

**THROUGH THEIR EYES:  
CHILDHOOD PERSPECTIVES ON IMMIGRATION AND EXILE IN CUBAN AMERICAN  
AUTHORS MARGARITA ENGLE, RUTH BEHAR, AND ADRIANNA CUEVAS**

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### **Abstract**

This literary research seeks to analyze the writing of second generation Cuban American authors Margarita Engle, Ruth Behar, and Adrianna Cuevas and how they incorporate personal experience, historical antecedents, acculturation processes, and language merging in their literary works. Through childhood perspectives, these writers portray the difficulties of a bicultural and bilingual identity for young Cuban immigrants in the diaspora. The novels selected for this research, *Enchanted Air*, *Lucky Broken Girl*, and *Cuba in my Pocket*, give readers the opportunity to learn what it means to be Latinx in an American context. In addition, the novels reflect on the dynamic culture and history the Cuban American community has within the Latinx and American literary heritage. With the growth of the Latinx community in the United States, the works of these authors help broaden the studies on Latin American and Latinx literature, giving them the opportunity to be recognized by their work while exploring different genres.

## Introduction

Cuba can often be seen as an isolated country from the news and social media platforms, primarily due to its communist political system in a Western Hemisphere primarily dominated by countries with democratic governments. What we frequently know of Cuba at times relates to Fidel Castro's revolution and its significant impact on Cuban migration to other countries, especially the United States. For literary studies, the Cuban revolution of 1959 created a new type of narrative that highlighted the topic of exile. Isabel Alvarez Borland refers to this common theme found in this type of literature in her book *Cuban American Literature of Exile*, published in 1998, as the "theme of displacement in the aftermath of the 1959 exodus" (2). Among the professionals that left Cuba in this massive migration and settled in the United States in hopes of seeking better opportunities, there were artists and writers who began to display their experiences in exile in their creative works. Within the literature being written during this period, two groups of writers were classified based on the perspectives from which they wrote about the diaspora. This is what Alvarez Borland calls the first generation writers, those who left Cuba when they were adults, and the second generation writers, who were mostly the children of the first exile generation (6). This second group is further divided into two subgroups: the one-and-a-half generation, and the Cuban American ethnic writers: "The 'one-and-a-half' generation is the subgroup of writers who left Cuba during their early adolescence and thus had Cuban childhoods and U.S. adulthoods, while the *Cuban American ethnic group* are younger writers who came from Cuba as infants or who were born in the United States to parents of the first exile generation" (Alvarez Borland 7-8).

The writers selected for this research: Margarita Engle, Ruth Behar, and Adriana Cuevas, fall under the classification of second generation writers. They reflect two predominant forms of

prose and free verse narratives in their writing: autobiography and creative fictions of community and geographic crossings (Alvarez 8). The literary works that were chosen for this research grasp the importance of the cultural experience of young Cuban immigrants in the United States. In hopes of highlighting and validating childhood experiences that shape perspectives of life in diaspora, this research will analyze the cultural, historical, and linguistic aspects that affect the identity of the characters in the novels or the autobiography and how literary elements work together in the process of telling a story. Based on personal experience, historical antecedents, acculturation processes, and language merging, second generation Cuban American authors portray the difficulties of a bicultural and bilingual identity for young Cuban immigrants in diaspora. As immigrants, the authors share what it means to find their own place and identity between two cultures and two geographic spaces through their characters. This research will also provide in-depth analysis on how the socio-historical aspects significantly impact and influence the authors and also the development of the characters they created. In addition, the use of bilingualism as a literary tool to convey certain ideas or feelings will play an important part in the writings' critical analyses.

In analyzing Engle's, Behar's, and Cuevas's works, it is important to clarify the differences between middle grade literature and young adult (YA) literature. Middle grade texts are age-categorized works written for readers between the ages of eight through twelve. Various genres can be considered middle grade texts: graphic novels, fantasy, science fiction, and more. A peculiarity of these texts is that the protagonists are roughly between the ages of ten and thirteen. On the other hand, YA literature is considered to be written for readers between the ages of thirteen and eighteen and the novels are written about teenage characters that are typically between the ages of fifteen-eighteen years old.

The texts selected for this research: *Enchanted Air* (2015) by Margarita Engle, *Lucky Broken Girl* (2017) by Ruth Behar, and *Cuba in my Pocket* (2021) by Adrianna Cuevas, fall under the category of middle grade texts, and although their main target is young readers, the texts are not limited to this age range audience. A search under middle grade Latinx books reveals a vast list of novels and books that reflect the life of Latinx children in the United States. Middle grade books that feature Latinx characters offer doors, windows, and mirrors for young readers to see themselves represented in the texts. As Laura Simeon points out:

A hallmark of memorable middle-grade writing is that the authors see through the eyes of children with an awareness that simply being young is no protection against tough times or an obstacle to understanding life's complexities... they make their books welcoming spaces to explore hard topics that often have no tidy resolutions. (*Kirkus Review*)

Although one might think that middle grade books are simple in their composition and the topics do not highlight the complexity of certain thematic concerns, more and more authors are writing works that resonate with difficult truths that affect young readers. In an interview with Richard Blanco, for example, Behar emphatically stated:

My novel is technically a middle-grade novel, not a young adult novel...  
But younger and older kids are reading the book, as are adults. Middle grade and young adult literature have young protagonists and the world is seen from their perspective. The language is accessible to children and teens but not simple by any means.

In order to understand why Alvarez Borland classifies these writers into groups, it is important to consider the historical events that serve as context for this literature.

Unquestionably, the figure of Fidel Castro has been known as a great influential political figure in Latin-American history. As Ilan Stavans explains in his book, *Latinos in the United States*, published in 2018, Castro's aspiration for political power made him file a legal brief accusing Fulgencio Batista, the leader of Cuba at that time, of corruption. This was a key act in Castro's plan for rebellion and finally on July 26, 1953, Castro began a series of attacks to take down Batista from his power and finally take over Cuba in 1959 (44). At the beginning of this new revolution led by Castro, his political ideologies remained neutral (5). Nonetheless, according to Ada Ferrer, "his detractors accused him of being a communist. It was not until two years later, on the eve of the US Bay of Pigs invasion, that he publicly proclaimed that he and his revolution were socialist" (285). The Bay of Pigs invasion was a defining event for the relationship between the United States and Cuba. Developing close connections with the Soviet Union, Cuba became a threat. The invasion sought the opportunity to overthrow Castro from power by recruiting and training Cuban exiles with the CIA. By April 17, 1961, when Brigade 2506 arrived at the Bay of Pigs, the mission fell to total failure. Castro's troops already awaited them at the beach; 114 were killed, and the other 1,100 were taken as prisoners. The president at the moment, John F. Kennedy, did not continue further with the invasion due to its compromising view internationally with the Soviet Union (Cueto).

From the beginning of his political establishment, Castro would address the people of Cuba often relying on José Martí's ideology and writings, demonstrating his political values of operating in secret in order to hide his true intentions and achieve victory (Ferrer 287). It was not long before Castro's intention started to become evident, the restrictions that his regimen started



to implement increased the tension in Cuban society. The target for implementing these new communist ideologies was the group most vulnerable: the children. The “communist party established a children’s auxiliary club, known as the Pioneers, to instill in children between the ages of six and fourteen a love of country and revolution” (Ferrer 387). For the parents, this meant the threat of taking away their children and forcing them to participate in cruel and disruptive indoctrination methods. The fear this created made many parents secretly send their children to the United States in what was called *Operation Peter Pan*. From 1960-1962, unaccompanied children from the ages of 6 to 18 ended up in the care of friends or relatives, and in most cases under the care of the federal government (Stavans 69). The extremist government provoked a wave of migration to the United States, not only of children but also of professionals and businesspeople who left the country in hopes of having better lives. It is due to these historical events that Cuban writers living in diaspora started to write about their experience in exile regarding the 1959 revolution. A form of escaping and metaphorically going back to Cuba is by writing about personal experiences or the experiences of those close to you. In the words of Gustavo Pérez Firmat, “exile is a mutilation, the exiled abandons not only his homeland and his possessions but also part of himself” (5). What we can frequently see in most of these Cuban American writings is a sense of loss, identity formation, and the perseverance or perpetuation of Cuban culture (O’Reilly- Herrera 10).

In *Enchanted Air*, *Lucky Broken Girl*, and *Cuba in my Pocket*, there is a significant contrast of scenery between Cuba and the United States that transports readers to the time and place where the stories were written. The authors’ use of literary imagery and figurative symbolism highlights the struggles of living outside of Cuba. Written from the perspectives of first-person narrators, these authors will uniquely combine structures such as letters/epistolary

format, dialogues, dual settings, descriptive passages, bilingualism, and free verse into compelling stories of Cuban exile and the perpetuation of Cuban heritage in the United States. Their works can be seen as an important part of the literary heritage of Latinx Literature within the larger context of American Literature in the United States.

