

## Introduction: Of Memory and Mirrors

### Rupture

*April 16, 1961.* My parents nervously put my sister and me to sleep in the bathtub of our home in la Vibora, a middle-class neighborhood in Havana. Earlier that month Cuban authorities had warned of a possible U.S. invasion. Bathtubs were the safest spot in the house in case of bombings, they told us. Extraordinary routines had become customary.

For a few weeks my uncle slept on the living room couch. An early supporter of Fidel Castro, now he had joined the *counterrevolution*. We were told not to tell anyone he was there. We were to call him “Pepegriño,” a Cubanization of Jiminy Cricket, Pinocchio’s conscience in Walt Disney’s production.

The Catholic school I attended had been closed for months. Instead, I would walk down the street to a neighbor’s house, where classes were held for the children on the block as my neighbor ironed clothes and brewed coffee through a stained cloth that hung over her kitchen sink.

Then came the Bay of Pigs invasion. Many families, fearful of the aftermath, made plans to leave for the United States. We waited in long lines for smallpox vaccines, passport photos, passports, and visa waivers. Again we were sworn to secrecy. No one was to know that we were planning to leave the country.

Finally, at dawn on July 30, 1961, my parents and I left our home. At the airport were hundreds of adults and children, some crying, others unusually silent. All the children wore name tags bearing the telephone numbers of relatives or friends in Miami. I kissed and hugged my parents. As I walked through the glass doors onto the runway, a guard abruptly stopped me and tried to take away a doll I was carrying. I grabbed it back and held it tightly. I must have given him a very angry look because he gave up and told me to keep going. (I kept my “Cuban” doll with me until I gave it to my daughter. When I did, I took out a whistle attached to its back and read that it had been “made in New Jersey.”) I boarded a plane filled with small children and, forty-five minutes later, arrived in the United States.



**AQUÍ**

MATANZAS, 1994

**HERE**

MIAMI, 1996



At the Miami airport I was greeted by Americusa, my kindergarten teacher, who was then living in Miami. Americusa took me to Nenita and Pucho Greer's home, friends of my parents who had agreed to care for me. Their kindness could not alleviate the pain of separation or replace the familiar routines of my home. School had always been a source of pride and accomplishment for me, but in Miami it was dehumanizing and disorienting. I sat in a crowded classroom and couldn't understand a word the teacher said. A few months later Nenita almost miscarried and was confined to bed for the remainder of her pregnancy. Pucho drove me to the house of my mother's cousin, and again the sense of loss and fear set in.

My parents arrived from Cuba a short time later and moved into the house in which I had been living. But everything had changed. My mother was chronically sad and worried constantly about the relatives she'd left behind. My father, in an effort to compensate, even started washing the dinner dishes. Everything that had held our family together—visits to my grandparents' homes in El Vedado and Matanzas, weekend beach outings at Santa María del Mar, the park at the end of my block, neighbors, pets, our future as it had been imagined by my parents—was left in the past. Lying in bed on those early mornings in Miami, the sun bathed me, but I had to strain to remember the smell of humid red dirt.

### **Deconstructing Identity**

By the end of my first year of school in the United States I had won the spelling bee. I learned to dance the "Mashed Potato" on the sidewalk of what would become Little Havana, and memorized the words to Petula Clark's "Downtown," which we pronounced "tountoun." I could not know then that kids in Cuba were singing the same song in Spanish and also learning to dance "el Puré de Papa," for engaging with those who had remained on the island, except with family members *que no tenían otro remedio* (had no other choice), was quickly becoming a forbidden act.

My parents refused to stay long in Miami. Feelings against Cuban exiles were mounting. My father wanted to revalidate his medical license and felt that he would have better job opportunities outside of Miami. My mother was critical of the pretension and consumerism that characterized life there, particularly around the "doctor's wives clubs." So my father applied through Catholic Charities for relocation, and we were sent to Cleveland, Ohio. (In response to pressure from the state of Florida, the federal government had introduced a program to disperse Cubans throughout the United States—a program that white, North American sociologists argued would hasten the assimilation of Cubans.)

The flight to Cleveland marked my second plane flight. This time we

headed north with a hectic stop in the Atlanta airport. Now I was with my mother and two younger sisters, but Cleveland proved difficult for me nonetheless. The cold weather and the racism were severe. By this time two cousins who had also been sent to the United States ahead of their parents had come to live with us. Every morning we walked two blocks to meet the school bus. The day after President Kennedy was assassinated the other kids on the block followed us, yelling that we had killed Kennedy. Their taunts grew louder as we boarded the bus: “You dirty Cubans, you dirty Cubans, you killed our President.” We were not those kinds of Cubans, I screamed back—we had fled the island. But the geographic and political boundaries that had so restructured our entire lives and redefined our realities meant little to those who saw only “dirty Cubans.” The next day, we found our bicycles smashed, and my father gave us a lesson in self-defense.

I remember thinking that these people saw us as bad, as their enemies, and that they also thought the Soviets were bad, that they were their enemies too. I knew that I was not bad; therefore, I reasoned, the Soviets were probably not so bad either. But I could not extend this logic to include Cubans on the island. I was not ready even to imagine crossing the political boundary that divided us.

