Self and Circumstance:
Journeys and Visions of Exile

Rubén D. Rumbaut and Rubén G. Rumbaut

FOREWORD

Rubén G. Rumbaut

"I am my self and my circumstance," wrote José Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher, on the eve of World War I, in his Meditations on Quixote. The self in exile, and the circumstances of exile, are as varied as human character and human history. Forced uprooting from one's homeland and community—coerced homelessness—may be the common crisis that confronts all exiles and refugees, but such groups are affected by, perceive and react to their changed and changing circumstances in different ways. Exile is not a uniform journey, but many different journeys, and “it” cannot be grasped by a single vision, but many—reflecting the different vantages and framings of different selves, and indeed of the same self over time, in circumstances that never stay the same. The meaning of exile, and of home, varies—not least as a function of age and generation, of biography and history, of self and circumstance.

A quarter of a century ago, in May 1976, my father and I, a psychiatrist and a sociologist, teamed together to offer our reflections and perspectives on the experience of exile. Joined by a common title, “Two Generational Perspectives on the Experience of Exile,” we each presented short papers on this theme at the annual meetings of the American Society of Adolescent Psychiatry—which follow below, unedited, and comprise the first half of this chapter. A quarter of a century later we collaborated again, at the invitation of Professor Peter I. Rose, adjusting and updating our respective visions and journeys with the passage of time. Those reflections, which were presented at a national symposium on “The Anatomy of Exile” at Smith College and subsequently revised, comprise the second half of this chapter.
Back then, at the ASAP meetings, my father’s paper offered a personal account, describing how we came from Cuba into exile in July 1960, a family of seven—he had turned 38 the week before, I was on the eve of my 12th birthday—clueless as to the journeys that awaited us all in the years to come. But there we were, in 1976, just blocks from the place in Miami where we had first landed—he was by then 53, I was 27—speaking in a language neither of us had spoken when we arrived, trying to make sense of the profoundly affecting experience we shared in common. He spoke as a survivor of “four shocks”—including “exile shock,” a concept he coined to distinguish it from other phenomena. I spoke from the vantage of the “one-and-a-half” generation, the term I had coined to distinguish between the first-generation adult protagonists (literally, “first actors”) of the decision to go into exile, and the generation of their children, who as deuteragonists (“second actors”) tend to be free of the impulse for self-justification that drives their parents' exilic vision.

And here we were, at the turn of the century—he was now 78, more than half his life lived in the United States, and I was about the same age as he was back in 1976—trying to do so again, older and wiser, to some ineluctable extent trapped by history and character, by time and self and circumstance, but still drawn to the experience of el exilio, to that “big bang” that so long ago set us off in a journey whose destination, beside the grave, remains as uncertain now as it was then. To be sure, our remarks on that occasion were not intended to encompass or summarize, even in a nutshell, the years of clinical work, empirical research, and scholarly reflection that had occupied and preoccupied each of us in efforts to understand the varieties of contemporary immigrants and refugees and their modes of adaptation. Instead, taken together, this chapter consists of a selective set of reflections, spanning a quarter century of changing circumstances, of two selves, two journeys, two visions, two voices, two generational perspectives on the experience of exile—but one solitary collaboration, now as then.
I.
FOUR SHOCKS: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT (1976)

Rubén D. Rumbaut

I came to this country in July 1960. I was then in my late thirties, a physician, a psychiatrist. My family accompanied me: my wife, and our five children, consisting of three boys (ages 11, 10 and 9) and two girls (ages 7 and 5). A sixth child, a girl, was born later, in 1963.

We came directly from Havana to Miami, to a small hotel on the beach. We had never expected expatriation, not even in our bleakest moments, and were not really prepared for it. On leaving Cuba we were hopeful that our absence was going to be rather short, perhaps 2 or 3 years. We tried to protect the children from the pains and agonies of the decision and preparations of leaving, our fears of the unknown, and the prospect of a separation from the homeland. We waited until the school year was over, and left during vacation time. Therefore, they spent the initial weeks of exile enjoying sea, sand and sun.

The events of 1961 [the Bay of Pigs invasion and its aftermath] persuaded us that our stay was going to be prolonged. In consequence, we applied ourselves to learning English, and I prepared myself for taking the E.C.F.M.G. [Foreign Medical Graduates] examination. On passing the exam I accepted a psychiatric position at a Veterans Hospital in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where we resided for almost five years. To fulfill the requirements of the Board of Psychiatry and Neurology, I then went to the Menninger School of Psychiatry in Topeka. Lastly, we moved to Houston, where I received my Board Certification. Since then I have been involved in academic and hospital psychiatry.

In these sixteen years of residence in the United States, we have lived in Florida, New Mexico, Kansas, and Texas. Our children have passed through kindergarten, primary and secondary school, college and university, not only in the four states already mentioned, but in Missouri, Massachusetts, California, and Washington, D.C. Three have married native-born Americans. My wife, in addition to taking excellent care of the home, the children and the frequent moves, worked during part of the process. We have now a native-born American child and grandchild. Difficulties, hard work, long studies, competition, adversities and acculturation under pressure have not been alien to any member of the family.

Exile in this country is not a new historical experience for the Cubans. During the first Independence War (1868-78) and again on the occasion of the second and final Independence
War (1895-98), Cubans came here by the thousands. Popular resistance against Machado in the thirties and Batista in the fifties brought Cuban exiles to these shores once again. Nothing, however, can compare with the massive exodus since Castro took power in January 1959. Of the approximately seven million people who populated the island then, one million have gone into exile, the great majority of them to the U.S.A.

