

*50/50*  
FINDING MYSELF  
*within two cultures*

by  
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A Project in Lieu of Thesis presented to the College of Fine Arts  
of the University of Florida in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

**Degree of Master of Fine Arts**

University of Florida

May 2013

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To my mother and daughter.  
The past and the future.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most of all I want to thank my mother for telling me about her childhood in Cuba and how wonderful it was. *Gracias Mami por tus recuerdos y cuentos de tu juventud.*

My daughter, who has endured my constant focus on this subject and grad school, thank you for your support and patience.

Nancy Shreck, my friend and co-worker for many years, thank you for encouraging me to pursue the Master of Fine Arts degree.

My committee, thank you for pushing me to tell my story.

Brian Slawson (Committee Chair), thank you for the endless resources and the freedom to do what I wanted.

Maria Rogal, thank you for your guidance and direction.

Lauren Garber Lake, thank you for teaching me how to experiment, explore and welcome those “happy accidents.”

Ellen Knudsen, thank you for saving me at the last minute and your common sense and honest approach.

Sandra Hice, thank you for being my personal editor. You are amazing at finding those little things that really count.

My colleagues, thank you for your support and feedback. I could not have done this without your help.

And to the interviewees (listed below), who welcomed me into their homes and offices and shared their life experiences, thank you so much. Your stories made me feel like I belonged, finally.

Albis Acosta  
Robert Almeida  
Randy Batista  
Manuel A. Cambó  
Maggy Cuesta  
Taylor Garrido  
Lauren Vanessa López  
Odalís Manduley  
Rosario Martínez-Cañas  
Nelson Mendoza  
Raul Merlo  
Andrew Ruiz  
Maria Christina Trujillo  
Beatrice Valdez

Abstract of Project in Lieu  
of Thesis presented to the  
Graduate School of the  
University of Florida in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Fine Arts

April 2013

Chair: Brian Slawson

Major: Art

## **ABSTRACT**

Growing up in Miami, Florida, I always felt like I did not belong. As a second-generation American, born in America with Cuban parents, I felt I was neither Cuban nor American. While in Miami, Cuba was present in my every day in the home, at school, and at play. I was surrounded by people like me, but the feeling of otherness was always there. When I moved away, it became more evident because I didn't have similar people around me. I realized just how Cuban I was. As I grew older, I longed for a stronger connection to my Cuban heritage.

For my MFA creative project, I have looked inward to understand what it means to have two identities, how my identities were formed, and why it is so important to me. I employed autoethnography and ethnographic methods to explore identity, hybridity, memories, and place. I conducted interviews with Cuban-Americans who talked about their experiences and how they perceive their identity. These interviews were very helpful in validating my feelings and brought into focus my upbringing and place.

I designed an autobiographical book describing my experiences growing up in Miami and how these experiences and the environment made me who I am, both Cuban and American. The structure of the book is, in essence, a book within a book, where the main focus is my personal narrative, with excerpts of stories revealed during the interviews.

As designer-author and through visual storytelling, I hope to gain understanding, acceptance, and cultural empathy, and to start a dialogue about identity and what it means to be American.

*Soy un ajiaco de contradicciones.*

I have mixed feelings about everything.

Name your *tema*, I'll hedge:

name your *cerca*, I'll straddle it

like a *cubano*.

Gustavo Pérez-Firmat  
*Bilingual Blues*

## INTRODUCTION

As a second-generation Cuban-American, born and raised in Miami, Florida, with Cuban parents, I was American, but Cuba was present in my everyday life. My mother frequently spoke about her childhood in Cuba, wishing she could still be there. For her, Cuba was a utopia. My father, on the other hand, had lived and traveled in the United States extensively since he was a child. He was called *el americano* (the American) in Cuba. He wanted his family to assimilate and grow up as Americans.

After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, my mother applied for visas to get her parents and brother out of Cuba. When I was five years old, my grandparents came to the U.S. to live with us. The extended family is an integral part of Cuban families, supporting each other in every way. It is expected of children to take care of their parents. Living with my grandparents reinforced Cuban traditions, customs, and the Spanish language.

At home I spoke Spanish with my grandparents, English with my father and brother, and Spanglish with my mother. We were already a hybrid family.

This mixture of American and Cuban created uncertainty for me, making me feel like I did not belong. I was not totally Cuban or totally American, I felt like I had two identities. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, in *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora*, questions:

Who is a real Cuban? Who is more Cuban? Churning in the mix were the experiences and expressions of *Cubands*, either born or raised off the island, who claimed to possess a Cuban consciousness shaped by their second-hand experience of exile. Though they are clearly aware of their unstable positioning in relation to other Cubans and their status in the diaspora, many experience what Marianne Hirsch refers to as “post-memory”—the historical traumatic effects of dispersion that persist in haunting them through generations, like phantom limbs, at both the unconscious and conscious levels. Many insist that they experience by

association a profound and perpetual sense of cultural non-belonging, despite the fact that they were born or bred outside of the island. They perceive themselves to be strangers in their own land, searching for a cultural “home” (7).

Lucy Lippard, in *Lure of the Local*, says,

... Today, many Americans “live on the hyphen,” or as Coco Fusco has put it, in a hybrid space that can be seen as “a shelter between cultures.” They are identified by two words, balanced between where they come from and where they have gone. Yet many people who are said to “live between two cultures” do not; they live as alienated outsiders within one culture. Deculturation and deracination hits every individual life in different ways, so some remain attached to their origins while others find new homelands; still others remain suspended forever over the abyss, in what Amalia Mesa Bains has called “a landscape of longing” (62).

These feelings and experiences led me to research culture, identity, hybridity, place, memories, what it means to be Cuban, and what it means to be American, and specifically, what it means to be Cuban-American.

## DEFINITIONS

For the purpose of this paper, American is defined as those Americans that do not have a connection to their culture of origin, because the first person in their family to emigrate to the United States did so many years ago, perhaps decades or centuries. These Americans no longer practice the customs and traditions of their ancestors because they have fully assimilated into American society and the American value system.

A second-generation Cuban-American is one that is American-born with Cuban parents. Cuban-born Americans (first-generation Americans) are defined as Cubans so as not to confuse the two groups.

## BACKGROUND

The second-generation Cuban-American lives between two worlds. We are the middle child that no one remembers. Between our exiled parents and our fully-assimilated American children. We are the forgotten ones. In *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, it explains:

Growing up American with foreign parents is not an unusual experience. It is the stuff of which innumerable films, novels, and personal retrospectives have been made. The experiences of descendants of Jewish, Italian, Polish, and German immigrants occupy a central place in twentieth-century American literature. On the other hand, the experiences and situation of children of the more recent arrivals are less well known. Because not only their countries of origin but also the society receiving them has changed, extrapolating the well-known saga of the old second generation to the new is questionable. The United States today is a very different place from the society that greeted southern and eastern Europeans in the early twentieth century. These differences interact with the racial, educational, and cultural characteristics of first-generation parents to produce very different adaptation outcomes (Portes 18).

Immigrant children and U.S. born children of immigrants are the fastest-growing segment of the country's total population of children under 18 years of age. By 1997, they accounted for one out of every five American children. In that year, there were an estimated ... 10.8 million U.S.-born children with one or two foreign-born parents (Portes 19).

The focus of much research, literature, poetry, art, film and music is the Cuban exile, but it was very difficult to find research and resources specifically for the American-born Cuban, the second-generation Cuban-American. The exile experience and story is full of drama, emotion, struggle and perseverance, while the American-born children of these same immigrants are forgotten. Their children were born in America, so they have been overlooked. What were their experiences? What were their challenges and successes? Who are they? I hope to answer some of these questions.



