

Cuban American Memoirs

Mayling C. Blanco

Born in Havana in 1978, she left the island for Spain in 1982 and moved to the United States in 1983.

It was during the Mariel Boatlift of 1980 that my family took its first steps toward the United States. As a young man, my father had been optimistic about some of the changes that took place as a result of the Revolution, such as the literacy program and the promise to decrease racism. Nevertheless, he could not deal with the increasing infringements on his economic, political, and religious liberties. Eventually, my father realized that the only way to ensure a life for his family free from political and religious persecution was to leave Cuba; so in 1980, he left the Island on a boat heading north with nothing but the clothes on his back, his dreams of freedom, and the desire to reunite his family.

My mother opted not to leave on a boat headed to an unknown future with two small children, both of whom were under three years of age. Although I was not quite two years old at the time, one of the few memories I have of Cuba is the day my father left. I remember that two or three men, dressed in the customary military fatigues and riding loud motorcycles, came to give my father the news of his departure. He was given only a couple of hours to get dressed and say goodbye to us. I still remember, as if it were yesterday, going out on the stone balcony of my grandmother's second-floor apartment in Havana to wave goodbye to my father as he headed toward El Mariel. Little did any of us know then that we would not see him again for over three years....

During that time period [in the United States], my father found himself performing a number of odd jobs, including waiting on tables and acting as a security guard. This was quite difficult for him because back in Cuba, he had been a professor at the University of Havana....

[I]f you asked me what I am, I would respond that I am Cuban-American. American because I value independence more than anything; because at the age of seventeen I left home to go to college; because *okay* is the most frequently used word in my vocabulary, regardless of whether I'm speaking English or Spanish.... Yet I am Cuban because I was born on the Island; because I cannot overcome the overwhelming urge to go there; because I still feel that my roots lie there....

I know that if I ever go to Cuba, I will never be seen as a *cubana*, and if I go to the heartland of America, I will never be seen as an American.... My Cubanness is something deep within me, yet I realize now that it is mostly something I have learned from my parents and the traditions they have instilled in me.

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Myra Mendible

Born in Cuba, she left the island for the United States in 1959 at the age of five.

... As one of over two million Cuban immigrants who settled in the South Florida area following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, I was raised a mere ninety miles away yet a world apart from my homeland. Growing up Cuban in a U.S. city where Cubans are in the majority meant that I could be an insider, could feel at home anywhere in Miami where my food was served and my language spoken.... Only later, in my adult travels beyond the city's borders, would I recognize the...relativity of that "insider" status: I did not have to go far to become the outsider, an object of suspicion or curiosity. I could travel a mere hundred miles south or north or west of Miami and encounter looks that said "go back where you came from." Yet these figurative boundaries were more fluid still: during a return visit to Cuba, I was shocked to discover that I was an outsider in the land of my birth as well.

...We had fled Cuba just two months after Fidel Castro and his Revolutionary Army occupied Havana, settling in Miami for what my parents regarded as a brief sojourn. Year after year, my mother safeguarded our property titles in a small metal box, convinced that someday we would reclaim the life left behind. My father's loss was less tangible; his memory served as his metal box, and it stored a wealth of stories rich in detail and drama. Years of exile never faded my father's memories of home....

So it was that as a teen growing up in Miami, I identified with the Cuban exile community. I shared the memories of loss that haunted my parents and other Cuban-born adults. I understood the rage, the mourning, the painful longing that fueled public protests and other expressions of Cuban exile identity. I moved between this familial world defined by exile and the world I shared with my American friends, who regarded my family's preoccupation with politics with curious bewilderment. They could not understand why so many Cubans in Miami did not simply move on, live in the present as Americans and shed their obsession with Cuba's past and with Fidel Castro. How could they know that lives had been forever changed and a people radically divided by events in 1959?... In my familial world, Castro's latest words or deeds informed dinner conversations, and news flashes about Cuba sparked impromptu street demonstrations or heated arguments among friends and family. In my home away from home, Cuba was always an absent presence, the subject of gossip exchanged over *café cubano* at the ubiquitous coffee stands and the object of passionate emotions vented on local radio talk shows and news editorials. It was a world where the butcher bore the scars of torture endured during twenty years as a political prisoner and my neighbor's brother had been executed by a pro-Castro firing squad. This was not a world where politics was just about an occasional election....

