Discovering Cuban-American Identity Through Literary Works

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Immigrants are often faced with a decision, be it conscious or not, to maintain their cultural identity as they once knew it, to abandon their identity and adopt a new American identity or to try and find a middle-ground between the two. This can be said of immigrants from any country, especially those who come from Cuba. The assimilation of Cuban-Americans has been documented, be it through fiction or non-fiction literature. While there have been numerous studies on the integration of Cubans into American society there is however, a lack of studies on whether there is any correlation between the studies and the literature. With the help of several studies on Cuban-Americans and their assimilation into American society, and the writings by Cuban-American authors of Cuban-American characters, this article will demonstrate that not only are there strong similarities between what the studies have found and what the authors of the fiction works are presenting, but the literary works often offer more insight into the complexity of the acculturation of the Cuban-American immigrant. From my vantage point, literary sources constitute “windows” through which the social, political and cultural realities of a given community can be observed and more fully understood. With their reliance on different aspects of the individuals’ inner reality (the subconscious, popular myths and the collective consciousness) works of fiction provide information that the so-called “historical discourses” fail to recognize. The texts that I have chosen to use on the basis of this study are texts that concentrate on the lives of Cuban-American immigrants, their assimilation and their identity. Part of my research also included reading novels written by Cuban-American authors. Of the books that I read I was able to observe and compare the factual and historical data I found to the representation of the Cuban-American in the novels.

Before exploring the similarities between the historical studies and the literature, one must first comprehend the historical factors that have affected the Cuban immigrant. In 1961, Cuba was declared a socialist state. Many of the aristocrats, educated and wealthy left the country. Those that left expected to return to their homeland as soon as the Castro regime was out of power. After years went by, with more Cubans seeking refuge in the United States, the first wave of refugees to come into the country began to unite and mobilize to provide a support system for the growing Cuban population within the United States. As the population grew, Cuban communities began developing. In doing so, the exiles found a way to sustain their values, language and culture. The purpose of their mobilization efforts within the United States was primarily to overthrow the Castro administration. However, when it became evident that the rule would not be ending promptly, they began to enter themselves in the political arena in their new communities (García 13-16).
These refugees are Cuban and consider themselves Cuban nationals, even if they have acquired American citizenship. They were born and raised in Cuba. Cuba is their home; the United States is where they live. Their lack of acculturation and acceptance of the American culture can partly be attributed to several factors: they did not expect to remain in the United States; they are adults who have already established their identities, and for the most part are making a conscious effort to maintain their culture and to instill it in their children as well.

The generation that was born in Cuba and left at a young age or left while they were adolescents is what Gustavo Pérez-Firmat refers to as the one-and-a-halfers. They transitioned from adolescence to adulthood in the United States, having to deal with both the pressure to maintain their Cuban culture from their family and the pressure from the society they live in to assimilate, to become less foreign and more American (Life on the Hyphen 4-7). While various sociological studies have been conducted focusing on the transition of the one-and-a-halfers, literary works by Cuban-American authors have also explored this issue and have been capable of developing the theme of the assimilation on a different level than the studies are capable of doing.

The authors are able to utilize their personal experiences as Cuban-Americans and relay it through the incidents with which their characters are confronted. Cuban-American author Carolina Hospital, editor of Los Atrevidos and co-author of A Little Love, said, "A writer works from her own experience but that also includes her own observations of the world around her (Hospital)." The new perspective taken by the literary authors versus that of the historians is one that allows the readers to take in a more complex and multi-dimensional image of the Cuban-American immigrant and the Cuban-American culture.

The contemporary Cuban-American authors mostly fall within the one-and-a-halfer bracket. Their protagonists are faced with life as Cuban-born immigrants. In an excerpt from Gustavo Perez-Firmat’s short story "My Life as a Redneck", the Cuban-American protagonist acknowledges the struggle of the one-and-a-halfer generation. It is a story of a Cuban-American man, who is tired of the life he is living, the life he was expected to live. He married a Cuban woman, had Cuban children and worked. That was his existence. After fifteen years of marriage, he began to have an affair. In regards to an American girl, who was his mistress, he says "Catherine was the Americanita of my dreams, the girl I should have married had I become American when I was supposed to, back in the sixties, when everybody else was doing it." Firmat displays how those on the "hyphen" had to choose which to become and how to find a balance between the two. In fact, it is the struggle to find this balance that causes identity issues for many of the Cuban-American characters in the works.