Among the early exiles were fifteen thousand Cuban children who were sent ahead by their parents when the revolution turned toward a totalitarian path. The U.S. and Cuban governments permitted children under 16 to come here under waivers of visas, while their parents were required to possess them. Unfortunately, intervening events made it extremely difficult for the adults to get their visas. As a result, hundreds upon hundreds of those “Operation Peter Pan” children had to be placed with relatives or friends, in foster homes, or in institutions (including orphanages) scattered over 110 American cities. Some of those children, raised in poor homes in Cuba, ended in rich foster homes here while some had the reverse experience. A percentage of these children was deliberately discouraged from speaking Spanish while other children, confused and angry at what they interpreted as a “desertion” by their parents, suppressed or repressed the knowledge of their native language. In any case, those children who were not accompanied by parents obviously underwent a different psychological experience than those who were. Some were reunited with their parents in a matter of months while some remained separated for a long period of time. Some never saw their parents again.3

For my wife and me, the decision of leaving a dearly loved country entailed an agony that lasted for months. New decisions and personal trials followed, in never-ending succession. The ideological struggle consumes part of the time and energies of any refugee; the survival struggle, another part; the duties toward family, job and the host society yet another part. One feels torn between diverse moral and ideological imperatives. Several dilemmas ensue: Resettlement? Change of professions, specialties, fields and goals? Retraining? Private, hospital or academic practice? Board certification? Other important decisions need to be made: should one increase income by multiple, simultaneous means, or study and prepare again for the future after having seen one “future” evaporate before one's very eyes, or simply work hard in one's profession and hope for the best? Lastly, in what way should we proceed with the children's education?

In addition to our private struggles, we had to fight against other odds. We came to this country on the threshold of marked social, cultural and political upheavals. For example, our exile paralleled in time the Vietnam War. We have witnessed the assassination of one president and of his brother (a presidential candidate), the murder of a Nobel Prize winner, the resignation of another president and a vice-president, and the attempted assassination and crippling of another presidential candidate. All this in the face of the senseless violence, the campus unrest, the city riots, the flower children, the drug epidemic, and the profound changes in social mores, sex roles, sexual values, religious beliefs, and life styles. Finally, our exile has coincided with a period of world turbulence and with an extraordinary turning point in history.4
Four Shocks

For lack of a better concept, I will attempt to describe the impact of all those things with the worn-out word “shock.” I believe we have gone through four of them: “cultural shock,” “exile shock,” “future shock,” and “generational shock.”

In the process of going from the Cuban culture into the American culture we found a series of similarities and dissimilarities. It was pleasant to deal with the former and difficult to cope with the latter. The Cuban pace was slower, less competitive, with lesser emphasis on unrelenting work and more on leisure; families were more patriarchal and close-knit, children were more protected and watched, and premarital virginity of women was highly esteemed. Interpersonal relationships tended to be warmer, noisier, more expressive and less formal. Individualistic trends were strong. The Cubans are (according to Erna Ferguson, an American author) “the fastest talkers in the world.” Quick, clever and long-winded conversation, humor, gestures, music, dance, politics, journalism, oratory and sports flourish among them. Lack of foresight and careful planning, superficiality and frivolity were considered national defects. Despite strong Spanish and Catholic traditions, religious adherence was rather nominal. Devoted churchgoers in Cuba were always less than 10 percent of the population. People, traditionally Christian, had nevertheless moral guidelines more hedonistic than puritanical, and more permissive than strict. Parents and children treated each other with a familiarity and informality far different from Spain and even from other Ibero-American countries, although independence from parental influence and marriage were habitually achieved later than in the USA. We found it more difficult to adapt to the “rat race,” i.e., “rush, rush, rush,” “bigger is better,” “time is money,” “mind your own business,” “follow the arrow,” “get to the point,” “go through channels” and “always be on time.” We found it disconcerting that the religious concept, “in God we trust,” appears printed not on religious medals but on all the coins and the paper money, as if the faith—just in case—ought to be backed by the omnipotent American dollar. We found alien aspects of food, climate, distance, mobility, family separation and fragmentation, early departure of the children from the family, unrestricted girls’ freedom, and what seemed to us too much routine, scheduling and predictability of numerous aspects of daily life.

The process of transculturation has been more difficult, above all, for the women. It was also harder for the black Cubans than for the white Cubans; for the older than for the younger; and for the non-professional and less educated than for the professional and better educated. The children fared better. Their cerebral cortex, as Penfield postulated, is still “uncommitted” before adolescence; thus, they learn new languages without difficulties and without an accent. Paraphrasing the concept with literary license, I would also speak of their “uncommitted heart.” In contradistinction, the hearts of the adults are already committed to their native soil, and so the land cannot be left behind without tearing apart some of the invisible fibers of the heart.

On the positive side we found the same basic background: a Judeo-Christian-Greek-Roman historical tradition; same alphabet, grammar, schooling, sciences and arts; similar encompassing western culture and fundamental values. Besides geographical proximity and
historical ties, all these similarities made many things easier than they would have been otherwise. The “cultural shock” existed, but in itself was not of major proportions.

“Exile shock” is a different thing. It entails much more than simply moving from one culture to another. The refugee is the reluctant immigrant; a person who has lost his homeland against his will, and whose bridges are burned behind him. He cannot return at will. The length of his expatriation, the separation from relatives and friends, and the change of the political situation in his country are not in his hands. Even communication with his compatriots does not rest in his hands. This complex, multi-determined feeling of loss, helplessness, hopelessness, frustration, rage and sadness, is the essence of the exile experience, and, as such, is different from the “culture shock” just described and from the slow adaptation of a voluntary immigrant to the chosen new land of his dreams.

Periodically the media refer to the Cubans’ “success story” in the USA. I will not argue with that evaluation, but I will add a note of caution. Success derives from exemplary performance, but says little about how people feel inside. Sadness and depression derive from experiences of loss, uprootedness, uncertainty, conflicting loyalties and isolation, and frequently represent the silent inner price that has to be paid for the outer, acclaimed victory. Parallel to almost every public “success story” of an adult Cuban refugee, there is a private “boat and raft” story of escape, tears, blood, sweat and toil which have left deep-seated psychological scars.

“Future shock” is defined as the shattering stress and disorientation that can be induced in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time: a reaction to vertiginous change. The pace of communication, transportation, information and reproduction have accelerated so much, and human events are accumulating with such speed, that the future appears to be coming toward us with the velocity of a meteor. There is almost no way to reasonably and calmly prepare for it, or to adequately assimilate the changes already upon us in the present. This phenomenon is worldwide and fairly recent. It has been incubating for years, to be sure, but has only been perceived, recognized and labeled during the decade of the sixties: the same decade that saw the beginnings of the Cuban exile as well as the turmoil within the American society.