Figure 1. Japanese research sketchbook.



Figure 2. Japanese folded booklet.



Figure 3. Japan/Cuba poster series, 18" x 23", digital print.

## PREVIOUS WORK

### A. Japanese Culture Study

I began my journey into cultural identity by researching a culture that I thought was totally different from the Cuban culture, the Japanese culture. My research method was traditional research from books and journals, and interviews with Americans that had a connection to the Japanese culture.

To my surprise, I found that the Japanese culture shares many things with the Cuban culture. Some similarities are that they value their elders and show respect. They have a love for baseball, and interestingly, both cultures became interested in baseball because it was an American pastime. They both wanted to be like Americans.

There were also some differences. Japan is a homogeneous society where everyone is the same, and they prefer this, they don't like change (Condon 2). They strive for social harmony where the group is more important than the individual, and they have many rules on how to maintain this social harmony (Condon 13–14). On the other hand, Cuba has a long history of colonization and is a heterogeneous society.

In the Japanese home, the woman is in charge. She makes all the decisions regarding the home, the children, and their education. The man is viewed as the breadwinner only (Grossberg 21). In Cuba, the man is in charge and has the final say for every decision.

The first project that resulted from my research was a sketchbook where I documented my findings through drawing, painting, transfers and hand-written notes in a Japanese stab-bound book (Fig. 1).

I then designed a folded book reminiscent of origami that visually represented some of my findings (Fig. 2), such as the importance of social harmony, *tatemae*, the outward appearance, and *honne*, the inner beauty or one's true voice (Condon 25–26).

To push the project further, I compared the Japanese culture to the Cuban culture by designing a series of posters, in the form of playing cards, that illustrated some of the differences in the cultures. The posters were designed to convey their differences regarding power and society.



Figure 4. Japan/Cuba poster series, 18" x 23", digital print.

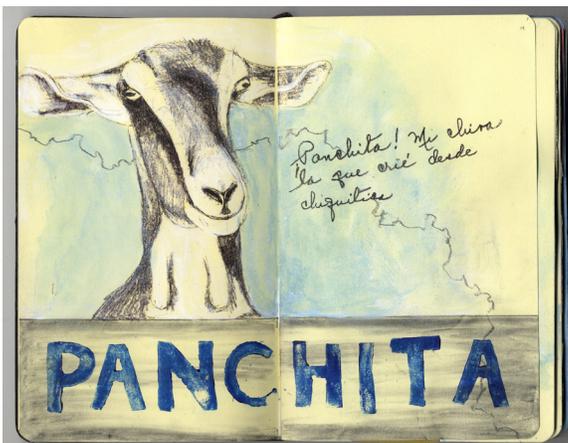


Figure 5. Panchita sketchbook.



Figure 6. Panchita sketchbook.

The power poster (Fig. 3) depicts the Japanese woman wearing a kimono, the formal Japanese dress, as the powerful one in Japanese homes. The Cuban card depicts the man as the powerful one in the Cuban home. He is wearing the Cuban formal dress, the long-sleeved *guayabera* holding a *machete*.

The society poster (Fig. 4) illustrates how the Japanese society is homogeneous and the Cuban society is heterogeneous. The repetition of the exact same teacup represents the homogeneous society and the heterogeneous Cuban society is depicted with coffee cups of different shapes and colors.

### B. Sketchbook

After exploring the Japanese culture, I began researching the Cuban culture and my Cuban roots through a sketchbook where I visualized my mother's stories about growing up in Cuba. In this sketchbook (Fig. 5 and 6), I developed a metaphor for my mother, *Panchita*, which was her favorite pet goat. I experimented with composition and different techniques of transferring images, painting, collage and storytelling, and I developed a nostalgic, whimsical visual language. This sketchbook represented the Cuba that was present in my home, the utopia that my mother always spoke about.

### C. Connections

Cuba has been connected to Miami and the United States for many generations, even prior to Castro and the Revolution in 1959. To illustrate this connection, reminiscent of Ed Ruscha's work, for my next piece I drew the word "Cuba," where the word is made up of a telephone cord, a metaphor for this connection (Fig. 7). This piece also illustrates the Cuban exiles' only connection to Cuba, other than the letter. The telephone continues to be a vital connection to Cuba, as the Internet is not widely available and is monitored, therefore, it is not a secure means of communication. You can almost say, that the telephone was and still is a lifeline to Cuba, the umbilical cord that keeps exiles connected to their mother country.



Figure 7. Connections, 29.25"x23", pencil on paper.

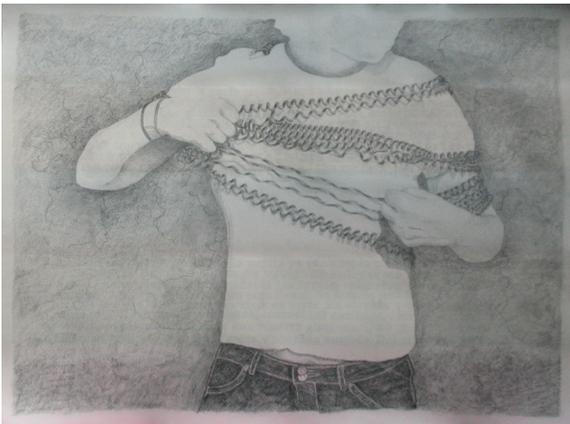


Figure 8. Inner Struggle, 30"x22.5", gouache, transfer, spray paint, and pencil on paper.



Figure 9. Little Havana Revisited, inside spread.



Figure 10. Little Havana Revisited, inside spread.

#### D. Inner Struggle

To push the telephone cord metaphor further, I illustrated the inner struggle of the Cuban exile and the American-born child of Cuban immigrant parents (Fig. 8). In this drawing, the Cuban exile is struggling with the past and their love for their motherland, Cuba. The child is constantly struggling with each identity and culture, wanting to belong, but not fully belonging to either culture. Under the pencil drawing are five bands of painted color, the top is blue to represent America, the bottom is red to represent Cuba, and the middle band is a mixture of both, purple. Inside the white bands are the national anthem to both countries. Spray paint was then applied to hide or obscure the nationalities. The drawing was then created over the painted background.

#### E. Little Havana Revisited

To delve into the Cuban culture even more, I revisited *Calle Ocho* (Eighth Street) and Little Havana in Miami. This place is evocative of the Cuba that my mother spoke of. With their little *cafetíns*, clubs, cigar bars, and endless Cuban memorabilia, this is where the Cuban exiles have preserved the old Cuba, the Cuba that does not exist anymore. Now a tourist destination, visitors can experience, see and taste old Cuba. During my two-hour visit, I felt like a tourist, and I took over 200 photos.

As designer-author, I catalogued my trip in a small, intimate booklet entitled, *Little Havana Revisited* (Fig. 9 and 10). The pages are packed full of imagery, digital collages, and my reactions during the visit. In this book, I created another metaphor, one for myself, the Cuban-American rooster. I came across these large rooster sculptures while driving to Little Havana and found one with both the Cuban and American Flag painted on it. I used this rooster to represent myself on this journey.



**Figure 11.** *Querida Mami* exhibit, Focus Gallery, University of Florida, August 15-24, 2011.



**Figure 12.** *Panchita* piñata.



**Figure 13.** My mother's stories, which were inside of the *Panchita* piñata.

#### **F. "Querida Mami"**

Before moving on to the second-generation Cuban-American, I created a final piece and exhibit, *Querida Mami*, or Dear Mom (Fig. 11–13). This was a solo exhibit where I featured *Panchita*, my mother's favorite pet goat, in a whimsical and nostalgic way, as a piñata.