Even so, a sense of nostalgia gripped me as I entered the third grade. In a notebook I kept, I wrote poems and practiced Spanish by copying other poems. All the entries in my notebook made reference to good-byes, to the darkness of winter, to the sun I yearned for. The last entry was a sonnet written by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda as she left the island for Spain centuries before, entitled “Soneto al Partir.”

The next relative to arrive (not to *leave*, because by this time my point of reference was the United States, not Cuba) was my grandmother, who had been waiting in Spain for several months to come to the States. For several years there were no commercial flights between Cuba and the United States, and Cubans leaving the island would go to third countries first. She arrived with a present for me, an album by a hot new band, *Meet the Beatles*.

After two winters in Cleveland we decided to head south. My father got a job in Dallas. My mother and sister flew to Texas, while my grandmother, cousins, and I drove with my father. We stopped at a gas station somewhere in the south that had two water fountains: one for “whites only,” the other for “coloreds” (the sign for which had been scratched out and replaced with the word *niggers*). We were not allowed to drink the water—we didn’t fit into either category—and we left thirsty.

Texas is like nowhere else in the universe. The racist hatred I had felt in Cleveland awaited us there as well. After a year in Dallas we departed for one of the state’s farthest corners, Midland, the land of oil and Larry

King's *Confessions of a White Racist*, in which he writes of black women servants standing beside trash cans in the alleys behind rich folks' houses at sunset, waiting for their husbands to pick them up. They were not allowed to wait inside or even in front of the homes in which they worked each day. My best friend was a black Cuban, Kay (years later I learned that she was killed by her pimp in Dallas). We attended a Catholic school that six years earlier had excluded Mexicans. As Cubans, Kay and I had a strong bond. She was a gifted pianist, and my father loved music. We also were bound by the graffiti we often encountered in bathroom stalls that read "niggers" and "spics."

When I was in the seventh grade, the John Birch Society began organizing in the parish after a young priest, sent to Midland upon the death of an older priest, began to give sermons based on the books of Saint Paul, with reference to *peace* and *love*—words that in the 1960s carried strong political connotations. The Birchers accused him of being a communist and tried to run him out of town. They chose my father as their spokesman and nominated him for the school board on an anticommunist platform. Emerging victorious, they began a series of McCarthyesque trials, with my father one of the most vocal proponents of firing those considered to be communists. After some time the group successfully ran the new priest out of town.

Needless to say, my father's newfound political friends were racist. (For the average white Texan there was little difference between a "spic" and a "nigger.") And in the long run North American anticommunists had no use for us either. Those who shared the worldview that was supposed to explain the dislocation from our homeland and herald us as the champions of anticommunism also wanted to run us out of town. Our windows were shot out, and threatening phone calls warned my mother that her daughters would be killed if we did not leave the country.

Yet where were we to go? Where was our home? What was our identity? "Go back where you came from," the angry diatribe we heard upon answering the phone, had no meaning for us. Even if we wanted to, we could not go back. Now and then we'd receive a letter from relatives on paper that carried the scent of a humid island. Or a friend or relative would come to the States. The only other Cuban family in Midland had supported Fulgencio Batista, the Cuban dictator whom Fidel Castro had overthrown, and, since my parents had been "Fidelistas," we had little contact with them. I was busy anyway, thinking little about Cuba; instead, I had started dating, although behind my parents' backs. They of course wanted me to go out only with chaperons, as they had in Cuba.

It wasn't until the early 1970s, while watching the evening news, that my unconscious past began to erupt. I watched—in an inexplicable

panic—images of hundreds of Vietnamese children being loaded on planes bound for the United States. I too was once on a plane filled with children, I remembered. And I began to question why. Why had I had been brought to the United States?

I learned later that my coming to the United States was part of a U.S. State Department / Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) plan which became known as Operation Pedro Pan. The origins of the operation are still open to speculation, but it is clear that U.S.-backed propaganda frightened Cuban parents into thinking that the Castro government was going to take their children away and send them to the Soviet Union for indoctrination. Upon their arrival the U.S. government took those children without friends or relatives in the United States to camps in Florida, Iowa, and thirty-five other states. While the expectation was that our parents would soon follow, meeting up with us at our final destination, relations between the United States and Cuba quickly deteriorated, as the revolution moved leftward and the United States stepped up its fight. As a result, about four years passed before many of the fourteen thousand “Pedro Pans” were reunited with their parents. For many other children the separation would be permanent.

As young Cubans became aware of the discrimination we faced in our adopted country and grew increasingly critical of the U.S. role in Vietnam, we came to question what had really happened in our home country. I began talking to North Americans who were part of the Venceremos Brigade, a group of New Left students and community organizers who went to Cuba on work brigades. These encounters were perhaps the most difficult. Brigade members relished their connection to Cuba and authoritatively spewed the rhetoric that we could not return because we were “gusanos”<sup>1</sup> who had abandoned the revolution. “Yes, but I was six years old!” I’d say. “So what,” they would respond, “you were obviously middle-class, and as such your class origins make you unworthy of return.” The hypocrisy of their statements still stings today: few of them were working-class either. Cubans in the United States had become the Latino community that white North Americans could discriminate against—ironically, with the help of the Cuban government.

