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AUTHOR Alvarez, Carlos; Bliss, Linda A.; Vigil, Peter
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ABSTRACT

This study explored patterns of differences and commonalities in the constructions of identity by Cuban Americans, focusing on the pain of their experiencing "Paradise Lost," a theme identified in earlier research in which Cuban American college students reported: strong Cuban connections; value for the Spanish language, food, and culture; and a sense of loss because of never having been to the home country. For this study, researchers interviewed three more Cuban American students. These students reported that: they retained a collective memory, vision, or myth of the homeland; they believed they were not fully accepted by their host country; they felt they should be collectively involved in trying to help restore the homeland to a position of safety and prosperity; they regarded the homeland as their true, ideal home and the place for eventual return; and they continued to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland. The study concludes that a need exists to better understand people who come from Diaspora communities and their struggles for a sense of wholeness in their cultural identity. (SM)

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Cuban Identity: A Preliminary Study

Carlos Alvarez, Linda A. Bliss and Peter Vigil

Florida International University

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Introduction

When asked to describe themselves, three young adults born in the United States to parents who were born in Cuba responded: I am “first generation American, of Cuban heritage”, I am “Cuban – American” and I am “second generation Cuban. My parents are actually the ones born in Cuba”. These twenty-something residents of Miami, Florida are each past or present graduate students in education at Florida International University. Their responses indicated some of the richness and complexity of Cuban/American cultural identity we have uncovered in this ongoing research project. During their one to one and a half hour individual interviews they each recounted ways in which being part of Miami’s Cuban exile community informed their sense of who they were.

This phase of the research project explored the patterns of differences and commonalties in these constructions of identity, focusing on (what we came to call) the pain of experiencing “Paradise Lost”- a theme identified from the previous phase of the research. As educators deeply involved with people in this situation, we are compelled to better understand it ourselves. As academics, we also recognize our responsibility to share what we have found through venues such as AERA presentations. At this beginning of the 21st century, there is a need to better understand the people who came to the US from Cuba, as well as better understanding people who come from other communities that identify themselves as diaspora communities; communities in exile.

Background

The research began in a graduate education course with the students themselves playing the roles of both interviewer and interviewee. Based on the work of Nagel (1994), De Vos (1982), Portes & Bach (1985) and others they were learning to understand both a complex

conceptual framework for “cultural identity” and their own identities. Based on questions such as “How do you define yourself?” “When do you feel Cuban?” “When do you feel American?” they sought to understand the symbols and situations that informed their conceptions of identity. This project was grounded in the understanding that this deep understanding of the affective or symbolic dimension of ethnic identity was a crucial element of that effort.

The instructor for the course was Dr. Carlos Alvarez, a Cuban-born psychologist who left Cuba at the age of 17. His departure came soon after Castro’s open declaration of adherence to communist ideals. He has lived in Miami-Dade for the past 27 years. His courses and research are concerned with the social-psychological dynamics of ethnic identities and on the application of interactive conflict resolution in international and intercultural settings. He is a member of the faculty of the Graduate Program in International & Intercultural Development Education and the Graduate Certificate Program on Conflict Resolution and Consensus Building at FIU. He is also an Associate Member of the Program on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Harvard University.

Peter Vigil, a Cuban born graduate student at FIU, assisted him in this phase of the research. He left Cuba at the age of 5 and also lives within Miami’s Cuban American community. He was studying for his Masters degree in Human Resources Development at the time of this study and was approximately the age of the participants. He is presently a doctoral student in Sociology. He describes himself as Cuban American.

Phase One Results

In this first phase of the research, the students reported their Cuban connections to be: a strong sense Latin-American spontaneity, close knit family structure and valuing the Spanish language. They also spoke specifically of Cuban food, music, and familial emphasis on

demonstrating a strong achievement drive. Cuba itself elicited feelings of pride, and trauma in its loss to them. The following statements are typical of their comments:

Beatrice:

[I heard] that it was beautiful. You throw a seed and the plant would grow. Beautiful beaches. Beautiful sand. The first color TV was in Cuba. Had it not been for Castro, they would have been the number one nation, country...

My family has always been pretty honest. My mom was a little better off than my father. I always heard both sides of what it was. It's not that I don't like saying that I'm Cuban. I think it's great. I'm glad that my parents are Cuban. I'm glad that's my culture... That [was] the best place to be at that time.

