

NAVIGATING HYBRIDITY:
INVESTIGATING THE DANCE BETWEEN CULTURE
AND VALUES WITHIN THE CUBAN
NATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract: Hybridity is the dynamic relationship between local and global factors that push and pull on people and nations. Hybridity is deeply situated in socio-contextual factors, like cultural beliefs, education, and political systems, that aid and hinder a people's navigation of globalized phenomena. Simply put, hybridity is how people and societies adapt to a changing world. This article examines the case of Cuba in response to hybridity. Specifically, the article's purpose is to examine ways that the Cuban National Education System impacts how Cubans navigate the global march towards hybridity. The article reports on a focused ethnographic study of a week long education trip to Cuba during February 2013. The ethnography includes over 100 hours of data collection, including semi-structured interviews with 26 Cuban participants. The study uses Freire's (1970) notion of "humanizing pedagogy" to analyze how the impact of the Cuban National Education System values in the context of Cuba and larger global context. The study found that three values in particular, *amor*, *solidaridad*, and *conciencia de derechos y response*, were deeply embedded in the Cuban National Education System and effect the way that Cubans navigate the complex hybridity that situates their island nation.

Keywords: hybridity, common good, Cuba, educational schooling systems, Freire.

Two billboards stand side by side outside the international terminal parking lot of José Martí International Airport in Havana, Cuba. The larger billboard is faded and shows a picture of Che Guevara. Next to Che are these words, "Te vemos cada día (...) puro como un niño o como un hombre puro. Che Comandante, amigo". Translated in English, the quote reads, "I see every day (...) pure as a child or as a pure man. Commander Che, friend". The smaller billboard is newer and depicts an idyllic Cuban beach scene, where a family of five, all blonde headed and blue eyed, are snorkeling. Under this scene, words in all capital letters state, "ciertamente familiar", which translated to English means, "Certainly Familiar". The juxtaposition of a Revolutionary leader next to a tourist bill-

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board is ironic, striking, and punctuated with a twist of humor. One can only imagine what Che would think of having his image so closely connected to a tourism slogan. These airport billboards capture the *hybridity* of today's Cuba. By hybridity, we define hybridity as the dynamic relationship between local and global factors that push and pull on people and nations. Hybridity is deeply situated in socio-contextual factors, like cultural beliefs, education, and political systems, that aid and hinder a people's navigation of globalized phenomena. Simply put, hybridity is how people and societies adapt to a changing world.

This article examines the case of Cuba in response to hybridity. Specifically, the article's purpose is to examine ways that the Cuban National Education System impacts how Cubans navigate the global march towards hybridity. Through a focused ethnography (Knoblauch 2005), the article reports on a study of the Cuban National Education System in relationship to the value emphasized in its schools. We use Freire's (Freire 1970) notion of "humanizing pedagogy" to analyze how the impact of these values in the context of Cuba and larger global context. We organize the article into three sections. In the rest of this Introduction section, we briefly discuss Cuba's socio-political and historical context. In the second section, called Methodology, we describe the article's theoretical framework and explain the methods that we utilized for collecting data. In the third section, called Outcomes, we share the study's findings and discuss the findings in relationship to Freire's "humanizing pedagogy" theoretical framework.

CUBA'S SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Cuba is the largest island nation in the Caribbean Sea and has a population of over 11 million people. Cuba has an extensive history that, despite what might be written in history textbooks, dates back many thousands of years before Christopher Columbus came ashore in 1492. Indeed, the island was originally "discovered" by Mesoamerican coastal tribes searching for new places to fish (Rogozinski 1992). Soon after Columbus' arrival in the late Fifteenth



Century, Cuba became colonized by Spain. The country was dominated by Spanish Imperialism (and, for some years, British Imperialism) until the late Nineteenth Century when Cubans, led by Jose Martí, fought for Cuba's independence. By 1902, after being occupied by the United States during the Spanish American War, Cuba gained its independence. Yet, the United States' imperialistic policies dominated Cuba's economic and political systems in the early Twentieth Century (Zinn 2010). In 1940, Cuba's constitution was rewritten and Fulgencio Batista was elected as President of Cuba for a four year term. In the 1950's, Batista seized power through a military coup until being overthrown in 1959 during the Cuban Revolution, which was led by Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos, and Raul Castro. Although the United States government first supported the Cuban Revolution; by the 1960's, the United States established a trade embargo on Cuba that has remained to this day. Despite the embargo, for over 54 years, a Castro (either Fidel or Raul) has been the leader of Cuba representing the Communist Party of Cuba. That will be the case until 2018, when Raul Castro is set to retire.

