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PARADISE LOST, PARADISE FOUND: ORAL HISTORIES AND THE FORMATION OF CUBAN IDENTITIES

*Myra Mendible**

Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element . . . [n]ot comfortable but home.

-Gloria Anzaldua¹

For those of us accustomed to navigating the fluid borders dividing our "Cuban" and "American" cultural identities, the condition of being both and neither at the same time is indeed not comfortable but home. We are, in Gustavo Perez Firmat's catchy phrase, "[b]orn in Cuba . . . made in the U.S.A."² We are members of that group referred to as the "one-and-a-half" generation, a designation that, like "Generation X" or "Baby Boomer," reduces complex social phenomena to an accessible and familiar sound bite. Like all such terms, "one-and-a-half" attempts to classify some aspect of human experience, to name (and thus tame) its many intricate and elusive strands. The phrase captures the "in-between" status of *cubanos/as* who immigrated to the United States as children or adolescents and have lived, as Firmat calls it, "on the hyphen."³

As LatCrit scholars, our analyses proceed from the assumption that Latinos are multifaceted and multidimensional; that identity is socially constructed and intertextual; and that all of us are continuously shaped and reshaped by variable influences, experiences, and mediations. Our position as bicultural and bilingual individuals only complicates and highlights the fact that identity is not a snugly tailored, creaseless suit. It is a wardrobe teeming with creative possibilities—a colorful silk scarf, a couple of hats, a sequined gown, an austere wool suit—each expressing an aspect but not the whole of us. We understand that how we see ourselves and how others classify us fluctuates according to context and perspective. I am an exile, a refugee, a naturalized citizen, ethnic, an immigrant, and *gusana*. As

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1. GLORIA ANZALDUA, PREFACE TO BORDERLANDS/LA FRONTERA: THE NEW MESTIZA Preface (1987).

2. GUSTAVO PEREZ FIRMAT, NEXT YEAR IN CUBA: A CUBANO'S COMING OF AGE IN AMERICA 1 (1995).

3. See generally GUSTAVO PEREZ FIRMAT, LIFE ON THE HYPHEN (1994).

Alice Abreu's "Lessons from LatCrit" reminds us, "[t]o full-fledged, natural born Americans," we are simply Cubans; to Cubans on the island, we are Americanized Cubans.⁴ Most of us have learned to cohabit two or more identities at once, to recognize, in Abreu's words, that "[a]spects of identity don't just intersect, they co-exist. They affect and inform one another."⁵ We are insiders and outsiders, both and neither simultaneously.⁶ We swim in waters as turbulent and treacherous as the Caribbean Sea itself, but they are our waters and our familiar shores bordering the distance.

It is one thing to acknowledge and accept this indeterminacy, however, and another to imagine the possibilities suggested by our panel topic, "Cubans Without Borders." While the former calls for a celebration of our multiplicity and differences, the latter challenges us to seek a common thread across time and place. Given the intensity of debates surrounding such issues as *diálogo* (initiating dialogue or negotiation between Cuban government representatives and U.S. Cubans), Elián, and Los Van Van (a Cuba-based band invited to perform in Miami, which resulted in vociferous protests and threats), the challenge to locate and pursue that elusive thread is no less urgent than it was four decades ago. As U.S. Cubans, we are often separated from Cubans on the island by a sea of silence, and from each other by misunderstanding, frustration, hostility, or indifference. I have heard fellow Cubans in the U.S. dissociate themselves from the identity essentialized as "Miami Cubans," and Cubans in Miami denigrate *marielitos*.⁷ Private memories dictate public policy, and as Berta Hernández-Truyol discovered in her conversations with Cuban-American law professors after the Elián crisis, "personal experience is outcome determinative."⁸

4. Alice G. Abreu, *Inter-Group Solidarity: Mapping the Internal/External Dynamics of Oppression: Lessons from LatCrit: Insiders and Outsiders, All at the Same Time*, 53 U. MIAMI L. REV. 787, 800 (1999).

5. *Id.* at 788.

6. *Id.* at 788-89.

