negative mode of incorporation linked to race (for both Haitians and West Indians) (Portes et al. 2005, 1023).

Among Mexican Americans, immigration status is a significant factor that can delay or lead to a downward path of assimilation. After analyzing the data collected for the study on “Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles,” Frank Bean et al. (2011, 349) found that second-generation Mexican Americans of mothers with “unauthorized” immigrant status have a more difficult time succeeding academically and assimilating to US culture than their Asian peers of parents who have permanent legal status. Furthermore, the US government’s failure to develop a pathway to legality for undocumented immigrants may continue to block the mobility of Mexican Americans for future generations and influence a path of downward assimilation or delayed incorporation (349). For instance, when comparing the educational attainment of children of mothers with legal residency and those of mothers unauthorized to be in the US, Bean and his colleagues found that the former had “an unadjusted years-of-schooling advantage of 2.04 years” in comparison to the latter (374). Anti-immigrant rhetoric,
social stigmatization, and fear of deportation continue to hinder upward mobility for immigrants and their children.

**Revival of the Classical Theory of Assimilation**

In *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*, Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2003) describe the flaws and limitations of the classical assimilation theory that stemmed from the Chicago School of Sociology and attempt to revive the canonical theory by arguing that it has not lost utility for revealing the contemporary processes of immigrant incorporation and intergroup relations. They reject the notion that assimilation is an inevitable and linear process whereby minorities fuse or blend into the majority culture. Instead, they define assimilation as a social process that “does not require the disappearance of ethnic makers,” “occurs spontaneously and often unintendedly in the course of interaction between majority and minority groups,” and is a contingent outcome of both individual and intergroup relations (Alba and Nee 2003, 11, 66; 1997, 827). They criticize Gordon’s contention that minority groups adopt the core culture of the Anglo-Saxon middle-class in a one-way process whereby the dominant group remains unchanged, and for failing to recognize the amalgamation of influences that make up American society (Alba and Nee 1997, 830). Instead, Alba and Nee argue that, in the processes of assimilation and acculturation, one group may become similar to the other as ethnic distinctions diminish, or the cultural differences of multiple groups will fade in a process of convergence (25). Thus, the fusion of elements of minority cultures with elements of the mainstream lead to the creation of a composite culture (Alba & Nee 2003, 25). Their broader definition of
assimilation is too idealistic since they fail to acknowledge the ways in which the racialization of ethnic minorities leads to divergent forms of ethnic resilience among minority groups. For instance, drawing from the 2006 Latino National Survey (LNS), García et al. (2012, 80) found that secondary to national identity, 69 percent of first-generation respondents identified strongly with the panethnic label of Latino or Hispanic (80). Identifying as Latino or Hispanic can provoke a sense of community and encourage activism aimed at combating social injustices confronted by immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries in the United States. Forms of ethnic resilience among minority groups challenge Alba and Knee’s contention that ethnic markers of minority groups disappear as they converge with the mainstream culture. Panethnicity, as a form of ethnic resilience, will be discussed further in the next section.

Also targeted for criticism is the “old” assimilation theory for being ethnocentric and for failing to acknowledge the positive role of ethnic communities as they provide opportunities for new arrivals attempting to negotiate the anxieties of relocating to a new society. Support networks, along with other causal mechanisms, help shape the trajectories of adaptation for immigrants and their children. According to Alba and Nee, these causal mechanisms include proximate factors, which operate at the individual and social network levels and are shaped by the forms of capital that individuals and groups possess, and the distal, often deeper causes, which are embedded in large structures such as the institutional arrangements of the state, corporations, and labor markets (38). For instance, when immigrants are confronted with discrimination, assimilation may be contingent upon collective strategies, or network mechanisms, such as the norms established by Chinese-American immigrants who moved to Mississippi in the late 1800s.
According to Alba and Nee, the “Chinese American community mobilized to demonstrate through their adoption of White social norms and etiquette that they should not be treated as if they were Black—that is to change the de facto racial definition of Chinese” (44). Labor migrants (e.g., Mexicans), with low levels of economic and human capital, also rely on collectivism and social networks to adapt to American society.

Alba and Nee rightly criticize the concept of segmented assimilation for essentializing Black culture “in the image of the underclass,” often perceived as undeserving and poverty-stricken, and for predicting a “pessimistic future for central-city minority youths,” instead of highlighting the ways in which African-American communities protect their youth from peer pressure and negative influence (8). While acknowledging the consequences of racial differences, Alba and Nee argue that race is “not the only trait by which immigrants and their children are evaluated” and present the case of successful East Indians in the US as proof of their argument (48).

Sociologists Edward E. Telles and Vilma Ortiz credit Alba and Nee for examining how institutionalized power helps to subordinate racial minorities, and how social boundaries block those minorities’ ability to assimilate into mainstream society (2008, 31). However, Alba and Nee’s revised theory has also been portrayed as being too optimistic. For instance, Portes et al. (2005, 1019) claim that Alba and Nee have failed to acknowledge a “sizable minority that is falling behind educationally, that lives close to poverty, that is weighed down by premature childbearing and that, in the worst case, is already in jail.”
Racialization & Ethnic Resilience

In “Second Generation Decline? Children of Immigrants, Past and Present–A Reconsideration,” Roger Waldinger and Joel Perlmann (1998) compare the experiences of the descendants of the first wave of European immigrants with those arriving post-1965. They describe both groups as having encountered economic challenges and initial resistance from the American mainstream. They cite the plight of the Jews as an example of a group that, despite experiencing rapid acculturation and “acquisition of schooling,” had difficulty being accepted by other Americans during the first half of the twentieth century (917). They argue that post-1965 immigrants, as opposed to earlier Europeans, have a higher representation within the middle class and encounter a more receptive and eclectic American society, which holds a more optimistic view for second-generation children and other working-class groups. Accordingly, they contend that second-generation Mexicans, the largest at-risk immigrant group, must overcome the same challenges as native-born children of America’s working class to move up the economic ladder.

The growing acknowledgement of race as a historical construction was invigorated in the 1960s, when various immigrants of color became racialized and conflated with African Americans and marginalized as such. Waldinger and Perlmann (1998) question whether the rise of an “oppositional culture,” or solidarity among oppressed groups, a theory developed by Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986), could lead to a different outcome for people of color—native and immigrant—than that suggested by the theory of segmented assimilation, and second-generation decline.
Telles and Ortiz (2008) recognize the importance of scholarship on the role of power and social boundaries (Alba and Nee 1997, 2003) and the role of racism itself (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001); they argue that assimilation or racialization hypotheses (e.g., segmented assimilation) have “oversimplified reality and the many possible manifestations of ethnicity” (21). For instance, whereas Portes and Rumbaut argue that “status and linguistic dissonance between immigrant parents and children” leads to a lack of educational assimilation, Telles and Ortiz found that “low education persists into the third and fourth generation when such dissonance no longer exists” (284) Additionally, they criticize assimilation and racialization theories for underestimating the “effects of social barriers based on race for Mexican Americans;” confusing “the effects of historical period with generation-since-immigration”; ignoring the wide variations within groups; failing to acknowledge “the effects of local contexts in shaping integration outcomes”; and exaggerating “the consistency and uniformity in direction which assimilation occurs” (283-84). Thus, Telles and Ortiz contribute to the existing literature by examining both the multigenerational experiences of an ethnic group, as well as intergroup variations, and by evaluating the effects of such factors as skin color, neighborhood of residence, and parental characteristics (44).

From 1998 to 2000, Telles and Ortiz conducted a longitudinal study of ethnic integration with a random sample of Mexican Americans who had been initially interviewed in 1965 as part of the *Mexican American Study Project* conducted by earlier scholars. They found that assimilation via politics, identity, and social exposure has been slower for Mexican Americans than for other minority groups. For Mexican Americans, low educational levels inhibit assimilation in other areas and also foster ethnic
distinctions. For example, institutional barriers limit educational opportunities for Mexican-American children since they “are sorted in low socioeconomic strata, mostly via the educational system” (Telles and Ortiz 2008, 284).

Telles and Ortiz fault other perspectives for failing to account for the ways in which racialization and discrimination impede the educational attainment of ethnic groups, a problem that persists for “several generations since immigration” (285). Consequently, they hypothesize that racialization (the “societal practice of assigning others to a race”), perpetuated and maintained through institutional settings beginning in the early childhood of Mexican Americans, makes their case different from other ethnic groups because it influences the way they perceive their role in American society (287-88). For instance, they found that “many respondents experienced discrimination and were aware of common stereotypes based on popular ideas that Mexican origins persons possess an inferior culture and an inherent unworthiness that keeps them from becoming fully American” (285). They found that skin color variations within the Mexican-American population did not influence educational or occupational status, and they attribute these findings to a generalized stigma produced by a racialization effect. Furthermore, they found that “9 percent of children with a non-Hispanic parent were less likely to know Spanish, were more likely to intermarry themselves, identified less with their Mexican origin, and were more likely to call themselves American” (281). Finally, Telles and Ortiz contend that for a century, American capitalists’ demand for cheap Mexican labor, “which is supported by the American state, and enabled by Mexico’s proximity and its large labor supply, can largely account for the persistent low status and ethnic retention of Mexican Americans” (285).
With a focus on the ethnic and racial identities of the children of immigrants, Mary Waters (1999, 6) examines the process of social identity construction of West Indian immigrants and their descendants living in New York, particularly “how that culture and those identities are shaped and changed by conditions in America—especially the American racial structure.” Waters found that “West Indian immigrants to New York demonstrate a typically immigrant attitude toward work and employment, a militancy about racial discrimination combined with a belief that racial barriers will not affect them personally” (12). Thus, to avoid downward mobility, West Indian immigrants distance themselves from Black Americans. She finds that residential segregation plays a key role in the future paths of second-generation Caribbean immigrants. For instance, children of poor or working-class families, influenced by the culture of segregated neighborhoods, may begin to identify less with their ethnic roots and more with African Americans, potentially limiting their chances of upward social mobility. Contrarily, those who retain their ethnic identity and the values of their parents tend to perform better academically and have higher chances of attaining upward mobility (14). A key argument of Waters is that, for West Indian immigrants, earning a higher status is not the result of Americanization but rather their ability to retain their ethnic distinctiveness. Thus, “remaining an immigrant is a better alternative than being drawn into Black American culture, perceived as an inferior status” (12).

Immigrants from Mexico and the Caribbean engage in various forms of ethnic resilience, as demonstrated by Telles and Ortiz and Waters, in hopes of achieving upward mobility while overcoming American nativism. According to Portes and Rumbaut (2001), coethnic solidarity and the development of economic enclaves have contributed
to the success of immigrant groups. Furthermore, interethnic cooperation among different minority groups has led to the development of a panethnic identity that is legitimized by social and political organizations. According to Okamoto and Mora (2014, 221), panethnicity “is uniquely defined by an inherent tension derived from maintaining subgroup distinctions while developing a sense of metagroup unity.” These observations weaken Alba and Nee’s “neo-assimilationist model because they show the importance of ethnic resilience for structural mobility” (77). According to Basch et al. (1994, 49), “there are many levels of resistance, beginning with the construction of individual identities and personal behaviors, but extending to group responses, organizational initiatives, and counter-hegemonic and revolutionary movements.” For instance, organizations such as the St. Vincent Benevolent Society and the Grenada Benevolent Fraternal Organization in New York, provided food, shelter, financial assistance, and other benefits for Grenadian and Vincentian immigrants in the United States. Other organizations facilitated the development of a political consciousness, necessary to contend with US racial constructs, and also to exercise political influence in their home countries (100-1).

**Transnationalism**

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1991, 191) evaluates the changing nature of locality because “groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogeneous.” Consequently, this twentieth-century phenomenon required a modification of anthropological inquiry to consider the reconstructions of group identity and histories (191). According to Michael Kearney (1995, 549), globalization has led to “a shift from a two-dimensional Euclidian space
with its centers and peripheries and sharp boundaries, to a multidimensional global space with unbounded, often discontinuous and interpenetrating sub-spaces,” such that shared cultural norms are no longer contained within a particular territory.

Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc (1994, 7) define *transnationalism* as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement,” and coin the word *transmigrant* to describe individuals who settle in a new country but also maintain roots or linkages to their own countries. Schiller et al. (1995) argue that three significant forces push immigrants to live transnational lives: the global restructuring of capital, racism in both the US and Europe, and nation-building projects of the host and home countries. Since the global economy transforms social and economic conditions in both the labor-sending and -receiving nations individuals are less likely to adapt and settle in one place. For instance, individuals entering the US from the global south in search of mobility often encounter social and institutional forms of racism that make it difficult to adjust. Moreover, nation-building projects reinforce social ties by encouraging political loyalties to one nation or the other (50).

Though transnational migrant populations seek greater social or economic freedom in a host country, many continue to identify with their home states. According to Basch et al. (1994, 8), “the political leadership of sending nations and immigrants from these nations are coming to perceive these states as *determinitalized*.” For instance, in their study of Haitian immigrants, Basch et al. (1994) found that despite establishing roots in New York, those immigrants continued to maintain transnational ties with Haiti. These ties included purchasing property, establishing businesses, repairing
infrastructures, and influencing political developments back home. Furthermore, when Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide labeled Haitians living abroad as “the 10th department,” he recognized Haitian transnationalism and challenged the traditional notion of a territorial nation-state (147). Thus, contemporary transnational migrants with ties to multiple countries may achieve mobility in either or both contexts (Levitt et al. 2003; Levitt 2004). Such practices differentiate transnational immigrants from members of diasporic communities who no longer consider themselves as belonging to their nation-states. Instead, they often remain nostalgic for the home they left behind and attempt to recreate imagined spaces for cultural, social, and economic exchanges.

Portes and Rumbaut (2014, 135) negate that transnationalism impedes assimilation since more educated immigrants have been able to establish themselves successfully in the US, and some with a “modest” level of human capital have established economic enclaves (e.g., Vietnamese, Koreans, and Chinese) to facilitate upward mobility for future generations. Though Portes and Rumbaut recognize that transnational political ties did exist among early European immigrants, they argue that “they could not affect domestic affairs with the intensity and rapidity that contemporary migrants do” and credit technological advances in transportation and communication for the emergence of contemporary transnational communities (174).

As transmigrants “engage in the nation-building processes” of their home and host countries, “their identities and practices are configured by hegemonic categories, such as race and ethnicity” (Basch et al. 1994, 22). Setting roots in a host country, while also maintaining social, economic, and/or political ties with places of origin, forces individuals to negotiate or redefine their identities (DeWind & Kasinitz 1999; Foner
For instance, as a result of her work with Jamaican immigrants, Nancy Foner (1997, 97) argues that contemporary immigrants “blend meanings, perceptions, and the social patterns” that lead to a “cultural and social kind of creolization” whereby their cultural norms are retained, replaced, or reinvented. Conversely, immigrants engaged in transnational activities transfer cultural elements of American culture back to their home country (e.g., food, dress, music, business practices, etc.) (Morawska 2009, 182).

**Conclusion**

As presented in this chapter, traditional theories that purport that assimilation occurs in linear stages where minority groups lose their ethnic markers as they immerse themselves into US society, have been challenged by contemporary scholars who provide alternative frameworks to examine how immigrants adapt to the US. For example, some scholars have investigated the effects of transnationalism on immigrant adaptation since the maintenance of transnational ties with a home country makes it more difficult for immigrants to fully absorb the characteristics and values of the host country; and forces them to redefine their cultural identities. This phenomenon suggests that traditional features of the American Dream—learning English, finding a job, purchasing property, and achieving upward mobility—are no longer standards of successful immigrant adaptation.

To contribute to the field of migration studies, my research examined the attitudinal and emotional dimension of immigrant adaptation to document how new members of an immigrant group in the US—Cuban émigrés—describe their adaption.
experiences and how they negotiate their cultural identities. My work on Cuban immigration is embedded in contemporary debates about how immigrants incorporate into US society since each stage of the Cuban exodus can be studied to determine how different factors either facilitate or hinder adaptation. These factors include: (1) the socioeconomic characteristics of each wave; (2) social, political, and economic conditions of the US; (3) modes of reception by the US government; and (4) US-Cuba relations. The study of Cuban émigrés may thus contribute to testing various hypothesis derived from the extant literature on immigrant incorporation into the US.

In the next chapter, I focus on how Cuban émigrés have been studied in the past, largely as an exceptional case of immigrant adaptation without complete assimilation (in the traditional sense of the term) and discuss the factors that may delay economic mobility for Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave (1995-2017).
4. THE CUBAN DIASPORA

This chapter begins with an overview of the Cuban communities that had been established in the US prior to the Cuban Revolution, followed by a review of the five major waves of Cuban migration to the US: (1) the Golden Exiles (January 1, 1959-October 16, 1962); (2) the Freedom Flights (December 1, 1965-April 6, 1973); (3) the Mariel Exodus (April 15-October 31, 1980); (4) the Balsero Crisis (August 12-September 14, 1994); and (5) the Post-Soviet Migration or “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” (May 2, 1995-January 12, 2017) (Duany 1999, 2017). Cuban migration scholars have defined each wave of the Cuban exodus based on turning points in US-Cuban relations and the émigrés’ changing socioeconomic profiles, as I will detail below. This chapter ends with a discussion of the factors that facilitated economic mobility for some Cuban émigrés, especially during the 1960s and the 1970s, and an explanation of how my research contributes to the field of Cuban studies.

Migration Prior to the Cuban Revolution

Before 1959, Cubans had already established sizeable communities in the US. The Cuban exodus was precipitated by the tumultuous conditions during the three wars of independence against Spain (1868-78, 1879-80, 1895-98), and later “the struggling economy of the young republic, and the frequent radical shifts in government in the first half of the twentieth century” (García 1996, 1). Comprised mostly of political refugees or skilled workers, 55,700 Cuban émigrés were admitted to the US between 1868 and 1898\(^1\)

\(^{1}\) Data obtained from the *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration* (1893-1932), cited by Duany (2011, 40).
(Duany 2017). During the Ten Years’ War (1868-78), middle and upper-class Cuban separatists typically moved to the Northeastern US, while most working-class Cubans moved to Key West, FL, and later to Tampa, where many worked in cigar companies and built thriving communities. For instance, in 1885, Vicente Martínez Ybor, a Spanish-Cuban entrepreneur, established a successful cigar factory near Tampa. Consequently, thousands of cigar makers and their families who migrated from Cuba to Tampa searching for work settled in a community that came to be known as “Ybor City” (Poyo 1991, 25). However, by 1930 Cuban migration slowed because of “the Depression, mechanization of cigar production, and the growing popularity of cigarettes” (Grenier and Pérez 2003, 19-20). Migration flows to the US once again increased during the social unrest, violence, and economic instability of Cuba’s Republican period (1902-58). According to Duany (2017), “on the eve of the revolution on January 1, 1959, about 60,000 Cubans lived in the US, primarily New York.” However, following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, Miami became the principal destination for Cuban émigrés seeking refuge, civil liberties, and/or economic opportunities in the US. From 1959 to 2019, over 1.6 million Cubans arrived in the US. The US Census Bureau (2019) estimated that as of 2019, 2,381,565 Cubans were living in the US, of which 981,456 live in Miami-Dade County.

The following sections will discuss the five main waves or stages of postrevolutionary Cuban migration, each with its unique socioeconomic profile, defined by tenuous relations between the US and Cuba throughout various junctures. According to Grenier and Pérez (2003, 22), “although those waves have differed a great deal from each other in their specific conditions and characteristics, they have all been the result of
an international conflict that has utilized migration as a political tool.” As the Cuban and US governments engaged in an ongoing ideological conflict, political decisions were made that either facilitated or slowed the inflow of migration to the US.

The Golden Exiles (1959-1962)

Following the overthrow of dictator Fulgencio Batista in January 1959, individuals who feared persecution and/or rejected Castro’s radical economic policies left Cuba, as the revolutionary government nationalized assets and implemented agrarian and housing reforms for the redistribution of wealth across the country. After the breakup of diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba in January 1961, obtaining a visa to migrate to the US became increasingly difficult. To be allowed entry into the US, a friend or relative was required to sponsor a Cuban national seeking refuge. The application was processed by federal agencies and then sent to the Swiss Embassy in Havana before a waiver could be issued and travel arrangements made (Thomas 1967, 47).

Considered the most economically successful wave of the postrevolutionary Cuban exodus, the Golden Exiles were mostly light-skinned, well-educated members of the middle and upper echelons of prerevolutionary society (Portes 1969; Grenier and Pérez 2003; Duany 2017). Approximately 250,000 political leaders, landowners, managers, professionals, government officials, and military personnel fled to the US with visas issued by the US embassy in Havana and the US consulate in Santiago until 1961. Later exiles were granted visa waivers by the US government for “humanitarian reasons,” and “could apply for parole and obtain refugee status” (Duany 2017). Despite the ease of
being legally admitted in the US, most exiles hoped that their stay abroad would only be temporary.

Infuriated with the nationalization of US businesses in Cuba, the Eisenhower administration established a partial embargo in 1960 and severed diplomatic ties with Cuba in 1961. In 1962, following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and Castro’s declaration that he was a Marxist-Leninist, the Kennedy administration imposed a full trade embargo to block all financial, commercial, and economic transactions between Cuba and the US. The Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 intensified tensions between Cuba and the US, leading to the suspension of commercial transportation between the two countries. When the exiles realized that an imminent return would not be possible, they deployed their social and economic capital to reestablish Cuban businesses and social networks in Miami (Duany 1999, 77).

