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Spring 5-6-2016

# Cuba a La Yuma: In, Around, and Millennial Thoughts

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## Recommended Citation

Kline, Zoe, "Cuba a La Yuma: In, Around, and Millennial Thoughts" (2016). *Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers*. 5.  
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*Cuba a La Yuma*  
In, Around, and Millennial Thoughts

May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016

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## **Abstract**

The camera phone prompted a new stylistic approach that has created an outlet for inexpensive and democratized photography, seemingly giving anyone the revolutionary ability to be called an artist. It is because of this that photojournalism, as an art practice, is losing its intrinsic ambitions — to employ visual storytelling to, more effectively than written word, foster positive social and political activism. Photographs of war and marginalized people in society have become both exploitative and dehumanizing in their treatment of both photographic style and relationship to subject and have only numbed their viewers to today's atrocities. I look to find a solution for these fundamental changes in postmodern art by interchanging the roles of photographer and subject, allowing for the camera to seamlessly flow through time and space to tell a more representative and less romanticized story. It is through this shift in the socially engaged creative process and aesthetic decision to subvert the common visual language of documentary photography to a "snapshot" approach that I seek to resolve the moral mind-field of photojournalism.

The United States of America and the island of Cuba, less than one hundred miles off the coast of Florida, have had hostile relations and long standing grudges against each other for over fifty years. America's ties to Cuba go back well before the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 to the end of the Spanish-American war in 1898, when Spain signed over their territories to America, including Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Guam. For the next half of a century, Cuba acted with independence under the pretense that the United States could intervene in the country's affairs if necessary. The Cuban Revolution followed, and took several years of fighting and American support to finally put Fidel Castro – with seemingly socialist ideologies in the early stages - and his guerillas in power in 1959. However, soon after Castro seized power he took private land and nationalized hundreds of companies, making the American government weary of his communist tendencies growing any further just after the end of the Second Red Scare.<sup>1</sup> The Eisenhower Administration retaliated against this behavior by way of destroying their economy rapidly and imposed strict trade restrictions on everything except basic food and medical supplies. Still concerned with the direction Cuba was taking soon after, President John F. Kennedy expanded the embargo to a full ban on all exports, including rigorous travel restrictions.

The remains of the two countries diplomatic ties were completely severed on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1961 during a staged and failed military invasion of Cuba undertaken by the CIA to overthrow the communist government. This climactic turn of events, best known as the Bay of Pigs Invasion, or in Cuba, Batalla de Playa Giron, involved 1,400

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cfr.org/cuba/us-cuba-relations/p11113>

American-trained Cubans, who had fled their homes when Castro took over, storming the Cuban government, but they were badly outnumbered by Castro's troops and embarrassingly surrendered within 24 hours.<sup>2</sup>

Since Kennedy placed the official embargo on Cuba in 1962 and shattered any remaining relationship causing the economic and political freedom of the Cuban people to slowly deteriorate. The Cuban government repressed individuals for decades to come with detentions, exile, travel restrictions depending on level of education, academic limitations, and are recently faced with problems such as an aging and hungry population, a low standard of living, and extensive foreign debt. The scarcity of consumer goods and lack of strong educational systems causing serious downward occupational mobility were debilitating factors that encouraged the first of three stages of immigration to the United States. The Early Departure Stage- January 1959-1962 was at the very beginning of Castro's communist regime and many wealthy Cubans left the island. The second stage occurred shortly after between 1965-1973 when Castro announced that exiles could pick up their relatives at the port of Camerioca, until the U.S. government halted boat trips. The third stage is currently ongoing, and more and more Cubans are immigrating to

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<sup>2</sup> Castro responded by expanding diplomatic ties with the communist government and enemy of the U.S., the Soviet Union, and allowed them to keep nuclear weapons pointed at the U.S. on their Cuban soil. This quickly became what is known as the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and for 12 days the U.S. and Russia were locked in a white-knuckled nuclear face-off — the Cuban Missile Crisis — that ended only when Nikita Khrushchev accepted President Kennedy's secret proposal to remove U.S. missiles in Turkey in exchange for the de-arming of Cuba.