7. "Marielitos" is an often used derogatory reference to Cubans who emigrated from the Mariel port during the 1980 boatlift. See B.E. Aguirre et al., *Marielitos Ten Years Later: The Scarface Legacy*, 78(2) SOC. SCI. Q. 487, 487 (1997). The exodus brought approximately 125,000 Cubans to U.S. shores. *Id.* at 488. Fidel used the vast migration to release prisoners and asylum inmates, forcing boat captains to bring them back to Miami along with their families. See *id.* at 491-92. While later analysis found that only about 1% of these Cubans actually had criminal records, stories circulated locally and recounted in national news reported a Miami overrun by rapists and murderers as a result of Mariel. See *id.* at 493-94.

8. See Berta Esperanza Hernández-Truyol, *On Becoming the Other: Cubans, Castro, and Elián*, in which the author examines reactions to the Elián situation among fellow Cuban-American law professors and finds that "the migration experience itself had an indelible impact on the way respondents perceived, analyzed, and related to the Elián saga." Berta Esperanza Hernández-Truyol, *On Becoming the Other: Cubans, Castro, and Elián-LatCrit Analysis*, 78 DENV. U. L. REV.

This Essay will attempt to negotiate this relationship between personal experience and historical perspective, highlighting the importance of collective memory in articulating and mediating exile politics. It is founded on the belief that history and memory share much the same function in shaping community: both employ imagination and experience to look into the past; both are subject to revision; and both intermix personal and public consciousness. Most importantly, both are indispensable for knowing one's personal and national identity. My broader aim throughout this discussion is to explore how conflicts between Cubans on and off the island boil down to this critical intersection where personal stories assume historical significance. In imagining a future of Cubans without borders, I locate 1959 as the dividing line, a border where history and memories collide. I argue the need for Cubans on all sides of the divide to extend our historical memories beyond the 1959 border and locate a shared vision that can connect us through time and space. Such a project of recovery and recuperation calls for a critical re-examination of Cuba's history and a remapping of the political terrain bordered by 1959. LatCrit scholars can guide the way in this collective effort; this Essay is a preliminary step towards reclaiming the complexity and breadth of Cuban history, the voices silenced by dominant discourses or forgotten in exile. Specifically, this Essay aims to erode the simplistic dichotomy of pre- and post-Castro scenarios that frame discussions about Cuba's present predicament, particularly as it defines Cuba's struggle to achieve social justice and equality merely in terms of Castro's so-called "New Society" or in terms authorized by so-called representatives of the Miami exile community.

In the Cuban exile community, univocal versions of history often serve as borders that buttress ideology and divide members of the "one-and-a-half" generation from each other. I raise this issue in relation to my opening comments about the "in-between" generation's ambivalence and diversity because history, and its offspring—cultural memory, are among the most powerful forces shaping our perspective and marking our boundaries. Here let me distinguish between the concept of history as an authorized, objectified, and fact-based reconstruction of the past, from history as a body of communal and personal memories, transmitted through time and subject to reinterpretation and reconstruction. This secularized conception of history is certainly more fluid and tricky, more tangential, anarchic, and subjective. Yet it is no less powerful in its didactic significance or formative function. Maurice Halbwachs argues that collective memories form the basis of both personal and cultural

687, 715 (2002). In all cases, the individuals' personal experiences determined how they judged events.

identity and help to define our membership in a particular group.⁹ These memories are born in the lived experiences of individuals who then bear witness to events through storytelling.¹⁰ Recounted and remembered, events are “kept alive” and granted authenticity (if not accuracy); the past is given shape, accorded value, and preserved.¹¹

Given the primacy of oral histories in the formation of national identity, it is not surprising that competing groups tinker with the past to fashion a positive, self-serving collective identity based on history but creatively embellished by memory. During periods of nation building and transition, empowered groups interpret and ritualize historical events in ways that build solidarity in the present and an agenda for the future. As historian Charles Maier points out, memory “mingles private and public spheres . . . [and] conflates vast historical occurrences with the most interior consciousness.”¹² This fusion of public and private history articulates aspects of Cuban exile group identity and contains the seeds for both discord and solidarity. For it is a richly textured and polyvalent voice that speaks to us through these collective memories, a chorus of conflicting and incoherent stories that deny us the comfort of tidy, imperious history. Personal memories, like the shards of a collective history, can reconfigure and revitalize the past in ways that help a community reclaim the present. Through this sharing of memories and telling of stories, we redefine our sense of community and foster our connection through blood and history.