Delia:

My feelings about being Cuban is that I feel, kind of like a loss about being Cuban, because I was never there and I always wondered what would it have been like. Even recently I was thinking it would be so nice to go to Cuba. Just nostalgia. Wondering what was it like and how it would have been, and I feel I lost out on that. And in terms of being American, I feel free. I don't have to live in a communist society. But at the same time I think that maybe I missed out on a better way of life. Maybe it was the life that your parents told you about which in the United States might have been the same way like thirty years ago. Maybe it's just the way things were before.

Jorge:

Although he was born in the United States and feels strongly American, family stories lead him to get "misty" when he hears the Cuban national anthem. When Cuba is free, he would like to visit it, to see what it's like, to be able to "associate better with the stories that I have heard and visualize it there. I heard that it use to be a really nice place."

The original analysis by Carlos Alvarez and Peter Vigil included establishing the multiple, contextual factors that have contributed to the establishment of a socio-economic enclave in South Florida, which in turn facilitated the process involved in solidifying and

maintaining a strong sense of Cuban identity. They also noted that the internal affective/symbolic constructs of the human psyche were dimensions of ethnic identification that appeared to be powerful ones worthy of further study.

Linda Bliss came into this research as an outside reader. She was given a copy of the uncoded transcripts. She was born and raised in New York City and is a recent migrant to South Florida. She is the Jewish granddaughter of immigrants to from Russia. Her studies of cultural identity have focused on Jewish identity and Appalachian identity. The latter work undertaken when she lived and worked in Boone, North Carolina, in the heart of Appalachia. Her background is in Cultural Studies. She presently teaches both qualitative research and foundations of education courses at FIU. Upon immersing herself in the transcripts, she found the same patterns Carlos Alvarez and Peter Vigil had found. At this point Peter was ensconced in his own studies and left this project. Alvarez and Bliss decided to continue researching the “Paradise Lost” feeling expressed by so many of the students, even those born in the United States. We wanted to better understand why theirs Cuban connections seemed to make them feel so cheated. After several months of discussion and exchange of readings, we jointly interviewed three more students, who shall be called here, Ernesto, Carla and Isabelle.

Theoretical Frameworks

The following theoretical frameworks ground this ongoing research:

Identity is understood to have both psychological and sociological elements. These internal and external elements interact. As theorized by Erik Erikson, identity is a psychosocial product influenced by external social factors interacting with needs of a psychosocial or internal nature. The concept of identity is interpreted as a dynamic, multidimensional, as well as integrative process that can serve to answer the basic question of “Who am I?” The construction of “I”

implies connection to people who I can join with as “We”. As Cornel West cogently points out, one’s “identity from below” or one’s proclamation to the world of, “I am...!” Or, as one of a group of people declaiming, “We are...!” is always in negotiation with our “identity from above” as society supports or rejects this particular construction of who we are. Power relations are an integral part of identity. For example, answers to questions of who is white, who is Hispanic/Latino/Chicano, who is an American, who is a patriot, are always answered in particular social contexts. Specifically concerning the cultural identity of migrants from Cuba and their children, Maria Torres’s exploration of how the national policies of both the United States and Cuba has been helpful. *In The Land of Mirrors*, she points out, “the community’s politics have been profoundly influenced by the national security interests of the U.S. and Cuban states. These two states developed policies that, while seemingly at odds with each other, have had the mutual effect of fueling a Cuban *exile* identity and political culture in the United States” p. 178.

Ethnic identity is recognized to have both instrumental and ascribed elements. It both establishes and crosses boundaries and is transnational. People mobilize around ethnic, or group associations based on claims (sometimes claims of inherency) to a common heritage usually bound to a particular place, to both help them achieve aims, from survival to political and economic advancement. Political scientists, sociologists, historians and anthropologists often conduct studies of the actions taken by ethnic groups within and across societies. In addition, psychologists point out the cognitive dimension of identity at work here. They also note that aims may also be considered to be psychological, as in meeting the human needs to belong and be affirmed. This is one reason that tribal affiliations continue to influence people so strongly today. This aspect of our humanity dwells in the realm of the affective – of

emotion, of the symbols that we turn to when we construct our identity and the identity of others.