Ernesto F. Betancourt

Born in Havana in 1927, he left the island in 1953 after Batista's coup. He returned to Cuba after the 1959 revolution but went into permanent exile in the United States in 1960.

...I went back to Cuba and was present at Columbia's military base when Fidel arrived in Havana.... Shortly thereafter, I was appointed to the Cuban Bank of Foreign Trade, and my wife and children joined me.

[At a weekly luncheon with the Economic Cabinet at the National Bank in July 1959]...Castro informed us that he wanted feedback on the potential economic impact of a constitutional crisis: he was getting ready to depose Dr. Manuel Urrutia, the man he had installed in the presidency six months earlier. Castro explained to us how he makes decisions in those cases: in effect, he sees all the actors as moving on a chess table, and eventually his instincts tell him what to do. He concluded by telling us, "Man is a political animal, and some of us are more animal than others."

A few moments later in the discussion, Castro revealed those animal instincts after someone warned him that since we had already antagonized American business interests through the land reform law enacted in May, any political instability could provide an excuse for an intervention. Fidel did not hesitate for a second; he snapped back, "If they send the marines, I do not care. They will have to kill between 300,000 and 400,000 Cubans, and I will get a bigger monument than José Martí." The truth was out. The man did not care about the well-being of the Cuban people, he only cared about the size of his monument. Right then and there, I decided this was not the kind of regime with which I wanted to be associated.

Although my wife and I decided not to stay in Cuba, we had to avoid giving the impression that we were defecting. As a result, we didn't tell anyone about our plans until shortly before all of the arrangements had been made....

In 1983, President Reagan proposed a law that resulted in the creation of Radio Martí. This led to my getting involved once again in matters related to Cuba.... My tenure at Radio Martí was the second most fascinating period of my life. I had to learn about a new activity—radio broadcasting—while putting to use all of my previous knowledge and experience in order to create an effective instrument of public diplomacy. At the same time, I was assisting the U.S. in promoting the cause of Cuban freedom....

As I go through my seventies, I am phasing out my consulting work in order to devote my time to promoting a civil society for the difficult transition period awaiting Cuba after Castro. As one of the people who helped Fidel Castro come to power, I feel that it is my duty to do anything possible to bring about a transition in Cuba.... At my age, and because I am an American citizen, it is unlikely that I will be able to make...a contribution as a government official by the time Castro is out of the way. It is the younger people inside of Cuba who will have to take over. All that people from my generation can do is try to share with them whatever experience we have gained....

Rafael E. Saumell

Born in Havana in 1951, he left Cuba for the United States in 1988.

Before leaving Cuba with my wife and two sons on May 9, 1988, I had already had numerous experiences of internal exile. I was in Cuba, but I didn't belong there; I lived as if bound to the Island and felt condemned living there....

[M]y first experience of exile began when I was only a child, for most Cubans, including my mother's family, didn't see Cuba the way Fidel Castro claimed to see it, with his visions of milk farms, rich plantain plantations, infinite sugar cane fields, and distilling volcanic sugar. Perhaps we Cubans were blind and deaf and dumb, for we were surrounded by buildings collapsing around us from old age and lack of care and dairies falling to pieces. And each time milk was watered down and production was less, the official vision claimed that the factories were up and running. In effect, communism is like *meringue*: the red roses grown by the working class are sold to foreign tourists, who pay with dollars; the athletes abandon the competitions; the few vaccines invented end up being exported or used in hospitals that offer health benefits for those who have strong foreign currency.... In Cuba, human rights do not exist for all; world leaders arrive on the Island and leave promptly, their arms full of tobacco, rum, sunshine, beaches, and mulatto¹ men and women. The vast majority of Cubans live on an island very different from the one described by the commander. This is the craziest form of exile that one could ever imagine. As a result, Cubans emigrate, looking for lands where they can use their own eyes to see....