It was after years of feeling the pang of this contradiction that I was ultimately politicized via the broader Chicano movement. I entered college in 1972, in the heat of the grape and lettuce boycott, the Raza Unida governor’s race, and a waning antiwar movement. I started to look for other Latinos: Mexican community activists, Puerto Rican students, and Chilean exiles who traveled to Cuba. The Chicano movement had a very narrow definition of *identity*, which excluded anyone who was not born in the United States of Mexican descent. I was, after all, a Cuban; I always



introduced myself as Cuban, adding quickly that I was not like the rest—whatever that meant. In contrast, members of *Central de Accion Social Autonoma (CASA)*, a radical organization of Mexican political refugees who had fled the Mexican government’s repression of 1968, had a more inclusive definition of Latino identity. Together with the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, they maintained close ties to Cuba. Unlike radical white North Americans, many of whom continue to discriminate against Cuban exiles, these Latinos understood the need to connect immigrant communities to their homelands. They supported my journey back to the island.

At first I was ambivalent about returning. For a while I justified not returning, with the rationale that there was nothing left there for me to do; the revolution had alleviated social ills, so my social responsibility was to be articulated in other parts of the world. My radical politics and counter-cultural lifestyle increasingly alienated my parents and my extended family in Miami. Traveling to Cuba would be the definitive break.

Yet, the further I got from Cuba, the more I wanted to return. During a long driving excursion through Mexico and Central America, I sat outside our van watching bats dance in the moonlight by Lago Peten and flipping the radio dial until I connected with a Cuban station. I started to listen to Silvio Rodriguez and Pablo Milanes, songwriters of *La Nueva Canción Latinóamericana*. I read everything I could find about Cuba. The doors, little by little, were opened.

### **Return: (Re)Constructing Identity**

In December 1978 I returned to Cuba for the first time. The relative calmness of the Carter years had allowed for a rapprochement between the United States and Cuba. On the island a political opening was under way, including a change of policy toward “the communities abroad.” My sister, Alicia, and I were invited to spend three days in Cuba as members of the Antonio Maceo Brigade, a group of young Cubans who, like myself, had been radicalized through various antiwar and civil rights movements. A Cuban airliner was to pick us up at the Atlanta airport, the same airport through which we had started our journey north.

We were part of a delegation invited to Havana to engage in a dialogue with the Cuban government. We negotiated—or thought we did—the release of three thousand political prisoners (a phenomenon I did not understand until much later) and the right of Cubans to visit their homeland.<sup>2</sup> More than that, however, we argued for the right to be able to go back and live in Cuba and to participate in political and military organizations. We wanted to be part of the nation. In the end we were denied the right of return by the Cuban government. I didn’t understand the reasons



for or implications of this denial back then, for my first trip home was charged with memories and emotion. I spent three sleepless days crying. Like the sunlight that pours into a bedroom when the shades are suddenly drawn, memories of smells, colors, and faces broke through the layers of distance. Everything looked beautiful, even the young military guards poised with shiny rifles whose job it was to guard the Palace of the Revolution from us. It was a time of optimism in Cuba. Elections were being held, peasant and craft markets were flourishing, and revolutionary governments had recently come to power elsewhere in the Caribbean. In the first year after our journey more than 120,000 Cubans returned to visit the island.

Since then I have journeyed across the longest ninety miles of ocean in the world, the Florida Straits, countless times and in almost every conceivable way. I have organized work brigades of U.S. Cubans to construct schools and apartments. I have picked coffee beans and harvested citrus fruits. For years I thought it was my patriotic duty to gather for the nation all those young children who had been taken away. I believed that Cuba wanted us back. At times, however, I have returned to Cuba under threat of death. For the exile community reacted to our visits with violence and terrorism. One member of the Antonio Maceo Brigade, Carlos Muñiz Varela, was killed in Puerto Rico.

Travel to Cuba has always been vulnerable to politics and internal bureaucratic warfare in both the United States and Cuba. The brief period of detente between 1977 and 1979 was a lucrative venture for the Cuban government, motivated by monetary gains rather than humanitarian concerns. It ended abruptly in early 1980 with the Mariel exodus and the election of the Reagan administration. The Reagan administration, understanding the power of symbolic politics, nurtured a group of conservative Cuban exiles and their hard-line policies toward Cuba while at the same time allowing the GOP to claim they were bringing Latinos into foreign policy positions in the federal government. With the launching of Radio Martí, a U.S.-sponsored propaganda station, the Cuban government, with fewer cards to play, took out its wrath on the entire Cuban community and reversed its policy of allowing family visits. Even the Antonio Maceo Brigade was barred from returning that year.