<<http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/bay-of-pigs-invasion>>

America to be faced with a unique cultural shock due to the distinctive absence of the American hand to both culturally and technologically shape the island.<sup>3</sup>

In 2008 Castro had no choice but to begin liberalizing his country, and with this American and Cuban relations began to improve slowly. Prompted by prisoner swaps in 2005, and followed by an influx of money and economic stimulation brought to Cuba under the orders of President Obama's administration, Raul Castro and Obama finally reconciled the relationship for the first time in fifty years at the Summit of the Americas in Panama on March, 21, 2016.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, a lack of civil rights like the Cubans face is not uncommon. Several activists and artists began to hone in on today's pertinent themes of escaping that type of repression in hopes of migration, and eventually cultural assimilation, and the formation of a new identity. One of the most acclaimed photographers capturing the complex stories of undocumented immigrants is senior photographer of Getty Images, John Moore. With experience in over 15 Latin American countries, immigration reform and awareness of immigrants as people are at the forefront of his significance. In his

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<sup>3</sup> *Migration Today*, Sandra Fradd explains that there are six different stages of Cuban immigration into America in reality- three peaks and three lulls. The different stages reflect the political and economic developments in Cuba. The lulls occurred Post Missile Crisis from 1962-1965, '65 until the beginning of the Freedom Flotilla in Mariel Harbor 1980, and in the 90s.

<sup>4</sup> *Obama Meets Raul Castro, Making History*, Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Randal C. Archibold talk about the face-to-face discussion between Raul and Obama and how these changes will normalize Cuba's economy and the precedent that Obama is setting in Latin American nations. Adding to Obama, "The United States will not be imprisoned by the past — we're looking to the future. I'm not interested in having battles that frankly started before I was born." Wrapping up the summit meeting he also said at a news conference, "our governments will continue to have differences, at the same time, we agreed that we can continue to take steps forward that advance our mutual interests."

recent series from 2014, *Border Security*, Moore searched to create a visual platform for political consciousness and reform. He said,

“It has become a cliché to talk about undocumented immigrants ‘living in the shadows. That’s of course not literally true, as we are surrounded by them every day...”<sup>5</sup> However, after looking at the series, we are confronted with startling images, see below, that do not relay Moore’s investment in the subject, but rather seem to exploit the subject in to becoming nothing more than an image.



Figure 1: John Moore. Former undocumented immigrant Arturo Santana sits in front of his modest home at the Tirabichi garbage dump on March 5, 2013 in Nogales, Mexico.

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<sup>5</sup> “...doing the work most Americans refuse to do. We would not have affordable food on our tables without them. And for the most part, these folks go way out of their way to stay out of trouble—the last [thing] they want is to get arrested. The good news is that the political environment is becoming more favorable to reform. I just hope it’s sooner rather than later.” (Continuation of) Moore’s quote from an article in *Slate Magazine* about his photographic projects that deal with today’s immigration conflict

The issues we see in Moore's body of work are nothing new to the photography world — photojournalistic world more specifically — and the thinkers within it. New York Times writer, Susie Linfield calls into question the ineffectiveness of this type of imagery, saying:

“They present a sharp challenge to modern concepts of universalism, to the comforting belief that “we” are all essentially the same and that the family of man, while sometimes disputatious, can unite on at least some basic common values. Not so. Perpetrator photographs reveal how terribly different people can be and how terribly easy it is to excise others from the category of the human.”<sup>6</sup>

She believes that the type of revelation of violence and oppression Moore and so many other documentary photographers are showing will only further dehumanize and advertize these perpetual atrocities.

Looking back at the predecessors of Linfield's conceptual documentary thinking, artist and writer Martha Rosler is at the forefront of the philosophers as she problematized the popular photographic style of depicting the underprivileged and suffering. She claimed the photojournalistic practice then was too counter-productive in

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Linfield in, *Advertisements for Death*, refers most frequently to the Syrian war, rooting this type of “torture porn” in Nazi WWII photography. She later continues to with “I never thought the camera would become a tool with which to proclaim and affirm, rather than fight against, the most hideous aspects of war and the most fearsome authoritarian regimes.”

its goal of creating a visually and socially conscious world. The 1960's and 70's artist said in her most famous essay, *In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)*:

“The exposé, the compassion and outrage, of documentary fueled by the dedication to reform has shaded over into combinations of exoticism, tourism, voyeurism, psychologism and metaphysics, trophy hunting—and careerism.”<sup>7</sup>

Rosler, however, implies ways in which to reverse this changing dynamic, some of which include a reciprocal relationship between the photographer and the subject. Here, she had just begun to touch the surface of what is now a commonly accepted contemporary art form, socially engaged and publically practiced art. Socially engaged art is reliant on an artistic practice that fosters meaningful dialogues and relationships with communities or individuals to create the finished work inevitably pushing the artist to act more consciously, as an ethnographer, rather than purely a photographer.