The Golden Exiles benefited immensely from the establishment of the Cuban Refugee Program (CRP) by the Kennedy Administration in 1961. Under the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the CRP provided relief funds and services to assist the large number of displaced Cubans. According to William Mitchell, the Commissioner of Social Security in 1962, the aim of the CRP was to provide employment opportunities, resettlement funds, financial assistance, welfare services, health care, a surplus food distribution program, training and educational opportunities, and funds for local public schools to accommodate the influx of refugee children (1969, 3). Many Cuban parents, fearing that their children would become indoctrinated in Cuban schools, forced into military service, or be sent to the Soviet Union or the Eastern Bloc, sent them to the US through a secret network later nicknamed “Operation Pedro Pan.” Of the more than
14,000 unaccompanied children who arrived in the US, approximately 8,600 received federal assistance from the Children’s Bureau (Thomas 1967, 48, 55; García 1996, 23-24). The CRP provided the Golden Exiles with financial benefits and relocation efforts that, coupled with their human capital, facilitated upward mobility and economic stability. According to Cuban-American sociologist Alejandro Portes (1969, 508), “The skills and qualities that this formerly powerful group had to offer in the US and the host society’s receptivity to them combined to produce a fast process of structural assimilation and a rapid upward movement in the American socioeconomic hierarchy.” For many members of the first wave of Cuban exiles, the American dream seemed well within their reach.

Like Rose’s (1993) category of refugee, individuals of this cohort were usually labeled as “exiles,” instead of “immigrants.” According to Juan M. del Aguila (1998), whereas traditional immigrants move abroad in search of material improvement and economic mobility, exiles “consciously choose to emigrate for political reasons of either a subjective (personal) or objective (context) nature,” and “it is one’s political dissatisfaction with a government, ideology, or society that drives the decision” (1-3). Distinguishing themselves from other immigrants, the Golden Exiles helped shape Miami’s social, cultural, economic, and political landscape. Little Havana became a concentrated space for political discourse and counterrevolutionary activities stemming from the exiles’ fervent desire to overthrow Fidel Castro and recover their homeland (Grenier and Pérez 2003). They established cultural centers, created new traditions, and, through various forms of political discourse, such as through radio broadcasts and the print media, reinforced a Cuban identity and an exile ideology. For instance, in 1962,
expelled Cuban bishop Eduardo Boza Masvidal delivered a speech to a Miami crowd of over 30,000 émigrés, in which he “articulated the task expatriate Cubans faced: building exile communities dedicated to denouncing Communism and preparing the return home while at the same time forging a new life in a foreign land without losing their identity” (Poyo 2002, 92). Thus, a strong sense of nationalism, an unwavering commitment to overthrow Castro, and a favorable reception by the US government led to the establishment of an ethnic community that facilitated the integration and upward mobility of future Cuban émigrés.

According to Grenier and Moebius (2015, 45), “the intensity of the migration during the 1960s created a dense web of interactions among Cubans that established the foundation of the much-studied Cuban enclave—an economic and social environment where Cubans hired Cubans to serve Cubans.” By taking advantage of their strong social networks and “character loans” offered by some banks to incoming émigrés who had entrepreneurial backgrounds in Cuba, the Golden exiles established a successful Cuban enclave in Little Havana. By the mid-1970s, “local cafeterias, fruit markets, barbershops, restaurants and mom and pop businesses” were mostly Cuban-owned (Grenier and Moebius 2015, 30, 32).

**The Freedom Flights (December 1965-1973)**

Commercial travel between Cuba and the US was disrupted in October 1962 because of the Cuban Missile Crisis, thus slowing down the influx of Cuban émigrés to the US (Duany 1999; 2017). Between 1962 and 1965, approximately 6,700 balseros or rafters (Ackerman & Clark 1995) arrived in Florida after leaving Cuba on makeshift
vessels and risking their lives in pursuit of freedom, and another 55,900 migrated to the US from countries that maintained diplomatic relations with Cuba, such as Spain (Duany 1999; 2011). Between October 10 and November 6, 1965, approximately 3,000 Cubans left Cuba through the port of Camarioca with permission from the Cuban government. Consequently, diplomatic efforts between Cuba and the US to establish a system of more orderly departures, made it possible for Cubans to leave the island on chartered planes. To decide who could emigrate, the US and Cuba compiled lists of names of individuals seeking family reunification but excluded young men of military age (Pedraza 2007).

The Vuelos de la Libertad, or Freedom Flights, were an airbridge that took place daily from 1965 to 1973, and transported 260,561 Cubans to the US, making it the longest refugee resettlement program in US history (Pedraza 2007; Duany 2011). By the time Castro canceled the flights in April 1973, the flights had expanded the socioeconomic composition of Cuban migrants arriving in the US. Compared to those who migrated during the wave of the Golden Exiles, a larger percentage of individuals who arrived in the US from 1965 to 1973 were skilled or semi-skilled blue-collar workers. According to Duany, “shifts in the refugee flow mirrored the impact of revolutionary programs on wider segments of the Cuban population, such as small-scale merchants and artisans” (2011, 44).

Most of these individuals were White, urban, predominantly female, older, and less educated than earlier refugees. The Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 granted these émigrés parole status and allowed them to apply for permanent residency after a year and

---

one day in the US (originally two years and one day) (Pedraza 2007). Moreover, they continued to receive assistance under the CRP. For instance, to receive financial assistance, single women were required to partake in the *Aprenda y Supérese* (Training for Independence) program, where they “received intensive English-language instruction as well as training in a number of skills: hand sewing, machine sewing, office machine operation, clerical work, nursing, domestic service, and even silk-screen art work” (García 1996, 42). According to Pedraza (2007, 122), this wave “sought greater economic opportunities than were provided in a socialist society that instituted a new ethic of sacrificing individual consumption to achieve collective goals.”

Miami was not the only destination for Cuban émigrés. By 1974, out of the 461,373 Cubans who had registered with the CRP, 299,326 were resettled to New York (27.1 percent), New Jersey (19.8), California (13.2), Puerto Rico (8.5), Illinois (7.5), and Louisiana (2.8) (García 1996, 44). Miami would not receive another large influx of Cuban émigrés until the *Mariel Exodus* of 1980.

Scholars have debated whether individuals from the second wave of the Cuban exodus were exiles or immigrants. For instance, whereas del Aguila (1998) classified all Cuban émigrés arriving in the 1960s as exiles, Amaro and Portes (1972) labeled those who arrived on the Freedom Flights as “economic immigrants.” However, Pedraza (2007, 6) argues that Amaro and Portes failed to acknowledge the Cuban government’s hostile reaction against individuals who intended to leave Cuba. From a political standpoint, the labels ascribed to different waves of Cuban émigrés by the US government upon arrival, were concomitant with the financial resources offered to them. However, because the political and economic spheres are inextricably bound (especially in a communist country
like Cuba), a political-economic dichotomy obscures the complexities inherent in an individual’s decision to migrate. Having grown up under socialism, later Cubans arriving in the 1980s and 1990s in the US were not considered political exiles. Instead, they were largely viewed as economic migrants seeking opportunities to improve their quality of life. Hence, their likelihood of achieving the American Dream diminished greatly because of the lack of US government support.

The Mariel Exodus (1980)

In 1978, despite ongoing meetings with Fidel Castro to discuss the normalization of US-Cuba relations and the release of Cuban political prisoners on the island, President Jimmy Carter refused to acknowledge the US’ involvement in those negotiations. Cuba’s military presence in Angola had brought negotiations to a halt. Hoping to revive diplomatic negotiations with the US, Castro invited members of the exile community to participate in a Diálogo, or dialogue, to discuss important issues, including the release of political prisoners and travel to Cuba. Although it was a publicity stunt that positioned him as a reasonable man, Castro hoped to influence the exile community and garner support for the renewal of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US (García 1996, 47-48). “As a result of the 1978 Dialogue, the Cuban government agreed to the release of political prisoners; to promote the reunification of families rent . . . by the exodus and to allow Cubans in the US to return, to visit their families and their homeland” (Pedraza 2007, 151).

With the easing of travel restrictions by the Cuban and US governments, over 100,000 Cubans living in the US returned to Cuba in 1979 to reconnect with family and
friends. The exiles revealed the freedoms and opportunities they enjoyed abroad (Bustamante 2020) Their stories of social, political, material, and economic success encouraged approximately 10,800 Cubans to invade the Peruvian embassy in Havana in hopes of leaving the island in April 1980. Infuriated, Castro opened the port of Mariel near Havana and allowed relatives living abroad to pick up those wanting to leave. The Mariel Exodus, or “Freedom Flotilla,” brought 124,779 Cubans, or Marielitos as they were pejoratively labeled, to Key West, Florida, between April and October 1980. The Cuban government also sent stigmatized persons such as those who had served time in prison and psychiatric hospitals, homosexuals, and those identified as prostitutes. The US government did not automatically grant these migrants political asylum. Instead, they were considered “entrants, status pending,” and did not receive the same financial benefits offered to the preceding waves under the CRP. Having only received a fraction of the benefits—“welfare, job training, Medicaid, food stamps, and Supplemental security income” (Eckstein 2009, 80)—, the Marielitos had a more difficult time integrating and adjusting socially and economically into US society. The US and Cuba ultimately reached an agreement that would allow 20,000 individuals to emigrate annually.

Immigration data collected in 1980 by Robert L. Bach revealed that most Marielitos were neither from the upper nor the “bottom layer of Cuban society. They possessed education and skill levels above the average for those remaining in Cuba and about the same as those who arrived in the 1970s” (40). Additionally, they increasingly resembled the racial diversity of Cuba since “approximately 20 percent were Black or
mulatto, compared to just seven percent of the Cubans who arrived between 1960 and 1964” (Duany, 2017).

Not welcomed by many exiles who had settled in Miami decades earlier, “Mariel Cubans faced unemployment, low-paid work, and welfare dependence” at least in the first years after their arrival (Duany, 2017). Furthermore, many were ostracized for their political opinions, religious beliefs, or sexual orientation (2007, 154). Propagating hostility towards Marielitos, the leading Miami newspaper, The Miami Herald, began to publish articles portraying them as undesired immigrants of different caliber than the émigrés of prior waves. For instance, in June 1980, the newspaper ran an editorial “reviewing the negative impact of Mariel on Dade County,” and claiming that Castro sent “hundreds of criminals to the United States” (Portes and Stepick 1993, 25).

Notwithstanding the negative coverage, 80 percent of Marielitos did not have a criminal record. Of the other 20 percent, most were political prisoners or convicted of minor crimes such as “alcoholism, homosexuality, prostitution, extravagant behavior, vagrancy, and dealing in the black market” (García 1996, 64); and only 2 percent had committed felonies (Boswell et al. 1988). Thus, the migrants’ negative reception by the US government and their disparaging portrayal in the media hindered the assimilation process for many members of the Mariel exodus. On October 31, 1980, following an agreement between the US and Cuba, Cubans were no longer allowed to leave the island without US visas. Fourteen years would pass before another mass exodus of Cubans.
The Balsero Crisis (August-September, 1994)

As Cuba experienced dire economic shortfalls following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Cubans wanting to improve their economic conditions made desperate attempts to leave Cuba. According to Duany (2011), “the decline in the material conditions of daily life in Cuba, including food and water shortages, power blackouts, deteriorating public health, and a decaying infrastructure” propelled individuals to risk their lives in hopes of reaching Miami’s shores (47).

Desperation and deteriorating conditions in Cuba led to the hijacking of eleven vessels between June 4 and August 26, 1994. On August 5, 1994, in a spontaneous manifestation known as El Maleconazo, “20,000 to 30,000 people demonstrated in Havana streets, smashing windows of government-run establishments” (Mesa-Lago 1995, 4). Furthermore, a prohibition placed on remittances by the US government strained the livelihoods of individuals who relied on US dollars to make ends meet (Ackerman and Clark 1995, 44). Castro, blaming the US for encouraging rebellious action against him, once again turned a blind eye towards undocumented emigration. On August 12, 1994, he announced that those who wanted to leave Cuba would be permitted to do so. As a result, an estimated 31,500 balseros risked their lives to cross the Florida Straits on makeshift rafts and vessels between August 7 and September 14, 1994. Most of these individuals were White males, below the age of forty, and departed from Havana (Mesa-Lago 1995).

On September 9, 1994, following a series of negotiations and a signed agreement, the US and Cuba agreed to implement measures to discourage undocumented migration from Cuba. Castro agreed to increase police presence in coastal areas, and the US
promised to send anyone rescued at sea to “safe-haven” facilities in other countries, and to “discontinue the practice of granting provisional admission” for undocumented Cuban immigrants (Mesa-Lago 1995, 13). Additionally, at least 20,000 Cubans would be allowed legal entry to the US on a yearly basis “through family reunification, as refugees, and as winners of el bombo, the visa lottery” (Henken 2005, 394). Although these negotiations gradually put a halt to the exodus, on May 2, 1995, President Clinton’s administration once again amended US policy towards Cuba. Despite the persistence of the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, asylum would not be automatically granted to Cubans intercepted at sea, who would instead be subject to deportation. Under the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” policy, only Cuban migrants who reached US soil would be allowed to remain in the US (Duany 2017).


From 1995 to 2017, 716,519 Cubans, mostly from “the lower and middle rungs of the labor force,” arrived in the “US by land, air, or sea, both with and without immigrant visas” (Duany 2017). Having grown up under a Marxist-Leninist regime, some of their political views differed from those of early exiles. For instance, while the exiles had zero tolerance for negotiations with Castro, later arrivals often supported the normalization of US-Cuba relations, so they could more easily communicate, visit, and preserve family ties with the island.

Nevertheless, both groups put their differences aside in hopes of influencing US officials to allow Elián González, a six-year-old child rescued at sea in 1999, to remain in the US, even though the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” policy required that he be repatriated to
Cuba. The Cuban-American community held protests and demanded that he be allowed to remain in the US, especially since his mother had died in hopes of reaching the US. Ultimately, US government officials refused to concede to local demands and returned the child to his father in Cuba. This decision was a defeat for the exile community, which saw this move as a win for Castro (Grenier and Pérez 2003, 101-5).

During President Barack Obama’s second administration (2013-17), Cubans feared that ongoing negotiations between the two countries would hinder their plans of migrating to the US. On December 17, 2014, Obama announced his plans to reestablish diplomatic relations with Cuba, beginning with removing Cuba’s designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, “reopening embassies in their respective capitals,” and making “extensive amendments to existing sanctions against Cuba, easing trade, communication, travel, and remittances, and other financial transactions with the island” (Duany 2017). In 2016, worried about the impending policies, an estimated 38,500 Cubans traveled through South and Central America to cross the US-Mexico border, and 7,400 Cuban rafters were intercepted at sea by the US Coast Guard. Finally, in January 2017, President Obama suspended the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” policy and deemed all Cubans entering the US without visas “inadmissible and subject to deportation like other foreign nationals,” and terminated the Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program (Duany 2017).

Despite their comparative lack of political influence in the US, Eckstein (2009) argues that post-Soviet émigrés did more to transform communist Cuba and erode socialist underpinnings with “their cross-border bonding and income-sharing,” and more moderate political views than earlier exiles (8). She argues that “their transnational ties infused new materialist norms in Cuba, decreased islanders’ economic dependence on the
state, eroded Cuban state control of the economy and society, introduced new income inequities, and undermined the socialist basis of stratification premised on performance in the state-run economy” (232). Moreover, whereas most Golden Exiles (Exile Cohort) opposed the lifting of the US embargo, individuals from the post-Soviet migration wave (New Cubans) often blamed *el bloqueo* (the US embargo) as the main source of Cuba’s economic woes (165). The 2004 FIU Cuba Poll revealed that most émigrés who arrived from 1965 to 1973 supported the continuation of the US embargo, while only half of those who arrived from 1990 to 1995 expressed similar views (Grenier and Gladwin 2014).

An analysis of data collected from eight FIU Cuba polls (1997-2016) reveals that opposition to the embargo and the favoring of diplomatic relations increased with each cohort. For instance, 58 percent of the 1995-2004 cohort and 70.5 percent of the 2005-2016 cohort opposed the embargo; meanwhile, 73.8 percent of the 1995-2004 cohort and 89.5 percent of the 2005-2016 cohort supported diplomatic relations with Cuba (Grenier 2017, 10). More recently, the 2020 FIU Cuba Poll revealed that approximately 60 percent of Cuban Americans currently living in Miami-Dade support the continuation of the embargo, compared to 51 percent in 2018. Additionally, the data reveal a retrenching of support for maintaining diplomatic relations with Cuba, with 58 percent of Cuban Americans currently living in Miami-Dade County expressing support in 2020, compared to 67 percent in 2018 (Grenier and Gladwin 2018, 10; Grenier and Lai 2020, 11, 19).

Unlike the early exiles, many post-Soviet émigrés have cultivated transnational ties and engaged in “cross-border bonding” with their families in Cuba by maintaining open lines of communication, traveling, and sending money to help support family in
Cuba (Eckstein 2009, 133). The 2020 FIU Cuba Poll reveals that 47 percent of Cuban Americans in Miami send money to friends and family in Cuba, of which 40 percent arrived before 1995 and 66 percent arrived after. The data reveal that more recent arrivals to the US are more likely to send remittances than those who arrived prior to 1995, despite having “fewer resources to contribute to relatives on the island” (Grenier and Lai 2020, 28).

Today, cross-border bonding is enhanced by social media platforms that increase opportunities for long-distance sharing of information and ideas, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The Mariel exodus was precipitated by the floods of Cuban exiles returning to Cuba and flaunting stories of success in America. Today, visual images in the form of photographs or videos are easily shared as more Cubans on the island own cell phones and have access to WIFI. Shortly after being appointed president of Cuba on February 24, 2008, Raúl Castro lifted a ban on private cell phones. In 2015, following negotiations with President Obama, US companies sought investment in Cuba’s telecommunications sector. The emergence of WIFI hotspots increased the flow of information to and from Cuba. In an article published on National Public Radio (NPR) on December 5, 2018, writer and editor Bill Chappell quoted the following information found on the website of the Telecommunications Company of Cuba S.A. (ETECSA): “with a population of more than 11.1 million people, Cuba currently has 5.3 million mobile lines and 1.3 million landlines.” Within a ten-year period (2008-2018), Cuban citizens with access to cell phones and Internet could more easily communicate with family members in the US.
President Obama’s progress towards normalizing US-Cuba relations was circumvented under President Donald J. Trump, who ordered new restrictions on trade and travel. The “Fact Sheet on Cuba Policy,” published on the website of the US Department of the Treasury on June 16, 2017, summarized Trump’s revisions made to the Obama-era policies towards Cuba. Significant changes included the prohibition of individual or self-directed travel. Individuals wishing to travel to Cuba for non-educational purposes were required to travel in groups. Approximately two years later, on June 4, 2019, President Trump announced that group travel for people-to-people educational endeavors would also be prohibited, and “the exports of passenger vessels, recreational vessels, and private aircraft would cease,” therefore reversing Obama’s 2016 policies allowing travel from the US to Cuba on cruise ships (US Department of the Treasury 2019). The Trump administration’s goal was to pressure the Cuban government for its human rights violations and for its support of the Venezuelan socialist government, headed by Nicolás Maduro (Sullivan 2021, 24). Effective October 9, 2019, remittances could no longer exceed 1,000 US dollars per quarter, and could only be sent to support the private, nonstate, economic activity of self-employed persons (US Department of the Treasury 2019). On October 25, 2019, CNN reported that the Trump administration announced further restrictions limiting travel to Cuba. Effective December 10, 2019, commercial flights to nine destinations in Cuba were suspended, excluding Havana (Kaufman and Lyer 2019). Moreover, the Trump Administration sanctioned the companies that transported Venezuelan oil to Cuba leading to gas shortages, further impacting Cuba’s economy. Lastly, on January 11, 2021, as the Trump Administration
approached its end, Cuba was designated again as a state sponsor of terrorism (Sullivan 2021, 31-32).

Despite President Joe Biden’s previous announcement that he would reverse Trump-era policies, his administration made no changes during the first six months in office. On May 25, 2021, the US Secretary of State, Anthony J. Blinken, issued a notice listing Cuba as a country that is not cooperating fully with the US’ antiterrorism efforts. Moreover, the widespread anti-government protests that erupted in Cuba on July 11, 2021 (see Chapter 7) further complicated US-Cuba relations. On July 22, 2021, President Biden, in response to the Cuban regime’s crackdown against protestors, imposed new sanctions targeting the head of the Cuban military and the division of the Cuban Ministry of Interior driving the crackdown—to make them accountable for their actions.

**Economic Mobility**

Most Cuban émigrés who arrived from 1959 to 1973 came equipped with social, political, and economic capital that helped them establish a successful ethnic enclave that would foster the adaptation process of future waves. Initially located in Little Havana, the enclave reshaped the cultural, political, and economic landscape of Miami. A Cuban-American identity began to consolidate following the termination of the Freedom Flights in 1973. Realizing that they would not return to Cuba soon, many émigrés sought US citizenship, became heavily involved in civic affairs, and established stronger ties to their local communities (García 1996, 108). According to García, their desire to become US citizens emerged from a “sense of loyalty to the country that gave them refuge” (113). All these factors played a role in the success story of Cuban Americans in Miami.
Migration scholars have proposed different reasons, though not necessarily in opposition to another, for the swift integration of Cuban Americans in Miami-Dade County. Lisandro Pérez, in “Immigrant Economic Adjustment and Family Organization: The Cuban Success Story Reexamined,” employed a household-level approach to examine the relative success of Cuban Americans. He focused on the organization of Cuban immigrant families and found that having “more workers per family” accounted for higher family income levels in the US (1986, 10). After examining the 1980 US Census, he identified three structural characteristics that facilitated upward mobility: “1) high rates of female labor-force participation; 2) low fertility; and 3) the importance of the three-generation family and the economic contribution of the elderly” (11). The elderly played a significant role in the economic stability of their households by helping financially and caring for their grandchildren. A three-generational household permitted young parents to work while leaving their children in the care of the grandparents. The typical structure of exile families allowed them to achieve upward mobility within the enclave in a short period of time (17). Many Cuban émigrés who arrived from 1959 to 1973 had the means necessary to achieve the American Dream—economic and social capital, extensive financial assistance received under the CRP, and familial support (monetary and childcare).