In Virgil Suarez’ Going Under, the Cuban-American main character, Xavier Cuevas, is on the same “hyphen” Firmat discusses. Xavier is a father, husband, son and a workaholic entrepreneur. Everything appeared to be moving well in Xavier’s life, his insurance company was doing relatively well; family life seemed fine until a problem in his business occurred. At this point in the novel, everything in his life spiraled downward. Xavier was not happy with his job and did not spend enough time with his family either. He felt that he had lost control of his life. Xavier was plagued with the constant feeling of being lost. Besides his problems at work, he was also having problems at home. His American wife was leaving him and taking their children with her. He knew
something was missing, but could not figure out what.

It was here that author Virgil Suarez was able to incorporate a part of the Cuban culture that most outside of the state of Florida do not know about. Noticing the slump Xavier was in, his business partner decided to take him to a santera\(^1\). Caledonia, the santera, invokes a spirit to help guide and heal Xavier of all of his problems. Throughout the course of the novel, Suarez demonstrates to the reader the capability of the religion and its healing power. He also establishes how the Cuban culture has transferred to the Cuban communities within the United States. Suarez uses the bongos in the work as another reference to the Cuban culture that Xavier has slowly forgotten. Once he sees the bongos\(^2\), he is immediately drawn to them and is able to play them, as if he’d been playing them all his life. Using a widely used instrument in Cuban music, Suarez shows the reader how Xavier longs to return to the land he was born in. Xavier struggled in deciding which side of the hyphen he would be on. Attempting to live on the hyphen was too trying and he knew he would have to choose one. At the end of the novel, Xavier chooses to go back to his birthplace, where he feels he truly belongs.

In the book written by Carolina Hospital and her husband\(^3\), *A Little Love*, two of the four main characters are Cuban-American women. Isabel Landon and Mercy Virtudes, not only share the same blood, but they share the same dilemmas that most Cuban immigrants are confronted with. Isabel is a divorced mother and a successful career woman. In the novel, Isabel tackles her responsibility as a mother and head of the family. *La familia* is extremely important in Isabel’s life, and at the same moment that she begins to live for herself, her son gets in a major car accident and is in a coma for several days. The new love that she has found eventually takes her to confession. The Catholic Church also plays an important role in the lives of Cuban-Americans, and Isabel turns to the Church for guidance in her problems.

Mercy is a single businesswoman who has lived a life of instability, in regards to her love life. She was continuously dating the wrong man and was under constant pressure from her mother to find a nice Cuban man to marry and with whom to settle down. However, when she finally met that nice man, it turns out he’s not Cuban. Her mother still has strong ties to the country and does not wish for her daughter nor grandchildren to be nothing but Cuban. She does not want the culture of her homeland to disappear and is against Mercy’s relationship. Mercy has to decide whether to follow her heart or listen to her family.

When asked about the importance of the family in her novel and in the lives of Cuban-Americans Carolina Hospital, co-author of *A Little Love*, said that

“Family is an important element in Cuban American culture, as in other cultures. Family bonds, family support is central and affects the decisions made and the life style chosen. Perhaps the family is even more important in exile communities where members are trying to swim upstream as minorities in a mainstream that doesn’t welcome them. In that case, the family can be the support needed to meet the obstacles or challenges.”
This can in fact be applied to most novels centered on Cuban-American protagonists. While studies on Cuban-Americans may touch on the importance of the family, it is not until one reads a novel where they can see the interactions between the Cuban-American protagonist and their family. The reader is able to see how the family affects the protagonists on different levels.

In order to completely grasp the assimilation of the Cuban-American population within the U.S., looking only at the sociological studies will not suffice. Literary works written by Cuban-American authors, most of whom fall into the one-and-a-halfers category, are an effective medium to completely understand the mind processes, culture and experiences of the Cuban-American immigrant. Using both the historical data and the literary books will create a more valid, both intellectually and culturally, and elaborate understanding of the acculturation of the immigrants. A clear correlation exists between the historical studies and the literary works by Cuban-American authors. The two complement each other. The studies are able to give a broad representation of the Cuban-American immigrant and mostly only touch the surface of their assimilation. Fiction writers, on the other hand, resort to different aspects of the inner life of their character, thus presenting a more complex and complete image of the Cuban-American immigrant.

**FOOTNOTES**

1. *Santera* is almost equivalent to a witch doctor. *Santería* is an Afro-Cuban religion that originated in West Africa. The African slaves came to the New World with their religion and combined elements of their religion with that of the Catholic Church (Hagedorn).

2. Along with the congas, timbales, guiro, etc., the bongos are an instrument that is used in much of the traditional Cuban music.

3. Under the pseudo name, C.C. Medina

**REFERENCES**


Hospital, Carolina. E-mail interview. 13 March 2003.


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