

## Cubans in Texas and My Anthropological Journey

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**Bio:**

Jason Vega spends his time in Tallahassee, Florida, majoring in creative writing and reading a lot of American fiction and poetry. Originally from Tampa, he came up with an idea to study his native tribe, the Cubanus Americanus, in their diasporic habitat. In the past, Jason has worked a slue of odd jobs and remembers masonry as his favorite. He currently entertains the idea of pursuing an MFA in poetry or working as an international sailor (basically, whichever offers the largest living stipend). Eventually, more research and a possible documentary chronicling the Cuban migration are likely.

**Abstract:**

This manuscript is a journey into applied anthropology coming from a creative writing student. The holistic methods of the field are discussed and explored, including ethnographic research and making a change in studied societies affected with social problems. This work addresses the recent and growing trend of the Cuban diaspora to Texas. Themes such as preservation of identity have been noted, as the recent immigrants bring their food, music, and tobacco along with them. The author discusses his experience as a beginning ethnographer and highlights the ups and downs during research. Also, he is able to point out several organizations that are offering aid and assistance to the new Latino minority in Texas, the Cuban people. Policy toward Latin America is discussed, particularly the Good Neighbor policy, and the idea of American film made during this era, influencing the Cuban diaspora to the United States.

### Applied Texas Anthropology

Chugging away at college all these years, I thought anthropology existed mainly around archaeology or things like cultural studies. Getting to the University of North Texas (UNT), I find myself immersed in an applied anthropology setting that ranks highly among American departments of the field.

Ever since World War II, the field of anthropology continues to evolve. Directly following the war, departments grew rapidly to fill the increasing demand of American students who were now interested in the broadening scope of the field. Applied anthropology approaches the subject of human existence with a holistic approach that not only examines the difficulties confronted by contemporary societies but also aims to find improvised, creative, and new solutions to the ever-changing ways that human problems are addressed.

I must admit, when I first encountered this idea of working with different populations and societies and offering ideas that would spark change, the idea repulsed me. “Whose right is it to make a change in a group that you are not a part of?” is the mantra that ran through my head. Journal article after journal article, I read about white guys who went to the *barrio* and did ethnographies of crack dealers, or the woman who hung out at the sex shop as a research site. I kept thinking to myself, “Do those people belong there?”

At my university, I study literature and writing, so studying people is new to me. I am used to reading scholarly articles that mention the Hemingway iceberg theory or something about the prevalence of Dirty Realism, a type of middle-class realism that continues to influence current trends in the American novel and film. Either way, we look at made-up stuff that dives into stories that have an ending created to aid or destroy the protagonist. Simple enough. But in anthropology today, we see a much different story.

Here I found myself in this fast-growing North Texas town surrounded by medical and sociocultural anthropologists studying in their own neighborhoods and areas that are related directly to the Texas cultural makeup. As I became immersed in dozens of journal articles, I easily overlooked the broad range of subjects researched by the scholars at UNT. As time has passed and the fog has cleared, it is easier to understand the purpose and modus operandi of this whole applied anthropology thing: make it relevant and make a difference.

### Research Journey

I often find myself taking courses in Film Studies back at Florida State; last semester a doctoral student, Susana Diaz, took us on a journey through Central and South America along with the Caribbean (Chanan, 1985). In class, we explored issues from the ousting of Allende in Chile, and we talked about the Shining Path in Peru and other injustices that have occurred in Latin America. Susana opened my eyes to the human rights and economic problems throughout the Spanish-speaking world, and related most of it back to the United States in a Marxist outlook and agenda that I find prevalent in university journals today.

Being a Cuban American, and so versed in (and very leery of) Marxism, I still took notice in a concept studied in sociology and the humanities, cultural imperialism. She had us watch films made in the Third Cinema movement, and we saw Cuban films that mocked the political system in Cuba, a mockery called a *choteo*. In addition, from what I understand from my feminist friends, the feminist struggle is rooted heavily in Marxism, as is most analysis of cultural imperialism. Thus, the class motivated me to explore a non-Marxist point of view, a standpoint not prevalent in the academy.