In *The Legacy of Exile*, Guillermo J. Grenier and Lisandro Pérez (2003) examined the influence, political power, and economic success of the exiles who arrived between 1959 and 1962. They largely credited the exiles’ entrepreneurial success to their unique shared experience, or the “culture of exceptionalism,” and to the belief that they could control their own destiny (30, 42). They also argued that the first exiles arrived in Miami
at a convenient socioeconomic juncture—during the Civil Rights Movement and US economic expansion, or postwar boom of the 1960s. According to Grenier and Pérez, “the Cubans arrived as a tailor-made minority: White, skilled, and, so all thought, temporary” (46). Originating largely in the upper echelons of Cuban society, many of the exiles brought economic and social capital to the US. Additionally, they were labeled as political “refugees” by the US government and were offered financial assistance under the CRP, easing and accelerating economic adaptation in Miami. Grenier and Pérez argue that the early exiles’ common background and memories of their homeland reinforced their sense of solidarity. Thus, their social capital was exemplified by their reliance on social networks and familial ties to achieve upward mobility (53-54).

After conducting an ethnographic study of Cubans in Union City, New Jersey, sociologist Yolanda Prieto (2007) credits the successful integration of early exiles to their “middle class work ethic and positive reception by the US government,” which includes the substantial benefits guaranteed under the CRP (8, 15). Because the CRP only provided benefits to those who entered the US prior to October 1, 1978, and was officially eliminated on December 1, 1980, émigrés who arrived during the Mariel exodus and those who followed did not have the same opportunities for upward economic mobility (Prieto 2007, 12).

Prieto’s findings support the argument made by Silvia Pedraza in her 1985 book, *Political and Economic Migrants in America: Cubans and Mexicans*. Pedraza describes how Cubans arriving in the 1960s and 1970s were labeled as political immigrants and received an abundance of help from the US government, while Mexicans, labeled as economic immigrants, were largely ignored (2007, 9). Furthermore, she argues that the
intervention by the US government led to different adaptation outcomes for Cuban and Mexican immigrants. According to Pedraza, favorable government policies such as the Cuban Refugee Program (CRP) “resulted in a process of cumulative advantage for Cubans” arriving in the 1960s and 1970s. However, for Mexican immigrants, “the lack of state policy to facilitate and support their structural assimilation amounted to cumulative disadvantage, reinforcing their social class disadvantage” (Pedraza 1985, 13).

No longer perceived as political refugees or exiles, later waves of Cuban émigrés did not have the same advantages that helped facilitate the upward mobility of the earlier waves. In “A Bifurcated Enclave: The Economic Evolution of the Cuban and Cuban-American Population of Metropolitan Miami,” Alejandro Portes and Aaron Puhrmann (2015) describe the difficult experiences of Cuban immigrants who arrived in the US beginning in 1980 and examine the factors contributing to the subsequent bifurcation of the Cuban enclave. According to Portes and Puhrmann (2015, 41), negative modes of reception and hostile attitudes by the general public towards the Marielitos “marked the beginnings of the bifurcation of the Cuban expatriate population into two distinct communities, with significant consequences for the future.” The bifurcation was initiated after local Anglo elites lobbied for a referendum making English the official language of Miami in 1980, repealing the bilingual-bicultural ordinance of 1973 (Eckstein 2009, 49; Portes and Puhrmann 2015, 3). This measure propelled the political mobilization of members of earlier exile cohorts to run for office, both local and federal, and successfully acquire government positions, eventually including seats in the US House of Representatives and the US senate. “By the mid-1980s, the mayors of Miami, Hialeah, West Miami, and several smaller municipalities in Dade County were Cuban born”
Portes and Puhrmann argue that the continuous influx of post-1980 Cuban émigrés, their “lower average levels of education and occupational skills,” and the lack of access to the resources provided by the enclave, led to a downward trend in median household income. As a group, post-1980 émigrés earned less than those arriving in the 1960s and 1970s. Most notably, the median household income of a Cuban-American family in 1999 reached $40,085. However, by 2010 the median household income declined to $34,919 (Portes and Puhrmann 2015, 47).

Gastón Fernández’s (2007) study of Marielitos highlights the lingering effects of stigmatization on immigrant incorporation. After examining data obtained from the 5% Public Use Data Sample of the person unit records from the 2000 Census, Fernández argues that “the Mariel case demonstrates the important role of states and media in molding the social identity of immigrant groups, affecting the overall context for their social incorporation” (620-21). Fernández found that for many Marielitos, negative stereotypes and stigmatization hindered the adaptation process, demonstrated by high levels of unemployment, “depression, incarceration, and economic hardship” when compared to earlier waves (620). For instance, according to the 2000 US Census, the Marielitos’ unemployment rate was 5.8 percent, compared to 3.6 percent for those who arrived in the 1960s, and 4.1 percent for those who arrived in the 1970s (Fernández 2007, 614). The current anti-immigrant rhetoric in the US may present similar challenges to post-Soviet Cuban émigrés and slow down the adaptation process. Additionally, feelings of alienation may elicit feelings of resentment towards the US.

In The Immigrant Divide: How Cuban Americans Changed the US and Their Homeland, Susan Eckstein (2009, 80) examines the forces that impacted the economic
adaptation of later Cuban émigré cohorts in the US. She found that “émigrés, who knew island life before the revolution, have tended to do better economically than émigrés who grew up after the social transformation, in ways not explicable merely in terms of their greater number of years in the US.” She also found that context mattered. For instance, towards the late twentieth-century Miami’s manufacturing jobs began to disappear as it transitioned to a postindustrial city (74). The integration of international markets and advances in technology have led to dwindling middle-class job opportunities in the US. Global trends in the labor market have made it increasingly difficult for both US natives and immigrants to achieve upward mobility without a bachelor’s or advanced degree. Eckstein argues that the enclave thesis alone cannot account for the rise or decline of economic opportunities resulting from global restructuring (84).

Immigrants, including Cubans, move to the US hoping that their children will have better opportunities and thus achieve the American Dream. However, global economic trends and stigmatization can hinder the advancement of children of immigrants. Portes and Rumbaut argue that unfavorable conditions in the host society—racial discrimination, the bifurcation of the US labor market, and the consolidation of a marginalized population in inner cities—hinder educational attainment and upward economic mobility for immigrants and their children, and how they face these challenges will determine to what segment of US society they will assimilate into (2001, 55). For example, segmented assimilation is evident in that some children of immigrants achieve upward assimilation while others experience a downward path.

Lured by the illusion of the American Dream and the ideology of meritocracy, adult Cuban émigrés face challenges as they seek opportunities for economic mobility in
the contemporary precarious economy of the US. Individuals who ponder leaving their homeland in search of better opportunities must consider the sacrifices that will be made if they decide to emigrate. For instance, many individuals choose to leave their relatives, spouses, and children, to make and send them money from abroad. If unable to achieve economic success, feelings of disappointment or frustration towards the US may emerge as immigrants realize that the idea of a better life in America, or the American Dream, is not so easily achieved.

According to Jennifer Hochschild (1995, 16-17), success can be measured in three ways: (1) absolute; (2) relative; or (3) competitive. If measured as absolute, “achieving the American dream implies reaching some threshold of well-being, higher than where one began but not necessarily dazzling” (16). If measured as relative, success can be interpreted as becoming better than something or someone else, such as one’s childhood, siblings, neighbors, or people that stayed in their home country. If measured competitively, or by the ability to outperform others, resources and opportunities must be available for one’s expectations to be met (16-25).

**Conclusion**

Cuban émigrés are among the millions of immigrants who have reached the US in hopes of improving their quality of life and achieving the American Dream. However, the post-1959 Cuban diaspora is unique in that early arrivals had substantial resources not available to other immigrant groups because of Cold War politics—particularly the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, which provided a swift path to US citizenship, and the Cuban Refugee Program (1961-1978), which assigned massive federal funds to facilitate the
refugees’ incorporation into the US. For post-Soviet Cuban émigrés (1991- ), the lack of financial assistance from the US government and scarcity of social capital make it difficult to achieve economic mobility. Despite the implementation of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” policy between 1995 and 2017, Cuban émigrés continued to put their lives at risk knowing that they might be repatriated if intercepted at sea. Individuals motivated by powerful tropes about the American Dream may fail to understand the challenges they will have to overcome to achieve economic mobility. Those challenges include the decline of jobs that pay middle-income wages, racial inequality, limited English proficiency, and the need to acquire academic credentials to earn an adequate income.

In “Cubans in Exile, 1959-1989: The State of the Research,” Pedraza (1992) concluded that social scientists heavily researched the Cuban success story, from the mid-1960s through the 1970s, “to capture and document the details of the exodus,” highlighting “the changing social characteristics of the initial two major waves of migration to the US” (236). During the 1980s, more scholars focused on analyzing the racial and ethnic relations of Cuban émigrés with the host society (Pedraza 1992, 241). Pedraza underlined the need for further study of Cuban immigrants as comprising distinct political generations, a topic she later explored in Political Disaffection in Cuba’s Revolution and Exodus (2007), along with Susan Eckstein, in The Immigrant Divide: How Cuban Americans Changed the US and their Homeland (2009). Pedraza (1992, 251) also underlined the importance of exploring other aspects of the experience of Cuban émigrés instead of only focusing on their relative accomplishments. According to Pedraza, topics that merit further study include “poor Cubans, working-class Cubans,
elderly Cubans. . . and the political generations that coexist in this exile and its immigration” (251).

My research contributes to the field of Cuban studies by documenting if the goals of Cuban émigrés who arrived from 1995 through 2017 have been achieved and the multitude of feelings—satisfaction, resentment, frustration, and/or accomplishment—that emerge as they work toward them. Additionally, this study documents how émigrés feel about the discrepancies between expectations of life in the US and lived realities, if they feel they have adapted, and how they negotiate their cultural identities. Since most émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave were unskilled, semi-skilled, or service workers in Cuba, it was more challenging for them to achieve upward mobility in the US when compared to the earlier exiles.
5. THE AMERICAN DREAM VS. LIVED REALITIES

Like the Marielitos who arrived in 1980, most of the participants in my study had heard of the American Dream and learned about life in US from phone calls, letters, or visits of family members who had left Cuba before them. The few without family living in the US heard stories from friends or people in the streets, or from American movies broadcasted on Cuban television. Popular stories of material abundance and economic success counteracted the Cuban government’s propaganda demonizing the US. Of the thirty-five participants in the study, twenty-five stated that they heard of the American Dream while still living in Cuba.

This chapter reveals the eight themes (see Figure 1) that emerged when participants addressed the first two questions of this study: (1) How did Cubans who moved to Miami from 1995-2017 conceptualize the American Dream prior to arrival and what influenced the construction of those ideas? and (2) how do the realities of living in America validate or invalidate their pre-migration expectations?

Figure 1.

Themes That Emerged During the Data Analysis Phase

- Life is Better than Imagined
- Life is More Difficult than Imagined
- Life is as Expected
- Work and Time
- Perspectives of Those Who Lived Abroad
- No Goals, No Worries
- Criticizing Newcomers
- The American Dream Depends on Society
When asked to explain their motivations for leaving Cuba, (1) eleven participants stated that they became frustrated or disillusioned with the limited opportunities and lack of access to basic goods; (2) twelve participants acknowledged that government policies hindered their ability to progress economically; (3) ten participants stated that family members who had already left encouraged them to leave; and (4) three participants indicated that they left for political reasons (see Figure 2). For instance, Mercedes said, “I didn’t want to stay in Cuba because professionally speaking, it was very politicized.” Alicia became disenchanted when she learned that she did not have freedom of expression to publish academic articles without government review.

**Figure 2.**

**Motivations for Leaving Cuba**

![Motivations for Leaving Cuba](image)

Once in the US, many Cuban émigrés encountered difficulty reconciling the promise of the American Dream with the reality of more difficult economic conditions. When asked to describe their experiences, six participants stated that living in the US was “like being born again,” or having to “reinvent” oneself. For instance, Anabel said that
living in the US “is like being born again, like having to learn to walk, to talk.” Rubén stated that “you must reinvent yourself because those tools you bring aren’t useful here.”

Although most expressed satisfaction with their life in the US, for some participants, experiences engaging with socioeconomic conditions informed their definitions and critiques of the American Dream, or how they feel about life in America (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.**

**How Participants Feel about Life in the United States**

![Bar chart showing how participants feel about life in the United States.](chart)

**Life Is Better Than Expected**

Eight participants indicated that life in the US is better than they had expected it to be. This section presents a selection of those narratives. Reyna, who arrived in 2014, remembers hearing various interpretations of the American Dream while living in Cuba. She explained that its interpretation is influenced by an individual’s perspective, background, and necessities, and provided examples of differing views:
I know people that the American Dream was to come here, not to leave, but to work and get that money back to Cuba and build their house there. For other people, the American Dream is to come here and live on the system—get the healthcare that the system gives and not do anything else. Other people want to study and get a good job, raise a family in a good neighborhood, buy a house.

Reyna indicated that she has been successful in achieving her goals, and that her American Dream is to (1) graduate with a master’s degree, which she will complete in a year; (2) be a homeowner, a goal that she has already accomplished; (3) start her own family; and (4) bring her fathers\(^1\) to the US. She emphasized that, in the US, there are no limits to what one can achieve. She explained that she feels fortunate to have family members who provided a temporary home and guidance to help her navigate the challenges people face when reestablishing themselves in a new country. She believes that without familial support, it can be difficult for one to adapt, set goals, and become successful.

Listening to people speak of the American Dream and watching representations of it in movies broadcasted on Cuban television, Raquel, who also arrived in 2015, was inspired to come to the US. She said that though Cubans come to the US searching for the dream they imagined, many are confused with its meaning:

Because one thing is what they sell you, and the other is the reality […] and then people in Cuba think that once you get here you will accomplish everything without having to work hard because in Cuba they are taught not to work. Then

---

\(^1\) Laughing, she said it was a long story (referring to her two fathers) but did not elaborate.
they get confused when they come here and they say, “this is not the American Dream, this is not the Yuma”² it is the llama³ [laughing] . . . because you have to struggle, you have to work too hard. If you do not come with that idea, its best if you do not come at all.

Raquel told me that she already knew that she would have to work hard to succeed and was not surprised at the challenges she encountered when she arrived in the US. She described the American Dream as being able to achieve the goals one sets for his or herself, no matter how big or small, such as becoming a bartender, waiter, boss, or engineer. For Raquel, life in the US is better than what she expected. Her dream, to see her daughter become successful, is coming to fruition. Despite having arrived at age fifty-one, she has been able to achieve the professional goals that she set for herself. In the evenings, she worked in retail, and took courses in the mornings to achieve her goal of becoming a behavior therapy technician. Later, while working for Medicaid, she took and passed the exam to become a behavior therapy technician, the job she holds today.

Annie, who arrived in 1999, never imagined herself living in the US. She had been a professional dancer in Cuba who traveled to different countries, including Japan, Canada, Mexico, and various places throughout Europe, to perform with a dance company. She imagined that she was destined to marry a Spaniard and move to Spain, since she had become friends with Spaniards who often traveled to Cuba. Prior to coming to the US, she had never heard of the American Dream. Nevertheless, she learned about

---

² *La Yuma* is a popular Cuban expression used to refer to the United States.

³ Translates to “flame.” In Cuba, *en llamas*, or “on fire,” is a colloquial expression used to describe someone who is in trouble or experiencing a difficult situation. Here the participant uses it to describe the difficulties of adapting to life the US.
the US from her grandmother who listened to Radio Martí during the Balsero Crisis of 1994 to hear the names of Cuban émigrés who arrived safely to Miami’s shores. While in Cuba, she had seen photographs of her cousins who were born in Miami. She said, “The pinkish kids in the hospital wearing pretty clothing. Wow! You saw those things, but it was like a dream, I mean it was another planet.” She said that she is grateful and content with her accomplishments in the US, especially since she has been able to continue performing and teaching dance and manages her own company. She asserted that though she does not live like a rich person, she feels accomplished for having bought her own apartment in 2004.

Modesto, who arrived in 2014, defined the American Dream as emigrating to the US from any country to achieve one’s goals. Unlike most of my participants, Modesto explained that indoctrination in Cuba influenced him to believe that life in Miami would be too difficult to manage. While in Cuba, he remembers telling his wife that he did not want to go to the US. To his surprise, life was not as challenging as he previously thought. Shortly after arrival, his in-laws suggested that he apply for a job in his field of study. He applied and was hired as a computer engineer for a company in downtown Miami. With an annual income of $150,000, he now believes that if you have ambition, the US provides many opportunities to achieve the American Dream.

Having lived in Venezuela for four years, Sebastián, who arrived in 2009, had imagined how life in the US would be like. He said that he already understood how a free market functioned, and how to manage credit and debt. His goal was to become a

---

4 A US government radio station that broadcasts to Cuba.
physical therapist in the US, the profession he had practiced in Cuba. When asked if he had heard the term, American Dream, he stated that “most of the time the people say the American Dream in quotations because maybe you can get it . . . It’s like American people say, if something sounds beautiful it’s not the reality.” He asserted that, although most people project the US as a country of opportunity, “. . . you have to move your fucking ass 5 if you want to obtain something. Nothing is coming from the sky, just rain.” Despite acknowledging that one must sacrifice personal and family time to be successful in the US, life is better than he imagined it would be. After learning English, he began his journey to achieve upward mobility by earning a master’s degree, obtaining a job as clinical director, and starting his own business. His goal is to complete the doctoral degree that he is currently pursuing, and to live a comfortable and happy life with his family. He expressed satisfaction over the fact that he purchased a home after only three years of living in the US, and currently drives a Mercedes Benz and a Cadillac. His responses suggest that his educational and professional accomplishments, and his ability to purchase material comforts, are evidence of achieving the American Dream.

**Life Is As Expected**

Eleven participants indicated that life in the US is how they expected it to be. For instance, Luisito and Rubén did not expect life in the US to be easy and criticized other Cubans for believing otherwise. Luisito, who arrived in 2016, told me that in Cuba young people have a distorted idea of the American Dream, a commonly used phrase, because

---

5 The participant apologized for using derogatory language.
they believe it is easy to make money without having to work hard. Since his father had already been living in the US, Luisito believes that he had more realistic expectations about how life would be. He said that no matter how many times it was explained “one doesn’t see reality until one arrives here.” After living in the US, he began to understand the true meaning of the American Dream: to have liberty and achieve your goals. When I asked him if he has achieved his American Dream he responded:

The American Dream is something that you start building, and you’ll be trying all of your life to achieve it. . . I have made it possible for my children to study, that they will be people who can achieve something, that they can have a family, that they can be good men. For me, the American Dream is not having money.

Contrary to what a lot of people think, for me the American Dream is to be healthy, it is to be able to have, as one says, the freedom of expression that one often does not understand because it is eliminated in Cuba.

The expectations that he had prior to arriving were influenced by his father who had warned him of the difficulties and challenges that he would have to face if he migrated to the US. Luisito enrolled in a vocational program after arriving in the US and currently works as a technologist at a clinic.

Rubén, who arrived in 2010, learned about life in the US from an early age since his father had regularly traveled from Cuba to Europe and understood how the free market functioned. His father warned him that even though the US is a place of material abundance, it did not mean that he could have it all. He told him that success was possible one step at a time. Rubén believes that Cubans have false expectations when they first arrive here but soon realize that life is more difficult than they imagined. He
admits that at first it was extremely difficult for him to adapt to life in the US, especially since he had to work in jobs which he considered menial. For instance, he described feeling embarrassed while working at a Wendy’s fast-food restaurant washing pots and pans since he had held a professional job in Cuba. He was eventually able to become a public-school math teacher and is currently a social worker; he hopes to eventually become a business owner and achieve his American Dream: financial freedom.

**Life Is More Difficult Than Expected**

Ten participants stated that adapting to life in the US has been more challenging than they anticipated. Argelina, who arrived in 2009, learned about the US from stories that her father shared with her. Like other participants, she described how the dire economic conditions during the Special Period inspired many individuals to leave Cuba. She also described the *doble moral* (double standard) that still exists today—“the people go out and scream ‘long live the revolution,’ but deep inside they want to scream something else.” Though she had greater expectations, Argelina is happy to be in the US because she has a better quality of life than she did in Cuba. She has been able to purchase a car, pay her bills, rent a home, and travel, but most importantly, she has freedom of speech. She admitted that she does not live the best life but is grateful to live in a country where she has the freedom to express herself and the opportunities to live “not with many things, but with the things that are necessary.” Having arrived at age forty-four, life for Argelina has been more difficult than she imagined. She feels that the minimum wage should be higher to keep up with the rising cost of living, at least in Miami it has dramatically increased since she arrived. With frustration in her voice, she
explained how difficult it has been to work as a nail technician and to save enough money to purchase a home. She explained:

It’s been impossible for me to purchase a home. The minimum costs $300,500 or almost $400,000. And when you buy it, you have to do a bunch of other things that need to be done to it. So, it’s not easy to invest in a home. The salary you earn isn’t enough to achieve things that at this point, I thought I would have managed to have.

However, she is satisfied because her daughter has graduated from the university, and her son will also soon graduate. She explained that, even though education is free in Cuba, “you become a slave of the government.”

Despite hearing about the American Dream while living in Cuba, Luz, who arrived in 2009, was not interested in migrating in hopes of acquiring an abundance of wealth or material resources. She simply wanted her daughter to live in a place with greater opportunities, to have freedom of choice, and to become an independent woman. She believes the American Dream is to prosper and that it can be achieved by working hard. When I asked if she has achieved the American Dream, she said:

Well, my priority was to educate my daughter. I think I’ve achieved what I imagined. In other aspects we haven’t achieved great things. For example, we haven’t been able to buy a house, but I think that’s the least of it. At the point where we are with our experiences and things, I can tell you that I am happy and that is my dream right now, to be happy.

Despite never hearing the phrase “American Dream” while living in Cuba, Anna María, who arrived in 2015, had heard stories of the numerous opportunities available in
the US. Currently working as a server in a hospital cafeteria, she believes that life is more
difficult than she imagined. Having arrived at age forty-seven, Anna María believes that
life would have been easier if she had arrived at an earlier age. She feels like she has not
been able to accomplish her vision of the American Dream, but she does have more
tranquility and material comforts than she did in Cuba. She complained about the high
cost of healthcare and medical bills, and the low wages received for working difficult
jobs.