Margaret Mead, with her comprehensive, telescopic view of mankind's evolution, has made a diagnosis which implies another more profound and unique kind of shock. In her book Culture and Commitment: A study of the Generation Gap, she describes what I am labeling here “generational shock.” In her opinion, until today mankind has evolved through two main types of cultures: the postfigurative ones, in which children learn principally from their forebears, and the configurative ones, in which both children and adults learn from their peers. We are now entering a period, new in history, in which we, the adults, will have to learn from our children: a prefigurative culture. We have at this moment, simultaneously available for the first time, examples of the way men have lived at every period of the last fifty thousand years. In almost poetic tones she affirms:
“Today, nowhere in the world are there elders who know what the children know, no matter how remote and simple the societies in which the children live. In the past there were always some elders who knew more than the children, in terms of their experience of having grown up within a cultural system. Today there are none. It is not only that parents are no longer guides, but that there are no guides, whether one seeks them in one's own country or abroad.”

Lastly, talking about our generation, she gives us these thought-provoking statements:

“No generation has ever known, experienced and incorporated such rapid changes... They know more about change than any other generation has ever known and so stand, over, against and vastly alienated, from the young, who by the very nature of their position have had to reject their elders’ past... We have to realize that no other generation will ever experience what we have experienced. In this sense we have to recognize that we have no descendants, and our children have no forebears. At this breaking point between two radically different and closely related groups, both are inevitably very lonely, as we face each other knowing that they will never experience what we have experienced, and that we can never experience what they have experienced…”

And so, here I am, survivor of four different kinds of “shocks,” giving you my generational perspective of the experience of exile in the 1960s, and sharing this tribune with my eldest son. The 11-year-old youngster who, from this very street, looked with inquiring eyes at the USA on the day of our arrival, is now a sociologist working on his Ph.D. thesis, and still inquiring. In the style of the times, I just did my thing for the audience, and now he is going to do his thing. In so doing, we both hope that we are being useful to you while demonstrating how, despite all the “shocks” and all the “gaps,” two generations still can work smoothly together for a common, worthwhile goal.
II.
THE ONE-AND-A-HALF GENERATION:
CRISIS, COMMITMENT, AND IDENTITY (1976)

Rubén G. Rumbaut

The experience of exile is an increasingly frequent phenomenon of a rapidly changing world which at once determines and is determined by it. While the fact of forced uprootedness from one's community—coerced homelessness—is the common crisis that confronts all refugee groups, whatever the diversity of their situation, such groups are affected by, perceive and manage their changed circumstances in different ways. Any phenomenology of exile can give only a tentative and incomplete rendering of an experience which, like any other relation of self and social circumstance, needs to be placed in its larger historical, political and economic context if it is to be adequately understood. Here I can sketch only some general themes of the experience of Cuban exile groups in the United States in the 1960s, focusing on the relation between the parent generation and a youth that reached adulthood in exile, a youth in transition both in reference to the new society and to its ethnic origins.

I follow the usage of the concept of “youth” as a stage of life intervening as a “psychosocial moratorium” between the stages of precocious adolescence and mature adulthood. The possibility of this type of moratorium prior to full absorption into the labor force is a recent historical phenomenon, made institutionally possible for other than elite youth by the lengthening of the formal educational process in developed industrial societies. And I focus on children of Cuban exiles who were born in Cuba but have come of age in the United States—what I would label the “one-and-a-half” generation—rather than the “second” generation of their children born here, for whom the notion of being in “exile” from a Cuban homeland (although not necessarily a Cuban heritage) may apply neither by definition nor self-conception.

The following discussion is necessarily limited and selective; in particular, I make no mention here of the Cuban Revolution of 1959, nor of the complex of motives which led large sectors of Cuban society to emigrate. Instead, from a personal perspective, I will suggest some observations on the themes of exile, youth and identity formation in the context of the general cultural crisis of the United States in the last decade.

Some Elements of the Experience of Exile

The experience of exile can be conceived as a dialectic of loss and reconstruction, entailing a prolonged inner agony (from the Greek agonia, “a struggle or contest for victory,”
and agonistes, “actor”), marked by a persistent conflict of loyalties and manifesting identifiable coping patterns in the expatriate's response to severe stress. Psychosocially, it involves an arduous process of dislocation and relocation, uprootedness and new growth, anomic and adaptation. In the process of acting to reconstruct a meaningful social world in a new country, the exile is challenged to resolve dual crises: a “crisis of loss”—coming to terms with the past—and a “crisis of load”—coming to terms with the present and immediate future.

On the one hand, exiles are by definition “losers” in sociopolitical conflicts. They lose or are separated from home and homeland, family and friends, work and social status, material possessions, and meaningful sources of identity and self-validation. Refugees from war-torn contexts in particular are also often traumatized by violent events prior to and during flight, including life-threatening experiences and the death of significant others. At the same time, the exile is overloaded by compelling pressures to survive, find shelter and work, learn a different language, and adjust to a radically changed environment, often amid conditions of poverty, prejudice, minority status, pervasive uncertainty, and “culture shock.” The magnitude of the “shock” and the ability to cope with it, in turn, depend on the social distance traveled from place of origin to place of destination.

In the Cuban case, the arduousness has been mitigated by a variety of factors: (1) the resources of the exiles as a group, including their comparatively high level of education and occupational experience and technical skills, their familiarity with U.S. society and ideological congruence with dominant U.S. political values; (2) the creation of a network of ethnic communities, the most salient example of which is the teeming colony of “Little Havana” in Miami, which permits the maintenance of a vigorous sense of collective identity and ethnic consciousness; (3) the organized reception accorded the refugees by American public and private agencies, which facilitated their entry and subsequent resettlement. Indeed, structurally the Cuban emigration to the U.S. has been aptly described as a “golden exile,” and one that contrasts sharply, particularly in social class origins and rapid economic advancement, with previous mass migrations of the 19th and 20th centuries.