The various exiles that I suffered in Cuba culminated in a surprising and violent manner the morning of October 14, 1981, when I was arrested and charged with "crimes".... In effect, I was being accused of dissidence—a result of a series of stories I had written, whose main theme was how different people succeeded or failed to leave Cuba.... During the interrogations at the Department of State Security headquarters, the official in charge of my case...read the political charges aloud, and even let me know the names of my accusers. My personal profile, which I was allowed to read, portrayed me as a vulgar political imposter who had written counterrevolutionary literature. This was enough to put me behind bars. The "legal process" carried out by the Department of State Security and its socialist laws eventually led to a prison sentence of five years of which I served four and a half. The classified crime was Enemy Propaganda...

My time in the "tank" made me an expert on unspeakable horrors and a cautious thinker regarding any kind of positive future.... During my time in prison, I saw many people die in different ways: by execution, by suicide, by acquired illness and despair....

When my family and I boarded an Eastern Airlines plane on May 9, 1988, at three or four in the morning, we began a journey that all Cuban refugees experience: in a craft we crossed airy pathways, over water and land, which took us to the destiny that we had dreamt of throughout long years of spiritual, political, and economic misery. The present would quickly become the past; the island of Cuba, which we carried with us in body and soul, would take off with us upon leaving the airport runway of Rancho Boyeros. The lights of Havana, in the obscured background and denseness of the tropical night, were left behind....

¹While this term is considered dated and offensive in the United States, it is more widely used in Cuba to describe people who are biracial, with both white and black ancestry.

Flora González Mandri

Born in Havana, she left Cuba for the United States as a teenager with her sister, Alicia, as part of Operation Pedro Pan in 1962.

...In 1980 I, alone, had returned to the Island after eighteen years of absence.... On that first return, I was carrying with me all the carefully forgotten memories of having left with my sister, who had been eleven; I had been thirteen. My parents had said good bye to us at the airport. "Just for a short while," they said. The separation would be temporary, they assured us, but my unspoken fears told me otherwise. We ended up waiting to leave at the airport for hours...that memorable glass-enclosed waiting room. Our parents were on the other side of the glass, feeling the anguish of sending their daughters away for the first time in their lives, hoping against hope that they had made the right decision. They had to protect us from the threat of communism. We were so young and susceptible....

[She returned to Cuba again in 1994 with her sister.]

"If we close our eyes and hold hands, we can pretend we never left, can't we?" she said, as if to bridge the chasm between Miami and Casino Park [in Camagüey, Cuba]. As soon as she made the statement we held hands so as to let the power of our shared past invade our present. But our pragmatic American selves knew better. I now know that remaining Cuban as a citizen of the United States means hard work. Hard work to retain my command of the Spanish language. For my sister, it is hard work to understand that being Cuban in Miami is not the same as being Cuban in Camagüey. Hard work to learn about the reality of Cubans who stayed. Hard work to imagine, "What if I had never left?" ...

Returning to Cuba in 1994 also meant dealing with our family's present. Those who had been enthusiastic about revolutionary changes early in the seventies now spoke about the different stages of hunger. The phrase "the Special Period," coined by Fidel Castro to help the population deal with extreme shortages, was pronounced in increasingly sarcastic tones....