While still living in Cuba, Ricardo, who arrived in 2016, imagined that in the US
he would be able to achieve the American Dream: find a stable job, own a home, have
health insurance, be in good health, and enjoy liberty and tranquility. He completed a
vocational program and currently works as an electrician. His dream is also to see his
sons graduate from a US university. He told me that life is not how he expected it to be,
since he has only been able to achieve half of the American Dream: to have liberty. He
has not been able to achieve the other half because prices are too high, it is difficult to
find work, and he has been unable to purchase a home. He explained that by choosing to
leave Cuba he sacrificed everything—a job, a private business\(^6\) he had for many years,
his wife, and his children. However, despite the challenges he faces in the US, Ricardo
feels happy and exclaimed that “those who don’t sacrifice, won’t move forward.”

María, who arrived in 2017, said that “of course” she had heard of the American
Dream from friends and family who had been living in the US. She also explained that in
Cuba some people say negative things about the US and advise you against leaving. They

---

\(^6\)Cuba’s private sector expanded after 2011 when Cuba’s Communist Party passed a series of liberalizing
social and economic policies to reform its economic model. See Mesa-Lago (2017).
believe that with money, one can live a “good life” in Cuba. María stated that for her it is not about the money, but about moving forward in life. She believes that the US is the best country in the world and does not argue with those that believe otherwise. Nonetheless, her life is not exactly as she had imagined it to be. She said, it “isn’t how one imagines, because one imagines paradise . . . because one always imagines something better.” For María, the American Dream is to accomplish the objectives she set for herself. She believes that it will take her approximately five years to achieve her dream. Although life is not as she expected, she is happy with the small strides she has made in the US. “I think that when I buy my house, I’ll be able to feel happier. When my daughter is already a college student . . . I think that will be the moment. It’s still too early to have the American Dream.” María explained that she and her family live in a small apartment but stressed that she was not complaining about her life. Although things are going well, she believes that one always strives to do better.

While describing the incongruencies between expectations and experiences, a common theme emerged among the responses of participants: too much work and not enough time. These findings suggest that it is difficult for many Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave to adjust to US working standards—working long hours, working weekends, having to stand for long periods of time, and dedicating more time for work and less time for family. The lack of middle-class job resulting from the postindustrial bifurcation of the labor market makes it difficult for émigrés to find decent-paying, stable, and desirable employment, thus making it difficult to achieve upward mobility. Many of the participants acknowledged that to achieve economic mobility they would have to earn a college or vocational degree.
Work and Time: *Un sueño que no se te quita*\(^7\)

When describing the reality of life in the US, fourteen participants expressed discontent with the amount of time they spend working and complained about not having enough time to spend with loved ones or to do things they enjoy (see Appendix D). Some participants unfavorably compared their work-life balance in the US with their work-life balance in Cuba.

Yanet, who arrived in 2011, had been warned by relatives in Cuba that life in the US would be difficult. With tears in her eyes Yanet, who has two part-time jobs, described how difficult it is for her to make time for her daughter. It is shocking to her that despite being in the US for nine years, she had been unable to find a job where she could work from Monday through Friday to allow her more time to spend with family. She has a full-time job for an airline company, and a part-time job as a realtor. Since she works on Saturdays and Sunday, she is extremely tired when she gets home after her shifts. She elaborated:

> When I get home, I’m tired since I had been awake since 1:00 am. In Cuba there was more time. You have more people around to support you. I had more time to spend with my family. Here we sometimes don’t even have enough time for our children. When you arrive home from work it’s about food, homework, you know? But in the long run you can have everything you want.

Though she would like to attend college to increase her wages, Yanet is worried about

---

\(^7\) Statement uttered by a participant, which translates to “it’s a dream that never leaves you.”
her lack of English proficiency and her age. She may consider a vocational program instead.

Anabel, who arrived in 2015, works part-time as a behavioral health technician and has a full-time job at a research development company. She underestimated the challenges she would encounter shortly after arriving. With passion in her voice, she stated, “you can have liberty, but you must work too hard to study and acquire things. Here you have to sacrifice too much. It’s that when you work eight hours, go to school at night, it’s difficult. You get home at night, and you’re too tired. But I realized that it’s worth it to study and strive.” Both Yanet and Anabel complain about lack of time, but also acknowledge that the sacrifice is necessary to achieve long-term goals. Comparably, Aimé, who arrived in 2003 and is currently unemployed, did know what to expect prior to arriving in the US. She said that even though she enjoys her life, too much time is invested in having to work to pay for everyday necessities. She said, “. . . sometimes we go beyond what we need. We want a lot more and we want more . . . and that’s where you have to have a limit, because if you don’t, you’re going to spend your life working. You are not going to have free time and you won’t be able to enjoy yourself.” Aimé earned her associate degree but has not yet returned to complete her bachelor’s. She admitted that her life could be better but refused to feel bad about herself because of her lack of accomplishments.

The lack of time for family was not the only criticism expressed by my participants. David, who arrived in 2015 and is currently unemployed, learned about life in the US from family members who had emigrated to Miami years before. He was also inspired from the stories about the material abundance that existed in “the outside world”
from friends who studied in capitalist countries, and from friends returning from the former Soviet Union. Before making the decision to leave Cuba, some friends and acquaintances advised him against it. According to David, they would say, “don’t be stupid, you have your home here, you have your wife here. With twenty dollars sent to you monthly you can manage your life here. You’re already too old. You’ll work much more there [referring to the US] than you do here [referring to Cuba].” At age fifty-five, he decided to ignore their advice and left Cuba. Despite having to work so hard, he is content with the material things that he has acquired in the US. When asked whether he misses Cuba, David stated that in the US one barely has time to become nostalgic and reflect upon one’s past. Lack of time to reflect disconnected David from his prior life and memories of Cuba. Other participants similarly expressed feeling disconnected from neighbors and feelings of solitude.

Alexis’ awareness and admiration for the US emerged at a young age while spending time with his grandfather as he listened to Radio Martí. He also enjoyed watching American music and films. He began to observe the contradictions permeating Cuban society. For instance, despite the Cuban government’s anti-American rhetoric, he said that most movies played on Cuban television were American. Additionally, one was expected to pay with US dollars, or their equivalency in Cuban Convertible Currency (CUC), when buying many goods at a store. In 1994, Alexis attempted to leave Cuba with a group of people on a raft. Unfortunately, after approximately twenty hours lost at sea, the group turned back to Cuba’s shores. He eventually took cooking classes and worked as a chef at Cuban hotels before making another attempt to leave the island. Approximately six years after his first attempt to leave the island on a raft, he secured an
invitation letter to travel to Russia. After four months in Russia, he traveled to Spain where he lived for thirteen years before moving to the US. Once in the US, he worked as a caterer until he became unemployed because of COVID-19. Despite losing his job, Alexis believes that the American Dream becomes a reality the moment one arrives in the US and begins working on personal goals. He considers the mere fact of leaving Cuba as an accomplishment. His long-term goals are to open a catering business, work as a chef, and continue to follow a simple concept: “if you spend less your life will be better.” He elaborated: “here, people spend too much money on unnecessary things.” He expressed his lack of desire for luxurious items and emphasized that he is not interested in purchasing a home. Nevertheless, the social aspect of life is not exactly how he imagined it would be. He has felt unbearably lonely since arriving in Miami in 2013. “I imagined a different kind of life. I didn’t think that I’d live so isolated from everyone, including my family. Sometimes I spend months without seeing them.”

Cleo, who arrived in 2013 and is currently an in-home patient caregiver, perceived the US as being “another planet” and had no idea of what to expect. Her current notion of the American Dream is to obtain her citizenship, own a home, remain healthy, spend time with family, and attain job stability. However, she also expressed feelings of solitude and sadness at the lack of warmth from people in the US. With a smile on her face, she recalled how her neighbors in Cuba greeted her and invited her for coffee every single day. “People don’t have time. Everyone’s busy.”

Roberto, who arrived in 2007, believes that Cubans who are accustomed to receiving remittances from family members in the US have a distorted understanding of the American Dream. With sarcasm in his voice, he said that Cubans believe that in the
US, “people have machines to print money from,” and that they do not realize that one has to work hard to achieve one’s goals. Though he believes that the US is a country of opportunities, Roberto has not been able to achieve his goals. Since he was unable to pass the exam to earn his veterinarian license, he decided to open a pet grooming business. His major criticism of life in the US is the detachment that one has from his or her neighbors. He explained that in Cuba, uno socializa en una magnitud extraordinaria (one socializes with extraordinary magnitude) and misses the relationships that one had with one’s neighbors. Since he grew up in a small town, people greeted and frequently hugged each other when they crossed paths in the streets. With a melancholic gaze, he shifted the focus of our conversation to describe the loneliness one feels in the US. “Here, sometimes you don’t even know your next-door neighbors, . . . besides, here you live your life a little more closed off. Maybe it’s because of the work system, people arrive home late, tired, having to help their children with homework.”

For Marcos, an employee at a discount auto parts store and a college student, the American Dream is the ability to make decisions, accomplish goals, and enjoy free time. However, since arriving in 2016, life in the US is not how he imagined it would be. He stated that in Cuba, people have a superficial image of the US, and that “when you get to the US, and you compare those ideas with reality, they’re different. They aren’t the same.” He explained that one’s expectations are influenced by family, music, television, and cinema. According to Marcos, life in the US is more difficult and stress-inducing than he expected. He believes that those who make lower wages have a more difficult time adjusting. He emphasized that having to work long hours in pursuit of one’s goals impedes individual freedom and agency—freedom to make time for friends, to go
dancing, to take up a hobby, or to do other things that one enjoys. Additionally, he believes that one’s mental health is negatively impacted by the sacrifices that he or she makes to achieve economic goals. Since time for recreation and/or family is replaced with work or homework, he emphasized that “one basically becomes a work machine because you have to earn money. Basically, it’s work, work, work, produce, produce, produce!”

Of the fourteen participants who expressed frustration with lack of time, Mercedes, who arrived in 1999, shared a more extreme perspective. She describes how Cubans in the US use social media to post images and videos of themselves eating, drinking, and having a good time. With irritation in her voice, she said that a “Facebook live moment” obscures how “you have to work your ass off to pay your bills.” She elaborated:

I think that the Cubans on the island, they live happier that a lot of people that have migrated to other countries. In Cuba they have something which is a luxury—they have time. So, when I go back to the island and they say, “I wish I could have your life,” I say, “don’t wish what you don't know.” Especially if you study at a university, you use that time. You're not going to have that time or be able to study and not work. Here, our time has been bought already. [In Cuba] you may not be economically wealthy, but you do have time. You have time to think. Mercedes’ response suggests that images posted on social media platform contribute to the construction of Cubans’ superficial ideas and unrealistic expectations that other

---

8 Referring to the images and videos posted on social media to show-off that people are having a good time in the US.
participants described about life in the US. Having served as motivating sources, oral stories and physical photographs have been replaced with a more accessible medium of information—social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

These participants recognize that liberty and economic mobility come at a cost: TIME. Ernesto’s perspective of the American Dream encapsulates their sentiments: *El sueño americano es una cosa que no se quita porque tienes que trabajar de madrugada, de noche . . . es un sueño que no se te quita* (the American Dream is something that doesn’t go away because you have to work at dawn, at night. It’s a dream that never goes away). Ernesto was one of seven participants who lived in a different country after leaving Cuba and prior to arriving in the US. The following section provides further details about his perspectives.

**Those Who Lived Abroad**

Of the ten participants who lived or studied outside of Cuba prior to moving to the US, five offered unique perspectives concerning their pre-migration expectations and post-migration realities.

Having lived in Norway for three and a half years, Ernesto’s views are informed by his experiences of living in two capitalist countries: Norway and the US. For Ernesto, the sole act of leaving Cuba gives people a sense of prosperity since *a sueño cubano* (Cuban dream) is impossible. For him, the concept of the American Dream is subjective and unique for each person. He assumes that most people hope to become US citizens, to have rights, and to have access to Social Security upon retiring. He fervently stated:
For you to achieve the American Dream you have to experience many nightmares, work too hard, stop living. You lose relationships, you leave your family behind. Family members die abroad. Those are the prices that you have to pay to achieve the American Dream. The price that you pay is greater than what you can accomplish. When you finally achieve it, you say, “was it really worth it,” “was it worth being away from my family?”, “away from my daughter?”, “for what, to live a little better?”

Ernesto’s first dream was not the American Dream, it was the Norwegian dream. Unfortunately, after three and a half years of living in Norway, his request for residency was denied and he had no other choice but to come to the US. Having come to the US from another capitalist country, he understood how to manage his finances, build his credit, complete a job application, take exams, and create a resume. Since he had saved money while working in Norway, he had an easy time transitioning to life in Miami. He believes that if he had come directly from Cuba, he would have had a much more difficult time. When asked to compare his life in the US to his life in Norway he became impassioned. He prefers the slower pace of life in Norway and the social services provided by the Norwegian government, even though citizens there pay significantly higher taxes. With frustration in his voice Ernesto argued that in the US, people spend their entire life working long hours while their health slowly deteriorates; then ironically, they must use their savings to pay for medical bills. Despite his strong criticisms of life in the US, he is content with his career as a social worker and his salary. He attributes his accomplishments to the fact that he spoke English proficiently prior to arrival. He hopes to bring his daughter from Cuba, buy a home, and ultimately retire.
Ernesto’s final remarks suggests that for many Cubans, the American Dream is not defined by material abundance, but instead represents freedom from an oppressive government. He said that for Cubans, “anything that you accomplish outside of Cuba makes them happy. For a Cuban, it doesn’t make a difference if it’s the American Dream, the Chinese dream, the Spanish dream, the Burundian dream, or the Nicaraguan dream . . . and anywhere a Cuban ends up outside of Cuba makes them feel like they’ve succeeded.”

Mercedes, whose father was a diplomat, attended Russian schools in Cuba and studied in Bulgaria. She later studied sociology for five years at the University of Havana before moving to the US in 1999. Her socioeconomic views are heavily influenced by her education and her experiences abroad. She said: “I was infatuated with Scandinavian countries. The format, the system, the structure that I like. You know, a lot of social benefits. And I think that that was important for me, you know, you have the basics covered. A capitalist country with a socialist twist, not in the way that’s perceived in the United States, which is the devil.” For Mercedes, the American Dream is to have a choice. She views the US as a country for business-oriented individuals who aspire to own a business. Describing it as an internal conflict since she has been living in the US for twenty years, she is unhappy about where her taxes are going and believes that there should be more social benefits, including free healthcare. Mercedes earned a master’s degree in the US and currently works as a higher education professional. Unhappy with the amount of time that she dedicates to a full-time job, her future goals are to become a full-time faculty member and researcher so that she has more time to travel and enjoy leisure time with family.
Alicia’s conceptualization of the US was informed by the negative propaganda disseminated by the Cuban government following the Mariel Exodus, and she imagined it as a place where only dishonest people went. However, her views began to change after hearing more positive stories from her peers who often talked about leaving Cuba, and from her boyfriend’s aunt who lived in the US. Though she did not want to leave at first, she eventually became disillusioned with Cuba and increasingly self-aware after coming to the realization that she did not have freedom of expression. She explained how she noticed the hypocrisy and doble moral, or ethical contradiction, inherent in Cuban society—individuals are trained to think but are not able to share ideas. The state “controls how you think, what you write, what you can say, what you can’t say.” She told me how she began to question why she had dedicated so much time to studying if she was unable to express her views without an official audit by party officials. Moreover, she realized how naïve she had been in believing that she worked for the university, and for failing to recognize that instead, all Cubans work for and are controlled by the State. From that moment onward her objective was to attend a university outside of Cuba, and ultimately, she was able to secure admissions into a graduate program in a university in Costa Rica. It was there where she first heard of the American Dream. Since Costa Ricans often traveled to the US to purchase commodities to resell back home, she visualized the US as a place overflowing with malls and brands, a society of consumerism. Alicia was worried that if she moved to the US, she would not be able to adapt or make like-minded friends. She decided to take college courses to improve her financial literacy before moving to the US. She explained that when she first moved to the US in 2000, she felt as if she did not belong here. Nonetheless, she eventually
realized that life in the US was not as bad as she imagined. She was able to make friends, pursue and achieve her educational and professional goals, and establish herself as a higher education professional. Alicia believes that being informed is the key to becoming successful in the US. She said, “the US is a country of opportunity for good, but also for bad. You can either move forward or sink.”

Having studied in Italy for ten months, Lily, who arrived in 2016, also perceived the US as a world of consumerism. However, she knew that life would be better than in Cuba. After being harassed by the Cuban government for running a successful private business, she realized that it was time for her to leave. She explained to me that she does not equate the American Dream with money like other people do. For Lily, the American Dream is to have freedom to make decisions and not feel pressured, and to be independent. Though she never envisioned or had a preconceived notion of how life in the US would be, she knew that she would need to be disciplined and avoid being pushed into a lifestyle of consumerism. Comparing the lifestyle in Italy with the lifestyle in the US, she stated:

I think that nobody is prepared, mentally and physically, to deal with the American lifestyle, . . . once you’re here you are pushed to have debts, to consume new cars, new phones. You’re pushed into consumerism, and it’s something that you can’t avoid. You have to be mentally prepared, not to be seduced by material things and to find a balance . . . between comfort and necessity.

Lily was able to launch a successful business in Miami. She hopes to expand her business and finish her master’s degree.
Sophia, who arrived in 2013, explained that her family had always wanted to come to Miami, “the place where all the Cubans live.” She had heard about the American Dream while living in Cuba. She told me that people’s ideas of the American Dream are informed by those who left Cuba in earlier years. Returning family members send misleading messages by making it appear as if they have accumulated more material wealth than they in fact own by flaunting items that Cubans have never seen before. Sophia exclaimed, “In reality, the American Dream is a chimera!⁹ Like many of the participants, she believes that the American dream is a subjective and misleading concept. She believes that she is living her version of the American Dream—to have her family together, to be happy, and have good health. She criticizes those who put the American Dream on a pedestal by equating it to material accumulation and asserts that money and material wealth are not enough to bring one happiness. She explained how she and her husband struggle each day to have a better life. She ardently stated:

How we struggle! We struggle every day to have more, to try to live. Not to have more money, no! It’s to make it to the end of the month happily. We go to the movies, we go to a park, we go to a restaurant. The four of us. That to me is what’s important. If I have that, my American Dream is realized.

She contends that those who think that the US is the best place in the world must not have lived anywhere else. Having lived in Spain for twenty years, she wishes that the US would adopt similar social services to ease the life of its people, such as better public transportation and either free or affordable healthcare. She described healthcare costs in

---

⁹ Defined by Merriam-Webster.com as “an illusion or fabrication of the mind; an unrealizable dream.”
the US as abusive. In her first job working for a private company in the US, she paid $800 a month for health insurance for her, her spouse, and their two children. Currently, she and her husband both work for Miami-Dade County, which pays for their individual healthcare premiums. She is now only responsible for paying an affordable monthly fee for her two children. She wanted to make it clear that though she favored the expansion of social services, she was not a communist.

Participants who lived elsewhere after leaving Cuba, but prior to coming to the US, share two common sentiments: (1) that the US should adopt policies to improve social services; and (2) immigrants should resist excessive consumerism and desire for material abundance. Thus, they had ambivalent feelings about the American Dream, which they often compared unfavorably to that of other capitalist countries.

Criticizing Newcomers: Generación Obama

When I asked participants whether they had heard of the American Dream in Cuba, and how they perceived life in the US, an unsuspecting theme arose. Seventeen of the thirty-five participants in this study criticized Cubans on the island for having a distorted perception of the American Dream. Of those seventeen participants, fifteen also criticized the more recent Cuban arrivals for their lack of goals and poor work ethic, for

---

10 Translates to “Generation Obama.” This phrase was used by the participant to describe the Cuban émigrés who arrived in the US as a result of President Barack Obama’s five-year visa program implemented in 2013 to facilitate travel between Cuba and the US.

11 Participants who criticized newcomers used phrases such as los que vienen ahora (the ones who arrive today) or la mayoría de los jóvenes que están llegando (the majority of young people who arrive today), to refer to Cuban émigrés who recently arrived in the US, presumably during the 2010s.
engaging in illegal activities, and for their desire to accumulate material wealth. In this section I present their main criticisms. As will be explained, only one participant elaborated what she meant by “more recent arrivals.”

Unable to Let Go of the Past

Alicia’s opinions concerning las nuevas personas que están viniendo (the new people who are coming) to the US are shaped by her experiences interacting with Uber drivers. She explained that she has met thirty-year-old drivers who only work to support family members in Cuba instead of working towards achieving financial stability, owning a home or an apartment, saving money, or planning for retirement. Reflecting on her own experiences, she said:

It’s sad to think about the fact that I had to leave my family. It was the price that I had to pay for freedom. To come to a country and have a future. I think new arrivals don’t see it as a sacrifice. They want to live in two places at the same time. When I left Cuba [in 1996], I couldn’t go back. I’m not judging them. It’s just a different reality that they have. They can travel back and forth; I wasn’t able to do that. It doesn’t allow you to focus, to grow here since all your energy is diverted to Cuba. Their energy, salary, time, vacations.

Despite her critical tone, Alicia, who arrived in the US in 2000 after having studied in Costa Rica for four years, acknowledged that Cuban émigrés who leave Cuba today, lived under very different socioeconomic circumstances than when she left Cuba twenty-five years ago.
Sebastián, who arrived in 2009, shared similar sentiments. His uncle had told him that to succeed in the US, his “heart had to be stone” and he had to forget Cuba. Sebastián now understands and believes the words of his uncle. He said that to move forward with life, to obtain goals, and to live better, one cannot worry about Cuba. He passionately asserted that it is impossible to live two lives—that one cannot be thinking about Cuba while trying to make a life in the US. Unlike other participants in this study, Sebastián believes that one must completely disconnect from their homeland to adapt to US society, countering the current literature on transnationalism, which highlights the “bifocal” identify of many immigrants, and the idea that “migrants adapt themselves while maintaining strong ties of sentiment, if not material exchange, with their places of origin” (Vertovec 2001, 977).