## Chapter 1: Enchanted Air by Margarita Engle

Second generation Cuban American author and poet, Margarita Engle, has been known for her unique style of writing mostly in free verse. She completed a bachelor's degree in biology at California State Polytechnic University, a master's degree from Iowa State University, and a doctorate from the University of California, Riverside. Her knowledge of agronomy and botany are aspects that are reflected in her precise way of describing nature. While completing her doctoral degree she took a creative writing seminar with Chicano writer Tomás Rivera which inspired her to pursue a writing path. Throughout her creative work she has written many verse novels, memoirs, and picture books. Engle has been awarded many recognitions such as the Pura Belpré Award, Golden Kite, Newbery Honor, PEN USA Award, Walter Dean Myers Award Honor and the Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award, Americas Awards, a Jane Addams Award, International Reading Association Award, Claudia Lewis Poetry Award, and the Charlotte Zolotow Award. Her memoir selected for analysis in this research, *Enchanted Air* (2015), received a Pura Belpré Author's Award, was a YALSA Nonfiction finalist, and was named a Walter Dean Myers Award honoree. As a writer, Engle intentionally writes in free verse to invite the readers to feel their own thoughts on the work written. In an interview by Jill Ratzan, Engle explains how personal and purposeful her memoir is: "All the thoughts and feelings are mine, and all are nonfiction.... They are childhood memories. I chose to write in present tense, bringing those moments back to life and granting them the power of immediacy" (2015). By interjecting references to Fidel Castro's revolution and the experience of growing up between two countries, Engle takes her readers on a bicultural journey through her memoir.

At the beginning of the work, readers are introduced to Engle's parents' love story. This gives a clear understanding that life for the author began to be bicultural even before she was

born due to her Cuban mother and her North American father falling in love. She was born and grew up living in the United States, where she spends most of her life, and every summer vacation she got the opportunity to visit Cuba, her second home. The way that she will experience the Cuban revolution of 1959 is going to be different from those children who escaped Cuba during that time. This will put into perspective how she assimilates cultural differences between the United States and Cuba, in addition to the impact of the historical events occurring at the time. This also relates to what Isabel Alvarez Borland and Lynette M. F. Bosch explain in their book *Cuban American Literature and Art* (2009), when they state that writers that are Cuban American will “embody a microcosmic portrayal of Cuban and American society in which individual artists choose their expository territory” (2). This territory for Engle will be her life in California where she could “speak boastful English”, enjoy watching American television programs like *Lassie* or Disney, and where she read books by American authors such as Jack London and Walter Farley: *The Black Stallion, White Fang, and The Call of the Wild* (Enchanted Air 25). Her childhood was very Americanized in comparison with those Cuban children that came to the United States after the revolution of 1959, and this is partly thanks to her American father’s influence. Still, her Cuban heritage would have a great impact on her cultural experience living in the United States primarily due to the deteriorating relationship between the two countries. As soon as the Cuban revolution of 1959 took place, Engle’s classmates, teachers, and neighbors started to look down on her and her family. A sense of discrimination began, as she expresses in the poem *My Own Questions*:

“Why are Cubans suddenly spoken of

as enemies?

Not so long ago, Mami’s island

was only known for music  
and sugar” (51).

From this moment on in the novel, Engle shows how difficult life was for her and her family in the United States because of her Cuban roots. “In Cuban American memoirs the critical turn will be determined...by one significant event: departure from the island and subsequent exile” (López 63), and although this is not the specific case for Engle, because she did not live in Cuba, the current situation on the island provokes a type of metaphorical departure from her second home and places her and her family in a difficult situation with their current home. Now they are considered spies or possible allies of the Cuban Communist Party, and therefore they are investigated by the FBI:

What’s wrong with receiving  
phone calls, letters, and packages  
from Cuba? (48)

The agents said they knew that Dad  
took an art-history correspondence class  
from a Communist UCLA professor  
during World War II. (51)

This sudden change in her environment and household will produce a different perspective on how comfortable the author feels on American grounds, which will greatly affect her sense of identity. As a form of escaping the difficult realities she is facing at a young age, Engle will rely on books as a coping mechanism:

All I want to do is read  
*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*,

*Aesop's Fables, The Tempest,  
A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

Ancient tales with endings  
that have meanings  
instead of doubts. (145)

Perhaps, one of the most relevant themes seen throughout the novel is the topic of identity. Early in the book, Engle expresses her conflicted thoughts between the two countries:

“Am I free to need both  
or will I always have to choose  
only one way  
of thinking?” (13)

Having to choose between two countries, two languages and two families, for a young girl as Engle, puts her in a difficult position and makes her question who she is. Knowing who we are gives us “a sense of stability and continuity” (Das 143), giving us further understanding of where we come from and where are we headed. Although the issue of identity started at a young age for Engle, when news of the revolution arrived at her household, her identity underwent a deeper misplacement. While she is in love with this exotic, tropical island in the Caribbean, that she longs to visit every summer, suddenly, the political decisions made in Cuba cut off this relationship. At this moment a metaphorical uprootedness happens in Engle’s life. Although she did not physically live in Cuba, the affinity she felt with her Cuban roots were disrupted. This aligns with Alvarez-Borland’s thoughts on how the readers perceive the Cuban situation based on how violently the children were uprooted due to Castro’s revolution. Engle comments:

At school, all the teachers and students  
Seem angered by Cuba.

“WHAT ARE YOU?

They ask....” (43)

The question, “what are you?” perhaps lingers in the back of the minds of many people that live in exile and are immigrants. In his essay *Where Are You From? A Cuban Dilemma* included in the book *ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora*, Pablo Medina says, “If you are legitimately interested in me and I, in turn, trust you, I will say, ‘I am from nowhere,’ and to calm your surprise, I will add, ‘Such is the fate of the exile’” (233-234). There is no clear answer when your wholeness is made up by fractions of other countries combined together through immigration. Engle asks:

Do I have to admit  
That I’m half Cuban and half American,  
or should I go even further, and explain  
That Dad’s parents were born in the Ukraine,  
Part of Soviet Russia?  
Or am I just entirely American,  
all the fractions left behind  
by immigration from faraway nations? (43)

For people who are born of multiracial families, it is hard to explain or even define who they are, because they not only represent one culture or one country, but they are also a combination of all those cultural traits that form them, and for Engle, who has always considered

herself a hyphenated Cuban American, asking herself these questions shows how diverse and complex one's identity can be.

There is a timelapse in the narration of *Enchanted Air*, where the readers start to navigate from 1947, the year Engle's parents met, to the year 2014, when there were talks of possible normalizing diplomatic relations between US and Cuba, providing information of the before and aftermath of Castro's revolution of 1959. This timelapse helps the reader understand how the relationship between Cuba and the United States deteriorates over the years and how this affects Engle's social environment as she grows up. By the end of the literary work, the author included a *Cold War Timeline* for readers that may not be familiarized with Cuba's historical past, so they can briefly learn of the series of key events that took place in that period. Throughout the narration of the novel, Engle does not explicitly talk about all the events she includes in her timeline, but she does make references to specific and impactful incidents that drastically affected her. One of them being the summer of 1959, when news that an overthrown Fulgencio Batista was taken down by a group of revolutionary Cubans led by Fidel Castro. As an eight-year-old child, it was hard to assimilate the magnitude of the things happening, but that was her reality, she had to open her mind to the topic of violence and war:

Revolution.

Violence.

Gunfire.

Danger...

...People in Cuba are fighting.

It's a civil war to overthrow a dictator. (41)



Another important historical event which Engle focuses on is the *Bay of Pigs Invasion* (1961). This failed attempt by the CIA to overthrow Castro from power intensified the control of Castro's administration, contributed to the ties of the Soviet Union with Cuba, and finally exacerbated a discordant relationship between the United States and Cuba (Cueto, BBC News Mundo). From this event, the narrative in the story shows how restrictive traveling to Cuba became, and how slowly Engle lost easy communication with her family there:

Travel restrictions are tightened.

There's no way we'll ever

be able to visit the faraway half

of our family. (131)

Children going through experiences such as exile or immigration have to cope with daily stressors which can be difficult to manage at a young age. Knowing the socio-historical background of *Enchanted Air*, and how Engle's personal story develops around Castro's revolution, helps readers understand how life was for those living outside of Cuba at that time. Often, we read stories of children or adults escaping the revolution and how life transitions in exile, but rarely do we come across stories that show what it was like for those that lived outside of the island while still having family there. By returning to her childhood experience, Engle does not highlight "the transition between the two life stages, but its disruption" (López 63), which makes this type of literature very pertinent since, "literature serves as a point of reference so children can better understand their life experiences... it offers insights into universal human behaviors, emotions, and moral dilemmas" (Roberts and Crawford 2).