The reality and the manner in which my family deals with it was brought home to me during a cool night, as we sat around a table piled high with chicken and rice, plenty of fried plantains, and the sweetest of mangoes, when the lights went out. Our conversation didn't skip a beat as the younger cousins pulled candles of all sizes out of drawers around the house and restored our faces in the soft yellow hues of candlelight. I was certain that the abundant display at the table was possible only because our visit came at the beginning of the month, when families received their food rations for the remaining four weeks. We were told that people could only manage with their rations for two weeks; after that, you had to *inventar* (improvise)....

It's ironic that my family, once divided over political issues, is joined through the dollar economy in Cuba. We, on the northern side, live on the nostalgia of our childhood and with the hope that our contributions will ease our relatives' days; they, fully immersed in the culture we supposedly crave, survive the "Special Period" by making jokes and walking arm-in-arm with those of us who occasionally return....

Gina Granto-Penque

Born in New York in 1968, she is the eldest daughter of Alicia Serrano Machirán Granto, who left Cuba for the United States in 1963 at the age of fourteen.

How I feel: Growing up, I never had this instant revelation that I was the daughter of a Cuban-born mother. I have never not felt Cuban.... [T]he feeling of being different, of not belonging, was strong....

Now I can't say that it was entirely the result of my Cuban heritage; but living in Niagara Falls, New York in the early 1970s and having a Cuban heritage was nothing less than rare.... Now, mind you, I am a walking contradiction. I have golden blond hair...and sky blue eyes; so it wasn't that I didn't belong physically—I certainly didn't look like your typical Cuban. Rather, it was a state of mind that characterized my behavior—a Cuban state of mind. In adulthood, that is how I can best explain the way I think, my contradictory features, and my love of the extraordinary.

Being Cuban is in my blood. I remember how I felt so alive, so a part of things, when we would go and see my cousins in New York City or Miami. Everything seemed to make sense; my cousins and I had this real connection that was instant and natural and was a result more of our shared Cuban heritage than of being cousins....

If I had been raised by second- or third-generation Cubans in America, I don't believe I would have seen or felt the pain of leaving Cuba. My grandmother speaks of Cuba with so much love, it consumes me. We have had many discussions in my family about going to Cuba, and we do fantasize about what it would be like to go and be there—perhaps we would find old friends and relatives and reclaim land and precious possessions. It is all romanticizing on our part, though. Nevertheless, my uncle (Mom's brother) insists that he is "going there to overthrow Castro and live on the Island in *his home*." I have been hearing of this all my life; it is pathetic, in a way. This is what Mom never wanted: to be so absorbed in the *what ifs* that you forget to live. She always reminds us that we are living in the here and now; whereas poor Tío is still planning and scheming to get to Cuba. What he doesn't seem to realize is that despite the fact that Castro has robbed the Cuban people of their freedom and basic human rights and stolen the physical island of Cuba, he does not own the spirit of Cuba; it still lives within its people and has survived and grown through the Cuban American generation. I feel it when I am with my cousins in Miami or on the Internet with other American-Born Cubans. There is an energy that is so sacred and so spiritual that it is overflowing into the new generation. I believe with all my heart that it is this spiritual energy that carries us and keeps Cuba alive in our hearts.

Sara Rosell

Born in Banes, Cuba in 1957, she left the island as part of the Mariel boatlift in May 1980.

...The Revolution triumphed when I was two years old. I belong to what I call the “sandwich” generation—the generation that grew up between the Catholic bourgeois and the generation that hoped for a different future.... We were affected, therefore, by both fronts. My generation is that of the experiment—the first pioneers, the first farming schoolchildren, the first militants of the Communist Youth Organization, the first to learn Russian, the first to leave after the *gusanos*. The frustrated generation; the one out of step. May of us could never comprehend how one could think of a different Cuba when everyone, from our families up to the highest leaders, refused to change. Our generation was denied the opportunity to really grow within the new system. The Revolution never put its trust in us, despite the slogans that proclaimed that it did. In a matter of days we were regarded as the “scum,” though months before we were applauded in the Square of the Revolution and were portrayed on newscasts all over the world as the example of the new Cuban youth.