Alexis, who arrived in 2013, left Cuba with the intention of never returning. He believes that recent Cuban émigrés have different priorities than those who arrived twenty years ago, and that consequently, the American Dream has changed. He explained that they want to leave for economic problems without realizing or caring about the underlying cause: an inept political system. What is most shocking to him is that many are desperate to leave Cuba but then cannot wait to return. He said, “they’re here, they work . . . and return to Cuba to have parties. It’s an interesting phenomenon.”

Easy Money

Annie, who arrived in 1999, explained that, as the years pass, people in Cuba have less desire to work. She is sometimes suspicious of the more recent Cuban émigrés who she calls Generación Obama, because “they came under his policy that allowed for a
five-year visa.” She asserts that those who arrived in 2017, and after, have a different mindset of those who arrived in 1995:

There are many people who arrive here on, or during Generation Obama. Many came to scam Medicaid, or insurance companies, or to have houses to grow marihuana, to duplicate credit cards . . . or young women come to dance in strip clubs as strippers. That is to say, they all take the fastest or easiest route because they come with the desire to own things that they’ve never owned. And perhaps they want to have money that they didn’t have in Cuba.

Her views towards more recent Cuban arrivals are influenced by personal interactions with peers. She explained that members of the “Obama Generation” often complain about their current living situations in the US. When her friends express jealousy because she owns a home, Annie tells them, “Mami, you’re going through what everybody goes through when they get here. All that is normal. Simply work a little bit longer and don’t buy so many clothes.” Annie also used the phrase Generación Pan con Bistec (“Generation Steak Sandwich”), to refer to Cuban émigrés of the Obama Generation, since she believes that they leave for lack of economic opportunities and access to food, instead of politics. She stated that knowledge about politics declines with each new generation because the Cuban government instills fear in those who express their own political views.

Roberto, who arrived in 2007, believes that upon arriving in the US, “the Cuban youth of today” make minimal commitments. They don’t want to make commitments with anyone—not with family, work, or school.” He stated that those who arrive in the US today hope to recreate the life they had in Cuba and expect to become successful
without putting forth any effort. Like Mercedes, who believes that “Facebook Live” moments create unrealistic expectations of the US, Roberto stated that young émigrés often return to Cuba and parade material items as a way of bragging about or creating the illusion that they have become successful. He noted that they sometimes wear items that do not belong to them, such as a rented gold chain or other vanities.

Sharing similar views, Allen, who arrived in 2014, told me that in Cuba people think that money comes out of the pipes like running water. He believes that, though life is significantly better in the US, one must work very hard. Giggling, he stated, “I think they’re a little confused about the American Dream.” Despite having arrived in 2014, he criticizes la gente que vienen hace poco (people who arrive recently). He explained that his girlfriend’s cousin, Raúl, arrived from Cuba over a year ago (in 2019) and has been living with family. Despite his relatives’ goodwill, Raúl does not help with the rent or any of the bills. With a frustrated tone, Allen said, “he thinks that things pay for themselves!”

Reyna, who arrived in 2015, states that communism is to blame for people’s lack of work ethic, jealousy, and lack of respect for others. She explained that in Cuba, people experience so much oppression that they must hustle or steal to find food and are often traumatized. Then, upon arriving in the US, it becomes difficult for individuals to adapt since they are not accustomed to working hard. According to Reyna, when young women in Cuba have chosen a career, they are negatively influenced by peers who promote

---

12 This idiom describes the idea that “money is easy to come by.”

13 Raúl arrived after the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” period, and as part of the emerging wave of Cuban émigrés.
“easier” ways of making money, including engaging in prostitution (known as *jineterismo* on the Island). She has witnessed girls say to their friends, “why are you going to choose a career if you can just work as a prostitute? I make more money by sleeping every weekend with a different foreigner and look at how I support my parents!” Reyna stated that it is imperative for Cuban émigrés to have a strong support system when they arrive in the US to help them realize that they do not have to live the way they did back in Cuba.

*Seek Unnecessary Benefits*

Argelina, who arrived in 2009, stressed that most Cuban émigrés who come to the US take advantage of opportunities and become successful. However, she has started to notice that the young Cuban people who arrive today want things handed to them without having to put forth any effort. She elaborated, “they demand things from this government that they never demanded of the Cuban government . . . If we have privileges that others are not given, we should take advantage of that. They shouldn’t ask the government for help if they don’t need it. What they do is go back to Cuba and spend the money there.”

*Fail to Prepare Themselves*

Ernesto, who arrived in 2016, criticizes Cubans for failing to learn English before coming to the US. “If the Cuban dream is to come to the US, why not prepare yourself so that you don’t have to struggle so much?” He argues that instead of learning English for an easier transition to US society, they immediately move in with family members living in Miami. As will be presented in the next chapter, many participants believe that living in Miami, a city with a predominately Hispanic/Latino population, can hinder one’s
ability to adapt to American culture (by which they mean the dominant culture of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant origin). These findings support the idea that context—including space, place, and reception—impact one’s ability to become successful or adapt to US society.

**No Goals, No Worries**

Currently working as an Uber driver, Alejandro, who arrived in 2015, is the only participant who did not establish long-term goals. He said that he was indoctrinated by the Cuban government to hate the US and defend Fidel Castro, something that his family would often laugh at him for doing. Even though his perspectives changed after his eighteenth birthday, as he began to think more critically, he firmly believed that his financial situation in Cuba would improve after he graduated from the university and secured employment. However, after he graduated, he realized that life would not get easier and worried that he would have to resort to illegal activities to earn additional income. After working for six years (three years as a lawyer, and three for a privately owned restaurant), he decided to leave Cuba and join family members already living in Miami.

He equates the American Dream with liberty. He argued that in Cuba, the American Dream is to leave Cuba in search of material things that were not available or easily acquired. Upon arriving in Miami in 2015, his short-term goals were to learn English and attend college but has not been able to achieve them. Unlike most of the participants, Alejandro has not established any long-term goals since he has decided he would rather live in the moment than worry about working towards a profession. He
stated that he does not want to struggle like other Cuban immigrants who live their life trying to achieve long-term goals while life passes them by. He is grateful that his parents own a home in Cuba and are in good health; otherwise he would have to work harder to help them.

Alejandro’s lack of concern with pursuing goals that lead to upward mobility may draw criticism from other Cuban émigrés who argue that newcomers are unwilling to work or disconnect from the life they left behind in Cuba. A lack of desire to pursue financial stability—including saving money, professional advancement, or purchasing a home—changes the conventional understanding of what it means to pursue the American Dream and can lead to increased resentment towards, or stigmatization of, a particular immigrant group.

“The American Dream Depends on Society”

Luisa’s intersectionality as a Cuban and Black-Latina woman and how she is judged by society continue to influence her attitudes towards the US. She offered a unique point of view since she had traveled throughout Europe as a musicology instructor and as a lead singer for a musical group, and lived and worked in Barbados for three years before coming to the US. These experiences provided Luisa with alternate points of reference to compare lifestyles.

She explained that, while living in Barbados, she initially imagined the US as a place of material abundance, and where things were inexpensive and easily attainable, but quickly realized that she was misinformed. She said, “However, I had already opened my eyes, read many books in Barbados, I had access to the news here [referring to the US] . .
. unfiltered, without being translated.” She explained that after moving back to Cuba after divorcing her husband, and having lived in Barbados, she could no longer tolerate the high level of surveillance by the Cuban government and decided to go to Miami for a few months.\footnote{A ten-year US visa was issued to her while living and working in Barbados.} When she visited in the year 2000, she decided to stay in Miami.

Luisa remembers how the negative rhetoric disseminated by the Cuban government—that the US was an awful imperialist country—encouraged a hatred for the US and its people. During our conversation she seemed surprised to have recalled one of her first encounters with the US: the time when her mother’s cousin brought back a six pack of Coca-Cola from el norte\footnote{A phrase used by Cubans to refer to the US.} (the north) to Cuba.

Despite never hearing the phrase while in Cuba, Luisa’s construct of the American Dream was influenced by American movies broadcasted on Cuban television. While living in Cuba, her American Dream was to work as a waitress, like the ones portrayed in film. “It wasn’t a house, or a husband. I wanted to be a waitress. My dream became a reality, and I was a spectacular waitress.” She earned enough money working as a waitress in the evenings and cleaning houses in the mornings to afford college tuition in Miami.

Life as a waitress was not exactly as it was portrayed in films. While working one evening, a Cuban male began to berate and sexually objectify her. He slapped her in her buttocks and when she called the police, he said to her, “what’s wrong with you? In Cuba you are sluts and whores.” This moment was a reality check and turning point for Luisa.
When I asked her to list some of her other goals, she said she had a few: to become a US citizen and obtain a passport, to graduate from the university, to integrate into American society, and never to work for a Cuban. She said, “I say it with sadness, but it’s the truth. I mean, to be able to study again, to be in a place of respect, not for financial status, but to find a place where I feel safe.” Chapter 6 will highlight Luisa’s challenges negotiating racial and ethnic identity in Miami, a city where Cubans are predominately White, and her dislike for Miami’s Cuban nostalgia, a phenomenon that she says she cannot relate to.

When I asked Luisa to elaborate on the American Dream, she provided a unique response. For Luisa, the American Dream is not static, but changes through the course of one’s life as they age or experience a change in status—“. . .whether you’re single, studying, working, whether you have children or not. If you have people, or family around.” She stated that she achieved her initial dream of becoming a US citizen. Currently, her dream is not to have to worry about her teenage son when he goes out with friends, since for Luisa, the American Dream does not depend on one person, but instead, on society. She explained:

I’m the mother of a Black teenager. My American Dream is what I visualized when I became a citizen of this country. That my son goes out with friends and that I don’t have to worry, to have peace knowing that he’s safe. That’s my American Dream. For that to happen here. That’s what I meant that it doesn’t depend on me.

She hopes there will come a moment when she does not have to remind her son, who looks older than his age, to carry an identification card. She worries that he will end up at
the wrong place and wrong time and may have to explain to law enforcement that he is a good child.

Luisa described her ongoing challenges in achieving one of her dreams: integrating into American society. As a Black Cuban living in Miami, she felt discriminated against by White Cuban Americans and felt as if she did not belong here. After thirteen years of living in Miami, and obtaining a graduate degree, she decided that she would move to Washington, DC. There, her experience negotiating race has been quite different as she deals with un doble racismo, or “double racism” (see Chapter 6).

Conclusion

The eight themes outlined in this chapter represent the main perceptions and attitudinal changes of the thirty-five participants of this study, all of whom arrived in the US during the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” (1995-2017) cohort of the Cuban diaspora. Having emerged in response to the social dislocations produced by the Great Depression of the 1930s and to encourage national development, the American Dream ethos continues to promote meritocratic ideas—hard work pays off. However, the findings of this study reveal that perceptions and definition of the American Dream are subjective and individualized, without a “one-size fits all” definition.

My research findings suggest that for some Cuban participants, engaging with current socioeconomic conditions in the US informs their definitions and critiques of the American Dream, or how they feel about life in America. For instance, some expressed feelings of gratitude and content with the life they envisioned. For others, life was more difficult than they expected, especially since they must work long hours and sacrifice
time with family to make ends meet. Despite the difficulties encountered, not one participant expressed feelings of regret for having left Cuba.

For some participants, the American Dream equates to liberty instead of upward mobility. For instance, Alejandro, who arrived in 2015 at the age of thirty-four, expressed a lack of desire to set goals or worry about the future and instead prefers to live in the moment. Alejandro seemingly represents Cuban émigrés who are criticized for redefining what it means to achieve the American Dream. Most of the participants who criticized newcomers blame the Cuban government and its socialist policies for producing individuals with poor work ethics who sometimes engage in illegal activities to make ends meet.

Since Miami’s Cuban enclave no longer offers the robust economic opportunities that accelerated the adaptation process for the earlier exiles, many of the participants in this study have not been able to achieve economic mobility as quickly as they had anticipated. Despite not having yet achieved their economic objectives, most of them feel that they are achieving the American Dream. Based on the limited sample of this study, participants with higher income levels have either earned a college degree in the US or attained an educational equivalency certification of the degrees earned in Cuba.

The original findings documented in this chapter contribute to the field of migration studies since much of the assimilation literature of the past fails to acknowledge how immigrants define success or how their attitudes towards a host country affect their sense of belonging to it. As immigrants navigate the challenges of moving to the US—learning a new language, learning to drive, looking for employment, using technology, experiencing discrimination, and managing finances—, they also
negotiate their cultural identities. The next chapter examines the interviewees’ experiences with adaptation, incorporation, and assimilation to the US.
6. ADAPTING TO LIFE IN THE US

Immigrants in the US have long been expected to assimilate by replacing their languages, values, and identities with those of its majority group (Park and Burgess 1924; Warner and Srole 1945; Gordon 1964). Challenging the straight-line theory approach of earlier immigration scholars, Gans (1992, 44) argues that immigrants experiences “bumps representing various kinds of adaptations to changing circumstances—and with the line having no predictable end.” My findings reveal that, contrary to much of the past literature, immigrants can adapt to US society without completely assimilating, or adopting the cultural norms of the White majority group.

Whereas Chapter 5 uncovered the perceptions and sentiments of the participants, this chapter will focus on the challenges they encountered upon arriving to the US, the adaptation challenges they continue to face, and how those experiences inform their cultural identity and sense of belonging. This chapter addresses the final two questions of this study: (3) How do Cubans who moved to Miami from 1995-2017 describe their adaptation experiences? and (4) Once in the US, how do Cubans who moved to Miami from 1995-2017 negotiate their cultural identities? Additionally, this chapter includes a case study that highlights the complexities of being both Latina and Black in two distinct spaces in the US: Miami, Florida and Washington, DC. This case study brings to the forefront the intertwining factors of race and ethnicity among post-Soviet Cuban émigrés to the US.

Motivated by stories, photographs, and social media images that neutralized the Cuban government’s anti-US propaganda campaign, the thirty-five participants in this study left family and friends behind in search of liberty and/or to improve their economic
status. Some participants criticized other Cubans for their lack of understanding of how political and economic matters are inextricably intertwined on the island. For instance, Alexis said, “People want to leave Cuba for economic problems, even though they don’t want to understand the underlying causes: politics. If the economy is poor, there is something behind that: the government. But they don’t care. They want to leave Cuba and they don’t care how or to where.” Similarly, Mercedes blames their unwillingness to become involved in politics on the Cuban government’s efforts to instill fear in its people and perpetuating their ignorance.

When asked to describe the challenges they have experienced or continue to experience, participants provided a variety of responses (see Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Frequency of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adapting to work/lack of time</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination by Hispanic/Latino persons</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding employment/Cuban credentials are not recognized</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial literacy/Navigating US economy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Technology</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt sadness or depression</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic culture/feeling disconnected</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process of translating documents and titles</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial discrimination</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-related health concerns</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Challenges

Twenty-five participants described experiencing challenges while attempting to adapt to US culture. Working long hours was the problem with the highest frequency of
responses, followed by difficulty in learning a new language. Twelve of the participants indicated that they have had difficulty learning to speak or understand English. Two of the participants believe that their age impacts their ability to acquire English as a second language. Raquel, who arrived at the age fifty-one, stated that her lack of English proficiency has been her greatest limitation and has hindered her from finding an adequate job. Cleo was forty-one when she arrived in Miami. Her lack of English proficiency brought her to tears during her first job at a food court at a local mall. She described feeling shocked at having to memorize the names of different types of cheeses, and how difficult it was to communicate with customers. With an emotional tone, she said that she cried every day as she tried to adapt to life in Miami. “The change was huge! When I arrived, I didn’t know how to use a credit card, or how to purchase items for a supermarket.” She described it as volver a nacer (literally being born again), a colloquial phrase used to describe a feeling of “starting over.”

Five other participants used the colloquial phrase while describing their experiences adapting to the US. For instance, upon arriving to the US, Luisito, who arrived at age forty-two, felt as if he was “born again” since he had to “deprogram” his former point of view and see the world from a completely different perspective. Everything was new for him:

In Cuba I never had a bank card. I got my first phone here [referring to the US]. I spent many hours in the evening trying to learn how it functioned from a technological standpoint. When one arrives here [referring to the US] the world seems much bigger, . . . children may adapt faster but for older adults the changes are more difficult.
Lily also believes that life is less challenging for immigrants who arrive to the US at a young age. She stressed that “age matters” since goal setting and achieving professional and academic goals take time. She also believes that in the US, many temptations can lead one to get “off-track” if they do not remain focused. She said:

When you get to the United States from any Latin American country, you find a completely different life or a lifestyle. You can find things that can get you off track . . . because you have free access to drugs, you have free access to arms, you have free access to a lot of things that you don’t, especially Cubans, have in your country of origin, luxuries!

Though Modesto did not use the phrase “born again,” he explained how difficult it was for him to adapt to a completely different way of life. He said that he had to learn a new language and adapt to a new culture, and that he continues to adjust the ways in which he thinks and acts. For instance, he explained that he must practice self-awareness when communicating with others since he has a fear of compromising his integrity. He began to laugh as he criticized the “bad habit” that Cubans have of “speaking loudly.” He said, “. . . we can be engaged in a normal conversation, and it seems as if we’re fighting. I’ve run into my friends here and to get my attention they whistle. And here you only do that with animals.” Modesto said that he was shocked upon learning how to behave if he is stopped by a police officer while driving, for instance, “remaining in the car to avoid getting shot.”

Rubén does not like to say that he was “born again.” Instead, he prefers to use the term *reinventarse*, which translates to “reinvent oneself.” According to Rubén, immigrants come to the US with prior knowledge, but must reinvent themselves since the
information and knowledge they bring with them are no longer useful. Having worked as a professor in Cuba, Rubén was embarrassed to be working as a dishwasher at a local fast-food restaurant, his very first job in the Miami. He realized that he was no longer perceived or treated as a professional. Additionally, it was difficult for him to adapt to the faster pace of life of the US. He explained that he liked the routine he had in Cuba. On his days-off he would wake up early, read books, and visit his friend in the afternoon. Rubén elaborated, “When I arrived here, I learned that life is more agitated. You have to reinvent yourself.” He feels as if he has been transforming himself while adapting to the American way of life.

When Sebastián first arrived in Miami at age twenty-nine, he became frustrated when prospective employers questioned his professional background. When he indicated that he worked as a physical therapist in Cuba, prospective employers would ask, “yes, I see that in Cuba, but how about here [referring to the US]?” He told me that he would respond by saying, “bro, I’m sorry, but I’m a physical therapist in Cuba, in China, in the United States. But my knowledge, no one can take away my knowledge.” Sebastián ultimately earned his master’s degree in the US and is currently working towards a Ph.D. He said that he understood how a capitalist country functioned since he had lived in Venezuela for four years alongside other Cuban medical professionals who were on an international mission. He knew that he would have to “start over” by learning a new language and completing a degree to be able to practice as a health care professional in the US. He was aware that he would have to sacrifice personal and family time to reestablish his life.
Like Sebastián, Roberto had been a professional in Cuba. He explained that shortly after arriving in Miami, he found a job and saved enough money to purchase a car. He then shifted his focus to learning English and to pass the Veterinary Licensing Examination, a requirement to practice veterinary medicine in the US. Unfortunately, Roberto took the exam on three different occasions but was unable to earn a passing score. Realizing that he would be unable to practice veterinary medicine as he did in Cuba, he worked for a few animal clinics and pet hospitals until he decided to open a mobile pet-grooming business.

While struggling to adapt to a new way of life, including learning a new language and understanding how to use technology, Alejandro fell into a state of depression. He explained that people who leave Cuba question whether they made the right decision to come to the US, and that Cubans refer to this state of depression as *el gorrión*.\(^1\)

According to Alejandro, it is common among Cubans to ask friends and family who recently arrived in the US if they have already experienced *el gorrión*, or about the amount of time it took before it onset. He defined *el gorrión* as a period of nostalgia when one constantly longs for home. He said:

> There are people who go into a depressive state and want to return or wonders if he really made the right decision by coming here. You see all kinds of things. For me *el gorrión* resulted from the shock of having to change my life completely. I

\(^1\) The term translates literally to “sparrow,” but according to Alejandro, the phrase is used colloquially among Cubans to describe a melancholic state where one questions whether they made the right decision to leave home. According to an article on Radio Televisión Martí (2011), *gorrión* “is a feeling of deep melancholy.”
didn’t want to talk to anybody. It’s not that I was depressed. I just didn’t want to talk to anyone.

Alejandro said that when he arrived in Miami, he just wanted to be calm, but became overwhelmed by the amount of people who contacted him. Though he understood their eagerness to meet him, he had too many things on his mind and felt tormented. Like many other participants, Alejandro described his experiences adapting to the US as being reborn. “Everything is new. Little by little you become familiar with how things function. You begin to adapt. You begin to realize the things you should be doing. You begin to feel better. That was my case.”

Marcos, who is only twenty-eight, has lived in the US for five years. He describes American culture as very different from Cuban culture. “The American way of life is about detaching; it is about individuality. The culture tends to be cold.” He attributes the lack of close interpersonal relationships to the need to prioritize work and education to prosper in a free market economy. He stated that the idea of being productive requires a shift in one’s mentality, and that the principal challenge that Cubans encounter once they get to the US is learning how the economy functions. He asserted that one has “to adapt, learn the language, adopt part of American culture, attempt to integrate your way of life or understanding of it.”