I came up with this idea that American film is having, and has been having, an impact on the Cuban diaspora. I came across things like FDR's Good Neighbor Policy (Fejes, 1986;

Newfarmer, 1985; Pike, 1985) and realize how this whole idea is completely relevant (Adams, 2007). Even through Castro's heavy use of censorship, I feel there is an American cultural influence infiltrating the island nation. Talking to family members who have come to the states recently, there are plenty of U.S. films being shown on the island. Also, with the global economy in effect, visitors from Europe and around the world flock to the island daily; the American dream could be even coming through to Cuba from our neighbors across the Atlantic. My several visits to Northern Europe over the past decade have shown a large influx of American culture in the Netherlands, where a good friend of mine resides. On my first visit around 1997 or 1998, I remember us watching *M.A.S.H.* at night before going to bed. Sure, there were BBC channels being broadcast across the English Channel, but that was it for American shows, the 4077th fighting the evils of communism in Korea. On my last visit, I was shocked to see a mall built in The Hague, along with a Home Depot-type home improvement center, not to mention the influx of American television shows and channels.

So I started to wonder about the films of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, such as *Top Hat*, that my aunt would watch in Cuba. There seems to me a dream world offered in those films, with the opulence of the main characters, living in fancy hotels and eating exquisite meals in canal-lined settings. My aunt and I would talk about the films of Bogart and the film noir of the 1930s and 1940s, which have a certain appeal to us. I often watch them now and think about how exciting it would be to run around San Francisco as a private eye looking for a statue, as seen in *The Maltese Falcon*.

#### Research and Literature Review

There is no mistaking that Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders helped Cuba in its fight for independence against Spain. The only thing that went wrong in my eyes is when the

United States continued to keep a hold on Cuba's political and economic sectors. Later in Nelson Rockefeller's address to Nixon, the concept of imperialism was directly addressed in *The Rockefeller Report*: "In its relations, the United States has all too often demonstrated, at least subconsciously, a paternalistic attitude toward the other nations of the hemisphere" (Rockefeller, 1969, p. 21).

The words were strong coming from the former Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA). He was working hand-in-hand with FDR on the project that consisted of making the United States and Latin America better friends. Rockefeller was one to be listened to with regard to our southern neighbors. Rockefeller personally saw the effects of U.S. intervention with Cuba from the time that FDR stepped into office in 1933, and was a natural choice to become the CIAA due to his family's business investments in Latin America, which consisted mainly of oil in places such as Venezuela and other countries.

When people think of Fidel Castro as a brutal dictator and oppressor, the simple fact is that Gerardo Machado, a dictator in early 20th-century Cuba, was as bad, if not worse. One main difference is that Machado was supported in Washington by the Republicans. The same year that FDR came into office, there was a large student uprising in Cuba that offered a chance for a change. The ambassador appointed to Cuba by FDR was Sumner Welles, who sat behind the scenes and offered cabinet advice to the new president of Cuba, Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, former ambassador to the United States. Cespedes soon arranged his cabinet with close advice from Welles (Pike, 1995). This guy did not last long, and around this time, Fulgencio Batista began to be a key player on the scene.

First, back to the students. They began to lean toward socialism and communism, and did not take well to the Cespedes presidency. Ramon Grau San Martin made his way into the top

office after the Sergeants Revolt, led by Batista. Yet Grau lasted only until January of 1934 before Batista caught wind of a possible U.S. intervention, and put Carlos Mendieta in office (no matter—Grau eventually made it back into the presidency) (Pike, 1995).

It actually gets complicated when discussing Cuban presidents, considering there were over a dozen presidents between 1902 and 1940. It was a time where presidents lasted for a month or, in the case of Manuel Marquez Sterling y Loret, a matter of hours. It would take too long to get into the whole thing.

Okay, so back to Rockefeller and on to film. As Rockefeller became head of the CIAA, he soon appointed John Hay Whitney to be head of a Motion Picture Division, created to address the problem of negative stereotyping and overall racist tones in films related to Latin America. Whitney, an established member of Hollywood production circles, invested a large sum of money to have *Gone With the Wind* filmed. This concept of fostering a better relationship between the United States and Latin America was an important one for the Rockefellers and other investors, who preferred “stable” governments and friends down south so that minerals could be extracted easily. Once Whitney was in, he eventually contacted the heads of the Production Code Administration (PCA) and appointed Addison Durland, protector of the image projected to America’s southern neighbors and, most important, business partners. And according to Adams,