A characteristic that stands out from second-generation Cuban American writers is that their work is primarily written in English, with some use of Spanish words. Codeswitching, which can be defined as “the alternation of two languages in a verbal or written text, is often featured in poetry, drama, and performance art, particularly in work that is published by Latino/a presses (Torres 76). The Spanish vocabulary used in the writing is notably accessible for the non-Spanish speakers, probably the reason why there is no glossary provided at the end. To help the non-Spanish speakers understand the words, the author relies on the use of italics and in some cases provides the translation of words. In a way, “literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or 'imaginative', but because it uses language in peculiar ways” (Eagleton 2). For instance, language in the novel, specifically Spanish, provides a level of comfort to the author and her mother throughout the narrative: “Homesick, she listens to Cuban music / Homesick, she sings to herself in Spanish” (2). Language, which is closely connected to identity, will have a strong significance in the bicultural life Engle had, and it will also showcase a closeness to her Cuban roots. Bringing back the socio-historical background, once the political conflicts between Cuba and United States intensified due to another important event, the *Cuban Missile Crisis* (1962), Engle’s mom becomes an exile. There is a powerful moment in the narrative where language is used as a symbol of this breach, and that is when Engle stops calling her mom “Mami” and begins to use the English term:

Mami turns into Mom, changing

Before my eyes

From an ordinary person

Who left her homeland

Believing that she would return

Every year-  
 To this strange, in-between-nations  
 exile.... (124)

This scene is the climax in the narrative, since it shows how the different thematic concerns connect to one another and are essential in portraying what it means to live in exile. Spanish represents home, Cuba, and when that place is no longer accessible there is no reason to use the word “Mami” anymore, because Engle’s mother represented that connection to Cuba, but now she has become an exile. It is both an emotional and metaphorical way of representing what language holds in Cuban American literature. Although Spanish words continue to appear in the writing, Engle no longer refers to her mom in the Spanish term because her mother acquired a ghostly image, of not knowing where she belonged:

Everything else about her island  
 seems so distant  
 that she clings  
 to her useless  
 passport – that last  
 papery link. (157)

Like Engle remarks in an interview with Jill Ratzan, there is an urgency in telling this story; in terms of the audience, this book is also meant to be read by those that went through the same experience as she did: young children living in the United States while there was a revolution happening in Cuba or children who were formally educated in English but grew up in a bicultural

and perhaps bilingual environment. Therefore, language and codeswitching become relevant in the narration of this memoir for the nostalgia it brings to the author: “I inherited my mother’s añoranza for Cuba and, as a result, the desire to keep visiting the island.... I have always thought of myself as a hyphenated Cuban American, long before hyphens were common” (Engle 2015).

In the *writer’s note* at the end of the memoir, Engle explains how excruciating the thought of writing of childhood experiences during a Cold War was; therefore, in order to ease the traumatic experience, she relied on the memories of travel. From the title of the book and the cover art, the reader can interpret that the author compares herself to a bird, flying between two airs, United States and Cuba, when she states: “As a young child, flying on an airplane to visit relatives in Cuba was a magical experience. I wanted to choose a title that would recapture that spell of gravity-defying excitement and hope” (Engle 2015). The words *enchanted*, *air* and *wings* are often used throughout the book. For Engle, the air that took her each summer to Cuba was enchanting, it made her escape to this magical place where she felt at peace and comfortable with her “second self.” Although she does not specifically compare herself to a bird, she often refers to her *wings*: “how it feels to slowly grow hidden wings” (65), “heal injured wings” (25), so the reader can imply she in the process of metaphorically becoming a bird soaring free through the air. In this case, the subtitle of the novel shows a relationship to this idea: “*Two Cultures, Two Wings* refers to the sense of freedom I gained by traveling back and forth between my parents’ two homelands, two languages and two histories” (Engle, 2015). How the content of the book is organized in different chapters in which the title is related to terms such as *fly* or *wings*, like *Winged Summer* or *Two Wings*, shows how the author meticulously structured her book, so that

everything would be connected to the title itself. Borrowing the image for the title of the book from the excerpt of Antonio Machado's poem *¡Oh tarde luminosa!*:

*¡Oh tarde luminosa!*

*El aire está encantado.*

*La blanca cigüeña*

*dormita volando . . .*

Engle was able to create a text that, while it depicts topics of exile and events related to Castro's revolution, is also written as a magical travel experience, providing young readers the opportunity to travel through Engle's life and learn how this traveling "opens the heart and mind...gives opportunity to see how others live...teaches compassion" (*Enchanted Air, 191*).

## Chapter 2: Lucky Broken Girl

Award-winning Cuban American author and anthropologist Ruth Behar came to the United States from Cuba at the young age of five and she settled with her family in Queens, New York. She completed her undergraduate studies in Spanish literature at Wesleyan University in 1977. Soon after, she pursued graduate studies at Princeton University, where she received a PhD in Anthropology in 1983. Her profession has given her the opportunity to travel to different countries and connect with people. She focused on Spanish-speaking countries such as Mexico, Spain, and her homeland Cuba. With her knowledge in anthropology, she has written stories and books that explore the topics of identity, immigration, and culture. *Lucky Broken Girl*, her first novel, inspired by the author's childhood and car accident, won the 2018 Pura Belpré Author Award, in addition to receiving recognitions such as honors from the Americas Book Award, Junior Library Guild Selection, and the Association for Library Service to Children Notable Book, among others. What began as an autobiographical novel, ended up being a fictional story mixed with moments and experiences lived by the author: "It started as an autobiographical story, but as it grew, the writing became a mix of what I remembered and what I wished could have been" (Behar Biography). Moving further from the Cuban Revolution of 1959, this novel presents the experience and struggles Latin American and Caribbean families face upon immigration and exile.

The novel begins in the year 1966; the song *These Boots Are Made for Walking*, performed by Nancy Sinatra, is the number one hit in the nation and, for fifth-grade Ruth, or better known as Ruthie, the iconic go-go boots are a must-have clothing item in her wardrobe: "I've been begging Mami for a pair of go-go boots ever since seeing the blond lady on TV

wearing them and singing that song” (11). From the beginning of the novel, the readers can see the American influence Ruthie and her family have as Cuban immigrants in the United States. The family left Cuba after the Castro revolution, in search of better and greater opportunities on, what they believed to be, the land of the free which, above all, will give them freedom to have certain luxuries, the freedom they felt Castro took from them. This motif will be seen throughout the novel in different situations coming mainly from the adults in the story. For example, Ruthie’s father finally buys his dream car, a blue Oldsmobile: “I couldn’t have it in Cuba, but I can have it in America. You don’t want to rob me of that. Rob me of my dream?” (31). As head of the family, Ruthie’s father, Mr. Alberto Mizhahi, will have a strong and constant approach to how fortunate they are to be in America and how grateful they should feel for the things they have. Although they have a tight economic situation, since he is the only one providing for the family and working different jobs, he constantly reminds his family how lucky they are: “My wife *no sabe* appreciate that she can complain all she wants because she’s in America. *Este es un país libre*, the best country in the world” (21). This type of thinking can be interpreted as a reflection of how Castro’s revolution and restrictions towards the people of Cuba affected them. In Jorge Duany’s essay, *Neither Golden Exile nor Dirty Worm: Ethnic Identity in Recent Cuban-American Novels* (1993), he explains how the U.S. public opinion perceived that many “Cubans came to this country as political exiles seeking freedom from communism rather than as economic migrants in search of better job opportunities” (168). This statement validates how Ruthie’s father behaves in the story towards work; even though he has multiple jobs, he does not necessarily complain about that, he continues to work just to provide income for the family.

But as for many minority groups that come to a new country to settle, there are challenges and difficulties to adjust to in a new culture. In his essay, *Virgil Suárez: memoria y*

*perspectiva exílica en la literatura cubano-americana*, Raúl J. Rosales Herrera explains how Virgil Suárez is able to demonstrate in his autobiographical work, *Spared Angola* (1997), personal and family misfortunes faced by the Cuban exile in an effort to seek the American dream (4). The same happens in *Lucky Broken Girl*. By recalling childhood memories, the author is able to not only present the readers with her personal struggles, but also her family struggles, in finding their place in this new country. Language will play an important barrier in the settlement of the family, mainly because they speak poor English. Therefore, they end up being looked down on or discriminated against because of this language limitation. For instance, Ruthie is placed in the so-called dumb class, just because she could not speak English, although in Cuba she was considered smart: “It’s the class for the *bobos*, the kids who failed at math and reading. Also in it are the kids teachers call delinquents” (1). This language barrier will affect how they will communicate in their everyday life, with people in the supermarket or with the medical team that helps Ruthie overcome the accident.

In addition to the aspect of language barriers, this novel provides a strong representation of what life is like for different minority groups living in the United States. As readers, we are not only looking at a family of Cuban immigrants, but we are also introduced to families that come from India, Belgium, Ireland, Puerto Rico, and Mexico. By incorporating these characters with different cultural backgrounds in the narrative of the novel, the author provides a wider perspective to the reader of how life for immigrant families in the United States. They are all searching for better and greater opportunities but still trying to preserve their own cultural beliefs. What is relevant about this novel is that books like this one by Behar “are indeed providing mirrors for Latino children, and windows for other readers” (Delgado 4) by incorporating thematical concerns regarding other minority groups.



The representation of different minority groups is strongly connected to the aspect of identity in the novel, in addition to defining the protagonist. Ruthie is a combination of different cultures that define her; she is Cuban, but she is also Jewish and American, therefore giving her one identity would be discarding all the other cultural aspects that are part of her. Isabel Alvarez Borland and Lynette Bosch point out that:

Because of the ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity of the groups who came or were brought to the island, cultural pluralism is a marker of Cuban and Cuban-American identity. [...] Cuba also had a significant Jewish population. As these groups met and mixed to differing degrees, their individual and group contributions to Cuban culture were brought to the United States by exiles and immigrants from the island. (2)

For Behar, being able to write this novel is a way to explain her own cultural diversity to her reading audience. In an interview with Caren Schnur Neile, Behar explained "...in my life, there were different forces that influenced me: the Cuban Jewish immigrant family background, then the car accident that sent me to bed for a year, then as I grew older the need I had to keep telling my story because people couldn't believe that a person could be both Cuban and Jewish as well as American" (149). Ruthie is aware of who she is, but as the event of the car accident takes place, she continues to broaden her identity and incorporate aspects of other people's ideologies or cultural elements that she finds meaningful to add to her life. For example, in her search to rely on something meaningful as she lays in bed with her body cast, she starts praying to the god Shiva, introduced by her Indian friend Ramu, or praying to Frida, the artist introduced by her neighbor Chicho from Mexico, although she and her family are Jewish. This is an interesting aspect Behar highlights in her novel, when you are an immigrant living among immigrants: "For historically marginalized groups, it is important that they find characters similar to themselves,

especially when considering the issues they must face such as assimilation, acculturation, and a bicultural identity” (Lofton 7). This is what Behar does in the novel, she is able to not only portray Cuban American identity, but also different identities of minority groups of immigrants as well. “Cultural identity is a collective notion based in ethnic memory, which is the memory of cultural beliefs and practices of a group that tie members together and separates them from other groups” (Das 144).