Unlike Marcos, William has lived in the US for more than a decade. However, he shares a similar sentiment: a dislike for the lack of interpersonal relationships in the US. During his recollection of his personal experience immigrating to the US, he remembered noticing the disconnection among people. He expressed dismay at the fact that neighbors fail to greet one another or acknowledge when one says hello. While working as a music
teacher in the US, he had a coworker who was incapable of saying good morning. With a disgruntled tone he said, “It’s a basic rule that you learn at a young age. If a teacher doesn’t greet you, what can he teach his students socially?”

Having lived in a European country prior to moving to the US, six participants shared how their experiences influenced their attitudes towards the United States. For instance, Alexis, who moved to Miami after having lived in Spain for thirteen years, expressed feeling disillusioned with life in the US. It saddens him that people are always too busy to make time for one another. He explained how in Spain people are always looking for a reason to see each other—to go to parties, to a local bar, to people’s homes. He said, “but here I’ve felt a lot lonelier than I did in Spain.”

Having lived in Costa Rica for three and a half years before moving to the US, it was difficult for Alicia to transition to an American lifestyle. She had become accustomed to living among Costa Ricans, who she described as well-mannered; they always said please and thank you. When she first arrived in Miami she felt as if she did not belong here. “Everyone was rude, lacked manners, everyone liked to gossip. Here people push and run you over without apologizing. That was hard for me.” She eventually realized that she had to find her own pace and try to adapt. She told me that when she enrolled in classes for English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) at a local college, she met numerous individuals with diverse backgrounds, but who shared a common experience: they sought a better life in the US. She said, “there was a Haitian lawyer, a Russian economist, an Israeli, a Turk, a Colombian, a Venezuelan. It was the United Nations. That class made me feel as if I was not alone.” Her comments suggest
that sharing experiences with classmates who also immigrated to the US contributed to her sense of belonging.

Ernesto had temporarily left Cuba to work as a professor at a Norwegian university. He asserted that the only reason why he came to the US was because his request for Norwegian residency was denied after his employee contract with the university expired. He thought that his time in Norway, a capitalist country, prepared him to adapt to life in the US. Perhaps believing that his experience was unique, he distinguished himself from other Cuban émigrés: “I wasn’t a person who came and had to start working the next day cutting lawns or putting on roofs. I could afford to wait for my work permit to arrive. Not do anything illegal . . . I lived with a friend of mine that told me that I could stay with him until I found a job.” During the three months that it took Ernesto to receive a work permit, he was able to get his vaccinations, learn how to drive, and obtain a driver’s license.

From the fourteen participants who expressed disillusionment with the amount of time they spend working (see Chapter 5), Yanet encountered an additional obstacle during her first job as a cashier at a local pharmacy—having to stand for eight hours at a time. She had to seek treatment from an orthopedic doctor when she began experiencing inflammation of the knees. Despite her challenges, she feels that she has been able to adapt to the American lifestyle. While giggling she said, “When you begin to receive a check you forget about all of it!” Working long hours, lack of time for family, and inflammation of her knees have not deterred her from appreciating the opportunities available in the US.
The interviews suggest that feelings of adaptation and belonging to US society are context dependent. For instance, many of the participants discussed how Miami’s geographical and cultural landscape have helped them adapt to life in the US. A pattern also emerged among some participants who traveled to Europe prior to moving to the US—in Europe, they were hyperaware of their Cuban identity and longed for home; in Miami they no longer felt like foreigners and their nostalgia for Cuba decreased.

**Miami: A Cuban Colony**

Miami’s unique cultural landscape impacts the immigrants’ adaptation process. Miami continues to be the prime destination for Cuban migration. The Miami neighborhood now known as Little Havana was transformed by Cuban émigrés, beginning with those who arrived during the first two decades following the onset of the Cuban Revolution. According to Grenier and Moebius (2015, 25), despite the exiles’ intention to eventually return to Cuba, little bits of Havana transplanted to American soil, were blooming in Miami as Cuban refugees re-created some of the things they had back home. Cuban exiles created an enclave that that continues to serve as a space for Cuban émigrés to live, work, and engage in cultural practices without having to learn English or adopt other practices of mainstream society.

In their book, *A History of Little Havana*, Grenier and Moebius (2015) describe Little Havana as both an imagined and lived space for many immigrants. They argue that for Cubans, Little Havana is “less a geography than a state of mind” resulting from the “memories and social relations of the individuals” that have lived and worked in the
community (12). Unlike the Cuban émigrés who arrived in the 1960s and 1970s and hoped to reclaim one day their past, not one of the thirty-five participants in my study expressed a desire to return to Cuba. What began in Little Havana sprouted to other communities of Southwest Miami and Hialeah, making South Florida the epicenter for Cuban immigration to the US. Although some participants described parallels between Cuba and Miami’s Little Havana neighborhood, none of them disclosed if they had ever lived there.

According to Alex Stepick and Alejandro Portes (1993, 6), Miami is unique because it has no mainstream, in the sense of a dominant American culture of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant origin. “The hegemony of the old ‘upper-uppers’ has given way to parallel social structures, each complete with its own status hierarchy, civic institutions and cultural life. As a result, economic mobility and social standing have ceased to depend on full acculturation.” Despite extensive research on economic enclaves and their role in facilitating the economic and social adaptation of immigrants their new society (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2004; Portes and Puhrmann 2015; Rumbaut 2014), little research reveals how immigrants interpret and describe their experiences in adapting to US society.

Eleven of the participants in my study recognized that Miami is unique and not representative of mainstream US culture, and that living in Miami has made it easier to adapt to life outside of Cuba. For instance, Allen stated that “in Miami practically everyone is Cuban . . . you practically listen to the same music, eat the same food.” Similarly, Modesto affirmed that in Miami he is surrounded by Cubans, a phenomenon that has helped him adapt. Comparing herself to Cuban émigrés who have moved to other
states within the US, Raquel stated, “at least the ones who live in Miami don’t notice much difference . . . since you always find other Cubans regardless of where you go.” María exemplified these sentiments. She said, “to know that you are in the US, you have to leave Miami. When you go to a state located up North is when you say, ‘I’m already in America!’ Miami is not America!” She said that it has been difficult to learn and speak English but since everyone in Miami speaks Spanish, it has not been too much of an obstacle.

Four of the ten participants who lived in a European country prior to arriving in the US provided unique perspectives. For instance, Alicia explained that while living in Costa Rica, she missed the memories of her life in Cuba. She missed el Malecón, the films she watched, and the annual film festival, among other things. However, living in Miami makes it difficult for Alicia to miss Cuba as exemplified in her statement:

we have the ocean, it smells the same, . . . Tower Theatre plays good movies, . . . but Cuba is here. It’s in Hialeah. It’s in Westchester . . . I missed Cuba in Costa Rica because everyone spoke differently, with a different accent. The moment that I began living in the US, I stopped missing Cuba because I felt as if I had returned to a prosperous Cuba with more resources. In Costa Rica there is no mojito . . . There isn’t anything that’s Cuban.

---

2 A walkway along the seafront in Havana’s coastline.

3 City in Miami-Dade County, Florida.

4 City in Miami-Dade County, Florida.

5 Mojito is a popular Cuban cocktail. Its main ingredients are rum, lime juice, sugar, and mint leaves.
Like Alicia, Alexis missed certain parts of his life while living in Spain. He missed el Malecón, walking through the streets, and speaking with people. He explained that, despite living in Spain for thirteen years, he never felt like he was part of that society. When I asked him if he identified as Cuban or Cuban American, he was surprised by my question. Reflecting on his experiences in both Spain and Miami, he said:

In Spain, I never felt like one of them. It could be because we live in Miami. The other day someone spoke to me in English, and I was shocked because in Miami everyone speaks Spanish. In terms of the culture and essence, it’s clear that I’m more Cuban. Additionally, it’s impossible for me to feel American in Miami!

Living in Miami doesn’t permit it.

Having lived in Spain for thirteen years, Sophia appreciates the “immigrant culture” that exists in Miami. She believes that one only needs to live in Miami for two weeks to begin adapting to its lifestyle since most people share common traits and immigration stories. Her response suggests that being immersed in Miami’s Cuban culture prevents some Cuban émigrés from feeling like foreigners, from missing their homeland, or both.

While most participants expressed contentment with the advantages of living in Miami, others, such as Alejandro, believe that it has impeded their ability to adapt to US culture. While describing his experiences adapting to the US, his response was prefaced with a question: “Why do Latinos love Miami?” and then proceeded with a response. He believes that living amongst Latinos who share a common language and culture makes one feel closer to his or her country. He elaborated: “believe it or not, the weather, the food, the people” make one feel more comfortable, but he does not consider himself American because “there are things that I don’t like about how they are.” His narrative
suggests that living in Miami potentially hinders the incorporation of Cuban émigrés or other Hispanic/Latino immigrants into mainstream American society. For instance, although he had hoped to learn English and enroll in college, he has been unable to achieve those goals. He expressed disappointment and suggested that living in Miami impedes one’s ability to learn the dominant language of the United States. Comparing himself to his cousin who lives in Central Florida and has a higher level of English proficiency, Alejandro exclaimed, “in Miami you have the luxury of being surrounded by people who speak Spanish!” Alexis and María echoed similar sentiments with their assertions that in Miami it is impossible to feel American.

Three participants—Alicia, Ernesto, and Reyna—indicated that they understood the importance of learning English prior to moving to Miami. For instance, Ernesto, who arrived in 2016, emphasized that in the US, “Miami is a colony of Cuba.” He believes that many Cubans make the mistake of not learning English prior to moving to Miami, especially since in Cuba “education is free, and they offer English classes.” Reyna feels fortunate that she had family living in Miami who recommended for her and her husband to learn English before leaving Cuba.

Being encapsulated in Miami, several of the narratives suggest, provides a unique experience or level of comfort for Cuban émigrés as they attempt to learn the rules of the US’ economic and social structure. Others feel that Miami’s Hispanic/Latino cultures do now allow them to completely adapt to US society. Only one of the thirty-five participants feels that Miami is a space where she does not belong. Luisa, who identifies as Black and Latina, described Miami as a superficial city where people are judged based on the type of work they do, they type of car they drive, where they live, the size of their
chests, and the brand of glasses they wear. Moreover, she has a difficult time understanding the nostalgia among people in Miami, “a nostalgia that has nothing to do with Cuba.” Luisa’s experiences negotiating race and ethnicity in the US will be detailed at the end of this chapter.

**Cultural Identity**

This section uncovers how attitudes and affinity towards the US inform the way Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave choose to identify. After describing the obstacles or challenges encountered while adapting to life in the US, participants were asked whether they identify as Cuban or Cuban American, notwithstanding their citizenship status. Of the thirty-five participants in my study, fourteen identified as Cuban, eighteen identified as Cuban American, and five did not provide a clear response. During the analysis phase, different factors were analyzed to determine if cultural identification is impacted by length of time in the US, nostalgia for their homeland, language proficiency, and citizenship status.

*Length of Time in the US*

The findings do not reveal clear patterns to suggest that the longer one spends in the US, the more likely one is to identify as Cuban American. When dividing the length of time in the US into increments of ten years, there is almost an even split between those who identify as Cuban and those who identify as Cuban American within each timeframe (see Figure 4).
The findings suggest that for Cuban émigrés, their decision to identify as “Cuban American” is not contingent upon the length of time living in the United States, citizenship status, or other standard criteria used by immigration scholars to measure degrees of immigrant adaptation. Surprisingly, half of those who have lived in the US for less than ten years already identify as Cuban American. Additionally, the findings suggest that cultural identification does not depend on how one feels about their degree of adaptation, income level, and/or occupational status (see Appendix E). For example, some participants identify as Cuban American despite experiencing challenges adapting to US society, including learning English and adjusting to workplace expectations. Instead, their choice to identify as Cuban American is based on the feelings of gratitude for the opportunities available in the US.
Cubans: Those Who Miss Home

Of the fourteen participants who identified as Cuban, seven expressed feelings of longing or nostalgia for non-human aspects of their homeland—food, culture, events, places—, compared to only five of eighteen participants who identify as Cuban American (see Figure 5).

Figure 5.
Cultural Identity and Nostalgia for Cuba

Like Luisa, Mercedes asserted that she will always be Cuban. She explained that she is obsessed with Cuban music and always looks forward to attending the jazz festival hosted in Havana every year. Jokingly, she shared that her brother likes to ask: “how is your re-Cubanization process going?” For Mercedes, re-Cubanization is the process of relearning codes and norms that exist in Cuba. She explained that “even though you believe you’re part of the island, you’re not anymore.” When asked to describe the aspects of Cuba she misses the most, she indicated that she misses the uniqueness of its people and authentic Cuban cuisine. She appreciates that, despite lacking basic necessities, Cubans tend to live in the present and emphasized “if we don’t have potato,
we eat yucca!” as an example of their positive attitudes. According to Mercedes, Cuban culture that exists in Miami is not the same as in Cuba and misses the authenticity of the food. Her nostalgia for Cuban food was exemplified in the example she provided. One day she opened the refrigerator and found mayonnaise. She opened a box of galleticas, or crackers, and put mayonnaise on them. Eating the crackers with mayonnaise reminded her of her Sundays in Cuba.

Upon arriving in the US in 2000, Luz missed everything about Cuba and yearned to be with the family she left behind. Though she found a job twenty days after arriving in Miami, it was difficult to adjust to a completely different way of life. She described missing the food, the air she breathed, family, friends, reunions, and her stability. According to Luz, it was difficult to adapt to her new life in Miami since she and her family were struggling financially, her father was suffering from health-related issues, and her daughter was very young. She said, “It felt as if I had left my security in Cuba, and I had come to the craziness [referring to US]. We had nothing [in Cuba], but in that moment being here, I felt as if I used to have it all.” Luz emphasized that she had hoped to return to Cuba but is now thankful that her husband ignored her pleas. She says that she has adapted well to the US, despite obstacles that have prevented her and her family from advancing. Even though she is now a US citizen, she still feels “very Cuban.” She explained that she cannot claim to be Cuban American until she learns the English language. She said, “I can barely speak English. It’s very bad. So, I can tell you that I feel Cuban.”

Marcos was twenty-eight when he arrived in the US in 2016. He acknowledged that he cannot predict how he will feel in the future, but he does not currently feel Cuban
American. He said that he still feels like a foreigner since he has only lived in the US for four years and has not yet adapted to American culture. Like Luz, Marcos does not feel like a member of American society since he lacks English proficiency and emphasized that he does not even speak “Spanglish” yet. Emphasizing that he is Cuban first, he stated:

What binds one most to Cuba are memories, memories you created in that country. In a strange way it’s when you go back that you feel that connection again. Like you’re reuniting with all those things, with the person you were before. You begin to recuperate things that you don’t realize you’ve lost along your path. Or things that form part of your personality, or idiosyncrasies as a Cuban . . . It’s a little difficult for me to describe because they are sensations, not material things. That’s what I miss.

While describing why he identifies as Cuban, Marcos proceeded to offer an illuminating perspective: “It’s obvious that living in Miami, up to a certain point, doesn’t really distance you from Cuban culture.” Of the fourteen participants who identify as Cuban, eight shared similar sentiments, compared to only four of the eighteen participants who identify as Cuban American (see Figure 6).
Figure 6. 
Cultural Identification of Participants Who Mentioned That Living in Miami Impacts Adaptation

Larry arrived in 2015 after having lived in Mexico for almost thirteen years. He considers himself Cuban with an American mindset because he believes in equality, progress, and merit-based mobility. However, he misses Cuba’s beaches, its landscapes, and the idiosyncrasies of its people. He misses the way that people greet their friends as they pass each other on the streets and the conversations he would often have with family. He stated that the city of Hialeah, with its high percentage of Cuban residents, has similar idiosyncrasies associated with Cuban culture, something that he misses about Cuba. As described in the previous section, Alexis, who became a US citizen over a year ago, continues to identify as Cuban. While living in Spain, he was hyper aware of his Cuban identity and felt like an “outsider.” Since Spaniards “are very different” from Cubans, he experienced nostalgia when thinking of his life in Cuba, including people and places he longed for. He stated that he feels different in the US and acknowledged that it could be because “we live in Miami.” Alexis’ narrative suggests that if he had moved to a
state with a smaller Hispanic/Latino population, he may have felt like an outsider, like how he felt during the thirteen years he lived in Spain.

_Cubans: Those Who Do Not Miss Home_

Ernesto was one of the seven participants who identifies as Cuban and does not miss home. Yet he asserted that he does not feel American. He said, “I’m still Cuban, not American. Americans are all of us who live here. But I’m Cuban first. Perhaps when I become an American citizen, I’ll begin to call myself Cuban American. But at this moment I’m Cuban, even if I live here. I’m not passionate about Cuba or the flag. I already lost that. But I’m Cuban.” His response suggests that his cultural identification may change once he obtains his US citizenship. With an affirmative tone, Ernesto emphasized that “Miami is the colony of Cuba,” in the United States, suggesting that Miami’s Cuban culture makes it difficult for one to feel even partially American.

Despite living in the US for the past eleven years, Argelina continues to identify as Cuban. She explained that she has not been able to obtain her US citizenship because she has not yet learned to speak English and has difficulties understanding it. She said, “I think I’m offending Americans if I consider myself American without learning the language.” Argelina is one of only four participants whose responses suggest that citizenship status and/or level of English proficiency may influence how one feels about his or her cultural identity. She adamantly stated that other than family, she does not miss anything else about Cuba, “not even the palm trees!” She elaborated, “one misses the good things and memoirs of a place where one was raised. If one doesn’t have good memories of Cuba, you can’t miss it.”
Citizenship Status

During the semi-structured interviews, participants were not asked to reveal their citizenship status. However, many of them willingly disclosed their status when explaining why they choose to identify as Cuban or Cuban American. Of the fourteen participants who identified as Cuban, four revealed that they have obtained US citizenship and three felt that they may “feel” more American once they become American citizens. Of the eighteen who identified as Cuban American, six stated that they have obtained citizenship status while eight have not. The findings suggest that for some Cuban émigrés “feeling Cuban American” is not necessarily contingent on their legal status, or length of time spent in the US (see Figure 7). For instance, Paolo, who has been in the US for eighteen years, and María, who has been in the US for only three, both consider themselves Cuban American and neither have become US citizens.

Figure 7.

Length of Time in the US and Citizenship Status

![Graph showing length of time in the US and citizenship status.](image-url)
Cuban Americans: Those Who Miss Home

Only five of the eighteen participants who identified as Cuban American expressed nostalgia for Cuba (see Figure 5). Modesto, who has only lived in the US for six years, explained that two elements of his life influence him to feel Cuban American: he lived his childhood in Cuba and is now living his young adulthood in Miami. Though he will never detach from his roots, he said that he is thankful to be living in the US because it opened its doors, made him happy, and allows him to accomplish his dreams. He expressed sadness in the fact that he left his friends, family, and “an entire culture” behind. Like others, he affirmed that it is advantageous to be living in Miami since “we’re surrounded by Cubans.” Unlike most of the participants in this study, Modesto exclaimed that if he had the same opportunities in Cuba that he has in the US he would have never left.

Like Modesto, Yanet considers herself Cuban American because of the opportunities that have been available to her in the US. When I asked her if she missed home, she became teary-eyed and had to grab a tissue to wipe her tears. With sadness in her voice, she told me that she misses the croqueticas de pollo (chicken croquettes) that her mother would make for her and still asks her mom to make them when she visits Cuba. She also misses places such as el Malecón in Havana and described how every time she and her family visit Cuba, they ride the ferry to Regla\(^6\) to visit an old church.

Roberto also considers himself Cuban American, despite never renouncing the land he was born and raised in. He accentuated that he has never supported the

---

\(^6\) A municipality of the city of Havana located across Havana Bay.
communist revolution and stated that Cuba did not choose that. He elaborated, “When I say ‘Cuba’ I’m referring to the land. I’m not referring to the people because many of them supported the revolution and permitted its establishment. I’m referring to the land where I was born.” Aside from missing friends, he missed the Cuban lifestyle and the relationship one has with his or her neighbors, who are often considered to be like family. He also misses interacting with people as he walked or rode his bicycle through the streets of Cuba. Despite his nostalgia for his homeland, he loves the US since it has provided him with many opportunities that were not available in Cuba. He admitted that in the US one does not have enough time to get to know their neighbors because they are too tired from working long hours and from performing responsibilities that one has at home.

Cuban Americans: Those Who Do Not Miss Home

Twelve of the eighteen participants who identified as Cuban American stated that they do not miss anything about Cuba except the people they left behind (see Figure 5). For instance, Raquel only misses her family and friends and cannot wait to visit them in Cuba once she has established permanent residence in the US. When I asked if she misses home, she said, “one who lives in Miami doesn’t notice much difference, unlike those who live in other states, because here you can find a Cuban anywhere.” Even though Raquel has only lived in the US for five years, and is not a US citizen, she identifies as Cuban American. Annie also prefers to identify as Cuban American instead of Cuban since she has lived more than half her life in the US (twenty-one years) and does not miss her life in Cuba.
Even though Reyna has only been in the US for approximately six years, she also feels Cuban American and only misses family. When I asked her to describe how she identifies, there was a long pause before tears came out of her eyes. Reyna said:

I feel more Cuban American, you know why? This is the country that I recognize as my homeland. Because in this country when you sacrifice and put forth the effort you get rewarded. It’s difficult to do the same in Cuba. Students oftentimes study without food in their stomachs and they still earn As! . . . Now that I’ve been living here for six years, I wonder how they do it. In the US you feel protected by the laws. You feel part of this country because it gives you the opportunity to become part of it by becoming a citizen. That’s something that you don’t get in Cuba, and that’s what made me feel more American.

Although she has not yet accomplished her goals and believes that her life could be better, Anabel’s cultural identity is influenced by her gratitude for the freedoms she gained upon entering the US.