Hays and Breen were somewhat easily persuaded by Whitney to bring Durland into the PCA because even before Durland the PCA had exercised certain censorial and regulatory powers over Hollywood films relative to the treatment of Latin Americans and Latin themes. (Adams, 2007)



So whether or not Durland was the right guy in terms of effects on Cuba, it had a major impact on the island. He was born to a Cuban mother on the island, and was a good choice with regard to Cuban interests. However, was it pure coincidence that Cuba would receive extra attention due to the placing of Durland? The United States did not want a huge mess down there, and Cuba is the nearest Latin American country, second to Mexico, which also received a lot of negative attention in American media. Adams points out an account by Alfred Charles Richard that states how over 300 films were made in the United States between 1933 and 1955 that related to Mexico. Eventually, Walt Disney was even thrown into the mix to play the role of chief propagandist for the CIAA (Adams, 2007).

#### Methods/Data Collection

When originally planning this project, my main intention was to run around Florida in my truck and interview Cubans. I imagined myself as a sort of Lois Lane-type character with an ethnographic edge. The plan was simple: I would drive to three areas immersed with large Cuban populations and ask people what impact American film had on their migration. Simple enough? The next thing I know, I am invited to work with the Department of Anthropology at the University of North Texas. No more Tampa, Miami, or Key West to do my study and possibly sneak away to a nice beach. Still, how hard could it be to find Cubans in Texas?

Here in Texas, I was immersed in dozens of anthropological journal articles and exposed to countless research methods. Terms like snowballing, gatekeepers, and random sampling were important (Behar, 2007). Also, I learned tons about the different forms of ethnographic research, both qualitative and quantitative. It was all new to me considering I had spent my time in college reading novels and poems and taking writing workshops or film studies courses. The way I

imagined research was reading a book, then reading it again and again, then write a long critique about it. Not too tough.

My data collection methods for the research project originally began with the idea of videotaping impromptu interviews that were loosely structured in nature. At first, I had no idea about anything such as an Institutional Review Board (IRB) or the ethics involved in the field of anthropology. As a creative writing major, we are afforded the luxury of not worrying too much about the impact of our work. Sure, our words on paper will have a longer-lasting effect than we might imagine, but we also have the creative freedom to talk to anyone, quote anyone loosely, and do as we please. The IRB and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) certificates are great in the sense that they protect both the researcher and the participants. Plus, the Tuskegee Project was presented to us via a documentary showing the damaging effects of science and how vulnerable populations could be mistreated. It was shocking to me to see how such things could be done in the name of science.

Next thing I know, I am certified with an NIH ethics certificate that shows that I have been trained in ethics and will do no harm to an unsuspecting population. I had to get my interview questions approved, to make sure I was not offending anyone, either. My questions involved asking people whether or not they watched American films in Cuba and their perceptions of America before and after arriving, as well as questions about censorship of films in Cuba.

My friends did a presentation for a client in Dallas, so I showed up to offer my support. I find an old Spanish-born, Cuban-raised guy that tells me that most Cubans are in Austin and Houston. I immediately get excited and see Cuban restaurants advertised online and hope I have found my way.

So I complete my ethics training and begin my journey into capturing interviews on film. It did not take long before I realized the idea of the “camera effect.” It all started when I went down to Austin for a short Fourth of July getaway. As I was attempting to get back to my hotel (on one of my many wrong turn voyages), I spotted a Cuban flag hanging outside a storefront, where the sign for the store would normally be. I immediately turned around and made an illegal turn into the shopping center. Walking into the store, I immediately noticed the quick Cuban drawl of the shopkeeper and customers as I browsed around the store. There were not that many products, but all of them were things that Cubans typically used at home. Violet cologne, *malta*, castile soaps, and various clothing. As I looked around, the shopkeeper’s mother came over and started showing me the various women’s blouses. I was not sure why she did so, but I smiled and told her they were nice.

As the customers cleared, I made my way over to the shop owner, a man about 40 years old, with a gold bracelet and short graying hair. I told him about my project and a customer jumped into the conversation and started on about why Cubans come to the United States. Themes such as the American dream came up and freedom was mentioned, all in a blur of fast-talking Cuban lingo. I asked him for his phone number so that we could meet up later and do the interview on film, to which he agreed, and when I finally called him back, he claimed he was working and would call me back. I never heard from him again; even after I called him back, there was no word from him.