What I am suggesting is not new; postcolonial theory and criticism has led the way in this approach by recognizing the importance of cultural memories in national identity and reunification. While “postcolonialism” marks a contested theoretical terrain, its critics and authors nevertheless share a preoccupation with history.¹³ Postcolonial discourses are engaged in an ongoing dialogue with “official” history; as Helen Tiffin explains, postcolonialism seeks to dismantle and demystify European cultural authority with a view to erecting a systematic alternative to define a denied or outlawed self.¹⁴ This decolonizing project consistently involves a strategy of dismembering the colonizer’s history of self-definition and self-critique that reclaims, in Simon During’s words, “an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images.”¹⁵

9. See generally MAURICE HALBWACHS, *THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY* 50-55 (Francis J. Dilter, Jr. & Viola Yazdi Dilter, trans., 1980).

10. See generally *id.* at 50-87.

11. See generally *id.*

12. CHARLES S. MAIER, *THE UNMASTERABLE PAST: HISTORY, HOLOCAUST, AND GERMAN NATIONAL IDENTITY* 149 (1988).

13. See, e.g., Helen Tiffin, *Teaching Post-Colonial Literary Theory*, in *BRIDGING THE GAP: LITERARY THEORY IN THE CLASSROOM* 41-54 (J.M.Q. Davies ed., 1994).

14. *Id.* at 42-45.

15. Simon During, *Postmodern or Post-Colonialism Today*, in *TEXTUAL PRACTICE* 1.1 32-47

Similarly, the condition of exile separates people from their homeland and their history. Like colonized subjects, Cuban exiles and their bicultural sons and daughters carry fragments of a shattered history like baggage. Forty years of migration and separation have eroded and confused our communal memories and colonized our history. We are left with conflicting stories, each account filtered through personal experience and historical perspective. At the same time, we hear dominant voices proclaiming their authority to dictate our memories, to view the entirety of a collective past through narrow and myopic lenses focused on the speaker's own interests. Often, these interests conflict with our own experiences or distort images of self and community. We cling to a thread of connection even as we feel our grasp slipping with each negative depiction of Cubans or each public incident of intolerance among our own people. Like many of my generation of Cubans raised in the United States, I have regarded my ancestry with mixed feelings, torn between a need to reject the identity conjured by these dominant perspectives and a desire to connect to my heritage without shame. As Margaret Ferguson has remarked, exile is "the metaphorical name for the experience of ambivalence."¹⁶

Vincent Llorens, himself an exile from Spain, once wrote that "a life of exile assumes an essentially unstable alteration of human existence which is paradoxically and tenuously balanced between two opposing points: the present and the future."¹⁷ Critic Michael Ugarte argues that "this 'tenuous balance' disguises the very existence of the present as it persists in blending with the past and future. Immediate surroundings have meaning only in terms of a lost geography, a place that is absent."¹⁸ Thus, exile defines the present only in relation to the past; it perceives "the world always in terms of relations: nostalgia, the fictional recreation of better times in relation to a negative reading of the present."¹⁹ This predicament sheds some light on an older generation of Cuban exiles who confound the "in-between" generation with their inability to act upon the present. Many are caught in this labyrinth of history where all paths lead to the past and there is no exit to the present. Any vote cast, any position taken, any alliance formed in the United States seems bound to this obsession with the past.

Such a preoccupation with the past makes exiled and displaced peoples

(1987).

16. Margaret Ferguson, *The Exile's Defense: Dubellay's La Deffence et Illustration de la langue francoyse*, PMLA 93, 277 (1978).

17. Vincent Llorens, *Literatura, Historia, Politica*, in MADRID: REVISTA DE OCCIDENTE 9 (1967).

18. Michael Ugarte, *Luis Cernuda and the Politics of Exile*, 101 MLN 325, 327 (Mar. 1986).

19. *Id.*

particularly keen on storytelling. They seem to sense its profound influence, its formative and instructive role in shaping identity and recording cultural memory. Perhaps, as Ugarte remarks, “to be displaced is to be obsessed with memory.”²⁰ Communal stories of exile are often preserved and disseminated through autobiographies, testimonials, or historical fictions. They produce a body of literary texts that expresses its own poetic, its own language, conceits, and motivations.²¹ Ugarte’s analysis suggests that regardless of the specific context, an exile’s voice records the experiences of loss, absence, separation, and fragmentation that seem to characterize the migratory experience.²² Most significantly, exile gives rise to a polemic that “brings into play a series of ideological and historical disputes whose battle ground includes the new home as well as the old.”²³