For many participants, their Cuban American identity is informed by their appreciation for the civil liberties and opportunities that became available once they moved to the US. The findings suggest: (1) that feeling Cuban or Cuban American is subjective to one’s personal attitudes and experiences, and not linked to any processes of adaptation; (2) one does not have to feel like they have fully adapted to US society to identify as Cuban American; and (3) one can feel like they have fully adapted to US society and continue to identify as Cuban. These findings are all related to the context of Miami’s Cuban community, where the sample was drawn from.
Length of Time in the US and Missing Cuba

The data reveal that feelings of missing Cuba decline the longer one lives in the US (see Figure 8).

Figure 8.
Length of Time in the US and Missing Cuba

Alicia has lived in the US for twenty years. She said that she missed Cuba while she was living in Costa Rica. She missed the ocean, the movies, and a yearly Latin American carnival that took place in Cuba. Upon arriving in the US in 2000, her nostalgia was short-lived since Miami felt like a more “prosperous Cuba.” Although she could never deny that she is Cuban, she feels Cuban American because of the opportunities that facilitated her personal and professional growth.

Unlike Alicia, Allen has only been living in the US for six years but also considers himself Cuban American since he had no rights in Cuba. Beside missing family and friends he said that he becomes nostalgic when he thinks of the land (referring to Cuba) and misses Cuban music and culture. After his response, he suddenly paused and said, “well, we have practically the same culture here in Miami. Almost everybody is Cuban, we practically listen to the same music, we have the same food, so what I miss the
most is family.” Both Alicia and Allen identify as Cuban American, but Alicia no longer misses Cuba.

The findings suggest that nostalgia for Cuba decreases the longer one lives in Miami. Miami’s proximity to Cuba, its tropical climate, and vibrant Cuban culture make it difficult for Cubans in Miami to miss nonhuman aspects of their homeland. It is likely that Cubans who live in states with smaller populations of Cubans may feel greater nostalgia for their homeland. Overall, these findings suggest that nostalgia and maintaining a Cuban identity do not impede them from adapting to life in the US.

Identify as “Other”

When asked if they identify as Cuban or Cuban American, three participants provided ambiguous responses. For instance, Jorge stated, “I consider myself American with Cuban blood, and Cuban with an American life. Since I’m a citizen and have lived here for so many years, this country is in my veins. But of course, I’m 100 percent Cuban, that’s where I’m from.” Jorge described how he becomes nostalgic when he reminisces about his life in Cuba. He misses the memories of his childhood, his upbringing, the warmth of the people, and even “the tree in the corner” of his house.

Discrimination

Of my thirty-five participants, twenty-eight identified as White, five identified as mixed-race, and two identified as Black. When asked if they have experienced discrimination while living in the US, six participants stated that they have only experienced discrimination from Cubans or other Hispanics/Latinos. For instance,
Rubén, who identifies as a White/Hispanic, stated that he has only felt discriminated by other Hispanic people in Miami, especially Cubans. While giggling, he said, “I think that we Cubans believe that we’re better [than other Hispanic/Latino groups].”

Argelina (who identifies as White/Hispanic) has only experienced discrimination while visiting New York. She explained, “I asked a stranger a question in Spanish. The person wasn’t even American. It was a Latin person. You can tell when someone is Latina. When I asked her a question she said, ‘you are in America, speak English!’ She said it in English, but I understood.”

Raquel (who identifies as White/Hispanic) shared a similar sentiment. She stated: I can’t say that I’ve been discriminated against by the natives . . . sometimes I’ve felt discriminated by Latinos. Not only Cubans but Latinos in general. When I worked at Target, my supervisors were mostly from Central America. When they saw that other people were better prepared than them, they tried to trample them.

Annie (who identifies as Black/Latina) stated that although she has never experienced racism, she has felt uncomfortable among other Cubans. She believes that Cubans who arrived in the 1960s do not see her generation as Cuban. She exclaimed, “I don’t know if they resent us or if they think that we all come indoctrinated by communism!”

Notably, two participants described feeling racialized by White Cubans in Miami. Mercedes (who identifies as mixed-race) was perplexed at the racial stereotyping amongst Miami’s Hispanic/Latino population. She explained that most of the people she meets in Miami become surprised when she mentions that she is Cuban. Since she does
not fit the stereotypical notion that all Cubans are White, she is often confused as being from Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic.

I go a lot of Puerto Rican when I straighten my hair. When I wouldn’t straighten my hair then I get Dominican. They don’t associate Cubans with the Black population. From Cubans I hear, “oh you don’t look like a Cuban; you don’t sound Cuban.” So how do Cubans sound? Like we have a potato in our mouths? They have stereotypes of people that live in Hialeah, which not everyone that lives in Hialeah speaks the same. It’s all about stereotypes. But to be honest with you, I’ve never felt racism, like someone approaching me as a Black person, or as a Latino . . . even though Cubans think that they are White here. I’m like, “I think that you need to go up a little bit, like past Orlando!” If you ask for Cuban food, they’ll direct you to a Mexican restaurant.

These stories suggest that because of Miami’s unique demographics, dominated by Cubans and other Hispanic immigrants, discrimination typically occurs across different Hispanic/Latino groups or within one’s own group.

Like Mercedes, Luisa (who identifies as Black/Latina) asserted that the perceptions of most Cubans in Miami are that “Cubans are not Black,” and became tired of experiencing subtle forms of discrimination. After moving to Washington, DC, she felt relief that she no longer had to provide explanations about her race and ethnicity. The next section describes Luisa’s unique experiences in two very different places: Miami
and DC. Luisa’s case merits attention since there is a dearth of scholarship on Black or Afro-Cubans in the US.\(^7\)

**Negotiating Race and Ethnicity: A Case Study**

Luisa highlights the complexities of ethnic and racial boundaries, being both Latina and Black, in two metropolitan areas: Miami, Florida and Washington, DC. According to 2019 census estimates, 75.1 percent of the population of Miami-Dade County is White, compared to only 17.4 percent Black/African American. The same year, 68.5 percent of individuals living in Miami-Dade County identify as Hispanic/Latino. In Washington, DC, 46 percent of the population is White, 46 percent is Black, and overall, 11.3 percent of the population identify as Latino/Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau 2019a, 2019b).

Luisa’s narrative reveals how an immigrant’s race and ethnicity impacts the way one is perceived and treated by members of his or her community. The narrative of her experiences negotiating race and cultural identity in two different regions of the US offers a unique opportunity to evaluate how context impacts the ability to adapt and develop a sense of belonging.

Soon after arriving to Miami, Luisa quickly became aware of her positionality as a Black Latina in the US and was shocked at how many times she was required to indicate her race on job applications and other documents. Pre-existing racial tensions between Black and White Cubans were transposed from Cuba to the US. According to

---

\(^7\) Few studies have documented Afro-Cuban experiences in the US, including Greenbaum (2002); Aja (2016); and Mirabal (2017).
Devyn Benson (2016, 123), Cuban exiles often denied the existence of racial problems in Cuba. She argues that “being in Miami allowed exiles to create a new, heterotopic space— the Cuba they felt the revolution was destroying—in which certain privileged values could be reconstructed under the aegis of a government friendly to their cause.” Luisa described the disheartening encounters she had with other Hispanics/Latinos in Miami and provided me with various examples of instances where she experienced from overt to more subtle acts of racial discrimination.

She described a hypothetical scenario to illustrate the frequent occurrences of subtle discrimination she experiences when interacting with employees of different establishments throughout Miami. For instance, when she walks into a place with an afro hairstyle employees become shocked when they realize she speaks Spanish. Luisa provided this example to represent a phenomenon that she calls el síndrome de las cebollas, or “onion syndrome.” Like peeling layers of an onion, strangers ask questions to try to make sense of the fact that she is both Black and Cuban. After a waitress learns that Luisa speaks English, the following verbal exchange tends to take place:

*Waitress:* Oh, you’re Dominican?

*Luisa:* No, I’m Cuban.

*Waitress:* But you don’t look Cuban.

*Luisa:* I’m from the same country as you.

*Waitress:* But how did you come? How long have you been here? You look American.
Many people in Miami automatically assume that because she is Black, she cannot possibly be Cuban. Luisa then proceeded to provide details of two instances where she encountered subtle forms of racial discrimination from White Cubans.

While waiting for a layover flight, Luisa and her (White American) husband stopped at a Cuban restaurant located inside the Miami International Airport to order her favorite Cuban staples: *vaca frita,*\(^8\) *pastelitos,* *pan de bono,*\(^9\) *empanadas,* and *croquetas.* 

While speaking English with her husband as they waited to order food, a male employee, not realizing she was Latina, told his forty-five to fifty-year old coworker, “attend to your cousin” (referring to Luisa). She responded, “Attend to your cousin because she’s in a hurry. I’m hungry and I have to catch another flight.” The man became paralyzed with embarrassment when he realized she spoke Spanish, and later approached her table to apologize. He tried to justify his actions by stating that Black Americans are conflictive and impolite. Luisa told him that the conflict comes from the fact that they (referring to Black Americans) speak English and he did not. The following exchange ensued:

*Employee:* You don’t live here [referring to Miami], correct?

*Luisa:* No, I live in Washington DC.

*Employee:* That’s why you look American.

Luisa stated that the employee was crossing the line by not respecting the business-client relationship. In her case, the fact that she was Cuban broke all barriers of respect and personal space. Initially, he assumed that she was Black, and when he found out that she was Cuban, he felt comfortable enough to criticize Black American females. She

---

\(^8\) Translates to “fried cow,” a traditional Cuban dish where the meat is shredded and fried.

\(^9\) Translates to “cheese bread.”
exclaimed, “No! It’s just that they speak English and you don’t! That’s where the misunderstanding comes from.” She said that she proceeded to offer him advice:

First, don’t despise your fellow man because there are Black females like myself that are also Panamanian, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Venezuelan, and I can even say they are in Patagonia. Second, you must be careful, you offer a service. You represent this establishment, and it represents Cubans, . . . we must represent ourselves with more class.

When the man apologized, she reminded him that Miami is an extension of Cuba and is not representative of the United States.

While traveling again a few months later and waiting for her layover flight, Luisa stopped to order food at the same Cuban restaurant. Surprisingly, she ran into the employee who had disrespected her. He greeted her politely and proceeded to describe the shame that he felt due to his actions and expressed gratitude for the lessons he learned from her that day. Luisa explained to me that she had felt disrespected and excluded from a specific group, in this case “Cubans,” because of the color of her skin. While remembering her encounter she passionately emphasized, “You are discriminating me! The discrimination occurs in many forms, and many are subtle and happen unconsciously because they don’t know any better.”

Luisa’s second anecdote illustrated the type of implicit bias and microaggressions she encountered from strangers in Miami. One day after leaving her job at a local university, Luisa rode the Metrorail, Miami’s transit system, to the destination where her car was parked. While on the Metrorail, an older White woman who was on the way to a theatre located in downtown Miami, asked for her for directions. The lady was shocked
when Luisa responded in Spanish. According to Luisa, this is the dialogue that took place:

*Lady:* You speak Spanish?

*Luisa:* Of course I speak Spanish.

*Lady:* But you don’t look Cuban.

*Luisa:* I don’t? Then what do I look like?

*Lady:* It’s just that Cubans don’t look like you. They look different.

*Luisa:* Different? How? You mean because I’m Black?

*Lady:* (disregarding Luisa’s question about race) But you speak differently. You’re different. You’re not like other Cubans. How long have you been here?

*Luisa:* I’ve been here for over ten years.

As they continued to chat the lady mentioned that she was on the way to see a show at the theatre. Coincidentally, Luisa told her that she also had tickets to the same show but for the following week, and that she was a big fan of the artist who was performing. The lady’s response was, “you sound so cultured!” Admitting that she may have taken those words as a compliment twenty years ago, she now understands that she was being insulted. The lady continued to ask her questions about her past and upbringing in Cuba. When she mentioned that her grandparents were of Jamaican descent, the microaggressions continued. Luisa said that the lady replied: “that’s what it is! It’s because you have English ancestry,” a fact used to justify that Luisa was educated, well-spoken, and appreciative of art.
Luisa experienced more overt forms of racism while working as a waitress in Miami. Among Miami Cubans, she was not “White” enough to be perceived as a Cuban, and also not “Black” enough to be perceived as a Black woman. As detailed in Chapter 5, her initial American Dream, inspired by Hollywood films, was to become a waitress. However, her experiences working as a waitress at an iconic bayfront restaurant in Miami led to a rude awakening. After being spanked by the older White Cuban male who told her, “*En Cuba todas son unas putas, jineteras*” (In Cuba you’re all whores and prostitutes), she came to a realization. With intensity in her voice, she stated that it was in that moment that she realized that she did not belong to that group, or that imaginary that they had of Cuba. On another occasion she felt discriminated by African-American customers who laughed at her accent and demanded that the 18 percent service charge that was added to the final bill be decreased. They claimed to have received poor service and stated that she had not informed them that drink refills were not free. As she narrated her story, she said to me, “Wasn’t that humiliating?” They were teasing her because of her accent. These shocking experiences made her realize that she did not belong to either group. To Cubans, she did not “look” Cuban enough; to African Americans, she did not “sound” Black enough. However, she acknowledges that her perceived identity depends on the person’s (Cuban émigrés) social status and the migratory wave they belong to; and provided me with her knowledge of the demographics of each wave. She said that the demographics of Cubans in the US changes with each incoming wave of Cuban émigrés, with more Black Cubans arriving in the latter waves. She had family who had come to the US in the 1960s, but like many Black Cubans, they settled in states located in the Northeast. Furthermore, many Black Cubans who came during the Mariel Boatlift, settled
in African-American communities in Northeastern states. While living in Miami she was not Cuban enough, and living in Washington, DC she was not Black enough and too “Latina” to be considered Black.

These encounters in Miami had motivated Luisa to return to the university to focus on academic success and professional growth. Prior to moving to Washington, DC, she earned a master’s degree from Florida International University, located in Miami. She credits one of her professors for helping her to come to terms with her reality: he explained that because of her race and gender she was at the bottom of the social pyramid. By focusing on her studies, she was sheltered from Miami’s superficiality and people’s biased speculations. The university seemingly served as a haven. She said, “I didn’t have to explain anything to anyone, so it was my salvation. It was another universe.” At this point of the interview, the focus shifted to her experiences negotiating her race and ethnicity in a space with few Cubans: Washington, DC.

There is a stark contrast in the share of Hispanics/Latinos who live in Miami (72.7%) compared to DC (11.3%). Luisa is not bothered with the small number of Latinos in DC. On the contrary, she stated that she appreciates that she does not have to provide people with the same explanation about her homeland or identity as she did in Miami to demystify the commonly held notion that “Cubans are not Black.” She provided me with an example of a conversation she had with a man at a supermarket in Washington, DC. When she revealed that she was Cuban, the man said, “You’re the only Cuban I have ever met”! She stated that she appreciates that she is no longer required to provide explanations concerning her race, identity, and when and how she left Cuba, since Cubans “are the only people who require an explanation of how you left Cuba.” In
DC people ask about her country without crossing personal boundaries and with curiosity, not because they are “interested in personal gossip.”

When I asked Luisa if she has experienced discrimination in Washington, DC based on her race and ethnicity, she emphasized that she does not “fit into any category.” She said:

Now I am in the United States. It’s a different world (unlike Miami). Here you begin to experience racial tensions. It has a different history. The world is divided between White and Black. I’m part of the minority but at the same time I don’t have a group. I don’t fit into any category. Am I Black? Hispanic or Latina? Latinos don’t see me as Latino enough, Hispanic enough. In this area there are many Central Americans. To them I’m not Latina. [They tell her] ‘You don’t look it, but you speak Spanish!’

When indicating that she is Cuban, Central Americans become stunned to learn that there are Black Cubans in Cuba. However, Luisa says that she is understanding and forgiving of their ignorance. Her narrative highlights the “double racism” that exists in DC.

In DC she confronts a bidirectional dilemma: is she Black or Latina enough? She stated that she does not “fit” into the “Black” racial category, as it is overshadowed by her other identity: “Latina.” For instance, Luisa recounted an argument she had with a colleague at her workplace. The lady asked: “why don’t you go with your people? The whiter ones. You’re married to a White man anyway. You’re not Black enough. Don’t you like Black men?” Contrarily, she stated that her Black colleagues, who have doctoral degrees and know that she is married to a White man, constantly criticize and say insulting comments about White people. On one of those occasions, she reminded a
friend who had spent half an hour generalizing and saying horrible things about White
people, that her husband is a White man, and proceeded to warn him about the dangers of
generalizing about groups of people.

As explained in Chapter 5, Luisa believes that the ability to achieve the American
Dream depends on society. She said, “My American dream is what I visualized when I
became a citizen of this country, for my son to be safe when he goes out with friends . . .
to have peace knowing that he is safe. That’s my American dream.” Unfortunately, her
son, who has a Black Cuban mother and a White father, must also deal with racial bias
and discrimination because of his own unique intersectionality. In middle school her son
was placed into a Spanish class for native speakers. Latino students, mostly from Central
American countries, regarded him as too Black to be Latino, and Black students rejected
him because he had White friends. They began to insult and call him names such as carne
quemada, which translates to “burnt meat.” As a result of these experiences, he refused to
speak Spanish when visiting family in Cuba.

Luisa’s experiences negotiating her race and identity in two demographically
distinctive spaces underscore the role that context plays in one’s self-image and
construction of identity. According to Masuoka and Junn (2013, 88), “members of
minority groups have experienced political belonging in the United States as being
conditionally welcome. Their Americanness is modified by their racial-group
classification as African American, Latinos, or Asian Americans.” Luisa contends that
cultural identification is constructed both by personal factors and societal influence. For
instance, people’s curiosity regarding where she is from, complicates her sense of
belonging. Her perception of the US and her sense of belonging evolved as she traversed places. She said:

Everyone expresses their Cubanness in their own way. Mine has changed a lot.

My vision of the US has changed. From when I lived in Cuba . . . from when I lived in Barbados . . . from Florida, which is not really part of the US, from my vacations, and later while living in the US. My vision has changed a lot.

She emphasized that she will always be Cuban. Because her accent provokes individuals to ask her where she is from, she is constantly reminded of her Cuban identity. She argued that the way in which one chooses to identify is influenced by how one is perceived by society. She elaborated: “No matter how broad my lexicon is and how professional I sound, my accent will always remind me, . . . it’s my place of birth, my accent, the rice and beans that I can’t go without. The coconut flan that I made today.”

Luisa’s sense of self can be distinguished from her sense of belonging. For instance, the place she “embraces” is the US, since the things she identified with in Cuba have ceased to exist. Luisa explained that her childhood home, her favorite library, and the spaces where she played music have been emptied or destroyed. Despite identifying as Cuban, Luisa asserted that because she lives and works in the US and because she is a mother to a son who was born in the US, she is “from” America.

Apart from missing her grandmother and the memories they shared, Luisa expressed intense feelings of longing and nostalgia for her homeland, including material items, places, and people. For instance, she explained that when she visits Cuba, not only does she bring back magazines, books, and rum, she also brings back pieces of her home—“a gas lamp that my grandma used when the lights went out, an iron, a sowing
machine.” She said, “if you visit my home it looks like a museum of antiques. But they weren’t bought in the store, they’re my family’s—three and four generations back.”

When asked why she wants to bring back old items, she says, “I don’t want any more clothes or shoes, I want my childhood, which are in those old objects that you don’t want. Because one doesn’t know what they have until they lose it.”

Luisa expresses sadness at the level of disconnection that Cubans Americans have with their land. During a family trip to the Native American Museum, she reflected on the relationship that Native Americans have with their land and with nature. She believes that for Cubans, “love for land,” was replaced with love for patria,¹⁰ or the Cuban Revolution. For Luisa, “love of land” is a spiritual connection that one feels when breathing the air and connecting with the nature of his or her homeland, and with sadness, admitted that it is a spiritual connection she does not have. Listening to Native-American Powwow music helps her feel closer to her homeland. She explained:

If one day I have a crisis where I can’t sleep or situations with Cuba that are very difficult, I listen to Powwow and I feel free. They are the mantras that Natives use. It hurts to know everything they’ve suffered, and to me it’s similar to what happens with Cuba. When everything is taken away. When they take the land, your rights, your light, that’s what makes me cry the most about Cuba.

Elaborating further, Luisa described how she can relate to the pain that Native Americans feel when she listens to their songs; she feels the pain from the loss of home and of no longer belonging. She believes that if one loses their land, or things they cherished, one

¹⁰ Translates to “homeland.”
recreates them. Those are the reasons why she brings items from her past back to the US every time she visits Cuba.

**Conclusion**

The findings presented in this chapter indicate that most Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave do not regret leaving Cuba despite facing obstacles while adapting to life in the US. The data suggest that attitudes, adaptation experiences, and sense of belonging to the US are affected by one’s local context and its racial and cultural dynamics. Moving to Miami, a city dominated by Cuban culture, makes it easier for Cuban émigrés to transition and adapt to US society. Stories about life in the US are typically transmitted to the island by family and friends who migrated to Miami years earlier. Therefore, Cuban émigrés’ mental construction of the American Dream is largely a story about life in Miami. Despite its high cost of living, Miami’s sociocultural similarities with Cuba makes it easier for post-Soviet émigrés to integrate to their new context.

Participant narratives were analyzed to determine the relationships between one’s cultural identification and the following factors: time spent in the US, citizenship status, and nostalgia for Cuba. For the Cuban émigrés of this study, the findings suggest that, whether they identify as Cuban or Cuban American is not contingent on income, occupational status, or challenges faced. Obstacles or challenges do not lead one to feel “less American.” The findings indicate that immigrants can feel as if they have adapted to US society while identifying with their home country, thus supporting Gans’ (1979, 15) argument that “nostalgic allegiance” to their immigrant culture can persist for
generations. This study further contributes to the broader literature on immigrant incorporation in the US since little research has been done about the attitudes of recent immigrants and how they interpret their experiences adapting to life in the US.