...Homosexuality in Cuba is a sin, an insult, a provocation, a threat, and an impediment. At the age of fifteen, I already knew that I could never be a part of the Communist Youth Organization; that I probably would not be allowed to go to college; and that almost all of my family would reject me. When I first had a sexual relationship with a woman at sixteen, I knew that in the future I would have to leave Cuba....

In April [1980], after the storming of the Peruvian Embassy, my lover and I reported to the police station in La Vibora. There, we told them all incriminating details about ourselves that we could think of—we told them everything they wanted to hear. As a result, they gave us a permit to leave the country that same day....

The night of May 17, 1980, I slept on a ship anchored at the Port of Mariel. To spend the night there was like being in limbo, like having one foot here and one foot there. I was afraid both to leave and to stay; afraid that something unplanned would happen and force me to walk the dock back to the place I had not yet left; afraid that nothing could happen and the ship would start moving in search of something that only existed in my dreams. I was twenty-two and was leaving my entire family behind. Only my lover was going to be on one of the other ships or perhaps she wasn't on any one of them. I sat on the floor, leaning against a wall in the bow with my head between my knees, and cried until I feel asleep....

In over eighteen years, I have never gone back to Cuba. The first time that I saw a relative since my departure was twelve years after my arrival, even though both my cousin and I came to the U.S. at the same time. During the three days of our visit, we did nothing but talk. Now, after the arrival of the *balseros* [rafters (of 1994)]...many of my friends and half of my family on my mother's side are in the United States. However, so much time has gone by that things are no longer the same. Once again, I feel as though I belong to yet another “sandwich” generation in yet another exile. For years, I heard many Cubans who had arrived in the '60s say that we didn't know what exile really was; that we had come to a ready-made community; that we didn't have to start from scratch and go through what they had gone through. The *balseros*, on the other hand, resent our opinion because, they argue, we didn't live through the Special Period and left when “things were still good.”... In spite of all the differences there might be among the various groups, we are all bonded by the nostalgia for what we left behind because, upon leaving, one way or the other, we all took the Island away “on our backs.”

Efrain J. Ferrer

Born in Consolación del Sur, Pinar del Río in 1951. He and his wife Vivian de la Incera defected from Cuba while in Moscow in 1990, lived briefly in Spain, and moved to the United States in 1991.

In some sense I have been preparing for my exile my whole life. I was seven years old when the revolution started.... From the very beginning, my family and I witnessed the horrors of Castro's regime. My cousin, who was openly against the government while at the University of Havana, was arrested and sent to prison on Isla de Pinos at the age of twenty-two; he was murdered in cold blood when they caught him trying to escape eight years later. He had just turned thirty.

During the early years of the revolution, most of my family left the Island. Some of my relatives wanted to take me with them to the States, but my parents wouldn't allow them to do so; they didn't want us to be separated. They had decided to stay behind mostly because my father was already in his sixties when the revolution started; he knew that it would be impossible to start over again in the United States with two small children. In addition he, like so many others, was certain that Fidel would be toppled within a year or so.

...In Cuba at that time [1960s], there were only two options for males when they reached the age of fifteen or sixteen: either you were sent to the military, or you became an intern at one of the schools in Havana, where you were simultaneously educated in the sciences and humanities and indoctrinated in the new Marxist-Leninist ideology. As a result, I entered Raúl Cepero Bonilla, a special high school located on the grounds of a former Marist private school in La Vibora, Havana. I, along with two hundred of the brightest students from all over the Island, was selected to study there as a result of my academic grades. In that school I, along with my classmates, was being molded to become one of the country's future leaders; in theory, we were the future elite, the "new men and women" of whom Che Guevara dreamed....