*Panchita* represented my mother in my previous work, but she had also become a metaphor for Cuba and Cuban exiles. To push that metaphor further, I made a piñata in the form of a goat, covered in my mother's stories, in her words in Spanish. This represented all the stories and experiences, struggles and successes, of the Cuban exiles.

During the exhibit opening, we pulled the strings and out fell my mother's stories for the audience to keep. This represented my mother sharing her life with me, and the Cuban exiles wanting to share their life stories.



**Figure 14.** *50/50: Finding Myself within Two Cultures* book, MFA Candidates Thesis Exhibition II, University Gallery, University of Florida, April 5-19, 2013.

## DESIGN PROCESS

### Statement of Purpose

The intent of my creative project is to engage the audience and reveal how second-generation Cuban-Americans feel about their identities, how one develops two identities, and why. Ultimately, I want to create understanding, acceptance, and cultural empathy.

### Research

In February of 2012, I participated as a facilitator for an IDEO workshop where we worked through the process of design thinking and human-centered design to come up with solutions to a problem. The IDEO human-centered design process is where multi-disciplinary design teams use ethnographic methods, such as observation and interviews, to gain empathy and get to the crux of the problem.

Qualitative research methods [such as observation and interviews] enable the design team to develop deep empathy for the people they are designing for, to question assumptions, and to inspire new solutions (*Human-Centered Design Toolkit* 21).

The IDEO workshop, and previous explorations with interviews, led me to the decision to interview other Cuban-Americans to learn about their experiences and compare them to mine.

During the summer of 2012, I began my research and design process for this project. I traveled to Miami several times where I conducted interviews with both first-generation and second-generation Cuban-Americans. Although I did not conduct ethnographic research in the anthropological sense, I took special care in formulating and asking open-ended, non-leading questions to provide insight on the experiences of Cuban-Americans. I had two different sets of questions for each generation (see Appendix).

While in Miami I also collected ephemera, and I documented place and my observations through photography, journaling, and video with the goal of transforming these items in my final creative project.

To conduct the interviews, I went to each person's home, studio, or office, so that they would feel comfortable talking about their memories and experiences. Most of the interviews were videotaped. I ended up learning more about these people than I would have otherwise. They spoke of memories, their upbringing, customs and traditions, assimilation and identity. Several said that they never really thought or talked about this before, but it was always in the back of their minds.

The interviews revealed four factors that were important to the interviewees:

1. Adaptation is key for Cuban-Americans, both first and second generations,
2. Family is most important,
3. Not all Cubans are the same, and
4. It's not easy being an exile.

The interviews were also key in validating my feelings and my experiences and gave me the confidence to proceed with this subject matter.

When talking about adaptation, the interviewees revealed how Cuban-Americans change or switch from one identity to the next when needed. They move back and forth within the two identities, Cuban and American. Rosario Martinez-Cañas said:

I feel that this experience to me [the Cuban-American experience] — I feel like a chameleon — because I've had to change so much. Every place you go — in order to become a part of that place — you have to change in some way. So, I feel that to me what exile has done is that it has made me this kind of person that [can change].

I feel like maybe that's what I get out of the whole Cuban experience, that I feel that I don't have that bond that I see people have with the place they were born. Because I haven't been allowed to live there, in Cuba. As much as my parents have brought me up with this knowledge of Cuba and their life over

there, it's not something that I've been able to personalize for myself (Martinez-Cañas).

She's talking about that feeling of not belonging. Maggy Cuesta talks about not fitting in also:

I think an immigrant doesn't really fit. The way I feel about myself, I'm not really Cuban, I'm not really American, because I don't 100% think like a Cuban, and I don't 100% think like an American, so we're kind-of, in-between these two worlds. I think if you take the best of the two worlds, you can find the happy balance. And that's what I've done with my life.

My dad always said to us that we needed to assimilate, but we needed not to lose our roots. He said to us, you have to follow the rules, you have to adapt to where you're living, live the American life, but yet you need to keep your language, you need to keep your past of Cuba (Cuesta).

The second important factor was that family is key to the Cuban-American. In all my conversations, family was always mentioned as the most important aspect of a Cuban-American's life. Without family, one is lost. Maggy Cuesta explains:

We lived with two grandmothers and a great aunt. And we also had three cousins at different intervals that lived with us because two of our cousins' father passed away. So, my father and mother brought 'em to Texas to help them. Help them go through school and live with us. So, it was called the "Cuesta Hotel." That's what the Americans called our house, because we always had people (Cuesta).

Nelson Mendoza agreed:

Family was the most important thing. Very traditional in the sense that you don't — they weren't very much the "leave home at 18" or go away to college. The family was the center of everything (Mendoza).

Recently there have been more arrivals in Miami from Cuba, and the Cuban-Americans I spoke with agreed that these Cubans are different from the Cubans who emigrated to America after the Revolution of 1959. These new Cubans were born and raised in a different Cuba, one with a communist dictator and limited resources. The interviewees felt it was important to educate the audience as to these differences. Some wanted to differentiate themselves from the “new Cubans,” while others felt we needed to be more understanding. Maggy Cuesta explains:

I think these people have been under a communist dictatorship for 50 years, and they’ve just had to survive. I think we need to have a little more sympathy for these people. A little bit more acceptance and maybe work with them more. They can’t be who we are, we’ve been in this country for 50 years enjoying our life. They’ve been there *surviving* their lives. I do think we’re different, but I think they’re Cubans, bottom line. I get a little upset when people go, “Oh, they’re so different.” I don’t think that’s fair. I often think, “What if I hadn’t gotten out? What if I’d been there, these past 50 years? What type of person would I have been?” I think life can dictate a lot of who you become.

In Cuba, you make what, \$15 a month, whether you do a good job or a bad job. You don’t have customer service to worry about. What aspirations do these people have? That’s why I think we need to be a little bit more — less judging —and maybe work with them more and help them more (Cuesta).

The last important factor that the interviews revealed was that it’s not easy to be an exile. Cuban-Americans identify with their parents. They have grown up listening to stories about Cuba’s history from their parents, other family members, and friends. They learned about the struggles they endured during the Revolution and their experiences when they left Cuba. Maggy Cuesta says:

It’s not easy, this feeling of not belonging. I really feel that. But at the same time we have two great worlds we can draw from. But I



**Figure 15.** Two-way pictures from *Eyes, Lies and Illustrations: The Art of Deception*.

think you will always be an exile. The first-generation will always be an immigrant. You're never really an American because people don't ever think you're really American. I think you will always be an immigrant, and they will always be biased against immigrants (Cuesta).

As quoted earlier, Andrea O'Reilly Herrera talks about the "... *Cubands*, either born or raised off the island, who claimed to possess a Cuban consciousness shaped by their second-hand experience of exile" (7). These stories have been internalized by their American-born children.

After gathering and transcribing all the interviews, I began to brainstorm ideas for transforming the interview content into a visual project.