Although Ruthie’s family, especially her mother, wants to forget about Cuba, their Cuban roots can be seen in their everyday routine, like when Ruthie’s family insists on speaking Spanish in the house; the way the mom tries to cook food she usually made in Cuba (such as *pastelitos de guayaba*, *arroz con pollo* and *flan*); or when Ruthie’s parents spontaneously sing and dance the Cuban *cha cha cha*. They do not necessarily want to forget they are Cubans; they just want to forget some of the people and the life that made them escape from Cuba. Ruthie exclaims: “I wonder if a day will come when I will forget Cuba. I hope not. But it already seems far, far away, and as hard to hold on to as sea spray” (49).

On the other hand, when it comes to socio-historical aspects in the text, Behar moves past the Cuban revolution of 1959. What is mentioned about Cuba by the characters is very little, and when it is brought up in the narrative there is a constant feeling of longing or sadness. Ilan Stavans explains that the relationship between the exile community and Cuba is often “a tense relationship defined by anger and frustration” (68), and that is what Behar shows through the character of Ruthie’s mother and father. Their behavior and expressions explain their constant wanting to forget Cuba, while still missing their homeland: “How can I forget? Oh Cuba, our beloved Cuba” (38). If we take into consideration the setting (time and place) of the novel, there

were political decisions being made by the United States in relation to the Cuban immigrants coming to the country. Ada Ferrer comments that:

The US government, meanwhile, continued to confer favors on Cubans leaving Cuba. In 1966 it adjusted their immigration status, so that they could apply for legal residency after just two years. Thus were Cubans fast tracked to citizenship and voting rights at a time when the struggle of African Americans for that same right had only just resulted in the 1965 Voting Rights Act. (406-407)

This illustrates the “exceptionality” of Cuban exile, who was privileged in comparison to other minorities, due to the anti-Communist stance during the Cold War. Taking into consideration this aspect of history, it correlates and explains Behar’s reference to Dr. Martin Luther King in the novel through the character of Ruthie’s teacher:

Then she passes me the saved newspaper from August 6, 1966, and tells me, “There’s an article about Dr. Martin Luther King I think you should read. Do you know what he’s fighting for?”...I read about Dr. King going to Chicago to protest segregated neighborhoods and being attacked by a mob of angry white people who threw rocks at him.... I know this is a free country, but is that okay? (147).

Not only is Behar highlighting the struggles of Cuban immigrants but also creating an awareness of the struggles of other minority groups within the United States that at the time were fighting to have a place in the country. This novel is an example of how “ethnic writing is focused on U.S. experiences of biculturalism and hybridity” (Caminero-Santangelo 508). In addition to these historical references, Behar briefly refers to the Agrarian Reform Law when Ruthie recalls the store owned by her grandparents in Cuba: “Zeide and Baba had a fabric store in Cuba, but Fidel

Castro took it away when he decided everything should be owned by the government” (33). This law, which was first passed in 1959, sought to help small farmers get access to land, but unfortunately the government took advantage of this law by confiscating great amounts of landholdings and by 1963 new modifications to the law were made. As Ferrer points out, “In 1963, the revolutionary government went further. That year, a second agrarian reform set much smaller limits on the size of private lands, bringing a total of two-thirds of the Cuban countryside under direct state control by mid-decade” (386). This meant that the government had authority/power to shut down small businesses such as bars, restaurants, retail stores, or street vendors. Understanding this aspect of Cuban history explains why Ruthie’s dad is constantly talking about how fortunate they are of living in a place where they can get access to anything they want without fearing the government will take it from them. If a reader is not familiar with Cuban history, perhaps this characteristic of Ruthie’s father will seem insignificant, but it can likewise represent how controlled and restrictive life in Cuba often was for many Cubans and how liberated some of them felt to escape this type of lifestyle when immigrating to the United States.

Similarly, regarding biculturalism, which is “the transition from Cuban to Cuban American identity” (López 60), language will also play an important aspect in the process of adapting to a new environment in the United States. Behar, as well as Margarita Engle, rely on the use of code-switching in the narrative of the novel to incorporate words or phrases in Spanish. Behar also identifies these terms in Spanish by using italics. Many Latin American and Latinx writers resort to the use of Spanish to “reference their particular histories, experiences, demographic realities, and ways of being Latino/a” (Torres 79). Nonetheless, apart from using Spanish words, Behar will include words in Yiddish, French, and even Arabic, to showcase the

diversity of minority groups being represented in the novel. Some examples are the phrases *masha'allah*, which means God bless you in Arabic; *très jolie!*, which means very nice in French; or the Yiddish phrase, *shayna maidelah*, which means beautiful girl.

Apart from code-switching, Behar introduces her readers to child language brokering. Lucy Tse defines the term as “interpretation and translation between linguistically and culturally different parties” (qtd. in Eksner and Faulstich 197). Through the character of Ruthie, the reader can see the dynamics of translating for her parents in different situations of daily life in order for them to understand and communicate: “At Dan’s Supermarket, Mami asks me to translate into Spanish the labels of everything she sees for sale on the shelves.... Mami can’t understand what the man is saying. She turns to me to translate for her” (26). For many Cuban families whose first language is not English, relying on their children who are learning the language at school constitutes a helpful tool to communicate in the country. Tse points out that:

...bilingual children of immigrants use their knowledge of at least two languages and cultures to assist their families in a wide range of ways. They read and decipher a variety of written texts, including medical and insurance information.... They interpret during interactions between family members and doctors, dentists, teachers, lawyers, government officials, and many other people. (qtd. in Eksner and Faulstich 197)

Ruthie’s role in language brokering becomes an important part of the novel after the car accident, because it helps her communicate with the different medical personnel and translate the information for both parties in order to establish communication. The moment a writer decides to create a bilingual or bicultural text, they have visualized the type of readers they want to address and the purpose of writing in this style. Even though Behar uses Spanish words and phrases in

her text, the vocabulary is accessible for the monolingual readers “because of their familiarity and circulation in popular culture, the general meanings of these items are easily understood and assimilated by readers with little or no knowledge of Spanish” (Torres 78). In addition, Behar makes sure the context in which the words are being used serves as reference for the reader to better understand what she is trying to say. This accessibility in the language used in the text broadens the audience of readers not only of Latinx background, but all readers who are multicultural and have come to the United States as immigrants.

The event of the accident is essential in the development of the novel since the narrative revolves around that moment and its aftermath. If there is anything symbolic about the car accident it is the result of having Ruthie in a body cast for over a year. The cast represents the brokenness of the character, but also the birth of a new Ruthie who dreams of becoming an artist and learns how everyone is also a bit broken inside. The attachment that Ruthie creates with her cast holds her life together, the cast becomes her shield that protects her from anything that might break her again: “I have gotten used to my cast holding me together and I am afraid I might fall apart when it comes off.... I am resting on the point of a star, far from everything I knew how to do before I broke my leg” (151). This car accident can be related also to the car accident Frida Kahlo suffered when she was 18 years old. “When the bus Kahlo was riding hit a trolley car, she suffered serious internal injuries as a long metal rod tore through her midsection” (Svoboda). Just like the character of Ruthie, Kahlo’s injuries were so severe that she had to be encased in a full body cast. The process of recovery, which took many months, transformed her views on life and art. In the novel, Ruthie’s neighbor Chicho, encourages her that whenever she feels sad regard Kahlo as her special guardian angel. “Frida is there to help you. Frida is the guardian angel of

wounded artists and she'll always be with you" (129). Relying on this belief and hope helps Ruthie in her process of physical healing and emotional transformation.

In addition to the physical brokenness that resulted from the car accident, readers can identify a geographic brokenness that most immigrants and people in exile go through when settling in a new country: "Ruthie is broken away from Cuba, her homeland, and she experiences it through her mother's memories, fragments of the island that have come with the family in their suitcases" (Behar 2017). Although Ruthie is no longer in Cuba, her homeland holds a special place in her heart and not even the freedom they can find in the United States can take away that longing she has for her homeland: "'Do you miss Cuba all the time, Mami?' 'Not all the time,' she says. 'And you Ruti, do you miss it, or have you forgotten about our island?' - I miss Cuba, Mami" (135). As Leandro Soto explains in his essay, *Cuban in the U.S.: An Example of Ethnic Identity in the Making*, included in the book *ReMembering Cuba*, "Cuban exiles have been forced by reality to give up the idea of recovering the Island, which has been replaced in their memories by a mythical land, a poetic paradise" (245). Ruthie may not be able to go back to Cuba, but she is able to revisit her homeland through memories and stories of her mother.