During my years at the University of Havana, my terror increased after I witnessed *las depuraciones*—the mandatory gatherings at which students who had been selected ahead of time were singled out and denounced for their presumably dissident views or "antisocial" behavior. It was like the Inquisition. One of Vivian's classmates, for example, was thrown out of school because he wore blue jeans—a symbol of American capitalism, he was told—and because he listened to The Beatles; others were denounced simply because they had long hair (like the hippies in the States) or simply because they were openly Christian. We were also made to fill out forms that required we reply to questions such as whether or not we believed in God; did we have family in exile; if so, did we communicate with them, etc. I was always filled with fear at the thought that they would find out about my family in exile and my political position—day and night, I lived in terror. Those who were integrated into the *Juventud Comunista* (the Young Communists) lorded over the rest of us; they were always trying to bully and intimidate us. From early childhood, you were made to feel as though you were living in a country divided into two classes, and that you belonged to the lower class. In such a system, hatred and intimidation are the engines that move society. As a result, you feel unprotected and very vulnerable.

...Vivian and I continued to dream about escaping to the United States, a place that had special meaning for me because my father had attended a preparatory school in Pennsylvania and then went on to study at Cornell University. His stories, coupled with the fact that we grew up being taught that America was the land of freedom, made me long for this country....

Vivian de la Incera

Born in 1954 and raised in Matanzas, Cuba. She and her husband Efrain J. Ferrer defected from Cuba while in Moscow in 1990, lived briefly in Spain, and moved to the United States in 1991.

...As a direct result of my upbringing, coupled with the fact that the overtly repressive measures that characterized the '60s in Cuba were largely conducted behind closed doors by the time I reached early adulthood, I grew up largely unaware of the horrors that my husband witnessed firsthand. I was completely naïve as a student at the University of Havana.... I believed in the ideals of the revolution and, moreover, was convinced that change was possible. However, even as a child I was aware that something was not right. It wasn't that I thought that Fidel was bad; we were led to believe that the problems in Cuba were the fault of his officials. In truth, the machinery of repression was manifest everywhere you looked. For example, when I was in grammar school it became apparent to me that mediocre students could succeed by demonstrating their fanatical devotion to the regime.... [Y]ou gained merit through your politics.... Even though I had been promoted and was two years younger than my classmates, the *militante* (political peer and mentor) who was assigned to look after me and see to my "political growth" accused me of being "politically immature" simply because I was openly critical of those around me. She said I wasn't militant enough and that even though I was just a child, I had not demonstrated that I could be "vigilant" over others....

...We didn't realize the degree of terror and repression we had experienced until we arrived in the United States. We all underwent very severe culture shock, and it took us quite a while to recuperate from the trauma we had experienced. For example, it took us a long time to get used to even the most basic freedoms that every American takes for granted, such as the idea that we could travel wherever we wanted without asking for permission, or that we could actually make decisions for ourselves....

Though we stayed with relatives in Miami until 1993, we were very anxious to move. We couldn't bear to even talk about Cuba; as you know, in Miami that is the only topic of conversation among Cuban exiles. In addition, we realized that the island we had left behind was not the idealized place that our relatives abandoned in the early '60s. The differences among us were marked. In their view, we were "*rosaditos*" (pinkos), while they had left Cuba before communism had fully taken hold. In effect, we had come from two completely different worlds.

Although we realize that it's not perfect here in the United States...we love the United States and have made it our home because above anything else, it is a country where in theory everyone has equal rights; and when this does not happen in practice, there are always conscious people who have the right to protest. For us, perhaps the most painful thing about exile is being separated from our aging parents and our extended families; the worst experience was when Efrain's brother grew ill with cancer and he could not return to Cuba, for fear of being captured, and be at his side when he died.... Though we have become American citizens and have benefited from the opportunities here and the various cultural experiences, we will always be Cuban more than anything else. We have learned that you don't have to live in Cuba to be Cuban. Rather, being Cuban is a state of mind—a very particular way of seeing the world, with humor and *alegría* (joy). Nevertheless, we love both Cuba and the United States; when you have two children (even though one is adopted), how can you love one child more than the other?