I decided I would continue to return even if it meant returning with North Americans. For a while Cuban officials tried to prevent progressive Cubans from doing this, but reason finally prevailed, and many of us began to be included as the “Cuban-American” on delegations of North Americans to Cuba. Although we traveled with Cuban passports, we were placed in a strange category called “of Cuban origin,” which segregated us from the Cuban population as well as from foreigners. We were Cubans

and not Cubans at the same time. In that border zone we had no rights, no protected links to the nation. We could only spend our money, and even that was subject to restrictions and unique rituals, such as the period in which we had to convert our dollars into government-issued coupons marked with a *B*, a monetary category invented for “la comunidad,” as we were politely referred to in Cuba. Constantly changing regulations determined in which stores and hotels our coupons could be used.

In the late 1980s some of us were able to professionalize our relationship with our homeland. In my case I forged a link to the University of Havana, which made perfect sense for a professor at a U.S. university. (To this day I am committed to cultural and academic exchanges and to the struggle to strengthen and professionalize higher education in Cuba, a battle I am convinced will be waged regardless of what political and economic destiny awaits the island.) But these exchanges were not easy. There were few of us who managed to continue returning during the 1980s. When we return to Cuba we must ask the Cuban government for a reentry permit. I have at times waited in Miami for re-entry permits that never arrived. On the island Cubans who live abroad do not officially exist, and those in state institutions who work with us are screened and authorized by the government. Even then they are vulnerable to the political winds.

In one case I conducted a research project with a colleague who lost her administrative job in a political purge. Together we were reconstructing the history of Operation Peter Pan. In doing so, we had tried to understand the moment of rupture. It was a personal journey for both of us. While her parents chose to return to Cuba after the revolution, mine decided to leave and did so by first sending me out. Students from the island and Cuban students from the United States worked with us; they also felt an urgency to understand a past that continued to define their realities. But the preliminary research I had gathered was sold to the Cuban government’s premier film institute without my permission and was used to produce a documentary that emphasized only the dirty tricks of the CIA.

Politics permeates the search for this history. Memory in a sense is a militarized zone. Topics perceived to affect the country’s national security are always difficult to navigate. Cuba’s “communities abroad” are a topic of national security concern because they are a result of emigration that has been likened to treason. To complicate matters, there is great suspicion about those of us who are engaged with the topic, since most of us who have emigrated live in a host country that is not only antagonistic toward our homeland but that has used émigrés to fight its war with the island. Finally, independent-minded island intellectuals view us with suspicion as

well, since we must be granted special permission from the Cuban government to conduct research in Cuba.

While it is easier to engage in research about the United States, there are still parts of the official history that are difficult to ascertain. The CIA, for example, denied my request to view documents about the origins of Operation Pedro Pan. “The CIA may neither confirm nor deny the existence or nonexistence of records responsive to your request,” the rejection reads. “Such information—unless, of course, it has been officially acknowledged—would be classified for reasons of national security under Executive Order 12356.” We, Cubans on the island and abroad, are trapped in a national security war that seeks only to manipulate needs for political ends.

Sometimes on the island I am able to lift the veil of secrecy and suspicion. My relationships and contacts with people in Cuba are many and varied. I have had long discussions with both high-level officials and dissidents. I have relatives in Yaguajay and Havana. I have relished some love affairs and been devastated by others. I have friends who have triumphed and others who have met tragedy. A close friend committed suicide after his father had hung himself in despair when his daughter left through Mariel.

Returning has always been difficult, but it is made easier by close friends who have traveled to the United States or have been touched by our experiences. I have had two spiritual fathers—both sensitive, loving human beings—who have opened their homes to those of us who live in the United States because they insisted that we too are part of the nation. Both were also great poets, poets of a very special generation who held the keys to the nation: Eliseo Diego, a member of Orígenes, and Pablo Armando Fernández, of *Lunes en Revolución*. They overcame their own factionalism to expand the frontiers of the island to embrace us. They understood our need to connect, and they trusted our motives for return. They built bridges with us and, perhaps most important, opened doors and windows into the soul of our nation to welcome us back. They have nurtured me through the most difficult times of my life, including my near-separation from my husband, a Chicago-born son of Austrian Jewish refugees from World War II, who has not always understood my passionate love for an island in the Caribbean. And, thanks to Pablo, his wife, Maruja, and their children, my daughters have a home in Miramar, on la Calle 20. My older daughter, Alejandra, tells her friends she has two homes, one in Chicago and one in Havana. Paola, my younger daughter, has begun insisting on building her relationship with the island as well.

In the late 1980s some young Cubans on the island went in search of

the exile community, just as many of us had gone in search of our homeland in the 1970s. The crumbling of the economic and ideological framework that had held Cuba together since 1959 created a full-fledged crisis of legitimacy for the present government. The scramble for a new framework has sparked political debate about the definition of the revolution and the nation. A key component of this debate is the nation's relationship to those who have left the island.

Cuban officials have rejected this search for new definitions with hostility. Critics were christened the "new gusanos." But other voices said that Cubans who had left were part of the nation and should be included in discussions of its economic, political, and cultural future. This view was echoed by every major internal opposition group, all of which also support an easing of U.S. pressure on the island. Significantly, increasing numbers of young Cubans in the United States are calling for the same. This generational pressure is a growing reality in the U.S. Cuban community, as its younger members are not necessarily inclined to support attempts, favored by some elders, to retake the island. They are more interested in their lives in the United States and increasingly concerned with establishing a more democratic culture within their own émigré community in the United States. And, while many are staunchly anti-Castro, most also want a normal relationship with Cuba.