Although the accident was a horrifying event that left many losses, it also served as a metamorphosis for Ruthie. Being in bed for nearly a year gave her the opportunity to meet new people, create connections, build empathy, and be more vulnerable to the brokenness of others. It was a healing process not only physical but also emotional. Coming from Cuba to begin a new life in the United States and suddenly having a life-changing accident made Ruthie question the goodness within herself. "I must have done a lot of bad things to end up like this, in a body cast. My leg is fractured, but all of me broke" (52). She is a young girl who has gone through many changes in a short period of time. She departed from her homeland in Cuba due to difficult

political circumstances, she comes to a new country where there is a language barrier, she is trying to succeed at school, she is the oldest child in the family and carries the responsibility of being the interpreter for her parents, there is also the uncertainty of not knowing if they will be deported. There are so many changes happening to Ruthie that the accident is the highlight that causes her to break. From that moment on in the novel, readers can see how Ruthie rebuilds herself and becomes a mature young girl who values her essence as Cuban, who is assimilating to her new American culture, and who is more conscious of the importance of connecting with others. Ruthie comments to her friend:

Danielle, I'm a different Ruthie now. I've been through a metamorphosis.

Now I am a girl who reads books and makes pictures. I like to be still. I like quiet. I can't go back anymore and be the old Ruthie. That Ruthie is gone forever. (225)

For Behar, writing this novel has a significant meaning in her life since it is based on her true story but also reflects her own brokenness: "This was a story I had carried with me all my life – I was that girl in the body cast. The accident was an event that changed my life and made me the person I am today" (Behar 2017).



### Chapter 3: *Cuba in My Pocket*

The last Cuban American author selected for critical discussion is Adrianna Cuevas. Her 2020 debut novel *Total Eclipse of Nestor López* was named a 2021 Pura Belpré Honor Book by the American Library Association. Her second novel and the one selected for this research, *Cuba in my Pocket*, was named a Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators Golden Kite Honor Book and received three starred reviews. Cuevas is a former Spanish teacher and ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) instructor. She is originally from Miami, Florida, but now resides with her family in Austin, Texas. *Cuba in my Pocket* is the first non-fantasy book written by the author, who mainly focuses on writing in this genre. Writing this story and using her father's experiences as a reference point brought certain challenges for the author. In Cuevas's interview with Betsy Bird she commented, "My brain naturally gravitates toward ridiculous ideas so having to stay grounded in reality was difficult. I was also writing a story based on someone's life and so staying true to my father's experiences while also providing needed drama and tension was a delicate balance." In her novel, Cuevas depicts the distressing political situations occurring in Cuba during the 1960s that forced many Cubans to escape the island at that time. Different from the stories in the novels by Margarita Engle and Ruth Behar, Cuevas shows her readers the experiences of the Cuban exile before arriving in the United States, providing the opportunity for readers who may not be familiar with Cuba's political situation at the time, to learn some of the reasons why Cubans flee the country. Through the life of Cumba Fernández, the novel portrays how humans can find hope again in a world that may often be discouraging.

Regarding the novel's main character, Cumba Fernández, cultural shock is a good phrase to describe what he goes through once he arrives in Miami, Florida. For Cumba, there is no time

to process all the events that he is going through, since he leaves Cuba alone and arrives at a new country with little knowledge of how life is in the United States. Miami has long been “the primate city in a system of urban settlements that make up a Cuban ethnic archipelago in the United States” (McHugh, et al. 504). Although the Cuban ethnic archipelago consists of sixteen regions, the four most populous regions with Cuban immigrants are Florida, New Jersey, New York, and California, Miami (Florida) being one of the cities with the highest number of Cubans. This aspect is relevant for the cultural experiences Cumba will have upon arriving in the United States, since back in the 1960s this was the ideal place for many Cubans that were escaping the island.

One of the aspects in Cumba’s process of acculturation in his new setting in the United States is nutrition. When it comes to food, there is a significant difference between the food eaten in Cuba and the one Cumba eats in the United States. He finds himself eating oatmeal for the first time, made by his cousin Benita. He can also savor hamburgers and real Coke at the Royal Castle, but no matter how interesting and different the food in United States may be, it does not bring the same comfort as the variety of foods found in Cuba: “I think of the food Mami and Abuela would always have on the table for breakfast: thick slices of mango dripping with juice and fresh chunks of bread slathered with sticky guava paste. I grip the edge of the table and blink, trying not to let tears fall for things that are far away, out of my reach” (Cuevas 113). Even at school, the aspect of food is significant in the assimilation process Cumba goes through: “School lunch is cheap. And gross. And there’s not really anything I want” (151). “I poke my fork at the mysterious glob on my tray. American food is weird” (167).

Another significant difference that Cumba finds in the United States is school. Back in his hometown in Santa Clara, the class had fifteen students which were all boys in a small

Catholic school. In Miami, the Ponce de León Junior High School, the first school Cumba attends in the United States, is much bigger and crowded, two aspects that clearly overwhelm Cumba as he comments:

The first wave that hits me when I cross the threshold is noise. Students shouting, bells ringing, lockers slamming. I'm caught up in a wave of kids moving down the hall. I try to catch my breath and calm myself, but the noise swirls around me. (138)

This contrast between schools in Cuba and the United States is important to highlight because as a student, Cumba will spend most of his time at that place learning and interacting with others. School is not only a place where you acquire academic knowledge but also a place where you can develop other social skills that help you maintain healthy interpersonal relationships, and it can be a challenge to adapt in a new school as an immigrant. For Cumba, who comes from escaping a communist political system that was oppressing its people, making friends will be difficult because not everybody knows the hardships he had to go through to get to the United States. This type of interaction can be illustrated in the scene where Arnold, Cumba's only friend at school, tries to calm him down over an emotional crisis. Cumba thinks to himself:

It's nice that he doesn't ask me to explain. I don't have the words for it anyway. I don't have the words to explain that I thought a teacher was a Cuban soldier, stomping across the sea to drag me back to the island. I don't have the words to let Arnold know that I don't know what's happened to Mami and Papi. (188)

As seen in all the texts selected in this research, language is distinctively a barrier upon arriving in the United States. Cumba is at a disadvantage because he barely knows the language.

For him, all Americans talk too fast, making it impossible to understand: “He says something in English and smiles, his blue eyes and freckles making him stand out like an alien. I have no idea what he just said.... Why do people have to talk so quickly? Are they all in a hurry?” (117). Nonetheless, Cumba makes great effort in trying to learn the language as fast as he can, even with his Spanish accent and his slow pace: “I feel a twinge of excitement. I just got in trouble for speaking English in class. Abuela would be furious with me, but I am happy. This means I’m making progress” (166). Mastering the English language is an essential part of the process of assimilation for immigrants like Cumba. As Lourdes Araujo points out, “Immigrants consider themselves assimilated to the host country after they have successfully learned the host country’s native language” (15).

Being in a foreign country due to difficult political circumstances in your homeland can also mean citizens of that place may not be pleased by your presence. This is something that Cuevas also includes in the narrative of the novel, in a scene where Cumba finds the Miami Herald newspaper and asks his teacher to help translate: “We decipher sentences like *There are too many Cubans coming to the United States...It’s wrong for the government to let them stay. They bring their problems, and we have to solve them...They should stay in their own country*” (235). Cuban immigrants above all face emotional stressors when arriving to the United States. Not only do they have to assimilate quickly to a new culture, but they are also struggling with trauma caused by Castro’s revolution in addition to feeling the loss of their homeland. “Cuban immigrants experience nostalgia, which externalizes as grief and loss symptoms, anxiety and depression, and being disoriented during the first 6 months after arriving in the United States” (Araujo 89). Cuevas was able to include the emotional struggles that many children at that time had to face, sometimes even alone, as in the case of Cumba and the other children he met on his

journey: “After school they’ll go home to their moms and dads, brothers, and sisters...They won’t have nightmares of shouting soldiers. Of the loud crack of rifles. Of shouts and screams” (185). At another point in the work, Cumba asserts: “...sometimes you have to forget in order to survive being in a new place. I didn’t realize that would hurt so much” (247). Amrita Das affirms that, for many Cubans, “the political upheaval of the revolution of 1959... ruptured the secure identity in which the Cubans grew to be comfortable and safe” (113). The emotional upheaval that exile causes in Cumba’s life affects his transition to assimilation and makes the simple day-to-day aspects such as school, friendships, and food, harder to adapt to. It is important to emphasize that Cumba was twelve years old when he left Cuba. Understanding that this decision was made for him and that there was no guarantee of him ever going back to Cuba or ever meeting his family again, means that these were decisions that entail an emotional maturity that Cumba was possibly not prepared to face. Having to say goodbye to places, things, or people he had grown attached to can be troublesome to process. Cumba asks himself: “Am I always going to be saying goodbye? Am I always going to think about people who are no longer here?” (209). Many Cubans feel that Fidel Castro took everything from the people of Cuba, and for many Cubans in exile this continuous feeling of loss follows them as they try to settle in a new country.