In my final thesis project, *Cuba a la Yuma*, the combination of a socially engaged artistic and documentary-style approach to post-modern photojournalism is how I challenge these themes of reality and success of a photograph in eradicating half-told

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<sup>7</sup> Martha Rosler, on page 178 in her essay *In, Around, And Afterthoughts*, refers to the “victims” of documentary photography, and thus the exploitative nature of liberal documentation. In this world where, according to Rosler, dedication to any type of reform has been replaced by exoticism, tourism, and voyeurism, is the subject nothing more than the photographic ghost?

stories and exploitative images that only astonish their audience, but never enlighten. Four to five times a week for the past three months I have been interacting with and photographing the Martinez family, a Cuban immigrant family who came from the province of Matanzas just days before meeting me at the International Institute of St. Louis. The family consists of the eldest brother and sister, Jesús 41 years, Noremia (Nore) 38 years, their nephew, Leoniel Bonachea (Leo) 27 years, his brother-in-law Juan Antonio (Guancho) 40 years, and Noremia's two sons Wanderley (Wandy) 18 years, and Derek (Dere) 8 years. In these last three months I have gotten the pleasure of giving them their first taste of everything American such as BBQ, museums, bars, and even doctors, while they quickly welcomed me into their family unit and encouraged me to be part of their daily cultural traditions.

Upon meeting the Martinez family, I explained I was working on a photographic project for my university that's end goal was to tell not only their story of assimilation and discovery of a new identity here, but also the current and revolutionary shift in the history of Cuban and American relations. They were eager from the start to be given a voice in America. Forming a solid and trusting relationship with them in order to foster a more relaxed and genuine environment was a priority of mine, and so began the shift in my project from a sole focus on them to the inclusion of myself in themes of the work. As a result, the significance of this project for me has become rather personal in that not only does it challenge me culturally and linguistically, but forces me to explore my place and my identity within these contexts. The questions answered in the final body of work deal with not only the problematization of current documentary photography approaches, but also questions of identity when two completely different cultures interact and

subsequently, react to one another in an equally unfamiliar territory to both. Essentially, I have created an auto-ethnographic study of my adjustment to a foreign culture and unit, in addition to the Martinez's family assimilation, using photography as a self-reflective and archival method. Although I do not physically place myself within the photograph, I developed several ways in which to visually depict the absorption of my presence into their home. This relatively new area of art-based inquiry and critical awareness is at the forefront of socially engaged artwork and basis for furthering the role of visual language in more effectively providing us with an ethnographic understanding of our surroundings.



Figure 2: Zoë Kline, *Cuba a la Yuma*, 2016

The final exhibition will be comprised of 12"x8" and 9"x6" photographs mounted on wood, that call attention to the temporal aspect of our development and our slow conversion. The photographs will be ones taken by both me, as well as the Martinez family during our time together, and screenshots of conversations in written word

between us. It is important to me to break to barrier that the camera places between subject and photographer, and speak to our daily off-the-camera relationship grounded in the tactile and real. The decision to back the small photographs with wood gives the images a weight, a sense of value and importance, that put them in a category of object and archival like-rather than fleeting and impersonal. There is a very strong sense of evolution in our relationship and cultural shifts seen within objects they give me and messages that each family member sends me. The juxtaposition of the text and imagery fills in a third layer of understanding that forces the audience to think about the relationship and moments beyond the camera- something that neither can accomplish on it's own.

My hope is that through this subverted creative process, the audience will gain an insight into the cultural values and rituals of the Martinez family — and the Cuban people — as well as my transformation into their family unit. My project enables the creation of a visual metaphor from which viewers develop their own emotional, physical and political response. I also hope they open their eyes to the pleasures and pains of assimilating into another group, and the stages of development at which it happens. For instance, the image below pictures Wanderley, on one of his first days in America, unable to put down his newly acquired cell phone for vaccinations because he never had useable technology (phone, TV, internet) in Cuba.