Yet discussion about Cuba's future and U.S.-Cuban relations is not easy, either in Cuba or abroad, although undeniably it is much easier in the United States. In Cuba, while wide-ranging discussions took place within the Communist Party in the early 1990s, in public the government rallied its citizens to unify behind an increasingly hard official position that made debate or dissent risky. Human rights activists were accused of working as agents for the U.S. government and jailed under laws that prohibit the right of assembly. Important cultural institutions that traditionally had been havens for free thinkers were often threatened by vicious turf fights among bureaucrats. These power struggles ended up destroying many valuable programs.<sup>3</sup>

Debate in the United States has been problematic as well. In 1989 the FBI named Miami the capital of U.S. terrorism after eighteen bombs went off in the homes and businesses of Cuban exiles working to improve relations with Cuba. Hard-line organizations, such as the Cuban-American National Foundation (CANF), accused those supporting better relations with Cuba of being agents of the Castro government. Incredibly, CANF's plans for the reconstruction of Cuba do not include the participation of people actually living in Cuba.

Sometimes, however, there are cracks in both empires. The economic crisis on the island forced government officials to change policies. In the

summer of 1992, at an international conference on economic opportunities in Cuba, a government representative announced that the government would welcome investments from Cubans living off the island—a radical break with a thirty-one-year-old position that excluded any Cuban living abroad from such transactions. And younger Cubans on the island have defended their artistic freedom and often included in their definition of culture that which is created by Cubans abroad.

In Cuban communities abroad a realignment occurred in the political center, which included “dissidents” from the Right and the Left as well as recently arrived exiles with radically different views and experiences of the revolution than exiles of the 1960s. Together, they were struggling for a more democratic culture in their communities and a reconceptualization of their relationship to the island. They too publicly called for an easing of U.S. pressure on the island. They supported internal movements in Cuba that called for a national debate and condemned the idea of a U.S.-imposed solution to Cuba’s problems. Many young Cuban exile professionals welcomed an opportunity to deal with the island as well.

But all these developments were met with intransigence on the part of those in power on the island. Every time it seemed as though the United States was ready to normalize relations, the Cuban government acted in such a way as to guarantee that they would not do so. The Cuban government’s shooting down of two *Hermanos a Rescate* planes in 1996, resulting in the deaths of four men, was but one example. Ironically, the United States reacts in ways that favor the hard-liners in Cuba. On that occasion Congress passed and President Clinton signed the Helms-Burton Act, which tightened the economic embargo of the island.

Despite these new barriers, I continue to travel to the island when I can. With each trip I find more similarities between myself and my friends there, although increasingly I understand as well the ways in which two very different and feuding societies have marked us. Cubans both on and off the island are in search of a new context, a new identity—one we can call our own. In part this is a search for memory, our memory. We are redefining what it means to be Cuban. For those of us in the United States it also means redefining what it means to be an “American”—really what it means to be *both*. For me this redefinition must include the opportunity for a normal relationship with the nation of my birth; for my friends in Cuba it requires a redefinition of *nation*. Our needs coincide.

A normal relationship with my homeland can only be achieved if the nation of Cuba is redefined to include those of us who have left and those who will yet leave. It also will require a new and less hostile U.S. policy toward Cuba. From 1959 to the present everyone who has left has been branded as a traitor on the island and a hero in the United States. For

Cubans on the island a constructive definition of *nation* means collecting elements of a past that were erased by official interpretations of history. Émigrés are a part of that past. We are united by the shared urgency to reclaim the past, to move beyond the 1950s and into the next century.

Nevertheless, our political cultures are very different. I am an activist. To survive in the United States and lay claim to my identity as a Cuban and a Latina—as well as to return to Cuba—I have to fight for political space every day. My friends on the island shun activism because in their world it is only opportunists who participate in politics. They see politics exclusively as the exercise of power and have no public space in which even to imagine political protest. My countercultural experience was about changing the world; theirs is about the desperation and frustration of being unable to change theirs. I am part of a broader Latin American community in the United States: I live and struggle with Mexicanos, Puer-toriqueños, and Centro-Americanos who are also in search of coherence. Despite official rhetoric on the island that portrays Cuba as part of the Latin American family, many of my close Cuban friends do not see themselves as Latino Americanos. In this sense they are closer than I am to Miami Cubans, many of whom also hold themselves apart from the larger Latino community. I, on the other hand, am anchored in a broader U.S. Latino experience.

Today it is not just politics but also economics that divides our experience. When I am in Havana I can invite island friends out to dinner, but they cannot reciprocate, as more and more restaurants in Cuba now accept only U.S. dollars. I do not worry about feeding my children or about finding medicine for my daughters who suffer from asthma. The daily lives of my friends in Cuba are increasingly consumed by preoccupations such as these, and there are few prospects that the situation will improve in the near future.