Such is a quick and very brief survey of Cuba's history. It is a historical context that reflects the hybridity of being in between imperialistic forces and political ideas. Today, Castro's Revolution has ushered in several decades of stability, albeit with a "Special Period" in which many Cubans went hungry and destitute after the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990's. After the "Special Period", Cuba ushered in policies that led to an increase in tourism and to privatization of certain sectors of the economy. These policies included the formation of a two currency system in Cuba. One currency, called the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC), is what most tourists' use; where one CUC is equal to one US dollar. Another currency is called the Cuban Peso (CUP) and is the currency for most Cuban citizens. Although Cuba's government officials have discussed moving to a single currency, the two currency system sheds light on expanding inequalities within in Cuba. The two currency system was instituted largely in response to Cuba's growth in tourism. Yet, tourism also brings with it complex challenges, including a rise in drugs, prostitu-



tion, and materialism. Like the billboards outside the airport, Cuba seems to be between worlds. There is a world defined by the commitment to the socialist ideals that ushered in the Cuban Revolution, whereas there is another world that is defined by an opening of economic policy towards the modernization of Cuba. Within these worlds lies Cuba's hybridity. How will Cuba navigate such hybridity? We contend that the Cuban National Education system provides a starting place for addressing that question.

While the Cuban National Education System emerged from Fidel Castro's Revolution of 1959, the system's moral certitude and legitimacy embodies the apostolic influence of José Martí (Báez 2005; Chávez 2005; Giles 2004; Kapcia 2005). To understand the Cuban National Education System, one must begin with Jose Martí, who was a poet, writer, political leader, and martyr for the quest of Cuban Independence in the late 19th Century. A bust of Martí is commonplace at the entrance of most schools in Cuba. Quotes by Martí adorn the hallways of the school buildings. One of Martí's most popular quotes, *educar es liberar* (to educate is to free), captures the liberating power of education that is an inherent belief of the Cuban National Education System (Blum 2011; Chávez 2005; Kapcia 2005). Despite the encroachment of capitalism and neoliberal policies, Cuba's education system continues to be centralized in its governance and based in socialism. Internationally, Cuba's education system is highly esteemed and equal, if not better, than many education systems situated in developed nations (Gasperini 2000). The Cuban National Education System has helped Cubans navigate their current socio-political hybridity as well as endure difficult times like the "Special Period". What accounts for strong reputation of the Cuban National Education System? What values define the Cuban National Education System? What are the perceptions of Cuba's citizens to the Cuban National Education System? These are the questions that we investigated as part of our week long study trip in Havana, Cuba.



METHODOLOGY

As preparation for our trip to Havana, we reviewed a number of studies about the Cuban National Education System in relationship to its strengths and challenges (Abendroth 2009; Báez 2005; Blum 2011; Breidlid 2007; Chávez 2005; Coe & McConnell 2004; Giles 2004; Kapcia 2005). Much of this research emphasized the importance of values education in Cuba. Thus, the methodology for our study's investigation is premised in the literature and builds on (and critically analyzes) the role of values within the Cuban National Education System. Additionally, the study examines a dilemma that Gasperini describes as the challenge of "teaching national [socialist] values in an increasingly global environment (...) that works to consolidate solidarity and a collective sense of responsibility in a context of scarcity, while individualism and material consumption are increasingly appealing" (Gasperini 2000, 19). Fidel Castro asserts that the revolutionary spirit finds its genesis in the culture and ideas of people (Castro 1999). What are the culture and ideas that surround the Cuban National Education System? This study investigates this question from the perceptions of Cuban citizens, professionals, and educators. The study uses Freire's concept of "humanizing pedagogy" as a theoretical lens for critically examining the values and ideas that are part of the Cuban National Education System (Freire 1970). Freire explains that a humanizing pedagogy, "expresses consciousness of the students (...) and it is co-intentional. A pedagogy in which the teacher and the student are both subjects who are co-intent on collective reflection of reality as well as collective action in order to create new knowledge" (Freire 1970, 69). Furthermore, Freire argues that humanizing pedagogy includes a deeper awareness of the world that is situated in a historical-social-cultural context (Freire 2004).