Figure 3: Zoë Kline, *Cuba a la Yuma*, 2016

In synthesizing and understanding my project as it began to grow, artist Nikki S. Lee was crucial in understanding myself within the frame and overall socially engaged project. In her 2001 photographic series titled *Projects*, Lee introduced herself as ‘artist’ and dressed up in many different subcultures and ethnic groups general style then spent several weeks participating in the group's routine activities and social events. She is posing similar questions regarding social barriers and identity and if it is possible for someone to shift identities between cultures? I look to Lee’s contemporary vernacular approach in this series as a step away from the traditional uses of photography as it advanced into a more accessible and effortless medium. Thematically alike to *Cuba a La Yuma*, the style in Lee’s *The Hip-hop Project (I)* (below) collective with the inclusion of a time stamp evokes a familiar feeling and serves more as archival snapshots and visual ethnographies of her assimilation experience.



Figure 4: Nikki S. Lee. *The Hip-hop Project (I)*, from the series *Projects*, 2001

She, too, is questioning her role as artist and the divide between artist and subject within the series by physically inserting herself into moment and exploring self as subject. However, she passes her friend the camera and steps in front of the lens with the challenge of changing her identity to achieve acculturation reduce social distance.<sup>8</sup>

Lee never spent enough time within each subculture to fully achieve assimilation and understand the inner workings of the unit like photographer Tierney Gearon had the luxury of doing. Working more introspectively, Gearon directs her attention more to the

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<sup>8</sup> Terms defined by Milton Gordon in his *Seven Stages of Assimilation*. States acculturation is newcomers adopting language, dress, and daily customs of the host society. By his definition, Nikki S. Lee has only accomplished acculturation, not full structural or behavior reception assimilation. Attitude and behavior reception assimilation (or the reduction of social distance) is the subjective state of nearness felt to certain individuals which is essential to determinant of entry into primary-group relationships. Social Distance decreases when common backgrounds and group experiences increase.

use photography has to be visual aids in comprehending her own evolution and psychological state within her own family unit. Although Gearon has unmatched access into her family in her photo series *The Mother Project*, she has the ability to stay behind the camera yet seamlessly eliminate any presence of the machine and enter the family dynamic and employ the photograph in a self-reflective, self-advancing way.



Figure 5: Tierney Gearon. *The Mother Project*, 2006

The combination of Moore's drive for a political commentary, Lee's unique style and untraditional approach to documentary photography, and Gearon's psychological and ethnographic approach have collectively inspired me to take the creative process I did, and ultimately expand my final exhibition beyond the photograph.

When beginning to work with the Martinez family, I expected to have much more agency in the conceptual and aesthetic outcome of the series, but quickly realized that my creative process would inform my thesis, rather than the other way around. Since the project hinges on its socially engaged and collaborative elements, I had to adjust for all of our underlying emotions, making every day unknown and spontaneous. Working with communities, however small they may be, can be a delicate process. When entering their home I had two overarching goals in mind and several approaches: make them feel unthreatened and at home. I kept a friendly face on the entire time and engaged in asking them questions about Cuba to show I have a genuine interest in their culture and lives. The first few days with them I did not even take my camera out of the bag, but rather engaged like any other member of the family in order to observe each person's boundaries and personality in the first moments of living in America. I tried to relate to a lot of what they said, showing them that America or an American can have similar thoughts and experiences which immediately made me feel less foreign to them. Along that same vein, I spent long hours studying the specifics of Cuban slang in order to better speak with them at home, breaking down some cultural barriers and making them feel at home again. Finding the balance between a professional and friendly relationship in this collaborative work was difficult while making them feel unthreatened, a crucial detail in creating a successful and genuine series of whom we are. I looked for subtle yet powerful juxtapositions of Cuban and American culture representing the slow assimilation process for them and me, as well as small nods to my presence in the scenes. After every day with them I would free-write as another form of decompressing, reflecting, and archiving

during an emotionally draining process which became central in my visual and written archival process.

Our relationship will only continue to grow past the completion of this thesis project. I will explore additional visual ways to display the evolution of our assimilation into each other and their cultural shifts through recording their voices. I have noticed a considerable change in their inflection towards me now, and find the addition of language and sonic element would bring this project to its next phase. This body of work has helped me to think about a future basis for my collaborative art practice and how to reflect and record my explorations and relationships. It has become more than my thesis but my curiosity, my discomfort, my voice, my unknown, and my world.

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**Image Sources:**

Figure 1: Getty Images Reportage < <http://www.reportagebygettyimages.com/john-moore/>>

Figure 2: Zoë Kline

Figure 3: Zoë Kline

Figure 4: Leslie Tonkonow < <http://www.tonkonow.com/lee.html>>

Figure 5: Tierney Gearon <<http://www.tierneygearon.com/exhibitions/the-mother-project/>>