With so many Cubans leaving the country and settling in the United States, maintaining, or representing their culture was at times affected by various factors that Julie A. Cohen and Anusha Kassan identify as “age during migration, how immigrants adapt to the host cultures’ educational system, immigrant status in the new society, feelings of belonging, and the inherent worth the immigrants feel among their newfound cultural values and that of their families” (qtd. in Araujo 13). How Cuevas displays the theme of identity in the novel has to do with how Cumba can properly represent Cuba in the United States. These are the words that his mother

tells him, upon departure from Cuba, “‘You need to look your best,’ she says, patting down my collar. ‘And represent Cuba well’” (94). Although an increasing number of Cubans were arriving to the United States in the 1960s, Cumba was the only Cuban boy at the schools he attended: “I’m the only Cuban in my school. This means I’m The Cuban Ambassador. All my teachers want me to tell the class about Cuba. ‘Talk about Cuba, Cumba.’ ‘Tell us about Cuba.’ I don’t have the English to tell them about Cuba.” (156-157). The Merriam Webster dictionary defines ambassador as a “an official envoy, a diplomatic agent of the highest rank accredited to a foreign government or sovereign as the resident representative of his or her own government” (“Ambassador,” def. 1.a). Taking into consideration this definition, being an ambassador carries a great responsibility of portraying one’s culture correctly, and for Cumba that was a great responsibility he had at school: “If everyone thinks that everything I do is what all Cubans do, then I can’t do anything wrong. It’s all my responsibility to show them who Cubans are” (194).

In the novel, Cuevas depicts how little knowledge Americans had about Cuba and Cubans in general, and therefore teachers and classmates would make cultural generalizations based on how Cumba behaved or did things, a huge misconception of Cuba and Cuban culture. As Cuevas illustrates in the novel, “Most Americans probably think that Cuba is such a small island that we all have houses right on the beach” (237) and “‘Why do they think Fidel played baseball, other than the fact they think all Cubans play baseball?’ I ask, winking at Alejandro. ‘Some American reporter wrote that Fidel had a tryout with the New York Yankees,’ Valeria explains” (159). It never occurs to the students, or even the teacher, that they could actually learn what Cuba is about through the reading and analyses of historical texts, among many other sources, as well as respectful class discussions that could include Cumba instead of signaling him out as the sole representative of an entire culture and place. This seems to be a flaw in an educational system

that refuses to consider other countries as important subject matter for class discussion and knowledge acquisition, especially given the hostile relationships that Cuba and the US have had for over more than half a century. In her 2009 TED Talk, storyteller Chimamanda Ngozi talks about *The Dangers of a Single Story*, and she comments on how the single story “creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (13:11). Showcasing this with the interaction that Cumba has at school with his classmates and teachers, demonstrates the danger of having a lack of knowledge about cultures that are not American. This is a reality in today’s society that Cuevas includes in her novel. The single story not only creates stereotypes but also promotes racism and discrimination toward other cultures. There is an urgency to continue to have multicultural texts that can display cultural differences in hopes of creating awareness and respect for others.

Another misconception shown in the novel connected to identity is when Americans confuse Cubans for Jewish: “There aren’t a lot of Cubans in Miami. The blanquitos here think we’re too white to fit what they think Cubans should look like, but we’re still darker than all of them. So I guess they think we’re Jewish?” (172). Although Cumba has not reached a full biculturalism because of the short period of time he has been in the United States, his acculturation process, which Gustavo Pérez Firmat defines in his book *Life on the Hyphen*, as “acquisition of culture” (5), is constantly impacted by the “attitudes and beliefs...of how immigrants perceive themselves and their comparison with conformity in the United States” (Araujo 26).

The uncertainty of not knowing how much time Cumba will be in the United States has a great impact on how he perceives himself culturally. Cuevas is able to showcase the relevance of maintaining one's cultural beliefs and identity outside of the homeland:

“You're Cuban. You always will be,” he says. “It's in your blood. It doesn't matter where we are. We'll always have that to hold us together.”

Valeria nods enthusiastically and rubs my arm. “He's right, Cumba. We can live in the United States the rest of our lives. They can bury our bones here. But we'll always be Cuban.” (206)

Through this quote, Cuevas affirms that it is possible for cultural identity to survive and even thrive in exile. Jorge Duany also agrees that “Cuban immigrants and their descendants may be able to retain their ethnic identity if they mix creatively aspects of their heritage with the dominant culture in the United States” (180-181). In addition, Leandro Soto acknowledges that although the diaspora has had several waves of immigration and exile, “each, in turn, has helped to keep the culture alive without interfering with the assimilation process” (qtd. in Herrera 246). United States can become a new home for Cumba, without getting rid of his Cuban essence.

Yet among the three works discussed thus far, *Cuba in my Pocket* is perhaps one of the texts with most vivid social historical aspects. Since the novel starts in Cuba, readers have a much more detailed context of the political situations happening on the island and their effects on Cuban society. The first chapter begins in April 1961, the date of the *Bays of Pigs Invasion*. This event is very significant for the relationship between Cuba and the United States because this invasion sought to overthrow Fidel Castro from power, but also on the eve of this invasion Castro had “publicly proclaimed that he and his revolution were socialist” (Ferrer 285) which meant for many Cubans the loss of a free Cuba. In Cumba's family the news of the failed



invasion brings deception and frustration to them: “¡Aquí, Radio Rebelde!’ shouts a deep voice from the speaker. ‘The Yanqui imperialists have failed, are failing, and will fail to overthrow our glorious revolution!’...The anthem of the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement, Fidel’s government, blasts from the radio, and Mami turns it off” (4-5). Tension and conflict surround Cuba’s streets and houses, an aspect that Cuevas is able to display in her novel and noted by the critic Alan West-Durán:

The post-1959 period has been fraught with considerable drama: nationalizations, the Bay of Pigs invasion, nuclear showdown, international commitments to socialist, decolonization and anti-apartheid movements that put Cuba at odds with the West, harsh exchanges at the UN and often bitter rhetoric. (8)

Beginning the story with the *Bay of Pigs Invasion* explains the reason why Cumba’s parents want to send him to the United States, and it also alludes to the massive migration occurring at the time. Alvarez-Borland points out that “Since 1959, more than 700,000 Cubans have settled in the United States. The first migration, from January 1959 to October 1962 was composed of about 250,000 men and women as well as their children” (5). As a result of this event, Castro’s government was requiring Cuban children to do military service, and the fear of parents thinking that their children were going to be sent to the Soviet Union reaffirmed the decision to send them to the United States. “They say they’re sending children to the Soviet Union for military training.’... He clears his throat and stares out the window. ‘You’re going to the United States’” (19).

The number of children being sent to the United States increased significantly, therefore there was a need for a project that could foster children until their parents could come to the United States; that is how *Operation Pedro Pan* was created:

The project known as Operation Pedro Pan, which existed between 1960 and 1962, was the coordinated effort to relocate and care for over fourteen thousand children in the United States between 1960 and 1981. The program relied on a vast network of federal and state offices: the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW); the U.S. State Department; and the Florida State Department of Public Welfare, to name a few. A long list of nonprofit church groups, child welfare agencies, and airlines aided and abetted the cause, as did embassies, parochial schools, and a solid counterrevolutionary network in Cuba (Gronbeck-Tedesco 15).

This is a crucial historical aspect that Cuevas incorporates in her novel because thanks to this project Cumba is able to go to United States. Prima Benita was working with the Methodist Church in alliance with Operation Pedro Pan, in helping place Cuban children: “Prima Benita says she gets letters from Cuban parents every week asking her to take in their children. So many parents are willing to send their kids all by themselves to a new country, just to escape Fidel” (196). Other children, like Valeria, the girl Cumba met in the airport, would be placed by the Catholic Welfare Bureau upon arriving to the United States. To illustrate the high number of children arriving in Florida at that time, Cuevas places Cumba in a foster care agency with a temporary family; this is helpful in giving her readers a clear perspective of how life was for children living in exile under this program: ““There’s just so many of you. I never imagined there’d be so many of you.’ ... ‘I don’t get to stay with you anymore, do I?’ ... ‘No Cumba. There’s just no room. We’re going to go to a foster care agency, and they’ll place you with a family who can take care of you.’” (198).

Even when the intentions of the program were good, the emotional and traumatic separation of young children from their families would have a long-lasting effect and created traumatic memories for children. John A. Gronbeck-Tedesco comments in his book *Operation Pedro Pan: The Migration of Unaccompanied Children from Castro's Cuba* (2022): “Familiar separation of this kind, especially at a very young age, often breeds a type of trauma, one that settled into the foundation of the Pedro Pans’ memories and their Cuban American identities” (24). Although the program sought to reunite the children with their families, many children did not have that same opportunity, as is illustrated by Cuevas with the character of Serapio. Castro had taken away everything from him and he was sent alone by his grandmother to the United States. She was not going to meet up with him afterwards; instead, she had asked Cumba’s parents to take care of him. An agonizing separation filled with uncertainty was the cost of freedom for many Cuban families, especially the children.

In addition to *The Bay of Pigs Invasion* and *Operation Pedro Pan*, Cuevas also references important terminology used in post-Castro’s revolution, like for example the use of the word *compañero* which was adopted once Castro took power: “Dr. Alvarez raises a thick eyebrow and sets the empty syringe on the examination table. ‘Señor? We don’t use that imperialist term anymore. It’s *compañero*. Don’t you know that?’” (73). Even with the character of Dr. Alvarez, Cuevas can portray Cubans who were in favor of the government and its ideologies. Another term seen in the narrative of the novel which was also constantly used at the time against the people that did not follow the government was *gusano*. Jorge Duany comments that:

The negative view of Cuban exiles originally emerged among the ideological defenders of the Cuban Revolution, both in Cuba and the United States. For political reasons, Fidel Castro's government

applied a cold war rhetoric to the Cuban exodus, branding the exiles as counterrevolutionary, unpatriotic, elitist, corrupt, selfish, and pro American. (168).