This study employs a focused ethnographic research design using qualitative methods. According to Knoblauch, focused ethnography is a research design for empirical inquiry that reflects a short-term field visit in an authentic context, that is characterized by a communicative approach, and that is intense in terms of its data collection and ongoing analysis (Knoblauch 2005). The study is a focused



ethnography in that it is drawn from over 100 hours of data that was collected in a little over a week's time in February 2013.

PARTICIPANTS AND DATA

The study's sample was drawn from 28 participants (n=28) who ranged in age from 18 years old to 60 years old. All the participants experienced schooling in the Cuban National Education System and all currently reside in Havana, Cuba. The participants included higher education students, teachers, and professionals. There were three qualitative data sources for this focused ethnography: field notes from on-site observations, participant interviews, and collected artifacts like digital images. The study's observation protocol provided focus for field observations in order to develop a "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of the phenomenon under study. Participant interviews were semi-structured and designed to identify perceptions of the Cuban National Education System. Collected artifacts included digital images as visual data of the Cuban National Education System.

We analyzed these qualitative data using Miles and Huberman's (Miles and Huberman 1994) three-step interpretive approach and the constant-comparative method. Pattern-matching logic (Yin 2008) was utilized to identify patterns in the data which either did or did not match with Freire's "humanizing pedagogy". Language and translation were important features of the study's data collection and data analysis. Most all the study's interviews were translated from Spanish to English. Both the study's researchers speak and read Spanish at basic level. However, there were translators present for each of the participant interviews so that an accurate translation from Spanish to English could be provided. In fact, for almost every interview, the researchers followed Emmel's (Emmel 1998) suggestions for having two translators present. Translators worked in tandem with each other to agree upon the closest meaning and the most accurate translation of what was said.



OUTCOMES

Three themes emerged as findings for this study. The themes are identified by discussing values that were oft-repeated throughout this focused ethnography. In our examination of the themes, we introduce each value in relationship to how it was discussed by the study's participants. The first theme is related to the value of *amor* or to love. Love is a complex and nuanced word. Love is wrapped up in words like: commitment, intimacy, materialism, patriotism, and relationships. In the context of this study, love was synonymous with dedication and fidelity. Many of the participants spoke about the value of love for *patria* as represented in patriotism for Cuba. Participants also identified love as an tantamount value related to education. For example, here is how one Cuban educator put it, "We believe that love conquers the world. Whatever challenges students may have, love is way to address the challenge. But students cannot share love, if they don't first receive love". The emphasis on love echoes Martí's belief that education starts as an act of love. Martí put it this way, "to educate is to give man the keys to the world, which are independence and love, and to give him strength to journey on his own, light of step, a spontaneous and free being" (Martí 2002, 113). According to the majority of the study participants, love was the most important value of the Cuban National Education System.

The second theme reflects the value of *solidaridad* or solidarity. In Cuba, solidarity also has a robust and nuanced meaning. One of the study's participants described solidarity as "what connects Cubans with each other and connects us with the world". Indeed, in one sense, solidarity is akin to internationalism. Yet, in Cuba, it goes beyond just international relations and includes a deep affinity for countries that share in the socialist struggle that Cuba continues to endure. At a domestic level, solidarity is synonymous with unity, brotherhood and sisterhood. Solidarity is a word that yokes Cubans together. In the schools and educational institutions that we visited as part of this study, solidarity was often represented in wall murals. For example, one mural entitled "Libertad y Solidaridad" had a image of a globe with a dove flying around



it and the words freedom and solidarity (in Spanish) in bold red letters above the globe.