In Austin, I even came across a cigar store that was a small cigar factory of sorts and had its own Cuban cigar rollers. I tried time and time again to secure a phone interview with one of the rollers, but time not being on my side, I had trouble getting in touch with any of the cigar makers due to their erratic time schedules.

I get back to Denton and keep trying to contact the few leads I had from Cubans in Austin, and I end up contacting a Cuban salsa band. The bandleader tells me that they are about to play a show that night and after that, most of the band will split up for summer vacations in Cuba and Miami. Go figure. I immediately look up other Cuban restaurants in the area and find one in the town next to the one where the Cuban band is playing. I rent a car and make a stop at the restaurant just in time to have an espresso with the owner who told me over the phone a video interview would be okay—until I showed up at the time he told me, which was simultaneous with an early dinner rush. We shook hands and I agreed to send him the interview questions via e-mail. I did. I called. He never got back to me. Busy working.

Same thing happened to me when I got to the park to see the band play. I introduced myself as they set up and I talked about my research with the guys, and it immediately went into the slew of American movies they had seen over there. All the classic black-and-white stuff. Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney. The bandleader who claimed she would do the interview flaked out. No interview. Just like the restaurant owner. Too busy working. We could never get together before my time ran out. She even was so happy to do it, and told me about a cigar storeowner in the city who was Cuban.

I contact the cigar storeowner and he agreed that I can come by and do some filming. When I call him to confirm, he says he is too busy. I mention the idea of a phone interview and he says okay, and we try to set up a time. He tells me to e-mail him the questions, which I do. He has to run, there is a customer. Busy working.

### Conclusion

I found it difficult in my short time frame to capture interviews, and as I was talking with a gatekeeper in Texas, she mentioned how she was telling other Cubans about my project and

seeing if they would help out. She went on to tell me that the Cubans that she talked to were having a difficult time with the idea of doing recorded phone interviews. Once I started to think about it, I realized the whole concept of recording phone calls or doing filmed interviews could sound suspicious to someone who has recently arrived from a country where phone calls are recorded and neighbors will turn you in if they hear you talking about the government. It was even made fun of in the Cuban film, *Fresas y Chocolate*, where the protagonist, a radical artist in Cuba, turns up his radio when speaking up about the regime. My population actually must have thought that I was spying on them, like the neighbor in the film who was an informant to the police.

In Florida, I theorize that my subjects might be easier to recruit considering they have been in the states longer, and do not live in fear of secret police invading their home and whisking them away. Instead, in Texas I had hit upon a population that has typically been in the United States for a short time, and are still traumatized by the idea of not being able to freely speak their minds. Through my research, I came across various organizations that are involved in helping Cubans make the transition to this country—offering economic support, teaching English, and so forth—but I also learned that Cubans are now migrating to Texas thanks to the commonly called Wet-Foot Dry-Foot Policy. The policy states that Cubans who make it to dry land in the United States on makeshift rafts can typically stay, claiming political asylum, but if they get caught out at sea, they are immediately sent back to the island. So a new trend of *balseros*, as the daring ocean crossers are called, are now making their destination Mexico and Central America (de Vise & de Valle, 2004; Huffman, 2006). Also, a large amount of human trafficking is occurring, leaving the Cubans in Mexico, where they rarely are sent back to Cuba. Once in Mexico, the voyage to the border begins, which is often difficult due to lack of funds or

legal documents, but once they arrive, they can claim immunity at the U.S. border and they are legally allowed to be admitted.

Perhaps the years of U.S. intervention in Cuban politics has left recent Cuban immigrants leery of their new country. The fact is that most of the Cubans I talked to in Texas were engaging in different forms of identity preservation because they are so proud of their native country, and proud to display it in their new one. Be it the cigar stores, the restaurants, the Cuban baseball league, or even the salsa band, Cubans were holding on to their culture in their new country. It is something that makes me happy as a Cuban American. I look forward to finding out more about Cubans, their evolving identity and self-preservation, and their perceptions of the United States and Cuba, as I plan to collect *testimonios*, or personal narratives, in the upcoming years.

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