If exile exerts inordinate psychological pressures and dilemmas, the relation of the exile to the host culture is also in part characterized by what has been called the “objectivity” and the “doubtful loyalty” of the stranger. Unlike the native, who typically takes for granted the assumptions of his or her culture, the stranger brings a more critical if estranged vantage to the new situation, a vantage which combines at once elements of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement. The exile as stranger is not bound “to worship the idols of the tribe;” although a commitment is retained to one’s own, he or she is not bound by the customary commitments, conventions and prejudices of the host society. As a marginal person, the exile surveys and questions the new set of life circumstances with an attitude of social and cultural skepticism. “Culture shock” interrupts the normal flow of everyday life and reveals the relativity and precariousness of conventional social arrangements. Thus it is one of the ironies of exile that, despite the practical and psychological problems it inflicts, the very condition of uprootedness, in forcing the individual to reconstruct his/her life with a newfound and vivid
awareness that it is far less guaranteed than it seems, can potentially free him/her to transcend the accepted constraints which bind native members to their group.

To be sure, the meaning of exile is interpreted variously by expatriates occupying different generational and socioeconomic locations. For example, the Cuban case is seen ideologically by expatriate groups as fundamentally a political exile, a political and moral decision to renounce not one's homeland but the policies of a revolutionary regime (although more recent expatriates appear to be less “pushed out” by political conditions than “pulled out” by hopes of economic self-advancement). To the parent generation, as the protagonists (from the Greek protos and agonistes, meaning “first actors”) in the decision to leave, going into exile is a crucial act of self-definition and represents a profound loss and a profound commitment. Their response typically demands a prolonged mourning of that loss and a vigorous justification of that decision; a tendency to idealize both the status quo ante and the society that offers asylum; a bitter resistance to interpretations that denigrate the meaning of their commitment and threaten ego integrity; a sense of the provisionality of their exile and a lingering wish to return to the homeland under new political circumstances.

But to the generation of their children, deuteragonists (from deuteros and agonistes, “second actors”) in this drama, exile carries a different scheme of relevances and represents less of a personal loss than a discontinuity with one's origins, less of a personal commitment than an inherited circumstance. Their adaptive response, sometimes in reaction to perceptions of ethnic discrimination in the host society, may lead to a firm sense of ethnic pride as a source of meaning and identity, but is essentially freed of the impulse to justify and protect the parents’ world view; it demands solidarity with the family's common predicament and its perception of a shared crisis, rather than with the particular ideological allegiances of the parent generation; and for the generation of youth the problems of forging new beginnings lack the intense affective significance that this process carries for the adult protagonists who lived the original agony of opting for exile and who are defined by its consequences.

In short, the relations of parent and youth generations in exile reflect their differing vantages and modes of response and adaptations, and include elements of cohesion and continuity as well as conflict and discontinuity – which are shaped in turn by a set of factors, ranging from their age at arrival to their pace of acculturation, and to the political, economic, social and cultural contexts of their exodus and resettlement. To understand the inter-generational and intra-generational experience of exile requires a look at the politics of commitment as well as at the psychology of adaptation.

Some Elements of the Experience of Youth

Clearly, any understanding of youth in exile requires a prior understanding of the phenomenon of youth generally. Let me turn, then, to a consideration of some elements of the experience of youth, particularly the problem of ego identity. The abundant energy and vitality of youth is no doubt what led a wry George Bernard Shaw to remark that youth is too good a
thing to be left to the young. Youth involves a process of self-discovery and experimentation in significant areas of social life: the sexual and the political, the cultural and the economic, the educational and the occupational. Youth as a stage of life involves both a developmental and a social transition, a sojourn for values and identity which is both prolonged and made more problematic in continually changing modern capitalist societies characterized by an instability of values and identity.

The question of identity, which frames what Erikson has called the “crisis” of youth, is not exhausted by the psychological dynamics of one’s native origins and childhood identifications, nor by the structure of one's social circumstances. Certainly the process called “self” is shaped by the concrete interplay of one’s character and society and is ultimately confirmed by others, but it is not merely the product or reflection of a fixed reality. Ego identity is also the creative and ongoing expression of one’s choices and commitments, of one's *praxis* in the world. Indeed, the coherence of any sense of identity and personal wholeness is achieved largely through commitment. The circumstance of exile – one that is to some extent paralleled within the U.S. by conditions of rapid change and mobility in a society increasingly eroding a sense of community – presents the youth with a more ambiguous framework of obstacles, opportunities and often obsolete models within which one must commit oneself to a style of “fidelity” that constitutes an active expression of identity. Put differently, among the chief tasks of identity formation is “the development of an ‘ideology,’ that is, of a philosophy of life, a basic outlook on the world which can orient one's actions in adult life,” a task made more difficult in the context of present-day U.S. society.

For a generation of youth in exile, the formative dialogue is with their “psycho-historical actuality,” i.e., with their context, one shared primarily with American peers who form their actual network of relationships and affiliations, rather than within Cuban enclaves which are no longer central to their lives. For certain sectors of this “one-and-a-half” generation of youth, particularly student groups, it was the general crisis of the U.S. in the 1960s that presented the context for ideological commitment and identity formation, a context sustained by the development of a youth counter-culture and in which youth movements themselves became a principal agency of change and challenge to established arrangements. Generational conflict was sharpened and accelerated by this period of profound societal conflict: a period of raised social consciousness and struggle for ideals of social justice; of radicalization and resistance, revolt and repression, polarization and delegitimation of national authority, which tore the bonds of generation and community: of confrontation with the contradictions of American society, developing first through an identification with a growing civil rights movement and finally expanded to a general critique of American institutions, both nationally (where the focus was on issues of racism and inequality) and internationally (where the focus was on issues of imperialism and war). It was, whatever the nature of our response to it, a period of flux and upheaval which has indelibly affected us all.