Diaspora community is defined here as a group of people living outside what they consider to be their homeland. In 1991 William Safran identified six characteristics of diasporic communities, noting that the term has expanded from the original meaning. The Diaspora has long meant “the exile of the Jews from their historic homeland and their dispersion throughout many lands, signifying the as well the oppression and moral degradation implied by that dispersion” (p. 85). Now it is a “useful metaphoric designation for several categories of people – expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities...” (p. 85). The characteristics and their application to the Cuban American community in Miami, as reported by our participants, are as follows:

1. They or their ancestors have been dispersed from a specific, original center to two or more foreign regions. Miami is one such region for Cuban Americans, the rest of the United States is considered another region. The former has sufficient numbers to differentiate it. At present, there continues to be a “reverse migration” (Torres, 1999: 160) of Cuban Americans to Miami. Several of the participants spoke of being partially raised in other sections of the United States before the family returned to the city where they first landed, Miami.

2. They retain a collective memory, vision or myth of the homeland, including its physical location, history and achievements. The participants continually spoke of the family, especially the stories of their mothers as reinforcing this collective memory, until it became their memory, too. Some families also spoke of specific trials and tribulations after the beginning of communism. The vision of the previously untarnished Cuba was reinforced with numerous photographs displayed both publicly and privately. We heard about bucolic photos

in the funeral parlor and photographic calendars inside kitchen cabinets; we heard about a “Cuba wall” maintained in one of the homes to display crafts and photos from Cuba. The myth of the homeland included how much better everything was there, even the butter. This characteristic is one of the most complex and rich for Cubans and Cuban Americans in Miami today, partly because they are now able to visit the homeland, even though it is still Communist.

3. They believe that they are not, and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host country. They are, therefore, partly alienated and insulated from it. Even Ernesto, who proudly identified himself as a first generation American, was planning to give future children his wife’s non Hispanic last name, so that things would be easier for them in the United States. Overall, though it was the young women who more often mentioned the conflict they felt about wanting that acceptance. Being American would grant them greater independence than the traditional Cuban family allowed. They often speak nostalgically about the closeness of the Cuban family. Torres points out, “Nostalgia helps create a “collective sense of identity and helps ease the pain of loss” (1999:38). In addition, it helps challenge efforts by the host country to erase the exile community’s connections to its home country as well as the host country’s “ambivalent acceptance of the group” (p. 38).

4. They believe that they should collectively be involved in trying to help restore their homeland to a position of safety and prosperity. None of the participants saw themselves as opposing this restoration. Some were concerned that traveling to Cuba financially and emotionally supported the present regime, and therefore hindered this restoration. The three who were interviewed in depth also each, unbidden, brought up supporting Elian Gonzales’s

staying in the United States as a move that would be both beneficial to Elian and detrimental to the Cuban status quo.

5. They regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and the place for eventual return when conditions are right. None of the participants spoke about going to live in Cuba. The desire, instead, seemed to be to visit Cuba, and perhaps to maintain a second home there. They wanted to be re-connected with family still there and to see where they came from. However, it was not their ideal home, even though it had often been their parents'. Even the "second generation Cuban" did not ever see herself living in Cuba full time. There was little enthusiasm relayed to see parents returning to live in Cuba when the situation there was finally "resolved" (Castro was gone, Communism was waning and Democracy and Free Enterprise were waxing.) The "myth of returning" seems to be transmuting into a generalized emotional attachment to the ancestral homeland.

6. They continue to relate, personally or vicariously to that homeland. Their community solidarity is defined by that relationship, rather than to building lives in the new place. The new place is just a host, not a home. The participants in this research relate closely to Cuba, while asserting that they are at home in the United States. They resist defining themselves in ways that force them into what Torres has called a "dichotomized identity" (1999, p.186). Ernesto's "head" may be norteamericano, but his "blood" and his "heart" are Cuban. And yet, he is not Cuban. He cannot "go back" to Cuba, because he has never been there. His American mind realizes all this, and is saddened.