Only six participants experienced discrimination from other Hispanics/Latinos in Miami. Luisa’s narrative provided insight into how Black Hispanic/Latino immigrants experience racialization and negotiate their identities in two unique spaces in the US. These findings demonstrate that social context influences how one feels about or adapts to life in the US, and that there is no universal standard of “US society.” Throughout the US, the fusion of elements from diverse races and cultures creates unique spaces for immigrants’ incorporation. Thus, defining what it means to be or feel American will vary depending on context, including the ethnic and racial relations of one’s locality.
7. CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes the findings of my qualitative study, its implications, and suggestions for future research. This study examined personal narratives of Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave (1995-2017) to learn about their perceptions, feelings, and adaptation experiences in the US. Motivated by legendary stories of unlimited opportunities, many Cuban émigrés have taken great risks and made painful sacrifices to travel to the US in the past few decades. Because of Miami’s proximity to Cuba, and infusion of Cuban culture, most Cuban émigrés reunite with friends and family who left for the city years before. In some cases, stories, photographs, and social media posts obscure the obstacles that hinder immigrants’ economic and social mobility as they transition to life in the US. Despite their awareness of the challenges that await them, most Cuban émigrés are willing to take risks to improve their living standards and acquire basic freedoms that are not afforded by the Cuban government.

Contributing to Cuban studies, this research reveals how Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” period conceptualized the American Dream prior to migration, how they feel about discrepancies between expectations and lived realities, and how they negotiate their cultural identities. Additionally, this study contributes more broadly to the field of migration studies by using personal narratives to better understand how immigrants define and measure their adaptation and sense of belonging to US society, and how their experiences inform their identity.
Main Findings

Motivations

Although “the political” and “the economic” are inextricably intertwined in migrants’ experiences, only twelve participants indicated that they left Cuba for both economic and political reasons, since many came to realize the contradictions inherent in the policies of the Cuban government. Three participants indicated that they left solely for political reasons: one participant was tired of being surveilled by government officials and the other two were academics who disagreed with the censorship of ideas and restrictions of their freedom of expression. Like Pedraza’s (2007) research findings of émigrés who left Cuba from 1989-2004, this study concluded that most Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave left Cuba both because of its deteriorating economy and political disillusionment. Building on Pedraza’s work, my research extends the timeframe of the sample to 2017 and concludes that Cubans’ complex motivations for leaving the island remain mostly same.

When asked why they decided to leave Cuba, ten participants stated that they hoped to reunite with family and friends living in the US. For instance, María stated that she had managed a stable business for many years but decided to leave Cuba since her husband’s family was living in the US. She noted, “I didn’t live too bad. We didn’t eat poorly. I lived like a normal person.” These findings reveal a less explored phenomenon that motivates Cuban migration: not wanting to stay behind and rejoining relatives abroad. This study concluded that perceptions of the American Dream alone do not lure Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” to American shores and affirms that family networks continue to play a decisive role in mobilizing people from Cuba to Miami.
The American Dream

According to Hochschild (1995, 25), “The American Dream is an impressive ideology. It has for centuries lured people to America and moved them around within it, and it has kept them striving in horrible conditions against impossible odds.” This study concluded that some Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave, and those who will follow, might experience frustration and disappointment with the difficulties of achieving upward mobility in the US. For example, when describing the obstacles they faced while adapting to life in the US, fourteen participants\(^1\) complained about how much time they must dedicate to work. However, feelings of frustration or disappointment do not lead to widespread regret, as evident by the responses of ten participants who stated that life in the US is much more difficult than they had envisioned it to be. These findings suggest that for most Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” period, the American Dream is fulfilled by the simple act of leaving Cuba.

This study also concluded that participants who lived in European countries after leaving Cuba are more critical of the US economy and the lack of social services available to its citizens and describe the US as a country of excessive consumerism. Some participants who lived in Europe left because of lack of job opportunities, discrimination, strict immigration policies, or to reunite with family living in Miami. However, most indicated that they appreciated the free or affordable healthcare, the extensive public transportation systems, the work-life balance, and the lack of emphasis on consumerism in the countries they previously lived in. As stated by Mercedes, she

\(^1\) Ten of the fourteen stated that life is more difficult than they expected.
appreciates “a capitalist country with a socialist twist.” These findings suggest that Cubans, and perhaps individuals from other nations as well, may now consider moving to countries that provide adequate social services, coupled with opportunities for upward mobility and guaranteed civil rights, thus demoting the US as the premier destination for immigrants.

*An Emerging Wave?*

Criticizing new waves of Cuban émigrés is not a new phenomenon of Cuban migration history. However, of the themes that emerged during the data analysis phase, “criticizing newcomers” was the most surprising since most participants shared their opinions without being prompted. Seventeen participants criticized Cubans on the island and émigrés who arrived more recently for having distorted perceptions of the American Dream, for their poor work ethic, for their desire to accumulate excessive wealth, and for engaging in illegal activities. For instance, Alejandro, who has not established long-term goals because he would rather “live in the moment,” epitomizes the type of person being criticized. This study concludes that, unlike earlier Cuban exiles, émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave or the “children of communism” (Pedraza 2007) who arrived during the post-Soviet period, have a more difficult time achieving upward mobility in the US because of the scarcity of jobs that pay middle-income wages, lack of social capital, and absence of financial assistance from the US government.
Since the suspension of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” policy by President Obama in January 2017, a new wave of Cuban émigrés has seemingly emerged.\textsuperscript{2} Increased transnational ties with Cubans in the US, growing access to information technologies, deteriorating US-Cuba relations, and a worsening economy exacerbated by the Coronavirus pandemic are defining features of the smaller number of Cubans who have immigrated to the US from 2017-2021. Now subject to deportation, unauthorized Cuban émigrés are increasingly traveling via the US-Mexican border in hopes of claiming asylum, a process that can take months or years before learning if a claim is approved or denied.

Increasingly frustrated with the Cuban government’s unkept promises, shortages of food and medicine, and lack of access to COVID-19 vaccines, Cubans on the island recently staged widespread anti-government protests across the island. The protests, which began on July 11, 2021, were motivated by the voices of contemporary artists on and off the island, most notably the subversive song \textit{Patria y Vida}\textsuperscript{3} (“Homeland and Life”), by rap/hip-hop artists in exile Gente de Zona, Descemer Bueno, and Yotuel Romero, and contributing artists in Cuba Maykel Osboro (Castillo) and Eliécer el Funky Márquez (Sayre 2014). Further research is needed to examine how the protests will impact immigration to the US.

\textsuperscript{2} More research is needed to examine how President Barack Obama’s travel reforms impacted Cuban migration. Another topic for further exploration is the effect of Cuba’s travel reforms, which went into effect in 2013.

\textsuperscript{3} The phrase, \textit{Patria y Vida}, is a spin on Fidel Castro’s slogan, \textit{Patria o Muerte} (homeland or death), invoked to influence Cubans to sacrifice their lives for the Cuban Revolution.
Adaptation & Cultural Identity

This study concluded that immigrants’ attitudes, adaptation experiences, and sense of belonging are influenced by the sociocultural context in which one lives within the US. For example, Miami’s Cuban culture makes it easier for White Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot” wave to adapt, especially since many reunite with family and friends who have already established themselves in Miami. Contrarily, Annie and Luisa, the only two participants who identify as Black in my sample expressed feeling racialized by the overwhelmingly White Cuban majority in Miami. Luisa, who believes that the ability to achieve the American Dream depends on society, described Miami as a racialized space where she does not belong. Her experiences negotiating her race and ethnicity in two different jurisdictions within the US affirms the idea that context matters and impacts one’s sense of belonging. In particular, the predominance of a Hispanic/Latino or African-American population may shape ethnic and racial relations in each place, and either negatively or positively influence the adaptation experience of immigrants.

These findings contradict traditional assimilation theories that purport that assimilation occurs in linear stages where minority groups ultimately conform to the standards of a majority group (e.g., Gordon 1964) and lose their ethnic markers (e.g., Alba and Nee 1997). An immigrant’s ethnic markers are not automatically erased while adapting to a host country. Instead, one’s level of adaptation is impacted by his or her attitudes towards US society, and in accordance with Portes and Rumbaut (2001), the sociocultural context in which one settles.
The data also revealed that feeling Cuban or Cuban American, or one’s sense of belonging to US society, is not strongly correlated with length of time living in the US, nostalgia for Cuba, or one’s citizenship status; and that adaptation does not occur through a linear progression of stages, nor require that one become “Americanized,” since feeling American will differ according to the community one lives in. Moreover, immigrants can retain their cultural characteristics and feel American concomitantly. Notwithstanding, for most of the participants in this study symbolic ethnicity has persisted without hindering their ability to adapt to American society (Gans 1979, 15).

Apart from contributing to the field of migration studies, this research adds substantially to the literature on the Cuban exodus by documenting the pre- and post-migration attitudes and adaptation experiences of Cuban émigrés of the “Wet Foot/Dry Foot Wave,” and by extending the timeframe of Pedraza’s and Eckstein’s samples by thirteen and fifteen years respectively. The findings reveal that, like their predecessors, émigrés of the “Wet Foot/ Dry Foot Wave” are adapting to US society despite not having the same advantages that helped facilitate the upward mobility of the former; and that despite not yet achieving their economic goals, many believe they are living the American Dream.

**Implications and Suggestions for Future Research**

The findings of this research reveal the need to explore the emotional dimension of immigration since people’s perceptions and attitudes can affect their experiences relating and adapting to a new society. This research has demonstrated that personal narratives provide contextualized data for immigration scholars seeking to explore the
experiences of immigrants. Since most of the participants in this study live in Miami, this research should be replicated elsewhere to explore how Cuban émigrés in other US states and countries feel about their migration and adaptation experiences to compare their cultural identifications, sense of belonging, and the relation between expectations and lived experiences. Additionally, this study can be extended to the new cohort of Cuban émigrés that have arrived since the suspension of the “Wet Foot, Dry Foot” policy, to define its characteristics, motivations, and experiences, and to assess whether improved access to mobile phones, the internet, and social media platforms influenced émigrés’ decision to migrate.

My future work will examine the experiences of Black or Afro-Cuban émigrés who live in the US, given the dearth of scholarship on their experiences. More research is needed to document how their experiences differ from those of White Cubans; and how racialization affects their attitudes towards the US, feelings of belonging, and how they choose to identify. To contribute to the broader literature on the Cuban exodus, I will conduct a comparative study of Black or Afro-Cuban émigrés who live in Miami and in a second location within the US.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

**Participants Who Lived Abroad**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Country Participant Lived in Prior to Coming to the US</th>
<th>Approximate Amount of Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercedes</td>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna María</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>Bahamas</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernesto</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>3.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>11.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>10 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luisa</td>
<td>Barbados</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>20 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

English Version: Semi-Structured Interview Guide:

Qualitative Research on the Perspectives of Cuban Americans Living in Miami

Date of interview (mm/dd/yyyy): ________________
Interview location: ________________
Pseudonym: ________________
Interviewer: ________________

The following guide is to be used to interview participants, following informed consent procedures for semi-structured interviews, in a private, comfortable location. Interviews will address the following domains of participants’ experiences, covering specific themes while allowing for personal elaboration along the way. The interview will take approximately two hours.

**Demographic Information**

Age

Gender

Racial/ethnic identity

Year of arrival in the United States

Highest level of education

Employment status, if employed (part-time or full-time)

Occupation
Marital status

Number of children

**Background Questions**

1. Reflecting on your life in Cuba, tell me about your childhood.
   - Where did you grow up?
   - What was your occupation in Cuba? Your parents?
   - What did you study?
   - Where did you study?

**Information about the United States**

Now that I have established the pre-migration context of Cuban Americans, I will shift the conversation to learn how my participants conceptualized the American Dream prior to arrival and the factors that influenced the construction of those ideas.

2. When was the first time you learned about the United States?
   - Approximately how old were you?
   - Did you have family living in the United States? If so, where?
   - Did they contact or visit you?
   - How did you envision life in the United States?
   - Have you ever heard of “the American Dream”?* 
   - What shaped those thoughts? (Internet, television, music, family, etc.)

**Leaving Cuba**

The next questions will reveal why the participants decided to leave Cuba and how they traveled to the United States.
3. Why did you or your family begin to consider leaving Cuba?
   - *(if as a child)* Why did your parents choose to come to the US?
   - *(if as adult)* Why did you choose to come to the US?
   - At what age did you leave? How did you travel to the United States?
   - What did you leave behind?
   - Who did you leave behind?

4. What arrangement did you or your family make prior to your departure?
   - How did you travel to the United States?

**Living in the United States**

The following questions will focus on the participants’ experiences and challenges they faced after arriving in the United States, their current economic status, and long-term goals.

5. After you arrived in the United States, what did you do?
   - Did you reunite with family or friends?
   - Where did you live?
   - What challenges did you experience when you arrived?
   - Did you seek employment immediately after arrival?

6. Can you describe the goals that you set for yourself when you arrived?
   - Career goals?
   - Academic goals?
   - Did you seek employment or enroll in an educational program? If so, when?

7. Can you tell me about your job or economic status?
• Do you have health insurance?
• Do you rent or own your home?
• Who lives with you in your home?
• What are your long-term goals?

8. Do you maintain relationships with family or friends back in Cuba?
• How do you communicate with them?
• Have you gone back since you left?

Concluding Questions

These final questions will reveal if the experience of life in the United States and engagement with economic conditions lived up to pre-migration expectations of Cuban Americans.

9. Is your life how you imagined or hoped it would be?
• Do you feel that life in the US is how you envisioned it to be?
• Do you have any regrets about leaving Cuba?
• What do you miss the most about Cuba?
• Do you consider yourself Cuban American? Just Cuban? Other?
• Have you experienced any discrimination based on your race, ethnicity, or because you are an immigrant?
• How do you feel about the American way of life? (economic, political, social)
Appendix C

Guía de entrevistas semiestructuradas:

Investigación cualitativa sobre las perspectivas de los cubano-estadounidenses que viven en Miami

Fecha de la entrevista (mm/dd/aaaa): __________________

Lugar de la entrevista: __________________

Seudónimo: __________________

Entrevistador: __________________

La siguiente guía se utilizará para entrevistar a los participantes, siguiendo procedimientos de consentimiento informado para entrevistas semiestructuradas, en un lugar privado y cómodo. Las entrevistas abordarán los siguientes dominios de las experiencias de los participantes, cubriendo temas específicos y permitiendo elaboración personal. La entrevista tomará aproximadamente dos horas.

Información demográfica

Edad

Género

Identidad racial/étnica

Año de llegada a los Estados Unidos

El más alto nivel de educación

Estado de empleo, si está empleado (a tiempo parcial o a tiempo completo)
Ocupación

Estado civil

Número de niños

Antecedentes

1. Reflexionando sobre tu vida en Cuba, háblame de tu infancia.
   - ¿Dónde creciste?
   - ¿Cuál fue tu ocupación en Cuba?
   - ¿La de tus padres?
   - ¿Qué estudiaste?
   - ¿Dónde estudiaste?

Información sobre los Estados Unidos

Ahora que he establecido el contexto de pre-migración de los cubano-estadounidenses, cambiaré la conversación para explorar cómo mis participantes conceptualizaron el sueño americano antes de su llegada aquí y los factores que influyeron en la construcción de esas ideas.

2. ¿Cuándo fue la primera vez que supiste de los Estados Unidos?
   - ¿Aproximadamente, cuántos años tenías?
   - ¿Tenías familia viviendo en los Estados Unidos? Si es así, ¿dónde?
   - ¿Se comunican o se visitan?
   - ¿Cómo te imaginaste la vida en los Estados Unidos?
   - ¿Has oído hablar de “el sueño americano”?
• ¿Qué dio forma a esos pensamientos? (Internet, televisión, música, familia, etc.)

**Salir de Cuba**

Las siguientes preguntas revelarán por qué los participantes decidieron abandonar Cuba y cómo viajaron a los Estados Unidos.

3. ¿Por qué usted o su familia comenzaron a considerar salir de Cuba?
   - *(si de niño)* ¿Por qué sus padres eligieron venir a los Estados Unidos?
   - *(si es adulto)* ¿Por qué elegiste venir a los Estados Unidos?
   - ¿A qué edad te fuiste? ¿Cómo viajaste a los Estados Unidos?
   - ¿Qué dejaste atrás?
   - ¿A quién dejaste atrás?

4. ¿Qué arreglo hiciste o tu familia antes de su partida?
   - ¿Cómo viajaste a los Estados Unidos?

**Vivir en los Estados Unidos**

Las siguientes preguntas se centrarán en las experiencias y desafíos que los participantes enfrentaron después de llegar a los Estados Unidos, su situación económica actual y sus metas a largo plazo.

5. Después de llegar a los Estados Unidos, ¿qué hiciste?
   - ¿Te reuniste con familiares o amigos?
   - ¿Dónde vivías?
   - ¿Qué desafíos enfrentaste cuando llegaste?
• ¿Buscaste empleo inmediatamente después de la llegada?

6. ¿Puedes describir las metas que te estableciste cuando llegaste?
   • ¿Objetivos profesionales?
   • ¿Objetivos académicos?
   • ¿Buscaste empleo o te inscribiste en un programa educativo? Si es así, ¿cuándo?

7. ¿Puedes hablarme de tu trabajo o situación económica?
   • ¿Tienes seguro médico?
   • ¿Alquilas o eres dueño de tu casa?
   • ¿Quién vive contigo en tu casa?
   • ¿Cuáles son tus objetivos a largo plazo?

8. ¿Mantienes relaciones con tu familia o amigos en Cuba?
   • ¿Cómo te comunicas con ellos?
   • ¿Has vuelto desde que te fuiste?

**Preguntas finales**

Estas preguntas finales revelarán si la experiencia de la vida en Estados Unidos y las realidades de las condiciones económicas estuvieron a la altura de las expectativas de los participantes.

9. ¿Es tu vida como imaginaste o esperabas que fuera?
   • ¿Sientes que la vida en los Estados Unidos es como la imaginaste?
   • ¿Te arrepientes de haber dejado Cuba?
   • ¿Qué es lo que más extrañas de Cuba?
• ¿Te consideras cubanoamericano? ¿Solamente cubano? ¿Otro?
• ¿Has experimentado alguna discriminación basada en tu raza, etnicidad, o porque eres un inmigrante?
• ¿Cómo te sientes acerca del estilo de vida americano? (económico, político, social)
Appendix D

Participant Responses Regarding Expectations of Life in the US

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Is Life how You Expected?</th>
<th>Discussed Work and Lack of Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>Met Expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luz</td>
<td>Met Expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberto</td>
<td>Met Expectations</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubén</td>
<td>Met Expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>Met Expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yanet</td>
<td>Met Expectations</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allen</td>
<td>Met Expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna María</td>
<td>Met Expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandro</td>
<td>Met Expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Met Expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>Met Expectations</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastián</td>
<td>Better than expected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yenny</td>
<td>Better than expected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Better than expected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modesto</td>
<td>Better than expected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Better than expected</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raquel</td>
<td>Better than expected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reyna</td>
<td>Better than expected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>Better than expected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jorge</td>
<td>No expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>No expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paolo</td>
<td>No expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aimé</td>
<td>No expectations</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>No expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luisa</td>
<td>More difficult than expected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argelina</td>
<td>More difficult than expected</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>More difficult than expected</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anabel</td>
<td>More difficult than expected</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleo</td>
<td>More difficult than expected</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernesto</td>
<td>More difficult than expected</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luisito</td>
<td>More difficult than expected</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcos</td>
<td>More difficult than expected</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricardo</td>
<td>More difficult than expected</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Result</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>María</td>
<td>More difficult than expected</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercedes</td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Participant’s Cultural Identification, Occupation, and Annual Gross Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Identification</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>AGI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Higher education coordinator</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Nail technician</td>
<td>$23,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Uber driver</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Social worker and dept. store associate</td>
<td>$60,000-$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Realtor</td>
<td>$60,000-$64,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Educational services, business owner</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Medical technician</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Medical center employee</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Discount auto parts associate</td>
<td>$12,000-$13,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>$75,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Electrician</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>Surveyor</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Aviation mechanic</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Research development and behavioral therapist</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Hospital cafeteria worker</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Dancer, choreographer and business owner</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Patient care assistant</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Higher education administrator</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Fast food restaurant worker</td>
<td>$30,000-$32,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Assistant project manager</td>
<td>$68,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Salary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Self-employed technical engineer</td>
<td>$150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Handyman and subcontractor</td>
<td>$40,000-$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Behavior therapy tech.</td>
<td>$43,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Software developer</td>
<td>$65,000-$80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Pet grooming business</td>
<td>$30,000-$31,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Clinical director for private college</td>
<td>$80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Travel agency employed and realtor</td>
<td>$26,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>Nurse practitioner</td>
<td>$105,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Handyman</td>
<td>$16,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Musician</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
VITA

VERONICA DIAZ

Born Miami, Florida

2001-2004  B.S., Social Studies Education
             Florida International University
             Miami, Florida

2004-2005  Social Studies Teacher
             SIATech Charter High School
             Miami, Florida

2005-2009  Social Studies Teacher
             Weis Middle School
             Galveston, Texas

2009-2010  Social Studies Teacher
             Newport News Behavioral Health Center
             Newport News, Virginia

2010-2012  Psychology Teacher
             Woodside High School
             Newport News, Virginia

2012-2015  Financial Aid Coordinator
             Florida International University
             Miami, Florida

2013-2014  M.S., Higher Education Administration
             Florida International University
             Miami, Florida

2014-      Sr. Academic Advisor & Project Lead
             College of Arts, Sciences, & Education
             Florida International University
             Miami, Florida

2016-      Adjunct Lecturer
             Honors College
             Florida International University
             Miami, Florida

2016-2021  PhD Candidate
             Florida International University
Miami, Florida

2019-
Adjunct Lecturer
Global and Sociocultural Studies Department
Florida International University
Miami, Florida

2019-
Adjunct Lecturer
Department of Liberal & Interdisciplinary Studies
Florida International University
Miami, Florida

CONFERENCES


2021 “The (Cuban-)American Dream: Perceptions vs. Realities.”
Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 31st Annual Meeting (virtual), August 14.