In the context of Cuban politics and discourse, Cuba’s history is often reduced to a dichotomy of simplistic pre- and post-Castro scenarios. On this side of the border, a dominant version of Cuba’s past sounds like an echo of Milton’s “Paradise Lost.”²⁴ On the other side, present day Cuba emerges as “Paradise Found” when compared to selective memories of Batista, neocolonialism, widespread poverty, and racism. Cuban exiles that cling to this singular vision, memorialize the past as the moment of solidarity, and communality; only insiders to this vision may share its glory. Similarly, dominant voices on the island extol the progress represented by Castro’s “New Society,” and proclaim themselves the enlightened ones, the founders of a discourse of equality in Cuba.²⁵ This polemic, which Frank Valdes aptly locates in elitist Miami and elitist Cuba factions, is founded on contrasting versions of the past.²⁶ It rejects the complexity of Cuba’s history in favor of a singular and myopic vision.²⁷ Each side insists on the authenticity of “their” story, refusing the possibility that the story of Cuba’s struggle for social justice and equality extends beyond these narrow boundaries. Each constructs a notion of *cubanidad* founded on imagined past and present communities. In Alan Singer’s words, “[d]esire dreams the identity of the one with the many, the plenitude of truth, the absence of difference.”²⁸ But as Fredric Jameson

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.* at 326.

22. *See id.*

23. *Id.*

24. JOHN MILTON, *PARADISE LOST* (1820).

25. *See generally* Francisco Valdes, *Diaspora and Deadlock, Miami and Havana: Coming to Terms with Dreams and Dogmas*, 55 FLA. L. REV. 283 (2003).

26. *See generally id.*

27. *See generally id.*

28. Alan Singer, *Desire's Desire: Toward an Historical Formalism*, 7 ENCLITIC 57 (1984).

reminds us, “[h]istory is what hurts, it is what refuses desire.”²⁹

An exile community’s historical consciousness is deepened by two kinds of experience: direct participation in the events, or emotional engagement through oral testimonies, memoirs, autobiographies, familial lore, and imagination. Since I left Cuba at the age of five, I possessed few memories borne of my own reality. Instead, I relied on the many stories I remembered and the diverse people I met who shared their private memories of Cuba’s past. These shared memories fostered in me the sense that I belonged to a colorful, sometimes dysfunctional, sometimes extraordinary extended family. As a carryover of our Cuban heritage, cultural memories are fundamental to the ideological formation of Cuban-American identity. Kept alive in exile through stories, myths, hearsay, and gossip, these memories shape and sustain our collective values, forge a communal and individual sense of self, and transmit a vision of the past that can guide us toward the future. Perhaps my position as the only literature professor among the conference’s many legal scholars leads to this emphasis on the role of storytelling in my identity formation, believing as I do that history is simply another twice-told tale. Yet during LatCrit VI, I was also surprised and delighted by the number of discussants who used personal anecdotes and family history as the springboard for analysis during sessions, and by the ways that all of us on the “Cubans Without Borders” panel crossed borders the day that we exchanged personal narratives and thus claimed our own bit of history. Terry Dehay characterizes this collective remembering as “reclaiming and protecting a past often suppressed by the dominant culture, and in this sense, as re-envisioning, it is essential in the process of gaining control over one’s life.”³⁰ During these intimate exchanges, I felt the extent to which our interpretation and understanding of Cuba’s past—our experience of *cubanidad*—grew out of the story of exile, its justificatory narratives, accusations, and loss.³¹

Like others of the “in-between” generation, my knowledge of Cuban history stemmed from secondary, often contradictory sources. It was

29. FREDRIC JAMESON, *THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS* 102 (1981).

30. Terry Dehay, *Narrating Memory*, in *MEMORY, NARRATIVE, AND IDENTITY* 405 (Amritjit Singh et al. eds. 1994).

31. I am indebted to Jesus Jambrina, the only discussant in the group who had recently migrated to the United States, for expressing his perspective as someone born and raised in Cuba. All of us on the “Cubans Without Borders” panel benefited from Jesus’ reminder that he did not share our sense of divided identity. As he remarked to us in an earlier email, “les confieso incluso que, a veces, me siento saturado de cubania y quisiera, cosa imposible claro esta, liberarme un poco de ella.” [I confess that, at times, I feel saturated by my cubanness and desire, something clearly impossible, to liberate myself from it.] While my emphasis here is on the development of a historical consciousness in exile, I in no way mean to exclude Jesus’ contribution. His insights enriched all of us.