More and more Cubans have loved ones—daughters and sons, brothers and sisters, cousins, best friends—who have left the island or may leave soon. Growing numbers of professionals, writers, and artists find they cannot work in Cuba. Emigration is as much a part of the national experience today as it always has been. Cuba is a nation of immigrants and emigrants. Most of us live in the United States, a country made up mostly of immigrants. Thus, I have come to think that categories of national identities that exclude immigrants—be they from the home or host country perspective—are narrow and politically shortsighted. So, too, is the perspective of Cubans in the United States who fail to see that Cuba after 1959 is part of our experience.

Regardless of where we find ourselves, we share a common experience with other Cubans: our birthplace. And we have been indelibly marked by

the historical moment at which our homeland sought to create an independent nation. This is not the only aspect of our experience that defines who we are, but it is a critical component of our identities. I cannot explain why our birthplace is so important in our definition of who we are, but for Cubans it is. Maybe the war of independence is still close to our family experience. My mother remembers her grandfather's twisted hands, a product of Spanish torture he endured for having fought in Cuba's war of independence. But maybe it is because Cuba was never truly able to establish an independent republic and is still struggling for one.

We have few words or concepts with which to understand or name what we are experiencing. Everything about us—our past, our identity, our similarities and differences, our loyalties—has been prey to the larger forces of world politics. Not only are we confined to categories of “us and them,” with reference points of north and south, “lo Americano y lo Cubano,” but we also have been cast in terms of east and west, communism or freedom, the cold war.

Those of us caught in the cold war had few, if any, analytical concepts with which to evaluate and understand our experiences, particularly those that emerged from collisions between two distinct economic, political, and cultural spaces. For communities in the battle zones of the cold war, the world was one-dimensional: everything was either/or. Any variation from this perspective could be interpreted as treason by the “other” side.

Each time I cross time and space, between Cuba and the United States, between cultures and economic systems, I am more resolute in my refusal to accept the either/or dichotomy of my identity—a dichotomy that demands I choose sides. My identity is far more complex than this. For years I neatly put away pieces of my being in different parts of the world, but I know now that I need not accept categories that split my identity in two. Instead, I must construct new categories, new intellectual, political, and emotional spaces in which my dual identities can be joined.

### **The Intellectual Journey**

This book is an effort to understand the politics of the cold war as they played out in the lives of Cuban exiles. This includes understanding the national security policies of two states as well as the conceptual corollaries that contributed to militarizing the politics and identities of Cuban exiles. The backdrop that initially framed the Cuban diaspora was a populist, nationalist revolution promising sovereignty and social justice to an island nation. But power quickly became concentrated under one man, and the promise of national unity became an excuse to repress dissent. In the world arena the Cuban revolution emerged as a point of contention in the cold



war. For the international Left the Cuban revolution restored the utopian dream of socialism that had been distorted by Stalinism; for the free world it marked the expansion of the evil empire. Thus, an island in the Caribbean became a key symbol in the intense competition between the two economic and political systems of the twentieth century: socialism and capitalism.

Neither system or accompanying ideology has proven effective in resolving questions of human needs and rights. Socialism, while providing a fairer distributive mechanism for social goods, has been inefficient. The bureaucracy that displaced the market stymied society's productivity, and, while it may have been a more equitable system, it generated less to distribute. Moreover, the unchecked political process characteristic of socialist systems proved to be corrupt and repressive. The workers' state represented through a one-party system denied the richness of human diversity. The very notion of the "vanguard," the goal of revolutionary organizations, proved to be elitist and autocratic.

Capitalism, on the other hand, has not fulfilled its promise that wealth will trickle down. Furthermore, inequality within a society's economic and social spheres ultimately has affected the political sphere as well. Class, gender, race, and national origin became factors upon which political participation was based. Citizens did not have equal access: those who were powerful in private arenas wielded more influence in public institutions as well. In addition, many capitalist countries employed policies in the international sphere that proved incompatible with the political values espoused in the domestic sphere. At home such nations provided mechanisms for the exercise and contestation of public power, but abroad they conducted unchecked, aggressive, and authoritarian policies that had the immediate effect of consolidating military regimes in the periphery. Moreover, these imperialist and colonial adventures often led to massive population displacements. Individuals dislocated to the metropolises were not afforded the same rights as "native" workers.

The failures of both socialism and capitalism force us to review and rethink recent history. This is not an easy task. The intensity of the ideological competition between these two systems has made critical reflection difficult. Yet an attempt to reconstruct and understand the past is necessary. For diaspora communities this requires us to reexamine the reasons behind resettlement, the subsequent development of exile communities, and the role they play in the politics of both host and home countries.

Intellectually, I was driven by a need to understand the nature and persistence of nationalism (or what was called the "national question" during the late 1960s and early 1970s), particularly within immigrant communities. But the theoretical framework available for the study of Latino pol-

itics, including Cuban exile politics, ignored the more progressive groups that insisted on retaining links with their culture and their homelands. Radical politics was not an object of study for traditional social scientists.