Ernesto

Ernesto is one of the participants from the second phase of the research who spoke at length about his struggle with the burdens of exilic memory. For Ernesto, that "first generation

American with Cuban heritage” who did not want to be identified in first grade as one of those kids who lived in a home where a language other than English was spoken, told several stories to emphasize the importance of Americans remembering their heritage. He said:

Look, I remember my heritage. Maybe you bunch of Americans don't. Maybe you bunch of Americans forget that maybe three generations ago somebody came from Poland, hungry as a dog. And now that you consider yourselves, “Americans”, you've got to remember your heritage. I mean, look at the Cubans. They're your great-grandparents. From another country, but you've got to look at it.

At the same time, he reports that he wants to put his Cuban heritage at a distance from him because it is too painful to keep close.

It's too painful to go there. Because, (pause) es defícil, it's hard, because if I go there, what do I have? What sense of identity do I have? Zero. What sense of, I mean, for example, my fiancée, she's American. She's fourth generation, or fifth generation American. She's got German blood in her, Irish, Scandinavian. What I've told her before; you can get a passport and go to Germany and do your family roots in Germany, in peace. You can go to Germany, in peace and trace your family roots. You can walk whatever is left of the cobblestones of where your great-grandparents lived – or whatever, six or seven generations back. You can go to Scandinavia and see what of your roots is there. You can go to Ireland and see what of your roots are there. And without any shame to your parents. Without any shame looking at your parents.

Why does Ernesto feel such shame to his parents? To visit Communist Cuba would be to spit in the face of “a couple of old people who love you very much” who had once lived in paradise. He would be supporting those who had destroyed that Paradise and caused them to be expelled. What is the shame of his parents? They are part of the Cuban people, and the Cuban people turned on each other and destroyed the good and lawful society they had created. He is “chained” to a heritage that is itself “in chains”. He longs to visit Cuba, to see where his heritage is based, but he dares not. He longs to be American, living away from Miami, released of his burden of memory, but he dares not. His sense of nostalgia for paradise holds him fast.

In his 1980 book, *The Longing for Paradise: Psychological Perspectives on an Archetype*, Mario Jacoby points out that the word's Greek roots are “nostos” - the return home

and “algos” – pain. Nostalgia is similar to homesickness. It is the longing for an idealized past; a past characterized by wholeness, security and harmony. It is longing for an intact “unitary reality” (p.5) that has quite possibly never really been experienced, although the experience of nostalgia is often expressed as one of memory. It is human to long for such a paradisiacal experience. One is more likely to feel homesickness for such a place when one does not feel at home, of course. Jacoby’s Jungian analysis emphasizes the longing for the “pre – ego” time when each one of us was in primal relationship with our mother; when we experienced harmony between our inner wishes and our outer reality. His view of the sociological interpretation of paradise concerns the collective image of happiness; the place that stands in “compensatory relationship to actual living conditions” (p.10). Is life harsh here? When you get to paradise, everything you lack materially here will be there.

Torres points out that an emphasis on memory is often a “central force in creating a diasporic identity” (1999: 38). Connecting this to nostalgic memories, she continues, “Myths about the past and the future play a powerful role. Memory, remembering and re-creating become individual and collective rituals” (p.38). The myth of Cuba past as Paradise is one Ernesto and the others have, both by nature and by nurture of those family rituals. All three gave numerous details as to how they learned the myth. They told us about the stories, WQBA, the dinnertime discussions, the adult conversations overheard, the Cuba wall, the efforts to make Americans see that the Elian case was not simply about child custody, etc.

Torres continues:

Desiring the past, and recreating that past culturally and politically, is a form of nostalgia. Nostalgia may be a common phenomenon, but for exiles this desire for the past is located in the memory of another geographic space: the homeland that embodies the past, childhood, sensuality. The nostalgia prevalent in the exile community and woven into its politics and identity reflects the impossibility of return. As opposed to yearning, or the

desire for something that may be attainable, nostalgia is a desire that can never be realized. p. 38

Ernesto both embraces this nostalgia, and detaches himself from it, because it is too painful to “survive mentally” if he thinks too much about how much his beloved parents and grandparents suffered when paradise fell into lawless ignorance – at the hands of “a bunch of idiots” who had no love of Cuba and no real concept of its laws or government. His shame is that he too is Cuban and that he was neither able to protect his family nor Cuba. This is the heritage with which he struggles.

Ernesto learned the myth and the stories from his grandparents and from his mother.