mediated by my parents and later filtered through an educational system that measured Cuban history only in relation to its own cultural myths and perspectives. On those rare occasions when Cuba was mentioned during my formal schooling, it was as representative of the “Communist Other” to democratic America—as an island nation defined by loss and lack. Cuba’s complex history, filtered through this narrow lens, served to affirm the virtues of capitalism or to admonish young Americans who may be lured by pop culture images of el Che or Fidel. I was keenly reminded of this colonized history by Adrian Wing’s cautionary remark during the LatCrit VI Conference that the U.S. often holds itself up as an example of democracy and justice against its “Other”: Latin America. Understandably, my view of Cuba from that perspective was that it had always been a “banana republic,” its history simply a string of strongmen dictators, racists, and regressive initiatives. In this version, Cuba’s long war for independence from Spain is named the “Spanish-American War,” obscuring the fact that a generation of Cubans, led by a military *leadership* comprised of forty percent Afro-Cubans, paid for that victory with their own blood.³² This script calls for the United States to play the enlightened democracy to Cuba’s “third world” role. It ignores the U.S. Government’s role in imposing their own segregationist policies on Cuba’s military during its occupation, and neglects to mention the fact that, unlike the United States’ war for independence, Cuba’s war for independence articulated a vision of racial equality and harmony.³³

Yet for years I felt destined to carry these remnants of a tattered and dishonored heritage like an albatross around my neck.³⁴ Stuart Hall’s remark that identity is never simple or stable but happens over time and is “subject to the play of history and the play of difference” suggests that identity is an ongoing process of identification and association. In this sense, my *cubanidad* became as much a political choice as a question of birthplace or native language. But it was a choice implicated by the stories I internalized as my own—personal and cultural narratives founded on family lore, personal experience, and hearsay that complicated my perspective. As is often the case with children of immigrants, these stories usurped the role of recorded history. Because I grew up in Miami, the

32. See BETWEEN RACE AND EMPIRE: AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND CUBANS BEFORE THE CUBAN REVOLUTION 13 (Lisa Brock & Digna Casteñeda Fuertes eds., 1998)

33. See generally Cathy Duke, *The Idea of Race: The Cultural Impact of American Intervention in Cuba, 1898-1912*, in POLITICS, SOCIETY AND CULTURE IN THE CARIBBEAN: SELECTED PAPERS OF THE XIV CONFERENCE OF CARIBBEAN HISTORIANS 87-108 (Blanca G. Silvestrini ed., 1983).

34. In Samuel T. Coleridge’s, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a sailor is bound to wear a dead albatross around his neck in penitence for sinning against nature. Samuel T. Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in LYRICAL BALLADS (1978). The sailor, doomed to wander endlessly, repeats his shameful tale to all who will listen. *Id.* at 38-40.

Mecca of many Cuban exiles, my birthplace remained a living memory. It was alive on the streets of *calle ocho* in Little Havana, in the language we spoke at home, and in the stories that nurtured my childhood. To me, those tales of home were like a lifeline to my Cuban identity. They provided a personalized history that helped to counter the less forgiving, sometimes hostile images reflected by my public world. To my parents, those stories were the only way they knew to cross the boundaries of time and place, to unite me—their Americanized *cubanita*—with her heritage and her birthplace.

I realize now that my parents' many stories were meant to safeguard not only our family's history, but also the history of an entire culture in exile. That storytelling was more than an entertaining pastime—that it was part of an oral tradition linking generations of displaced and fractured communities across time—was a history lesson that I would learn later. My parents fled Cuba in 1959, just two months after Fidel Castro and his Revolutionary Army occupied Havana. Yet year after year of exile had not faded my father's memory of his homeland, and his stories were rich in detail. Although my father's gratitude to his adopted land was unquestionable, he never forgot his first love. He yearned for her, idealized and idolized her; she was *his* Havana. Eyes full of emotion, he referred to her as "the Paris of the Caribbean," a graceful, exuberant city that never slept. He knew every nook and cranny of her, and she clung to his senses—her vibrant rhythms, pleasant and familiar smells, sultry breezes, and gentle sun.