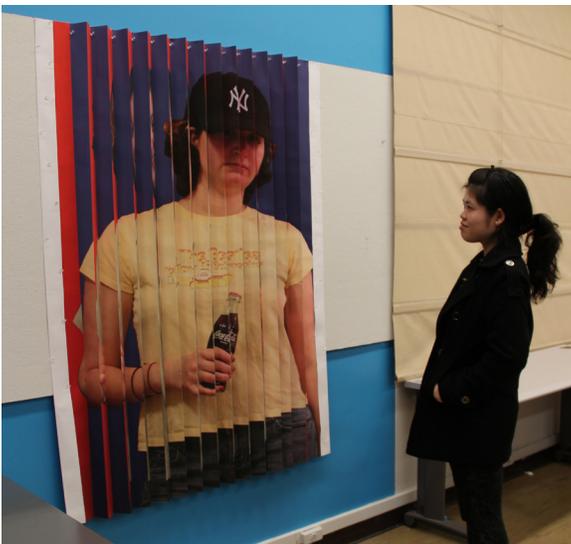
### Inspiration

These revelations from the interviews reminded me of my work about the Japanese culture and how they used optical illusions to depict the inner and outer voice, and I thought that might be a way to illustrate adaptation. I began researching optical illusions and found a book about optical inventions from the Renaissance, *Eyes, Lies and Illustrations: The Art of Deception*. In that book I found photographs of artwork that was described as two-way pictures (Fig. 15). The artwork was accordion folded and the two pictures were alternated on each fold. The image changed depending from what angle you viewed it, similar to a hologram. There is also a photo process called lenticular photography that does this.

I believed this form could illustrate how the second-generation Cuban-American adapts and moves, back and forth, from their Cuban and American identities. The view from the front was especially successful, a mixture or blend of both pictures. This could represent the mixture or blend of the two identities.



**Figure 16.** Early prototypes of adaptation folded piece using American/Cuban girl and apple pie/*flan* (Cuban egg custard).



**Figure 17.** Final prototype of two-way, accordion folded piece featuring stereotypical Cuban and American dress and icons. Here you see how it changes images from different viewing angles.

## Ideation and Prototypes

To illustrate the concept of adaptation, I first used images of an American girl, “the girl next door,” and a Cuban girl, a girl dressed in a *quinceñera* dress, the traditional dress for a girl celebrating her 15th birthday. I then tried items like stereotypical food or icons (Fig. 16). I contrasted the American apple pie with the Cuban *flan*, Elvis Presley with Célia Cruz, cigars with cigarettes, and cards with dominos. These worked, but they didn’t feel personal.

My final prototype (Fig. 17 and 18) consisted of one girl, dressed in what I believed to be American and as a Cuban. The feedback was good, but something was missing. The two-way poster was interesting and the imagery fun, but it did not fulfill my ultimate goal to create understanding and cultural empathy. It illustrated duality and hybridity, but it didn’t explain why or how this happens. It wasn’t meaningful enough to the American audience.

As part of my ideation process, I developed icons of stereotypical American and Cuban items to use in the accordion folded piece (Fig. 19). I later made prototypes of dominos using these icons (Fig. 20).

## A Change in Direction

Prototyping and feedback had revealed that my original idea was not fulfilling my ultimate goal of understanding. It was important that the target audience learned about the second-generation Cuban-American, understood how one acquires two identities, and gained empathy for those people.

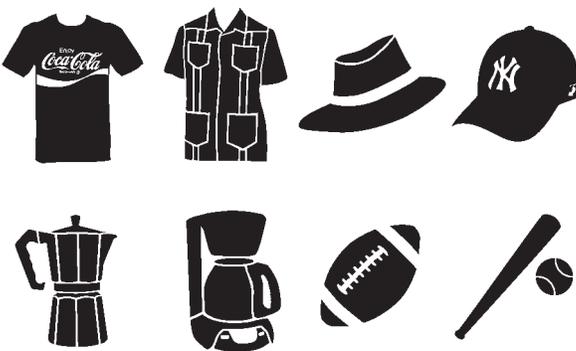
I remembered that when I talked about my experiences, people were always much more interested. I also remembered that the response to my mother’s stories in the *Panchita* sketchbook and the *Querida Mami* exhibit were positive.

## The Story or Narrative

Stories have existed long before recorded history. Oral stories have been handed over, from generation to generation. Stories tell us about our past and without them we wouldn’t know how to plan for the future.



**Figure 18.** Final prototype of two-way, accordion folded piece featuring stereotypical Cuban and American dress and icons. View from the front.



**Figure 19.** Icons developed for adaptation piece and dominos.

Narrating of an event or action, results in generation of meaning. ... By recounting a set of events that are memorable, story validates memory and gives it form. Story and memory have a strong interdependent relationship. Just as a narrative or story cannot exist without memory, so also is story a bearer of memory. Story imparts life to experiences and makes remembered events memorable (Sabnani).

The influence of the story can be seen everywhere, in music, books, media, religion, and art. “Finding a fitting place for oneself in the world is finding a place for oneself in a story. The story is composed of mythologies, histories, ideologies—the stuff of identity and representation” (Lippard 33).

### Autoethnography

To tell my story, I employed the ethnographic research method of autoethnography. Deborah E. Reed-Danahay, in *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* defines autoethnography:

Autoethnography is defined as a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text, as in the case of ethnography. Autoethnography can be done by either an anthropologist who is doing “home” or “native” ethnography or by a non-anthropologist/ethnographer. It can also be done by an autobiographer who places the story of his or her life within a story of social context in which it occurs (9).

### Designer as Author

As designer-author I needed to engage the audience in my story. To do this I developed a poetic voice throughout the book where I chose my stories very carefully and edited down the text to the most important details.

Michael Rock, who writes about designer as author, questions: Could a theory of poetics be a functional model?



**Figure 20.** Domino prototypes with Cuban and American icons.

Wimsatt and Beardsley remarked, "... Poetry succeeds because all or most of what is said or implied is relevant; what is irrelevant has been excluded like lumps from pudding and 'bugs' from machinery. In this respect poetry differs from practical messages which are successful if and only if we correctly infer the intention" (qtd. in "Graphic Authorship").

That poetic/practical opposition proposes two examples; the artist book on one hand and activist design on the other. The artist book offers a form of design authorship in which function has been fully exorcised. The artist book, in general, is concrete, self-referential and allows for a range of visual experiments that include text and image without the burden of mundane commercial tasks.

Artist book work uses word, image, structure and material to tell a story or to invoke an emotion and may be the purest form of graphic authorship (Rock, "Graphic Authorship").

It was time for me to become the designer-author, the autoethnographer, and tell my story. Through storytelling, I want to communicate to the audience how it is possible for someone to have two identities, how this happens, and what it means. Ultimately, my goal is to gain understanding, acceptance, and cultural empathy from the American audience.

## **50/50: FINDING MYSELF WITHIN TWO CULTURES**

For my MFA creative project, I created an autobiographical book of my stories about identity and growing up in Miami, Florida. These stories and experiences illustrate how it is possible to develop two identities. I also included key stories revealed during my research and interviews in the form of tip-ins. Tip-ins are usually smaller pages inserted into books or magazines. The structure of the book, in essence, is a book within a book, or stories within stories. My personal stories intertwined with excerpts from the interviews.