And the stories [were relayed] through my mother that my grandfather at the age of over sixty had to turn over his house. He literally had to give the key over to the people that the government decided to give the house to. And I’m going through my mind and I’m trying to detach myself that this is my grandfather. Trying to detach that. And I’m thinking, how would I feel that, if I’m over the age of sixty, I’m in the twilight of my life. I had earned my way to the top, because my family were professionals. They went to the University of Havana. My grandfather taught there. He was a dentist. He moved his way up. And this is a man whose in the twilight of his life, who had finally made it, and he’s in his sixties, and a group of idiots that knew nothing about government that all they had was ego going for them, orders an old man to turn over his house. Where’s he going to go? “Don’t care” is the answer. And it gives shame.

He cannot forget his heritage, nor should he, but it is a heritage that brings him pain.

It’s hard to say – to stand up and say, I’m Cuban. How the hell can I say, “I’m Cuban” when you’ve got this baggage of this is how Cubans treat other Cubans? If this is the way Cubans treat other Cubans, shoot, I want to be a Martian. OK? Because at least there aren’t any. It’s that thing of, how do you treat each other. If you treat each other great, hey, I’m proud to be that country. But when you’ve got this history of other influences and you’ve got this history of Cubans treating Cubans in a negative way, how can I stand up next to somebody else who was also born here when he says, “I feel Cuban”? When I turn to him – that actually happened to a friend of mine. He was born in Cuba. He came over when he was just a little child, when he was about four or five and he says, “I’m proud to be Cuban.” You know like, “I’m proud”, hand to the chest, everything. Yet, I look at him and I say to him, and I say to myself as well, “What is it to feel Cuban when you know everything that happened?”

Before this happened, Cuba was a third world country systematically developing into a first world country. Progress toward this goal was stopped, like a river being dammed. Jacoby points out that in literature and scripture, paradise has been portrayed as a secure enclosed garden or park, or as an island. For Americanized, progress oriented Ernesto, however it was a river, one that no longer flows as it once did. He feels that only when those of Cuban heritage become more assimilated into the American society and power structure, will they have the power to change American policy to tear down that dam and help restore the pristine, free flowing RioCuba.

Carla

Carla, the second of the three participants sees herself as an American born “second generation Cuban.” Growing up she has learned about a Cuba that was more harmonious than anything she or her parents have since experienced in the United States. She said:

My family has always described the way of life that they had there. They would talk about how, like the neighborhoods were smaller and the whole sense of community that they don't have here; like the neighbors all knew each other and things like that. All the families knew each other. Whenever [there were] birthdays, it was like the whole family of everybody went. You know, it's not really like that here – birthday parties are just for the kids or whatever. The family of the children are not really invited.

It was a community-oriented place where everybody knew each other. Carla has also grown up hearing about the more rural, self-sufficient life of her mother. It was a more natural, admirable lifestyle. In many ways it was closer to perfection than life in Miami.

Of course they talk about the land. My mom lived more towards the country so she would talk about that more, that they got their own things. Like at breakfast time, sometimes she always talks about the butter. She says that the butter here doesn't taste the same as they used to make the butter themselves, with the cream - and that it's different... The impression I got from my mom make it seem more country, more serene, less city-like, like how it is here in Miami...The butter was better. It was pure and it was white, because it hadn't had the color added to it, like they do here when they sell it.

In talking about the closer families there, she said that her mother, “felt like there was more family involvement. Here, she sees it more like it more like kids, once they get to a certain age, they already kind of have their own life and you don’t really know and she says that when she grew up, she says it was just like, that the parents were always involved in everything. They knew. And here, it’s kind of like once the kids get to a certain age, the parents are not welcome or something – and that it wasn’t like that over there.” She laments the abnormality of life in Cuba now. As long as Fidel is in power, people will not have the opportunities they deserve for a normal, happy life.

Like Ernesto, she would feel guilty if she were to visit Cuba now. Like him she also feels resentful that “the situation” and how her family feels about it prevents her from visiting. She doesn’t even think that it would be a good idea for her mother to visit now. “It would hurt her to see everything different from how she left it. I guess maybe she wants to look back on it in that like perfect way that she sees it and if she goes back it will probably ruin that for her. I guess that the only thing she has is that memory.” By acknowledging the strength of a memory of perfection that never existed, Carla thus acknowledges the nostalgia that has such a strong hold on her.