At home and on the street, I heard other stories too—stories fueled by rage and disappointment. In those stories, Havana was "Paradise Lost," and Cuba a nation violated—her people scattered, oppressed, imprisoned, executed, or lost at sea. She was the Republic whose possibilities had been cut short by *comunistas*, by traitors, and despots. Later, my university studies offered other versions as well. If conditions in Cuba were so ripe with potential; if the island had sustained a healthy, vibrant economy; if there was little evidence of discontent—then why did the Revolution happen? To my adult mind, my father's stories seemed unreliable, like memories filtered through the eyes of a lover. I began to question contradictions, inconsistencies, and partial truths.

In the summer of 1996, I traveled to Cuba as part of a Delegation of North American Philosophers and Social Scientists. During my seven-day visit, I exchanged ideas with Cuban professors, met my 83-year-old godfather, and sought some answers. I wanted to know if the Havana of my father's stories still existed. I wondered if it ever had. I hoped that with this visit, I would finally get "the real story."

The Conference was held at the University of Havana, a prestigious university with a long history of revolution. It had been the setting of student protests against the Spanish colonizers at the turn of the century,

and where Fidel and his followers rallied fellow students to oppose Batista's government. My days were spent at the University, where students and professors offered stories that differed radically from those I knew. In their version, the Revolution has made remarkable progress in health care and education, and its ideals endure despite constant and powerful opposition from exiled Cubans and the U.S. government. Through their eyes, I envisioned other, less forgiving images of Cuba's past. Their answers to my questions transformed my father's Havana into a decadent, impoverished city rife with corruption. Meanwhile, my U.S. colleagues toured Cuba with University guides who escorted them during scheduled visits to "collective farms" and health facilities. Sympathetic to these selected examples of egalitarian incentives, most seemed to accept uncritically the accompanying grand narrative: according to this version of history, the 1959 Revolution marks the onset of a vision towards social justice in Cuba and its discourse holds title to a critique of racism, social inequality, imperialism and patriarchy. Only the memory of Batista seemed to speak to Cuba's history before 1959. During one of my discussions with a U.S. economics professor, theory and social realities collided when I persisted in my efforts to understand why these gains could not have been achieved without sacrificing human rights. Frustrated by my unwillingness to accept the embargo, U.S. policy, and "Miami Cubans" as definitive justification, he finally responded that Latin American history shows that "we" seem to need a "more heavy-handed" type of leader to achieve our national goals. This remark, coming from someone with whose progressive politics I identified, disappointed and saddened me. On what political framework would I rely to understand Cuba's history, and in the process, my own? Whose stories would I choose to remember, whose would I reject?

In the afternoons and evenings, I encountered other, less official versions of Cuba's present. I met people who expressed anger and frustration in whispers. I spoke to many Cubans who had lost their jobs and been harassed or imprisoned for their discontent. I heard different answers to my questions. Is it true that the U.S. embargo is to blame for the people's hardship? That all decisions affecting labor are made only after affected workers approve them? That no other developing nation can boast a higher literacy rate? That Afro-Cubans have achieved social equality and justice? One woman quipped that the only thing keeping Cubans on the island alive is the flow of money and goods from Miami. My cousin, a university-educated "son of the Revolution," laughed at the notion that workers in Cuba would dare to oppose any policy or objective endorsed by Fidel. So much for consensus. And as for literacy, my learned godfather's comment tells its own tale: "*En Cuba hay mucha instrucción—pero no hay educación.*" ["In Cuba, there is much instruction—but no education."]

I did not find the answers I sought, and in fact, found more questions. But I did see traces of my father's beloved city. The once majestic colonial buildings still line the city's streets, but their walls are crumbling, literally collapsing into piles of rubble. With those crumbling old buildings, a city's rich history is fading. I saw two-by-four wood planks holding up balconies, layers of peeling paint on walls that revealed years of neglect. The sea was still deep blue, and the night breeze still cooled the city even in the dead of summer. Young couples still strolled through shady plazas, people still gathered at *el malecón* (the seawall that stretches along central Havana), and the Tropicana nightclub still entertained tourists. But the city had lost its luster, and its nightlife catered to tourists paying in dollars. There were few cars on the road, and weary faces waited in line for a dilapidated, overcrowded bus that may never arrive.