Until recently we have had very limited frameworks through which to understand Latino politics. For years the study of this subject was conducted within the framework provided by traditional political science. At the time, political science inquiry emphasized traditional methods of participation like voting and consequently limited the scope of inquiry to domestic politics. Low voter turnout in Latino communities was explained by culture and ethnicity: Mexicans are passive, Puerto Ricans unsettled. Some of the first Latino scholars to study Latino politics were compelled to question these stereotypes. Many of their studies ended up dispelling the importance of ethnicity as a factor in political mobilization. Furthermore, attempts to study home country connections were met with hostility.<sup>4</sup> These scholars sought to show that Latinos were as American as anyone else.<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, this movement in academia had a political counterpart as well, for ideas and paradigms reflect broader social forces and situations. Groups such as the League of Latin American Citizens and the GI Forum were founded after World War II to help integrate Latinos into the mainstream of society. Other groups, such as the Mexican American Political Association, sought entry into the Democratic Party, which had so adamantly excluded them in the past.<sup>6</sup> Curiously, the strongest advocates of assimilation were from Texas.

The late 1960s witnessed an explosion of radical activity in the Latino community. Initially, this movement included groups like *Raza Unida*, which emphasized ethnicity while seeking integration. A little later other groups, such as *Central de Acción Social Autónoma (CASA)*, an organization established by Mexican political refugees; the Puerto Rican Socialist Party; and *Areíto*, a magazine of young Cuban exiles, sought to establish relations with their homelands.

These movements challenged the prevailing modes of studying Latino politics by defying the prediction that ethnicity and homeland issues were not part of the political agenda of the community. The internal colonial model emerged, which sought to combine issues of class and race with a historical view.<sup>7</sup> Numerous scholars set out to study the political activism of Latino communities while challenging the narrow definition of politics as an activity reserved for the electoral arena. Many of these studies emphasized social mobilization as the key to understanding Latino politics.<sup>8</sup> Rich accounts of the historical linkages between Mexicans and Mexico were published,<sup>9</sup> as were studies documenting the relations between Puerto Ricans on the mainland and the island.<sup>10</sup>

Others, myself included, sought to understand the linkages with home countries and how these influenced émigré communities in the United States. My earlier work examined Cuban exile politics as a case study of the U.S. state.<sup>11</sup> I wanted to explore how U.S. government policies toward Cuba (foreign policy) and toward Latinos in the United States (domestic politics) influenced exile politics. The Carter and Reagan years provided two distinct periods for comparing these policy influences. I concluded that U.S. policies were decisive factors in the development of Cuban exile politics. Cuban exiles had both foreign and domestic policy concerns, as did the U.S. state with exiles. During periods of conflict between our host and home countries, the exile part of our experience was at the forefront. In contrast, when relations eased, domestic concerns were played out. In addition, a more normal relationship between Cuban émigrés and our homeland de-emphasized the condition of *exile*. With the passage of time Cuban exiles were beginning to resemble other Latino communities in search of political influence and empowerment. I concluded that Cuban exiles were on their way to becoming an ethnic minority, a finding that fit in with the minority model of political socialization. I was still, however, bound by a U.S. perspective, the perspective of a single nation-state.

A few years later dramatic changes in Cuba's policies toward its communities abroad allowed me to return home. I also witnessed the effects of these home country policy changes on the exile community. I then began to include Cuban policies in my analysis, expanding the framework of inquiry beyond the borders of the United States.<sup>12</sup>

It seemed at the time that the Cuban government wanted reconciliation with the exile community. But gradually I saw haunting symmetries in the ways both states dealt with Cuban exiles, from the point of departure in Cuba to the point of entry in the United States. Each nation administered its policies toward the group from within its national security apparatus. National (in)securities were being played out, in part, through this community of exiles. This parallelism in the policies of two feuding states—mirror images, reflected across the bright waters of the Florida Straits—deeply influenced Cuban exile politics. “In the Land of Mirrors” seemed the appropriate title for this book.

In 1980 another massive wave of Cubans came to the United States through the port of Mariel. The Cuban government blamed visits to the island by exile community members. By the mid-1980s the doors to the island were once again shut. New exiles and the inability to engage normally with our homeland contributed to reemphasizing our sense of being exiles.

Still, I continued to avoid the exile community itself. While I had always identified myself as Cuban, my anti-Vietnam War position and my

support of the civil rights movement contributed to my estrangement from the community. Furthermore, my interest in returning to Cuba resulted in a second exile. The first was my parents' exile, which automatically made me a traitor to Cuba. Returning now to Cuba made me a traitor to the exile community—an exile among exiles. Those of us who dared to travel to Cuba, particularly if we showed sympathy for the government, became targets of anti-Castro terrorism. Miami became a place through which I would pass with great fear on my way to and from the island.

It was not until a few years later, while conducting an in-depth study of the early years of exile, that I began to appreciate the dynamics of the exile community in shaping its own politics and identity. Our existence as a community of exiles in the United States crossed many worlds. We were pawns in the larger geopolitical struggles in the Caribbean between two feuding states. We were exiles from our homeland because there were few meaningful vehicles of political dissent that did not lead to jail or exile. Yet we were still outside mainstream U.S. culture, despite the political rhetoric of Cubans as the “golden exiles.” I discarded the minority model and again considered the exile experience as critical. Exile, after all, as Lourdes Casal so eloquently expressed, is both a political and personal displacement. Time does not erase the effects of dislocation.