Isabella

Isabella, the Cuban American, has visited Cuba. Her parents are not as unitary in their viewpoint as either Carla’s or Ernesto’s apparently are. While her father entreated her not to visit Cuba, telling her that she would be “a traitor” if she went, her mother, the creator of the Cuba Wall accompanied her. She feels guilty about going against her father’s wishes.

Isabella’s view of Cuba is focused on her family, both in Florida and Cuba. She envisions a time when political differences are put aside, and families are mended. She told us, I went there and I didn’t (sigh)... I wanted to be so biased. I didn’t want to be involved in the... I didn’t ask too many questions, I didn’t... I was just there to enjoy

myself, to meet the family I that I had not met, which is my uncle on my mom's side of the family. I know that he never left Cuba. I know that he didn't try to leave Cuba. He's still not wanting to come over here. The exact reasons I don't know why. And I didn't care to ask. I just wanted to meet *my uncle*. I didn't want to know or understand why he wasn't coming over or what his reasons were because I think throughout the periods they change. Why they're coming or why they're choosing to stay (unintelligible) It depends on the situation over there why they decide to come over here.

She was raised to know that, "Cuba is the best place on earth and Fidel is an SOB for taking it away from them [Cubans], basically." She knew that "there's nothing positive about him or his regime or anything that has to do with him." Her mother has shared many stories about "how wonderful her life was in Cuba" before Castro. Perhaps it is more than Castro who is the snake in the grass in this view of Cuba, because Miamians have rejected her observations that Cuba is still beautiful. The Cuban community in Miami was "insulted" by both mother's and daughter's stories about their recent positive experiences in Cuba. Isabella feels that the paradise that could be Cuba – a place where people have the material resources they need and can re-unite with family members who are now separated by politics. It is too painful for her to consider herself knowledgeable about politics, despite its importance to her boyfriend, her family and her community. She looks both back and forward to a harmonious time when politics did not split people apart.

The pain she feels now is three-fold. It is painful to her, not only to go against her father's wishes in order to get closer to her Cuban heritage and family but also because her family members have suffered so much by being on different political sides. They have suffered separation and some have suffered exile. Her grandmother had to leave "her son, her only son" behind in Cuba when she came with her daughters. Echoing Ernesto and Carla she said, "We love our parents and we feel their pain". The third part is her "personal pain" at the physical separation between her and her Cuban relatives she has grown to love.

In response to a question about the role Cuba plays in her life now, Isabella brought up the image of Cuba being the “forbidden fruit” that she has sampled, and thus betrayed her father. For Jacoby, with knowledge of difference, paradise is forfeited. It is a helpful metaphor to pursue here.

Forbidden fruit

Ernesto, Carla and Isabelle seem to consider personal knowledge of Cuba (from their being there) to really be the forbidden fruit. Or, at least for Isabelle, perhaps the forbidden fruit is asserting to her boyfriend, father (and others) that she is truly knowledgeable about the “politics” that’s such an important part of Cuban and Cuban American identity. Or, is her desire to have personal knowledge, to make up her own mind from her own experiences an example of what she has learned to value while growing up in the United States?

Perhaps this internalization of American values is the forbidden fruit for the three of them. In the end, Ernesto wants his future children to take his American fiancée’s name. Neither he nor Isabelle want to pass along their pain to another generation. Despite expressing a desire to pass on close Cuban family values, Carla does not want to prevent her future daughter from going away to college. These young people have been denied access to the Cuban paradise of their parents. Return to the past; to childhood is impossible. This separation from such a blissful place and condition leads to both sadness, pain and to a desire to close the gap, to be redeemed. But to live a life of wholeness is to move forward, not back to “the good old days” that never were.

Those who are undertaking this movement and those people who share their lives if not their cultural identities, might take note of the fact that paradise can potentially be both past and future. In both Jewish and Christian traditions, paradise is possible again in human experience.

Being courageous, humble and working to make a more just world are some of the paths to the balance, peace and harmony that characterize paradise. As this research goes forward, this understanding will ground the researchers' quest to better understand these young people. A better understanding of their struggles for a sense of wholeness in their cultural identity is essential in order to better teach them, help them settle conflicts and with them, to build a sense of community in South Florida.

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