I have been referring to “parent” and “youth” generations in a broad and somewhat indiscriminate way. Like any other social category, the concept of “generations” becomes
elusive on close inspection: a “generation” (like a “social class” or “ethnic group”) is formed by the nature of the bonds which unite its members, by their consciousness and participation in a common condition, by their mode of collective response to their historical actuality. There is, of course, considerable diversity within generational units. Still, I think the following generalization applies: if the parent generation in exile was defined by the events of the Cuban Revolution of the 1950s and its aftermath—if that was the decisive crisis of their experience—then, and with not a little irony, the Vietnam War of the past decade defined significant segments of the youth generation: that, more than their own inherited exile, was the decisive crisis of their experience. And yet, despite the nature of generational conflict precipitated by these events, it is precisely the shared circumstance of exile—however differently is has defined and been defined by parent and youth generations, and however differently it has shaped ideology and identity—which remains a singular bond between them, a continuing source of generational solidarity, enrichment and mutual confirmation.

Finally, with respect to the issue of youth in transition and its relevance to this audience, these considerations contain some implications for contemporary psychiatry and social science, and here it may be well to conclude with the following observation by Erikson:

“Our understanding of these processes is not furthered by the “clinical” reduction of [youth] phenomena to their infantile antecedents and to an underlying dichotomy of drive and conscience. [Youth's] development comprises a new set of identification processes, both with significant persons and with ideological forces, which give importance to individual life by relating it to a living community and to ongoing history, and by counterpointing the newly won individual identity with some communal solidarity.”

Youth act in the world, and are not merely acted upon (or “act out”); they determine their world and are not simply determined by “heredity” or “environment;” they create new realities and are not just an echo of their surroundings. A psychiatry or social science that becomes little more than a technique for a general adjustment is impoverished and misses the promise of its profession: to lend a radical sagacity to human problems within their irreducible historical actuality.
III.
LOT’S WIFE: LOOKING BACK AT HOME AND EXILE

Rubén D. Rumbaut

At the annual meeting of the American Society for Adolescent Psychiatry, held in Miami Beach in May 1976, my eldest son and I presented papers on the theme of “Two Generational Perspectives on the Experience of Exile.” Today, a quarter century later, in an unexpected and extraordinary opportunity, we were invited again, this time by Professor Peter I. Rose and Smith College, to touch on the same subjects. The occasion is so rare in history that we did not hesitate to accept immediately. So here we are, repeating the immortal phrase of Friar Luis de León, spoken several centuries ago, when he was returned to his Chair at the University of Salamanca after many years of prison, censorship, and strict vigilance by the Inquisition: “Como decíamos ayer…” [“As we were just saying…”]

My first contact with the idea of exile came early on, in my childhood, when my parents brought home a set of books they thought would be good for my education—about 20 volumes, entitled El Tesoro de la Juventud [Treasury for Youth], made up of encyclopedic essays and stories on all sorts of topics, all illustrated. One was about the effect of Beethoven’s music on its listeners. Another showed the deck of a ship full of people about to leave their homeland, coming from Europe to the United States. The image stayed engraved in my mind as an example of the effect on people of that uprooting experience—of the painful separation from the homeland, and of the sadness on the faces of the people as they left all that behind. Ever since that idea, that concept, has been present in my mind, in my subconscious, though I never suspected that one day I would become one of those people. I am sure those early memories inform something of the substance of “A Psalm for Refugees: Lot’s Wife”—a poem I would write several decades later to portray the image of the disobeying wife who looked back at her homeland as more faithful to it than those who moved on and never looked back, as an object of honor and not of calumny, as a symbol of fidelity and not of disparagement—and even seep into my experience of exile itself.

To my previous report and personal account of 1976, I would now add several chapters. During those last 25 years I have suffered important losses: my dear beloved wife in 1997, after 50 years of companionship and engagement and marriage; recent losses of a son-in-law and a daughter-in-law, of my home in Houston, and my recent move to San Marcos, Texas, earlier this year. It is a miracle of sorts that I am still physically able to dictate these notes from my new home in Texas. My medical history during the last decade has included diseases, accidents and surgeries. I had a triple by-pass heart operation, a gall bladder extirpation, two cataract operations; and I have also suffered since 1997 from a gait disorder, exhaustively explored by clinicians and neurologists without satisfactory diagnosis or treatment,
to the exclusion of all the usual suspects (from Lou Gehrig's disease to Parkinson's, brain or spinal tumors, infarcts and organic sequelae). [In view of all this mystery I have decided to call it the Rumbaut Syndrome, because every physician has the right to call an unexplained syndrome in his own name, especially when he suffers from it and no one has come out with a definite conclusion.] At any rate, I'm suffering it now from the neck down and need a tripod to walk, but from the neck up I feel OK. I think, I read, I watch TV every day, I write, I have good memory, I hear very well, I see satisfactorily after the cataract operation, and all my senses are in fine shape.

In my case the length of my exile has now extended for 40 years. The four shocks that I described in 1976 still stand, although some diluted and attenuated by the passage of time, others modified: culture shock, future shock, generational shock, and exile shock. For instance, culture shock diminishes with acculturation and a positive reception in the new country. Future shock, in contrast, increases with the pace of technological and social change. Generation gaps may be maintained, though in different ways, depending on and varying with the person. There have been different distances and gaps between different generations and waves of Cubans who have come here over the past four decades. There are some in the second generation (children born in the United States who are not "in exile," by definition) who want to retain some attachment to Cuba and to travel there, and there are some exiles who would condemn them for their attitude and perspective. Much depends on how you manage "home," and not make things worse by rejecting those you love because they do not share your exact ideology.

Exile shock, however, is maintained because the possibility of return remains unavailing and the sense of loss remains raw, if hidden. The unconscious is not able to perceive the passage of time. The experience of exile is a trauma that leaves a scar—it never disappears. The initial impact is traumatic, but it scarifies, and that remains as a permanent mark. I continue to feel in exile. I never desired it or imagined it; I did not come here for the American Dream but because of the Cuban Nightmare. Once here I had to make my way again, and represent my homeland in what I do here. One's homeland is not an "imagined community" (that's what Benedict Anderson imagines); rather, homeland is a remembered community, remembered via a shared history—a history which for 40 years I have remembered and shared in exile.