The doors were eventually opened again, and I resumed traveling to the island. In the next few years the fall of the Berlin Wall gave renewed impetus to the possibility of change in Cuba. But many forms of contestation were met with repression. Government policy began to encourage emigration. Others simply launched their fate to the sea on makeshift rafts. Intellectuals, artists, and writers began finding work abroad and overstayed their visas. Among them were close friends I had made in my travels to the island.

I became convinced that U.S. policy toward Cuba only encouraged greater repression from the hard-liners there. In response I engaged in policy-related research, encouraged collaborations in my research projects, and helped organize the Cuban-American Committee's Second Generation project, which sought to bring together Cubans from the island and from the States to talk about policy alternatives that could lead to a reconciliation among us. But, the more successful we were in opening the debate in the United States, the more difficulties we encountered in Cuba. Over time I realized that many of those in power in Cuba did not want better relations.

What helped me most during this period was participating in a multinational and multidisciplinary research group of the Inter-University Program on Latino Research. For years the program's leader, Frank Bonilla, had insisted that we need a more comprehensive paradigm with which to

understand U.S. Latino reality. Such a paradigm would have to include an understanding of both home and host countries as well as the development of various Latino communities.<sup>13</sup> While each group is unique, there are similarities. The burden of “Cuban exceptionalism” was somehow lessened by understanding that there are comparable situations faced by all Latino groups—including their ambivalent relationship to homeland.

The studies sponsored by this research program have raised serious questions about the narrowness of the political options available to émigré communities whose lives are affected by multiple states. Cuban émigrés, for example, have had two political options: staying on the island and defending their home country or joining an “enemy state” and thus becoming “traitors” to their homeland. Once in the United States, in order to acquire citizenship, émigrés must swear an oath of *exclusive* allegiance to the United States of America. Yet the identity of Cubans off the island (and of course other immigrants as well) is far more complex than either of these options allows. Members of diaspora communities often reside in multiple states or have at least traveled through them. Therefore, while the condition of loyalty to one nation-state diminishes the exile’s capacity for genuine political involvement—and simultaneously leaves the exile vulnerable to the policy whims of numerous nation-states—being compelled to accept one-nation citizenship also blunts and silences the diaspora experience.

As I continued to look at the situation of Cubans, I was struck by the similarities between the intolerance I found in the exile community and on the island. But two incidents made me recall the differences and reminded me of points of reference shared with other Latinos. In 1990 “Rapid Response Brigades” organized by the Cuban state security apparatus broke into the home of María Elena Cruz Varela, a Cuba-based poet, and tried to force her to eat leaflets she had written. She was then jailed for “actions against the security of the state,” in her case organizing a group of independent, critical intellectuals. Ultimately, she was forced out of the country. Her son was not permitted to travel with her.

In 1994 Magda Montiel, a Miami-based Cuban-American lawyer who once ran for Congress, attended a Cuban government-sponsored conference on the island, where she was unwittingly videotaped as she thanked Fidel Castro for everything he had done for her people and added, “you are a great teacher.” Upon her return to Miami images of this encounter were broadcast repeatedly on television stations across the city. The Cuban government had sold the videotape to the international press. A group of protesters who had applied for and been given a march permit staged a demonstration outside her home. FBI agents and the Miami police protected her home and investigated telephoned death threats

aimed at Montiel and her family. Clearly, the culture of intolerance was at play in both incidents, yet one difference was critical: on the island the state perpetuated the violence; in Miami the state protected the victim and prosecuted the perpetrators. More important, in Miami Montiel could fight back. Exercising her freedom of speech, she went on a media offensive, posing for a photograph wrapped in a sheer cloth imprinted with the Declaration of Independence.

The dark curtain that has separated the Cuban nation for thirty-five years has created many illusions. We could never really know how bright or dim was the light that seeped through the occasional holes that appeared. But, little by little, the curtain has become more transparent. At first the similarities of the blurred images were more obvious, perhaps more comforting. But, as the focus sharpened, so did the contrasts. This difference is critical. Reconciliation is not only about finding common ground; it is also about understanding our differences.

In this sense “In the Land of Mirrors” is a metaphor for still another stage in this complicated and often painful process of discovery: not only must we find ourselves reflected in the other; we also must recognize our differences and our distinct ways of observing one another. For this we need to be tolerant of difference. Such a perspective demands a more open political system in which both similarities and differences can be accommodated. Finally, perhaps most important, reconciliation will require a long, hard look at ourselves—at the image we project upon the mirror—and a coming to terms with our enemies/selves.

The process of reconciling with oneself, however, begins by understanding that what once was can no longer be. Reflections need distance. And distance contributes to the construction of memory. In this realm Eliseo Diego’s mirror sleeps while other objects take its place, and the texture of history/memory can be appreciated through the various threads that illuminate its mystery at a distance. It is in this place of contemplation and critical reflection that I now understand the title to this book.