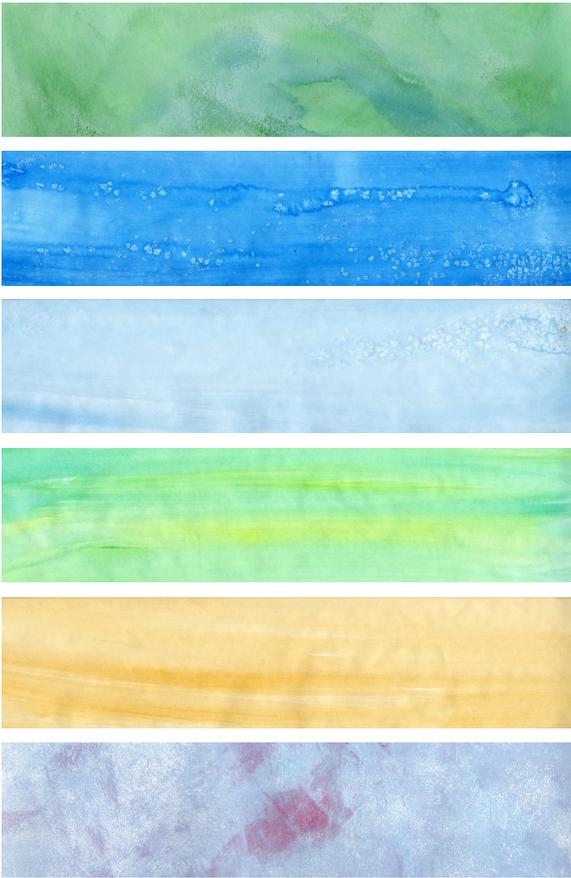
### **Production and Design Decisions**

#### **A. *Writing***

To create understanding, I wanted to explain how someone can love two cultures and identify with both, or become a hybrid. Identity is formed by history, experiences, the environment, and memories, therefore I wanted to illustrate how my experiences were perhaps different from the typical American person, and how these experiences and my environment formed my dual identities.

Conveying my “Spanglish” environment was also very important to me. I realized when I moved away from Miami that I grew up in a very unique environment, a place where two cultures were dominant and present every day, not only to me, but to all of its inhabitants. Lucy Lippard defines the concept of place as:

... a portion of land/town/cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar. Most often place applies to our own “local”—entwined with personal memory, known or unknown histories, marks made in the land that provoke and evoke. Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person’s life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there (7).



**Figure 21.** Watercolor washes and mono type prints used throughout book.

Early drafts of my story were text-heavy, because my instinct was to explain everything, every detail. The feedback was positive on the more poetic pages, so editing and cutting was much needed so that I could distill the information to include only what was crucial to get the message out or communicate the story. This was very difficult, but I knew that it would help facilitate understanding.

For the interviews, I had to go through hours of video footage to transcribe and identify the most important excerpts that were related to the main content of my story.

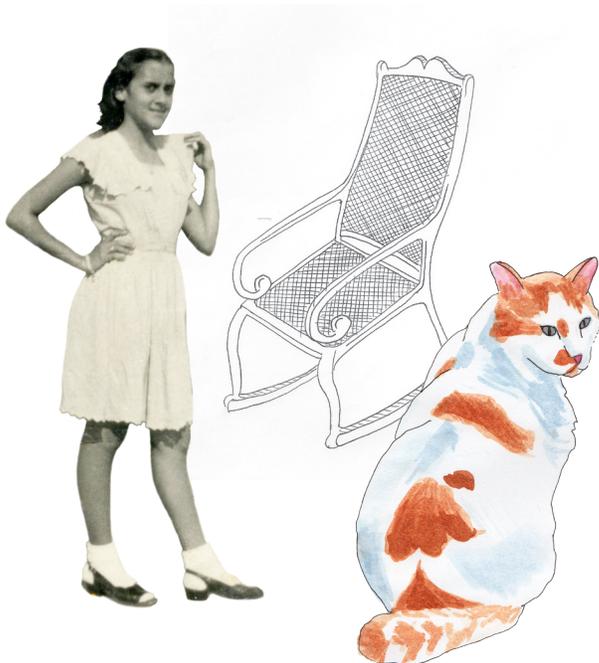
### **B. Imagery**

I wanted to continue the visual language I had developed in the *Panchita* sketchbook, because the book is personal and about my past experiences. To reinforce this language I needed to make everything by hand. To achieve this, I created watercolor washes and mono type prints for the backgrounds (Fig. 21), and I used a mixture of techniques to create imagery including, drawing, watercolor paintings, photography, and collage (Fig. 22). All was originally made by hand then digitized to use in the final book. I revisited metaphors I used before, such as the rooster (Plate 3), which represents me, and *Panchita*, which represents Cuba and my mother. I also used symmetry and mirroring throughout the book to reinforce the concept of duality.

Each spread is a micro-story, revealing another aspect of my life or my family's life that I feel contributed to the formation of my two identities.

Each image has meaning and purpose. For example, in Papaito's page (Plate 10), I show his home in the background, and a photo of him with his horse and carriage, which he used to deliver the bread every morning. The little card, off to the left, is a love note he sent my grandmother when he was courting her.

In Mamaita's page (Plate 11), I showed her in front of her home proudly posing with her poinsettias. On the bottom right, you can see a hint of embroidery that my mother and grandmother worked on.



**Figure 22.** Examples of imagery created for book. Collage, watercolor illustrations and drawings.



**Figure 23.** Laying out the pages helped to make sure the book flowed visually.

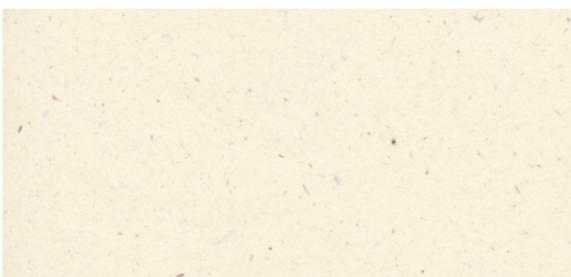
*Chapparral Pro Italic*

**GARAGE GOTHIC**

Chapparral Pro Regular

*Chapparral Pro Bold Italic*

**Figure 24.** Typography.



**Figure 25.** Sample of paper used to print book, French's Speckleton, Madero Beach, 70# text.

For the chapter pages I used the icons I previously developed for the dominos to add texture. I made the icons transparent, so that you can only see a hint of the icons over the painted background (Plate 9).

To ensure that the book visually flowed, I used a board to pin-up all the pages (Fig. 23).

### **C. Typography**

I chose a serif typeface for the typography because of the personal content. A sans-serif would have been too cold and impersonal. I used Chapparral Regular for the body text and Chapparral Italic for the headings (Fig. 24), designed by Carol Twombly for Adobe. It's a slab serif, but an elegant one that has a lyrical quality, which I felt was appropriate for the tone of the book.

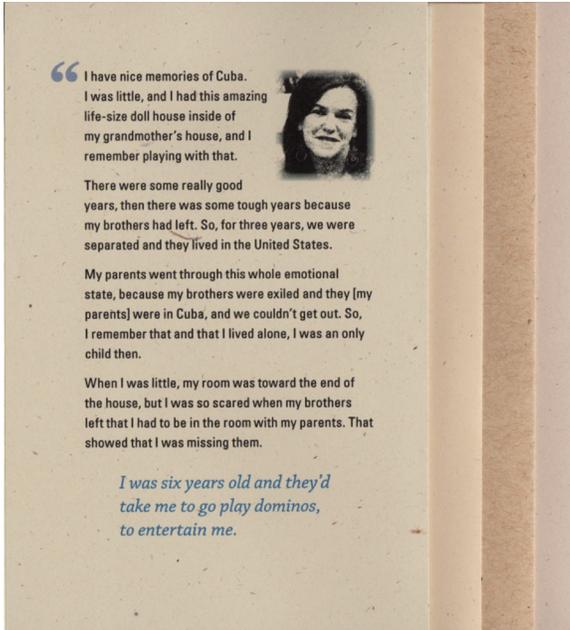
For a bolder contrast and to highlight Spanish words and the Cuban side on some pages, I used a sans-serif, Garage Gothic (Fig. 24), designed by Hoefler & Frere-Jones. The typeface is bold, but somewhat rounded, so it's not as harsh or geometric as other sans-serif typefaces. It resembles the typography used in hand painted signs, which reinforces the past.