Exile is a defining fate; you don't just take it off like you would a pair of shoes. It involves going though the searing agony of loss—"encarnando el fenómeno" [living it in the flesh]—quite unlike the vantage of the distant observer, “-ologists” of various disciplines and subjects. From the point of view of dispassionate observers, the claim can be made that a person ceases to be an “exile” when they have become citizens of a new country, learned its language and customs, and so on. But to an exile, you cannot take the label away; it is seen as a cross and as a term of honor. For some (not all, since some others do fundamentally adapt to new circumstances), the essence of that trauma persists, and they will die feeling it. In that sense exile is a subjective variable.

In the United States people received us well; I never felt discriminated against, rejected or excluded. But, while I am very grateful for that reception, and although I have a different
citizenship and am regulated by the laws and norms of the new society, I have not become transformed as a person. And while I have always maintained a hope of return, I've been disabused of the idea (almost as wishful thinking) by the death of my wife and of so many colleagues and friends who were never able to return.

If I have a message or lesson to be drawn from my experience, it is that life—including everything that occurs in one's life, including exile—should be contemplated with the conviction that it changes with the passage of time: not because of time *per se*, but because during those passing years events are happening, leaving an imprint, changing the circumstances of one's self. If you act with that conviction, you can react flexibly—but some exiles react inflexibly, having drawn a line on the sand and refused to accept the malleability of life, of human possibilities. One does not control the future; the future is not a function of one's wishful thinking.

Whether you like it or not, in the Cuban case the inflexible exile reacts wholly around Fidel Castro (that is, around the object of one's anger and hatred, the perceived cause of one's loss). Some end up distancing themselves from "reality" as they become more and more wedded to conspiratorial collective imaginings and irrationalities. "Cuba" continues to exist in its landscape, its beaches, its royal palm trees and many other distinguishing features. But in exile one need not convert oneself into a member of the geriatric militias of Miami who rigidly and wishfully think that they are the guardians of the historic exile. One needs to be realistic and not fixed, not inflexible, not filled with wishful thinking. The image of clay—as a flexible, malleable, modifiable medium—is apt here. As an image it suggests that experiences and human relationships modeled in clay are not immutable, but that as events occur and people react differently, it leaves a modified outcome. In that sense it serves as an image that better reflects reality; it is also symbolic of earth, land, vitality, fertility, life source. The history of this exile will be written neither in marble nor in sand, but in clay.

More and more I observe my existence now as if through a rear view mirror instead of the windshield. This is a condition of aging and it happens to everybody, whether an exile or not. The passing of the years muffles all events and modifies each pain, each smile, each tear, each day and each night. For my observations and comments I have to rely much more on my son's eyes and ears. Despite all the shocks and the gaps and the years, we have managed to share our thoughts productively and to collaborate smoothly together for a common worthwhile goal.
IV.
LOT’S CHILDREN: THE POST-EXILE GENERATION

Rubén G. Rumbaut

Several years ago David Rieff penned a perceptive portrayal of “el exilio” in The Exile: Cuba in the Heart of Miami. 23 He depicted the many facets of “el tema,” the main topic of conversation in Cuban Miami, a catch-all phrase that described everything relating to “the exile.” He wrote of men and women who lived and breathed “el tema,” who loved their lost homeland—indeed, who felt their love of Cuba as a “sacred illness,” the bedrock of the exiles’ cohesion—and who “were horrified by the existence of a younger generation so far along in their indifference to Cuba that they were loath even to acknowledge its existence.” The wound that was exile was for them, Rieff observed, “unstanchable” after more than three decades, reflecting “the sense of lives, and homes, and youth, all gone forever… and the inexpressible, desolate sense of all exiles the world over share at being at ease and at home nowhere on earth.” 24 Aptly, the book opens with this epigraph by Czeslaw Milosz: “It is possible that there is no other memory than the memory of wounds.”

“Fresh starts” in the United States were for immigrants, motivated to get ahead; exile was about looking back, and remembering. In Cuban Miami—a mere 45-minute flight to a Havana that might as well have been light years away—the exiles “continued to live, metaphorically at least, with their bags packed and a strong fantasy alive in their hearts of what they would do in Cuba and for Cuba when, at last, they were finally able to return.” Yet these “argonauts of nostalgia” were blind to the possibility that their own cubanía, their sense of Cubanness and their roots in a lost past, might be purely generational, that it might stop with them and not extend to their Americanized children, who were thoroughly at home in Miami. Assimilation and exile did not mix. To assimilate was to accept that the exile was over, and, on a political level, that Fidel Castro had won, that all had been for naught. “The paradox was that the more comfortable they felt [in Miami], the more the wound of exile would be stanched, and the more their defining pain went away, the less they would be able to consider themselves to be exiles.” 25

Generational shifts in frames of reference are apparent to any Cuban-American parent, even in Miami. In Life on the Hyphen, the Cuban-American writer Gustavo Pérez Firmat, a “1.5er” who came with his parents into exile in Miami at the age of 11, observed that his U.S.-born, Miami-raised children could no more be “saved” from their Americanness than his parents could be “saved” from their Cubanness; for his children, Cuba was “an endearing fiction, as ethereal as the smoke from their grandfather’s cigars (which are not even Cuban but
Dominican);” and even for himself he would now envision a return to Cuba as a form of second exile, increasingly alien with the passage of time. How accurate are those portrayals by Rieff and Pérez Firmat, an outsider and an insider to the group, and what are their implications for our understanding of the Cuban diaspora?

The end of the 20th century may well have seen the end of an era of the Cuban diaspora. Inexorably, a new generation of largely U.S.-born and U.S.-oriented Cuban Americans has been replacing the generations who defined the meaning of being Cuban in exile. The signs of transition are everywhere, from the daily obituaries in Miami newspapers to glossy new magazines like Generation ñ devoted to exploring “life on the hyphen” for the young cohorts now coming of age in “Havana USA.” Whether these “pinos nuevos,” in José Martí’s famous metaphor of a century ago, will be able to sustain a Cuban identity and an attachment to the Cuban nation is an open question.