Nonetheless, the term was not only used for people against the government, as Cumba states in the novel: “I know that for Fidel, gusanos are not only anyone who’s against his government, but also homosexuals, disabled people, even priests like Padre Tomás” (55). Lastly, another significant term in the novel is the word *bitongo*, which was used to refer to the children that were escaping Cuba at that time: “*Niño bitongo* is what Fidel calls all the children who are leaving, who are being sent alone by their parents to a new country. He calls us spoiled brats for wanting to be free of the revolution” (98). Although Cuevas uses other terms in the novel, the words previously mentioned emphasize the controlling environment Castro’s government had over its people. The words *bitongo* and *gusano* diminish a person and could also create a state of guilt because the norm established is not being followed. These words also function as a form of erasing people and discriminating against them in society. The power that Castro withholds reaches such a point that it is not only reflected in his actions or decisions, but also in how he controls what is being said. Cuevas’s use of these specific terms reinforces the communist political beliefs of the government but at the same time serves as a critique of the effects they had on both Cuban exiles and Cuban society at large.

Finally, something that Cuevas highlights in her novel is the abuse and emotional toll Castro’s regimen had over Cubans, which is undeniably related to the social and historical events that were occurring at the time the story takes place. Unlike Engle and Behar, Cuevas includes in her novel the cruel control/power Castro’s government had over the people by narrating a scene where an old man gets killed:

A line of rifles forms in front of the old man, and my stomach rolls....  
 That's when the singing starts. The old man stands against the wall,  
 his shoulders square and his chest puffed out as he sings 'La Bayamesa,'  
 the Cuban national anthem.... The soldier next to Papi shouts, and the  
 firing squad readies their rifles.... One final shout and a series of cracks  
 puncture the air. The singing stops. Pepito's eyes grow wide, and his mouth  
 drops open as he peeks over the wall. (31-32).

Castro's revolution has been recorded as brutal and controlling, and for the author to include details of an execution as part of Cuban history validates one of the most important reasons why Cubans were fleeing the island: "when we measure our alternatives, we always come out feeling very happy to be here (United States) rather than in Castro's Cuba" (Pujalá-Soto qtd. in Herrera 24). Not only does Cuevas refer to death in her novel, she also briefly refers to people taken to questioning and being brutally hurt. In the letters exchanged between Cumba and his brother, Pepito writes: "They won't tell what happened.... Papi has a black eye, and his lips look cut. Abuela has to change bandages on his wrists. Mami has a bruised cheek, and I notice she limps on her left leg when she thinks I'm not looking" (231). During this period in Cuba, many children were being exposed to traumatic experiences that were hard to process at a young age, and the inclusion of these details in her novel creates an awareness on how emotionally broken Cuban immigrants were upon arriving to the United States.

Apart from Engle's and Behar's texts, Cuevas's novel stands out in how the author uses Spanish in the narrative of her work. Cuevas does not rely on the use of italics to highlight words or phrases and in some cases full Spanish sentences. The amount of Spanish that can be found within the text, could present a limitation for the non-bilingual readers. Nonetheless, this could

be a strategy of the author to encourage her readers to build their own knowledge in the Spanish language, considering Cueva's professional background in education. This motivates non bilingual readers to do their own research on words' meanings. Reed Way Dasenbrock states that "No utterance or written text is ever fully explicit, completely freestanding. To be understood, any text must be read in the light of prior knowledge, background information, expectations about genre and about sequence..." (10). As a reader there is a responsibility to know what you are reading to better engage with the topics being discussed in the text. Dasenbrock also comments on this by saying that "the reader who is interested in a work should expect to do some work to appreciate it" (11). Although this does not imply the reader must know everything to appreciate a written work, it does highlight the relationship both writer and reader have to make a text meaningful. Cuevas resorts to the strategy "of untranslated or otherwise marked standard or informal Spanish in the text" in addition to "leave[ing] untranslated phrases or entire sentences" (Torres 83). For example, there is the scene where Cumba has a panic attack at school thinking the Cuban soldier Ignacio has come for him: "El hombre en el pasillo. Es Ignacio. Está aquí porque no fui a la guarnición. Está aquí para mí" (187). Code-switching in Cuban American literature or any Latinx text has a deeper meaning, as Lourdes Torres points out; it "is not only metaphorical but represents a reality where segments of the population are living between cultures and languages" (76).

Although Cuevas does include a glossary at the end of the novel, it does not provide the meanings for all the Spanish words or phrases she includes in her narrative. Most of the words found in the glossary are terms used in Cuban cuisine like *ajiaco*, *batido*, *bocadito*, *crema de leche*, *croquetas*, among others. Cuevas also includes other meaningful phrases distinctively related to the revolution such as *hasta la victoria, siempre*; *patria o muerte*, *Radio Rebelde*, or

*Yanqui*. Considering that the setting of the novel starts in Cuba, their cultural authenticity is revealed in the use of their language in their homeland. Lori Ween states that “Because Cuba exists *allá*, there is a rhetorical struggle within the community and its authors to accurately and authentically represent the idealized Cuban image for an American public that has received a barrage of negative renderings” (129). By incorporating a great quantity of Spanish terms in her narrative, Cuevas shows how detail-oriented she is as a writer to capture the cultural essence of the language of a Cuban family. Because of writers such as Cuevas, Torres remarks that:

Latino/a fictional texts are an example of a contact zone where English and Spanish confront each other and comfortably or uncomfortably coexist. Latino/a writers who incorporate Spanish in various ways appropriate standard English and rework it so that it conveys the linguistic reality of a multilingual population. The range of strategies that they implement make clear that there is not just one English or even one Spanish/English bilingual experience; they capture the multiple ways in which Spanish is seeping into English language prose texts. (92).

The study of bilingual texts in districts that have a high proportion of Latinx residents and students in the educational system can also provide a richer understanding of how the experience of immigration and exile have historically affected the lives of millions of people in the US and how these lives are depicted or fictionally recreated in literary works. In the current historical moment, when intercultural exchanges are contentious, when the use of terminology is constantly questioned, and when book-banning by conservative government officials is on the rise, the works of writers like Cuevas, Engle, and Behar become more pertinent than ever to

promote a more inclusive and respectful approach not only to the study of literature, but also to social interactions and multicultural awareness within a multifaceted American society.

Cuevas also joins her fellow Cuban American writers in her use of symbolism in the novel, represented, for example, in the game of dominoes. Playing dominoes in Cuba is more than just a pastime for Cubans. It is a social event that combines competition with camaraderie, while also featuring an extensive use of slang by the players during gameplay. For each number, Cubans have adopted a nickname that they use when playing, like in the case of the double-nine, which Cumba in the novel refers to as *caja de muertos*. The symbolism the domino piece holds has a significant meaning connected to the title of the novel. The opening scene of the novel shows Cumba playing dominoes with his brother Pepito and cousin Manuelito, while the family listens to *Radio Rebelde* and the news of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion:

Pepito lays down a new domino, and his eyes grow wide. “¡Ay caramba! ¡La caja de muertos!” ...Pepito has always thought the double-nine tile was bad luck because it’s called the dead man’s box. When I hear the stomps and shouts outside, I’m reminded that there are worse sources of bad luck than a little white tile. (5)

From this moment in the novel, after the unexpected visit of a soldier to the house of Cumba’s family, the boy keeps the tile in his pocket throughout his journey: “I’ve kept the dead man’s box tile with me ever since the soldier tossed it onto the table in Tía Carmen’s kitchen last week” (11). As the narrative of the novel continues to develop, Cumba returns to the *caja de muertos* tile each time he feels the trauma of Cuba haunting him or when he misses his family: “I reach under the bed and pick up the caja de muertos. Proof of my bad luck. Proof that Fidel still has his claws in my back, even a hundred miles away” (180). There is a moment in the novel when



Cuevas lets her readers know the true meaning behind the *caja de muertos* in a conversation between Alejandro and Cumba: “‘Why do you always carry that thing with you?’ Alejandro asks. Is it special or something?’ ‘No, it’s not special. It’s just a reminder,’ I tell him, shoving the tile back into my pocket. ‘A reminder of what?’ I sigh. ‘That I’ll always be afraid. That I’ll always be alone’” (204). The domino tile represents Cumba’s discouragement over the difficult life experiences he and his family have gone through. It can be seen as a reflection of loss, sadness, frustration and fear many Cubans felt during their time in Cuba post Castro’s revolution and that may continue in exile. Almost at the end of the novel, there is a powerful moment where Cumba breaks free from this “bad luck” that has followed him:

I shove my hands into my pockets, and my fingers wrap around the *caja de muertos* once again. I pull it out and hold it in my palm. The spray of dots stares up at me, taunting me. They shout that Fidel still holds my family and won’t let them go. They scream that the sky will wrap them in darkness and that the sea will swallow them whole. I rub my thumb over each dot.... A dot for each person in my family. For each person who is my home. “You can’t have them, Fidel,” I whisper to the waves. I clear my throat and lift my head. “They’re not yours.” I close the *caja de muertos* in my fist, thrust my arm back, and launch the tile into the sea. (265)

The use of this symbolism is so well-constructed in the development of the novel that even in the design of the book’s cover the readers have hints of the domino tile, and the image of a boy with one hand in his pocket. With a distinctive piece of a very popular game in Cuba, Cuevas was able to capture the essence of Cuba’s culture and references its significance, even as

the characters find themselves in diaspora, by highlighting this symbol as an important part of her novel.