The third theme connects to development of the value of *conciencia de derechos y responsa* or consciousness of rights and responsibilities. Many of the study's educators spoke about the importance of this value. For example, educators shared how Cuban students would commonly respond to questions about their rights by explaining that they, the students, have the right to be in a family, a right to education, and a right to live happy and healthy. But with these rights, they also had to take care of their family by doing well in school and by staying healthy. The development of a Cuban consciousness was a feature of Che Guevara's "New Man" campaign (Blum 2011). The "New Man" campaign promoted self-sacrifice for the common good; where people have a greater consciousness of their collective rights, but also their duties to the larger community (Gasperini 2000; Malott 2005). The consciousness of a common good is an important part of how Cubans navigate the changes in the nation. One educator put it this way, "Cuba is an economically poor country, but it is socially rich. Cubans know how to take care of one another". The social richness of Cuba is evident in its schools, where the curriculum includes a focus on the arts, including 90 minutes of *salsa* and *merengue* dance per week. The dancing also reflects the depth to which Cuba's cultural norms inform its values.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From our 100 plus hours of data collection in Cuba, we quickly came to notice how culture is embedded in the values of the Cuban National Education System and, to a degree, within Cuba. Indeed, Cuba's marriage of culture and values is knotted together rather tightly. Jones describes culture as "a set of living practices and relationships, activities and artifacts that help and inspire us to shape a radically better future" (Jones 2011, 35). The culture supported by the Cuban National Education System seems to inspire the Cuban people toward a vision orientated toward the common good. Such vision is inspiring in the



face of hybridity, which is often characterized by globalization in service to gluttonous neoliberal policies, which cloak ignorance and greed.

Yet, no culture is perfect or, for that matter, entirely inclusive. This includes Cuba, which has a less than stellar human rights record, including the systematic harassment of gays and lesbians (Arenas 1993). Through the trenches of global intersectionality, we must recognize that hybridity can be a forced construct, which creates a space for both development and decline. The Cuban values *amor*, *solidaridad*, and *conciencia de derechos y responsa* are situated in a struggle between capitalist driven globalization and the struggle for a humanistic socialism. The “Special Period” of the 1990’s forced the Cuban government to explore creative approaches to revive an economically and resource-depressed social environment impacted by the fall of the Soviet Union and the *Cuban Democracy Act* (also known as the United States Embargo against Cuba). One response was tourism. Tourism has created economic growth and access to certain resources, but it has also created a space for concern. Cuba’s economic system is semi-closed. Tourism increases opportunity for extrinsic rewards such as tips (money and other physical gifts) which impede on a semi-closed economic system. The increased emphasis on tourism has encouraged many workers to leave traditional government jobs (such as education) to seek employment in the tourism sector because of the increased likelihood of receiving tips. One tour guide (a former teacher), for example, stated that he typically makes more financial gain off of tips in one week than what his yearly salary was as a teacher. During our conversation, he repeated the importance of his responsibility to Cuba as an educator. It was obvious that he was torn by leaving education to enter the tourism sector. When asked specifically why he left, he stated that it was because of “the opportunity to provide a more financially secure life for his family”.

The tour guide’s struggle is like the two billboards outside the international terminal at Jose Marti International Airport writ large. The Cuban society reflects hybridity. The Cuban government continues to explore approaches to increase the standards of living while being



conscientious of the potential impact of each approach. How will Cuba continue to evolve? Only time will tell. What seems to be certain is the continued emphasis of a humanizing, value-guided approach to education. The values *amor*, *solidaridad*, and *conciencia de derechos y responsa* are deeply entrenched in the Cuban Education System and reflect the Marxist beliefs that education can be a powerful contributor to human completeness when it empowers people to use their creative capacity for the common good (Marx 1867). Paulo Freire's notion of a humanizing pedagogy provides a larger interpretive frame for these themes. Cuba's emphasis on values education segues into teachers and learners who are conscious of their own presence as well as the presence of others (Freire 2005). Freire states that "[teachers and students] attain knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement" (Freire 1970, 67). In sum, Freire's quote captures the depth and level of commitment that aids Cuba in navigating this current age of hybridity. Such a commitment is reflected in the values that Cuba's Education System upholds, the collective culture that supports these values, and, perhaps most importantly, even in the dances that the Cuban people continue to dance.

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