Consider these related questions: If the future of Cuba as a nation lies with its children, then who are those children? Who “is” Cuba? Do the children of the diaspora belong to it, and do they identify with it? Do they feel that sense of belonging and of attachment to la patria—to the “father-land,” “mother-land,” “home-land”—that suffuses their parents’ national self? Where is “home” for this post-exile generation (the U.S.-born children of the exiles)? How is the post-exile generation likely to act and react to changes in Cuba? As time passes and events unfold, as they will, however unpredictably, will they call Cuba home? Or will they become only curious visitors, genealogical tourists, largely indifferent both to the manifold possibilities of national reconciliation and to the intransigent “vertical” position maintained by some sectors in exile of utter opposition to the regime in power—a politics not only of vindication but of vengeance as well?

The future of Cuba as a nation has a rendezvous with demographic destiny coming up shortly. Fidel Castro is in his mid-70s; most Cubans on the island today were born well after the triumph of the revolution in 1959. The main protagonists of the tragic drama of revolution and exile are aging and passing on. In the not too distant future, they will make their exits from history—stage left or stage right, with a bang or with a whimper, some with great personal dignity, undiminished by their circumstances—but exits nonetheless. They will pass into the collective memory of Cuban history. And when the wall of bitter enmity between Cubans, on the island and in the diaspora, dissolves at last in the new century, the question of what it means to be Cuban in America will become all the more consequential. What bridges will form then, and who will cross them?

**The Case of the 400,000 Missing Cubans**

New national-level evidence bearing on this question suggests that a Cuban identity is rapidly eroding, especially as a result of intermarriage and dispersal outside the dense ethnic enclave in South Florida. An analysis of data collected in the late 1990s by the annual Current Population Surveys of the U.S. Census Bureau, which (unlike the decennial censuses since 1970) now asks questions about parents’ country of birth, is illuminating in this regard. For
decades official statistics on ethnic and racial identity have relied entirely on self-reports (on what persons say they are). I measured "Cuban identity" in two ways: a subjective identity (if the respondent self-identified as Cuban in the Hispanic question of the CPS), and an objective identity (if the respondent was either born in Cuba or had one or both parents born in Cuba). By the latter method, I estimated a Cuban-origin population (of persons born in Cuba or with at least one Cuban-born parent) of 1.6 million living in the United States as of 1997. But by the subjective identity method, which is the one used in reporting official data, there were only 1.2 million Cubans in the country at that time, a figure entirely in line with the 1990 (and now 2000) census counts. I dubbed this "the case of the 400,000 missing Cubans"—the substantial 25% who no longer identified as Cuban and who were fading into the twilight of ethnicity.

What happened to their identity? Of the “missing” 400,000, only 11% were born in Cuba, only 14% had two Cuban-born parents, and 80% lived outside the the primary enclave in South Florida. By contrast, of the 1.2 million who did identify as Cuban, over two-thirds were Cuban-born, 4 out of 5 (78%) had two Cuban parents, and a whopping 3 out of 5 (59%) were concentrated in metro Miami alone, where they were more likely to sustain a Cuban identity into the second generation. Generation, parentage, intermarriage and location were thus the main predictors of identity—and of identity loss. The 1990 census had counted almost 1.1 million (self-reported) Cubans in the United States. Of these, about 750,000 were born in Cuba, mostly exiles who came after 1959—and their median age was 50. In sharp contrast, the median age of the approximately 300,000 born in the U.S. was only 15—and of that post-exile generation, 80% were under 30, born after 1959. Census data on married persons also showed that 25% of Cubans in the U.S. were married to non-Hispanics—a figure that did not include the significant number of Cubans married to non-Cuban Hispanics. Those rates of intermarriage have increased over the past decade, raising still more questions about the meaning and construction of identity among their children.

Growing up in Cuban Miami

What do we know of the young people growing up in Cuban Miami? The best available evidence comes from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), the largest survey of its kind to date in the United States. The study has followed a sample of over 5,200 youths representing 77 different nationalities in South Florida and Southern California, from junior high in 1991-92 (when most were 14 or 15 years old) to the end of senior high school in 1995-96. The sample was evenly divided by sex and nativity (half were foreign-born, half were born in the U.S. of foreign-born parents). Since Miami was one of the two sites in CILS, it is not surprising that children of Cuban origin represent the largest single ethnic group in the study. Over 1,200 of the CILS respondents surveyed in 1992 had at least one parent born in Cuba; in most cases both parents were Cuban-born (77%), but the children themselves were mostly U.S.-born (71%).

The study confirms that without exception children of immigrants and refugees learn to speak English proficiently and come to prefer it to their mother tongue. While a foreign language was spoken in 93% of these households, 73% of all the children already preferred to speak
English in 1992 and that proportion swelled to 88% by 1995-96. In these respects, Cubans did not represent an exceptional case in comparison with the other groups in the study. Even in Cuban Miami, English language proficiency and preference for English was high and increased over time. By 1995-96 about 95% of the Cuban respondents preferred to speak English—suggestive of their rapid Americanization despite their location in “Havana USA.” Still, the Cubans significantly surpassed all other groups in the proportion who remained fluent bilinguals; this was especially evident among those enrolled in bilingual private schools, the majority (55%) of whom were fluent in both Spanish and English by the end of high school (compared to 42% of Cubans in public schools).

CILS respondents where asked to indicate, in an open-ended question, how they identified themselves. Of all the groups in the study, the Cuban respondents were the least likely to identify by national origin—i.e., as “Cuban.” This was true in both the 1992 baseline survey and in the 1995-96 follow-up, and among those in private school (only 3% to 6% thought of themselves as Cuban) and in public school (only 17% self-identified as Cuban); the small proportion who did tended to be Cuban-born. In the first survey the Cubans were among the groups with the highest percent identifying as plain “American,” though those numbers plummeted by the follow-up survey. Instead, the Cubans in private school shifted increasingly in favor of a hyphenated Cuban-American identity over time (from 58% to 71%), while the Cubans in public school were more likely to have adopted the panethnic label of “Hispanic” (increasing from 8% to 32%). When they were first interviewed in 1992, relatively few thought of themselves as “Hispanics”—unlike most other Latin Americans—but by 1995-96, that identification with a racial-ethnic minority group had made great strides: 30% of all respondents with Cuban parents identified that way. In terms of identity, the process of “becoming American” for these youths is taking a bifurcated path, with the more socio-economically advantaged and ambitious adopting a more mainstream hyphenated identity (a bilingual “life on the hyphen”), while others internalize a minority group identity.