For the Spanish words appearing in the headings or body text, I decided to highlight them in a subtle way and not change the color. When I speak Spanglish, it happens automatically, I don't stop and think in Spanish and then go back to English. It happens organically and smoothly. I wanted the text to reflect this. I wanted to highlight the Spanish words just enough to show the reader that it's another language, so I chose to only bold them (Plate 13).

Every image has a meaning and was carefully chosen, and to clarify their meaning, captions appear throughout the book.

### **D. Materials**

This is an autobiographical story, so it's very personal. Because of this I wanted to reinforce the personal and the past by making the book look and feel handmade. To achieve the handmade feel and materiality, I printed the book on French's Speckleton paper (Fig. 25), which is uncoated and has visible flecks. The paper soaks up the ink and the result is very soft color, which also gives a sentimental feel.



**Figure 26.** Tip-ins printed on different color French's Speckleton paper.



**Figure 27.** Early prototype of book structure featuring the tip-ins.

The tip-ins were printed on different color Speckleton paper for each interviewee, and the sheets were cut into different widths so that they would gradate out (Fig. 26).

To reinforce the hand made quality and materiality of the book, I chose a banana paper from Thailand for the cover (Plate 1). The banana is an important fruit and vegetable (plantain) in the Cuban culture, therefore I felt it was appropriate.

### **E. Book Structure**

The book structure was very important because I wanted the audience to interact and empathize with the content. I experimented with several book structures. At first I made a large “dos-i-do” book structure with three sections, one for the Cuban story, one for the American story, and then the Cuban-American story in the middle. When I started writing my story, though, it just didn't flow that way. I then thought a regular “dos-i-do,” with two sections, one section being my story and the other section with the stories of life in Cuba. Eventually I decided to put it all together in one book, because my parents' memories of Cuba also influenced my identities. To make the book more interactive and meaningful I added the interviewee stories and a few reveals (Fig. 27).

Words should not be housed but revealed by the book format. The writer can pace the text through the pages, amassing here ... fewer words there, and no words on several pages ... to allow silence to speak. The writing is then revealed by the act of experiencing the book, and the book becomes part of the writing (Smith 323-326).

The size of the book is small, because it holds my personal memories and feelings, so I wanted it to feel intimate. I wanted the viewer to hold it in his hands as if holding something precious.

The main part of the book consists of my stories, split up into chapters: Memories of Cuba, Growing up in a Spanglish world, and Moving away made me more Cuban. The beginning of the book is very poetic and features my thoughts about identity and how I



**Figure 27.** Visitors who viewed my book during the *MFA Candidates Thesis Exhibition II* opening reception, University Gallery, University of Florida, April 5, 2013.



**Figure 28.** Designer and author, Myda Iamiceli, with her mother and daughter during the *MFA Candidates Thesis Exhibition II* opening reception, University Gallery, University of Florida, April 5, 2013.

feel like I have two identities. I used symmetry to illustrate my dual identities throughout the book and added more layers of meaning by including personal notes handwritten on transparent vellum. Reveals are incorporated within the book to add interest, meaning, and interactivity, and at the end of each chapter, tip-ins with excerpts from the interviews are revealed.

### Audience Response

My book was exhibited in the *MFA Candidate Exhibition Show II* at the University Gallery on April 5–19, 2013. The book was displayed on a single pedestal amongst very large and contemporary artwork from the other MFA candidates. During the opening I was pleased to see that my book was not lost amongst the diverse artwork. I was especially pleased to observe the students and visitors take the time to put on the gloves and go through the book, some actually reading every page. All night someone was always viewing the book.

Throughout the evening I received many comments about the book. Susan Duser, whose family is from Germany, commented on the page with the crochet and how she used to knit with her grandmother and eat German streusel. Ronnie Lovler, a journalist, insisted that I publish the book. She commented on how different the book was, “like nothing she has seen before.” She especially liked how I visually told the story and added content and support with the excerpts from the interviews in the tip-ins. The visitors that grew up in Miami especially loved the book, reminiscing about their pasts and comparing their experiences to mine.

Both Americans and Cuban-Americans connected with the book during the exhibit. They enjoyed my stories and compared their experiences to mine. They showed interest and understanding, and hopefully they will carry this experience with them when faced with other culturally diverse individuals.

## **CONCLUSION**

To create understanding and cultural empathy for the second-generation Cuban-American, I became the designer-author and documented my feelings about identity and my experiences growing up in Miami, Florida. Using the design-thinking process, I was able to research, brainstorm, ideate, prototype, and produce a product that I believe connects with multiple audiences to the challenges of being a Cuban-American. Through storytelling, I communicated my feelings about identity and explained how one develops two identities. Through poetic writing and visual storytelling, I engaged the viewer and made the experience interactive.

I hope that viewing and reading my book will help Americans understand how a Cuban-American feels, and ultimately, how other second-generation Americans feel. This will lead to greater cultural empathy and acceptance.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

I have many plans for the future. I enjoyed and learned a lot from the interviews, and I would like to continue to conduct more and design a companion book, which would feature the interviews in-depth. To contextualize the book, I'd like to offer the books as a boxed set, my book and the companion book with the interviews. I also plan to publish the book so that others have easier access to the story and content. It would make a great addition to school libraries.

To reach a broader audience, I would like to produce a video using the many hours of footage I have accumulated from the interviews.

An exhibit with my previous work would also contextualize the book and content further.

Eventually, I would like to expand this research to other cultures, as I believe all second-generation Americans have similar experiences and feelings about identity. The ultimate goal of all my work is to start a dialogue about what it means to be American.



**Plate 1.** *50/50: Finding Myself within Two Cultures* book cover. Detail shows close-up of stab binding.



**Plate 2.** *50/50: Finding Myself within Two Cultures* book, title page. The transparent words in the background are *Mitad Mitad*, which mean half-and-half or 50/50 in Spanish.



**Plate 3.** *50/50: Finding Myself within Two Cultures* book, inside spread. Here is an example of visual symmetry used throughout the book to illustrate duality. On this page I used the rooster images which represent me (on the left) and Americans (on the right). Close-ups show typography and a detail of the watercolor wash for the background.