After my return, I tried to further complicate my notions of Cuba's history. I learned that Cuba's struggle to define both *cubanidad* and *ciudadanía* stretches back generations, and the ideals and discourse of the 1959 Revolution were employed throughout the Island's history (yes, even by Batista and others). I recognized the extent to which Cuba's complex past had been reduced in my own mind to a clear-cut polarity, its present evaluated and understood only in relation to 1959 as sole historical marker and determinant. I discovered new stories that overturned the notion that Latinos are innately incapable of enlightened self-rule, that the struggle to build a just nation translates into the "American way of life." Over the years, I had engaged in endless debates with Cuban scholars, friends, family, and colleagues about Cuba in an effort to hear their stories. Invariably, among Cubans on and off the Island, discussions had led back to 1959 as the litmus test for Cuba's alleged progress or deterioration. It was as if the year of Fidel's triumph stood as a great wall blocking our view of Cuba's past and our vision for its future.

Following the Elián debacle, I read the stories the national newspapers and television news shows disseminated about Cubans in Miami, where all of us were neatly lumped into one mass of loud-mouthed, narrow-minded fanatics. I heard many of my own closest friends disparage and ridicule "Miami Cubans." Some participated in the "banana republic" parade held in Coconut Grove by a predominantly "Anglo" population—a parade in which a few Confederate Flags waved proudly beside the U.S. flag. One morning during the Elián protests, I witnessed police officers antagonizing protestors then pushing a male protestor to the ground and handcuffing him. I later saw front-page photos featured across the nation that decontextualized and exaggerated events to such an extent that my best friend's parents in Kansas City were under the impression that Miami had been overrun by a riotous, violent herd of Cubans. Another friend blandly defended Elián's armed seizure with the remark, "Well, you know that most Cubans in Miami carry guns." As anecdotal and media "evidence"

continued to characterize the Miami Cuban community as heartless zealots intent on destroying their compatriots on the Island, I struggled to reconcile those depictions with my own experiences or with the knowledge that “reliable estimates put Cuban-American remittances [to Cuba] at close to \$1 billion per year, far exceeding the sum total of private contributions by charitable organizations to Cuba worldwide.”³⁵

Attending the LatCrit VI Conference marked an important point in my search for perspective. I had never met any of the panel participants until I arrived in Gainesville, though we had exchanged warm and lively emails. Seated among the fellow Cubans who would comprise the “Cubans Without Borders” panel, I discovered the extent to which all my stories converged and formed my self-image. As I sat among the wonderful people who would share their little bit of history and self and thus venture across borders, I felt like both an insider and an outsider to this group. It was not a distance created by discipline (I was a literature professor among a majority of law scholars). The distance I felt stemmed simply from the fact that I was a “Miami Cuban,” a *cubanita* who had not moved away or dissociated herself from the Miami exile community. It seemed that years of graduate study or personal successes had not erased the negative self-image projected upon me by that association. I longed to cross the border imposed upon us by those who would control our history, who insist on “representing” our views. I wanted to vindicate my community, to humanize the demonized, to share stories that spoke of individual acts of generosity, courage, or forgiveness. And most of all, I felt an absurd desire to redeem our history, to recall a dream of economic, social, and racial equality that links us across generations.

I expressed my discomfort to the group, and we exchanged personal memories, reaching across differences and finding that we shared intellectual, political, and emotional bonds. On that day, we aired our dirty laundry; we looked critically at notions of *cubanidad* that disappointed, divided, or alienated us. We expressed our rage and our hopes. Our exchange did not produce a coherent narrative of Cuban identity. Nor did it seek to deny the ugly aspects of our collective history or to supplant them with idealized and nostalgic personal musings. I do believe that our familial dialogue served to remind us, again, of the truism, “there are more than two sides to every story.” It may also have achieved some “historical consciousness raising.” Most importantly, it allowed us to see, reflected in our differences, traces of familiarity; it reaffirmed the need to engage relentlessly in a process of self-critique and self-reconstruction, of historical deconstruction and recovery. Such a process will doubtless

35. Alejandro Portés, *Morning in Miami: A New Era for Cuban Americans*, 9 AM. PROSPECT 28 (1998).

produce more ambivalence, a more tentative and open-ended view of our own Cuban “Others.” But as Cubans struggling to come to terms with our differences and yet longing for connection, we can live with ambiguity. In fact, we can make it home.