CILS respondents were also asked to indicate if they had ever felt discriminated against, and whether they expected that they would be discriminated against no matter how much education they achieved. Tellingly, Cubans in Miami (whether in private or public schools) were the group least likely to report experiencing or expecting discrimination, even less than white respondents from Europe and Canada. That finding is noteworthy, and points to the protective nature of the dense Cuban enclave in which they have been raised—and to the fact that they are the only group to form a majority in the city where they have settled.

This sense of security from outside discrimination shows in other ways. Psychologically, Cuban-origin youth in Miami were found to have well above average self-esteem scores, and the lowest level of depressive symptoms of any group in the study. Of all groups in CILS, the Cubans (in public and private schools) watched more television and put in the least effort on homework, and in this unflattering respect they came across as perhaps the most assimilated of the 1.5- and second-generation groups. Finally, CILS respondents were also asked to agree or disagree with the statement that “the U.S. is the best country in which to live.” Of all the groups,
Cubans were most likely to agree with that statement, and by decisive margins. Furthermore, the percentages increased over time, so that by 1995-96 more than 80 percent of all the Cuban respondents agreed with the statement.

“Becoming American” takes different forms, has different meanings, and is reached by different paths. But the process is one in which all children of immigrants and refugees are inexorably engaged—forming a new national self and defining an identity for themselves, which is to say, a meaningful place in the society which is “home” to them. In the latest survey we asked them which place most felt like “home:” the United States, or their/their parents’ homeland, or both, or neither. The overwhelming majority—9 out of 10—said that the United States was “home,” while miniscule proportions (just over 1 percent) indicated that either their country of origin, or neither, most felt like home. The rest, less than 1 in 10, indicated that “both countries” felt like home to them. Even in Miami, the heart of the Cuban community, they are coming of age in an American crucible, one not capable of sustaining intergenerationally a deeply felt sense of belonging to a Cuban nation. In the generational movement from exiles to ethnics, a hyphenated Cuban-American ethnicity is likely to flourish, especially in Miami. Yet even there it will most probably be absorbed into the vast American mainstream: a post-exile generation that will see itself mostly and natively as American, with or without the hyphen, and that will see Cuba nostalgically as origin but not as destiny, as the past and even the wished-for future of their criollo parents—but not as their own. This, in any case, is what present signs and trends seem strongly to suggest.

But who knows what the Law of Unintended Consequences has in store for Cuba and for Cubans, in and out of the island, and what surprises await all of us yet? Our children, and grandchildren, may still surprise us themselves. Theirs, after all, will be the last word. But unlike their parents in exile, incessantly remembering and looking back home as in the metaphorical story of Lot’s wife, for Lot’s children there is no similar memory of wounds, no phantom pain, over a homeland that was never lost in the first place.
In that way:
  your neck
turned towards the past;
  your hair
loose, long, in disarray and gray;
  your eyes
absolutely fixed in the flames;
  your flesh
braised by burning ashes;
  your feet
covered by creeping lava;
  your whole body
made into salt, stone, and coal, and diamond;
  not wanting
any distraction, any consolation;
  ignoring
the present and the future, and all images
different from that perennial, radiant image
which fuses into itself
the cradle with the grave,
the home with the old land,
and the unforgettable
presence of persons, places, times and circumstances;
that total, vivid, never-passing image
where all the things we were, and had, and loved,
forever lie . . .

  Statue of the exile,
tall trunk, deep root, firm rock and living water;
biblical pillar; tireless, sharp spur;
dry pain without asylum or respite;
dark silhouette against the red bright fire;
sentinel, solitary and ever-watching;
infinite witness of the human history
erect between destruction and expulsion.

You, the one who defied
the orders of departing and forgetting;
the most loyal, most faithful,
most tenacious
beyond fear, beyond death;
of all your ancient people
only you have remained:
single survivor since the day you died
among corpses that chose – they thought – to live.

I do not know
if your city sinned more than other cities;
I do not know
if the extermination was predestined;
I do not know
the cause of so much darkness, so much pain.
But from the catastrophe and the exodus
(when all the ashes cooled
and all the noises ceased
and the last sandal wore slowly away)
I know that you persist
the same forever;
you, heroine
victorious over death, space and time,
sculptured in the flower of the mountain
with your profile of salt and mute defiance,
a longing gesture in the extended hand
while eternally looking at your land.
NOTES


2 The two papers were presented on May 8, 1976, at the annual meeting of the American Society for Adolescent Psychiatry, Miami Beach, Florida. They are reproduced here in their original form. The theme of the ASAP meetings was “Youth in Transition: Developmental, Clinical, and Cultural Aspects.”


Erik H. Erikson, Identity: Youth and Crisis, op. cit.


Ibid., pp. 22, 63, 102, 146.

Ibid., pp. 27, 30, 60, 158.

Census data and life table analyses suggest that probably 100,000 Cubans who came in the early 1960s had died in exile by the year 2000, as had as many as 150,000 of the older Cubans who were airlifted during 1965-74. By 2010 the generational transition is likely to be virtually complete.

Martí, the quintessence of Cuban patriotism, was the Cuban-born son of Spanish immigrants who spent most of his adult life in exile in the U.S., a struggle which deepened rather than weakened his sense of Cuban identity.

A woman in a camp in Croatia captured in a vivid metaphor the war-torn refugees’ sense of loss of homeland: “They are like people who have lost a limb. Amputees. They can still feel their homeland, even though it’s gone. It tingles. Subconsciously they know everything was destroyed, but as long as they’re in camp they can dream it’s still there.” Christopher Merrill. 1995. The Old Bridge: The Third Balkan War and the Age of the Refugee. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.

I call it a “post-exile” generation because to speak of a second generation in exile is an oxymoron: in Spanish, the word for exile is _destierro_ (literally, without one’s homeland), but for the second-generation children of the exiles the land of their birth is the United States, most often the Florida peninsula, where two-thirds of the Cuban-origin population in the U.S. is concentrated.