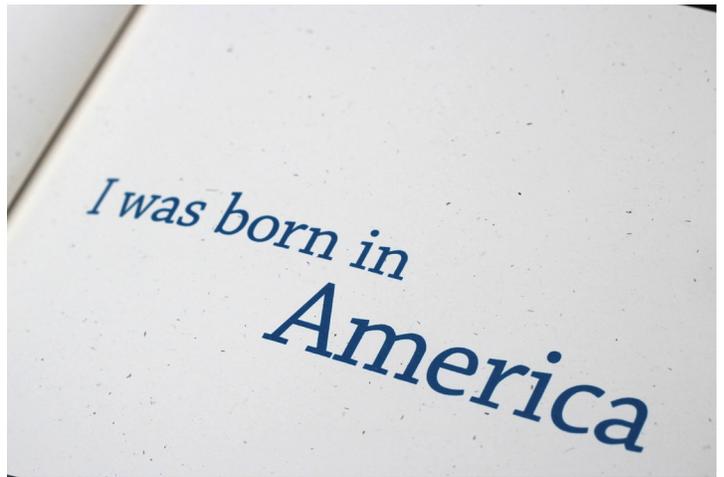
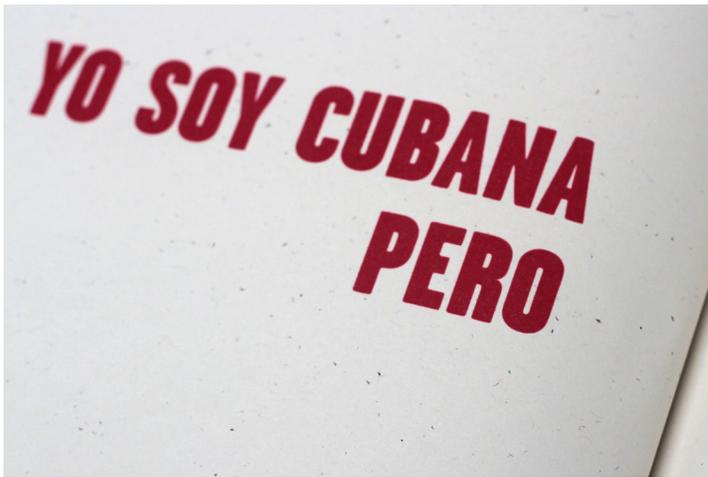
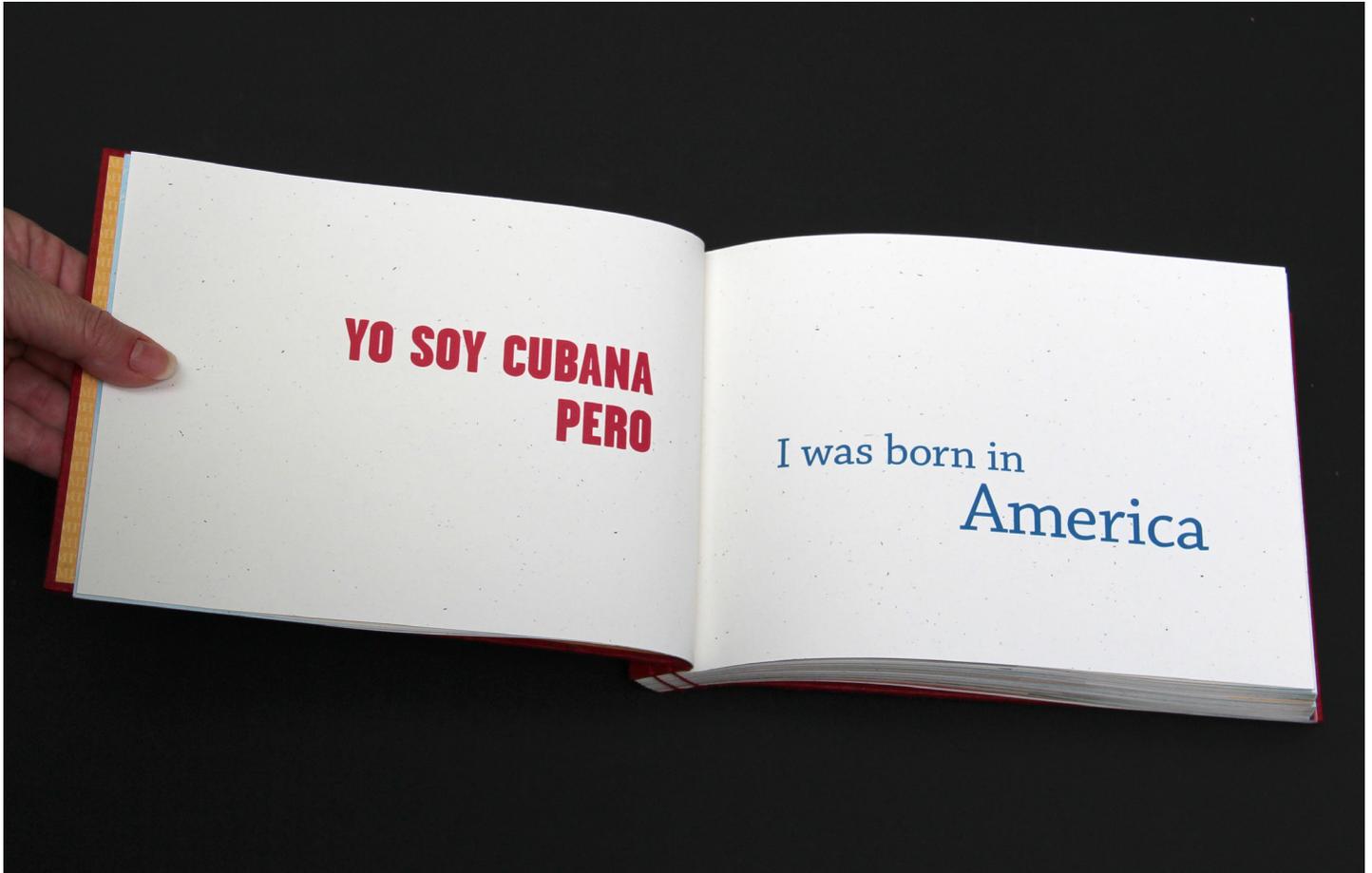


Plate 4. 50/50: *Finding Myself within Two Cultures* book, inside spread, example of Spanglish. Close-ups show typography and the flecks that appear on the Speckletone paper.



Plate 5. 50/50: Finding Myself within Two Cultures book, inside spread, another example of visual symmetry.