## Conclusion

Why choose texts that are related to Cuba, revolution, migration, or exile for reading and literary analysis, especially when critics such as Andrea O'Reilly Herrera have commented that "... the Cuban exodus or diaspora and the consequent condition of physical exile are painful realities that are often obscured, minimized, fetishized, and even effaced..." (10)?. Within the fiction that Margarita Engle, Ruth Behar, and Adrianna Cuevas write, there is an undeniable history that affects a community of people that up to this day continue to suffer the consequences of living outside of their homeland. The authenticity of the texts selected for this research provides the readers "with an intimate look at a time, a place, or a life they would otherwise never be able to see" (Jiménez et al. 121).

Cuban American writers distinguish themselves from other Latin American or Latinx groups because their writing displays a past that is still very much present. As Isabel Alvarez Borland remarks, "By incorporating their Cuban selves into their English selves, the writing of these authors becomes enriched" (7). This has a great influence in the dual languages they incorporate in the narrative of their texts, which expands the range of their readers. For young readers and readers in general that may feel a connection to the texts written by these authors, it provides an opportunity to address and validate certain topics such as identity, language, cultural aspects of living in the US, and socio-historical facts related to Cuba. For these Pura Belpré Award and Honor Book winning authors, being awarded these distinctions means that their work "best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth" (American Library Association).

But as Alvarez Borland rightfully points out, "Even if the themes of exile and displacement seem to be a constant in the literature... the perspective from which the story of

diaspora is conceived and told varies considerably...” (6). This is exactly what *Enchanted Air*, *Lucky Broken Girl*, and *Cuba in my Pocket* reflect in their stories. Margarita Engle gives her readers an autobiographical work that takes them through a timelapse before and after the Cuban revolution seen from the perspective of the United States. In the meantime, Ruth Behar focuses more on the lives of a Cuban family living in exile and different minority groups within a community based in Queens, New York. Finally, Adrianna Cuevas tells the story of a boy that goes through a geographic crossing/migration process from Cuba to the United States. Regarding authors such as these, Alan West-Durán asserts that “Cuban writers, artists, and thinkers... help us understand the island's history and culture, whether they live there or abroad” (13). The longing or frustration of a lost Cuba and what that implies, through the three perspectives from which the authors narrate their stories, gives a deeper understanding of why Cuban American writing is often so impactful.

Engle and Cuevas come together to provide important historical references such as the *Bay of Pigs Invasion*. As recorded in history, this invasion was a crucial event that contributed to the already ruptured diplomatic relationship between Cuba and the United States. By providing this historical specificity, both authors were able to give readers that may not be familiarized with Cuban history the reasons why Cubans have lived in exile. As Pablo Medina points out, “Cuban history, at least from the nineteenth century on, is in many ways the history of exile, and emigration...” (635). Castro’s revolution of 1959 has had significant impact in the last years because the political system established by Castro’s regimen continues to control the island. Another aspect in which Engle, Behar and Cuevas come together in their writing is that they use personal experience or family experiences to showcase the bicultural identity of their characters.

These are not isolated stories of made-up people; although two are considered fictional novels, there is real life experience in all of them.

An interesting detail of these texts is the location or where the works develop. California, New York, and Florida are among the places where a high number of Cuban exiles have been settling for the past years. Based on a study conducted in 1990, “outside South Florida, the largest numbers of Cubans are in Central Florida, northern New Jersey, New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago” (McHugh 508-509). This places in perspective what life for Cubans entailed in diaspora. By having these three places of settlement, readers get the opportunity to see the contrast of each place and how the texts complement each other in using these emblematic settings.

In addition, nostalgia is an essential piece in the works since it “plays an important role in this recreation of the lost space” (Das 143). There is an impactful quote from *Cuba in my Pocket*, when the tailor says to Cumba, “Young man. You never really leave. You never really escape... Your heart will always be in Cuba” (45). Engle, Behar, and Cuevas perfectly display this affection and mixed frustration of knowing you have lost your homeland and may never get the opportunity to live life like it was before. Cuban American writers “have given voice to the reality of the thresholds they occupy as Cubans and Americans living within the continuum created by their bicultural identities” (Alvarez-Borland and Bosch 2). Language is an example of that bicultural identity, and all the writers showcase this cultural aspect by using code-switching in their narratives to exemplify their Cuban background. There are words or phrases in Spanish that could not be translated into English because they would otherwise lose meaning and intention. Their lives and events mostly happened in Spanish, therefore using code-switching maintains that Cuban essence in the writing of these texts.

Lastly, all the texts are uniquely alike because they include valuable information at the end of the novels. “Because many authors of books for young readers are now writing like historians, the back matter provides a space where they can expand on the process of historical research or offer other ideas that communicate more directly with the readers” (Jiménez et al. 121). In each text selected, the reader can find the *author’s note* which provides additional information about the writing and why the author chose to write about the specific story. In *Enchanted Air* we find a “Cold War Time Line,” plus a Reading Group Guide with discussion questions. In *Lucky Broken Girl* there is a short interview with the author and various family recipes of dishes she references in the novel, in addition to some reflection questions. Lastly, in *Cuba in my Pocket*, there is a glossary with specific terms, and the author includes pictures of her father, on whom the story is based-

Something that contrasts between the texts is perhaps how Behar moves farther from the socio-historical events happening in Cuba and focuses more on the experiences of Cuban immigrants in the United States. From the three authors, she is the one that most emphasizes topics such as minority groups, immigration, and assimilation to American culture. Although there is longing in the narrative, there is a strong sense of contentment from the characters knowing they are now free and live in a free country: “We are lucky to live in a free country and have this bread to eat” (Behar 19). On the other hand, Engle and Cuevas emphatically highlight the desire of going back to Cuba, a thought that for many Cubans living in exile was present in their daily lives. This is what Gustavo Pérez Firmat, among others, talks about in his book *Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano’s Coming-Of-Age in America*: “la gran mayoría de los cubanos llegó a este país con la esperanza y más, con la certeza de regresar a nuestro país en corto tiempo... con el pasar del tiempo se convierte en el episodio central de nuestras vidas” (7). This is what Cumba

asks himself on the last page of the novel, “Will we be able to go back? Will we ever see Abuelo and Abuela again? I don’t know” (274). It is also what Engle asks herself in *Enchanted Air*:

Someday, surely I’ll be free  
 To return to the island of all my childhood  
 dreams.  
 Normal diplomatic relations.  
 An ordinary family – united.  
 Magical travel, back and forth.  
 It will happen.  
 When? (185)

Finally, Cuban American literature continues to be significant in literary studies because it addresses issues and topics that still affect a community. The books selected for this research add value to Cuban American literature, since “addressing real-life situations are effective with a wide range of age levels because their story lines ring true and they evoke real feelings (Roberts and Crawford 2). The writing of these authors reminds us of the importance of representation and also validates the experiences of young people. One of the reasons for selecting these texts for critical analysis is that the authors use young characters to portray the difficulties of biculturalism and bilingual identity. Oftentimes, we find texts that speak about these issues but from the adult point of view, which is why these texts have been considered middle grade texts instead of Young Adult Literature, because their characters are children. But just because they are children does not mean they are exempt from experiencing these changes. Even so, these texts can be appreciated by young readers, young adults, and adults in general.

The writings of Engle, Behar, and Cuevas offer a literary space for Cuban American readers to feel represented. Will there ever be a change in the type of writing second-generation Cuban American writers produce? As long as there is an unchangeable status for Cuba, writers in diaspora, even the ones who have never set foot on the island, will continue to enchant readers with stories that talk about a lost paradise. In his essay “Cubans in the U.S. An example of ethnic identity in the making,” included in the book *ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora*, Leandro Soto comments on how writers and artists leave behind the Island (Cuba) and create an archetypal island that contains the collective memories, which he refers to as mythic island or lost paradise.

The Latinx community continues to grow and impact the environment in the United States, which has helped broaden studies on Latin American and Latinx literature and has given writers the opportunities to be recognized by their work while exploring different genres. It is within the work that they create that readers can access information that otherwise would rarely be known. Readers often grow accustomed to the idea that knowledge and information are given in an academic environment and ignore the value that novels such as the ones selected for this research have.

Living in a multicultural society opens the door for writers to have a platform where they can display their own stories and social issues. Many US Latinx communities lack representation in US and Latin American histories, whether they are Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican or, in this case, Cuban. Through their writing, readers can learn what it means to be Latinx in an American context. *Enchanted Air*, *Lucky Broken Girl*, and *Cuba in My Pocket* reflect the dynamic culture and history the Cuban American community has within the Latinx and American literary heritage. In an academic setting, and even for the general reading audiences,



these books open conversations about cultural, socio-historical, linguistic, and identity issues that are present in the daily lives of many Cuban exiles, and the generations that came after them, in relation to other cultural groups in the United States. In a literary aspect, the works help us engage in critical analyses of the uniqueness and value of Cuban American writing.

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