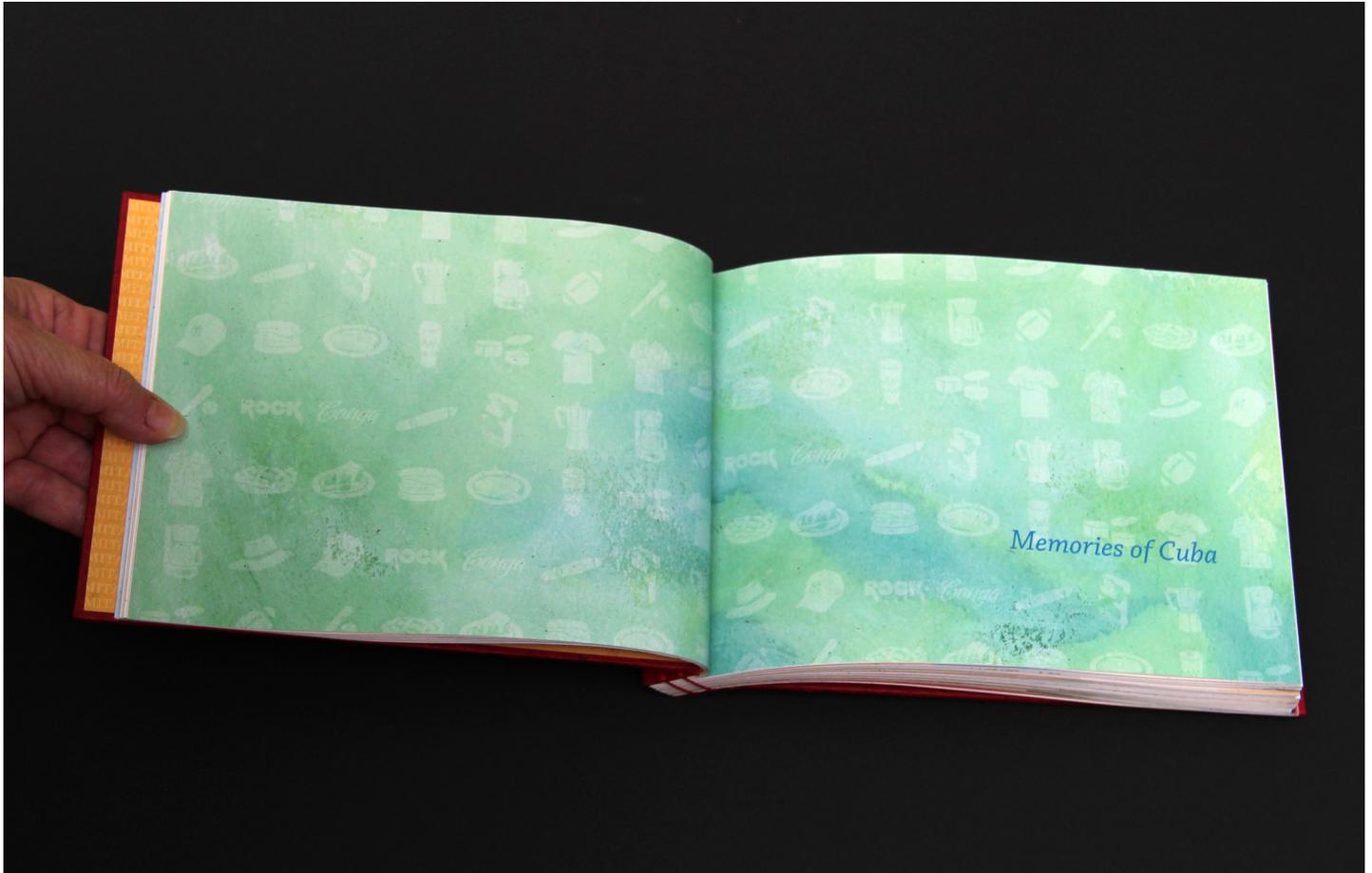
**Plate 6.** 50/50: *Finding Myself within Two Cultures* book, inside spread, example of tip-ins as a way to reveal new content. Close-ups show vellum tip-in where personal notes are handwritten and a detail of a colored pencil drawing of a single flower from the Royal Poinciana tree that grows in Miami and Cuba.



Plate 7. 50/50: Finding Myself within Two Cultures book, inside spread, example of tip-in as a way to reveal new content.



**Plate 8.** *50/50: Finding Myself within Two Cultures* book, inside spread, another example of Spanglish. Close-up shows watercolor of Plumbago flowers and a wood type "R" used in the text.



**Plate 9.** *50/50: Finding Myself within Two Cultures* book, inside spread, chapter page. Detail shows transparent icons used as pattern and texture over the painted background.



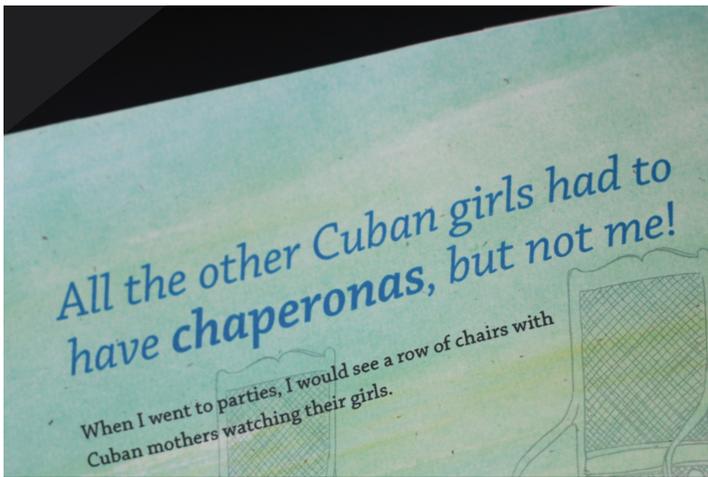
Plate 10. 50/50: Finding Myself within Two Cultures book, inside spread, Papaito's page, my grandfather with vellum tip-in.



Plate 11. 50/50: Finding Myself within Two Cultures book, inside spread, Mamaita's page, my grandmother.



Plate 12. 50/50: Finding Myself within Two Cultures book, inside spread, example of tip-ins with interview excerpts at the end of each chapter.



**Plate 13.** 50/50: *Finding Myself within Two Cultures* book, inside spread. Close-up shows how Spanglish is treated in the headings and the body text, by bolding the Spanish words only.



Plate 14. 50/50: Finding Myself within Two Cultures book, inside spread.

## APPENDIX

Below are sample interview questions for the second-generation Cuban-Americans, which I used as a guide *only* through the interview process. The interviewees never saw the questions. I obtained protocol approval from the IRB-02 Board at the University of Florida to conduct the interviews, and approval from each participant. Generally, the interviews each lasted over an hour.

### Second-Generation Interview Questions

- 1) Where were you born?
- 2) Were both your parents or grandparents from Cuba?  
Where?
- 3) When did they immigrate to the U.S.?
- 4) Why? (Exile or choice)
- 5) Tell me about growing up in your family.
  - a. What was your first language?
  - b. What language was dominant in your home?
  - c. What traditions did you follow?
- 6) Tell me about your relationship with your grandparents.
  - a. Did they live with you?
  - b. Did your parents or grandparents want you to grow up with strong Cuban values, or did they want you to assimilate and become more American?
- 7) What are some traditions and values that you followed?
  - a. Do you plan to follow your parent's values and traditions (Cuban), with your children?
- 8) What were your friends like growing up?
- 9) Were they also mostly Cuban-American?
- 10) Why do you think that is?
- 11) Can you remember an instance that being Cuban was a problem?
- 12) Why do you think that is?
- 13) Can you remember an instance where being Cuban was a plus/or a positive?
- 14) Why do you think that is?
- 15) If someone asks where you are from, what do you say?
- 16) So you strongly identify as an American/Cuban?
  - a. How do you define an American? A Cuban?
  - b. What do you think being American means?
- 17) Is identity more about ethnicity or nationhood?
  - a. Do you think you can claim to be Cuban, even if you weren't born there?

- 18) You've probably heard Latins say, "she's becoming American," or "she's American."
  - a. How do you "become more American?" What is meant by that phrase?
  - b. What does it mean to Cubans?
- 19) Do you ever feel you have two identities?
- 20) Do you feel conflicted sometimes, being Cuban and American? Do these two identities sometimes conflict?
- 21) Can you explain?
- 22) How important is the Cuban culture to you?
- 23) In what way, can you explain?
- 24) Is language important to keep a culture alive through the generations?
- 25) Can you be Cuban and not speak Spanish? Why?
- 26) Can you be Cuban and never have been to the island? Why?
- 27) What is the most important thing you want to communicate to others about Cuba, Cubans or Cuban-Americans? Anything you feel strongly about, whether we've talked about it or not.
- 28) What are four adjectives you would use to describe Cubans?

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## ADDITIONAL READINGS

The following readings also informed my MFA Creative project.

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### **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Myda Iamiceli was born and raised in Miami, Florida. She attended Florida International University where she received a Bachelor of Business Administration in Marketing. After moving to the New York area and then returning to Florida, she attended Santa Fe College and received an Associate of Science in Graphic Design Technology. In 2013, she received her Master of Fine Arts from the University of Florida where she studied graphic design.

Prior to attending the University of Florida, Myda worked on campus, in University Relations, as the senior graphic designer. She worked with a diverse group of university departments designing printed collaterals such as annual reports, posters, brochures, and magazines, in addition to web design.

Myda's research is centered around identity and what it means to be American.