

Lily Fernandez

Professor Marilyn Waligore

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Guatemala & Cuba: A Convergence of Cultures

“Guatemala & Cuba: A Convergence of Cultures” showcases the diversity of Latino culture through sharing aspects of my own Cuban and Guatemalan heritage, specifically the geography and cultures from the cities Havana, Cuba and Antigua, Guatemala. Growing up learning about these cultures has had a large impact on my life, and the combination of both has played an important role in shaping my identity. I hope that with this project I can shed light on these two cultures and showcase the diversity of the Latino community. My goal is to create a positive and memorable experience for the audience that piques interest in learning about other cultures while also encouraging the audience to reflect on themselves and their cultural traditions. The influences of my Cuban and Guatemalan heritage have provided me with opportunities to develop an appreciation for the many traditions that have enhanced my creative, artistic, and intellectual capacity. I will use digital and mixed media aspects of work to incorporate an artistic representation of my Latino heritage into two accordion artist books that demonstrate the beauty of the history and the artistic influences of these cultures.

My mother and my father have had a great influence in providing me with exposure to traditions and cultural heritage. My mother's family is from Guatemala, and my Father was born in Cuba and came to the United States in 1973 when he was only six years old. From a young age, I was blessed to be exposed to many of the traditions of both cultures. My Mom's aunt, Tia Concha, has lived with my family for the greater part of the past 20 years. My Dad's mother,

Consuelo, or "Abuela" as we fondly know her, also helped raise my siblings and me as we had two working parents. Both Tia Concha and Abuela had a huge influence on our lives, and I hope to allow this project to express some of my experience and love of both them and my family tree. This project will incorporate both some of my family's life and experiences and more educational aspects to allow the audience to learn more about each respective country and city of my heritage.

When ideating for this project I wanted to incorporate my experiences along with images I recognized most while growing up. However, I also wanted to create a more informative experience for the audience to learn more about the history of these cities, so I also included information on the historical and architectural background of each. For the book, I worked to create a landscape that feels as though it's going through each city, while also including more personal or familial experiences. One of the biggest things I hoped to avoid as well was possible romanticizing of the cities, especially of Havana, Cuba. I want to make sure all information incorporated is more factual and align more with my family experiences, including the elements and history I know best. The information I decided to include for each city varies widely, as I feel I know most about my Guatemalan heritage while my Cuban heritage has a lot more historical background. So, I was able to base images around my own knowledge while doing more research on each of the countries and the elements I would consider talking about in each book.

Background

For each of the countries backgrounds I focused mostly on geography/location, history and culture. For Antigua, Guatemala, I wanted to incorporate the mountainous, forested landscape seen around the city before going to the city itself. Especially since Guatemala is

known for its more volcanic regions and earthquake activity as well, I wanted to incorporate those aspects of its location within the ring of fire and the impact that location has on Guatemala into my work. With Antigua being surrounded by three volcanos, Fuego, Acatenango, and Agua, I wanted to lead with those main landscapes before entering the city, where I then began to focus more on the city's appearance and architecture, from the colonial structures to the arc of Saint Catalina. From there, I began to focus on more cultural aspects of Antigua, such as the connection to their indigenous Mayan culture even in a more westernized city. I especially wanted to bring attention to the Guatemalan fabrics as I have always grown up with these fabrics and patterns in my life. With how common it is for me to see them, I wanted to share that aspect of myself in this book. Additionally, I wanted to include many of the foods I grew up with. I used the food and patterns as a transition from an outdoor setting to an indoor, more personal experience at a dinner table. I wanted to emphasize this aspect by including a familial portrait of my great aunt preparing food. To end the book, I wanted to make a connection back to those mountainous regions that surround the city's location, bringing in the concept of Guatemala's more natural connections to the world. I also wanted to end with a dedicated page to Guatemalan pride through the flag as well as the state bird, the Quetzal, that many Guatemalans see as a symbol of themselves and their country.

For Havana, Cuba, I focused a lot more on the history of the city rather than location, for I wanted to incorporate how large the city is and how long it has remained the capital. I made more connections to the location through the water and the fact that Cuba is an island. I then added history to this by discussing Havana's past role as a shipping port for exchanging between the old world and the new world. I still wanted to keep the aspect of traveling through the city by starting on the outskirt borders with the historic forts, then into the city. One of my biggest fears

for this book was accidentally romanticizing the city, especially Havana. Although it does have its positives, it also has negatives. With my family stories, I wanted to keep true to the more factual aspects of the city and include some pretense, especially when it comes to the city having a significant architectural history but lacking the ability to restore and maintain said history (Scarpaci). From there, I wanted to include a similar aspect of incorporating more personal and relatable aspects to my book, so I decided to include my family photos from within Havana homes. I incorporated much of the style at the time in the clothing and furniture while also including that aspect of familial relations and bonding through music and communication. I also included many staple foods as most of my cultural connection to my Cuban roots comes from the food that we eat and share together. To end the book, I wanted to return back to some of the architectural structures and staple icons of the city, such as the buildings of old Havana and vintage cars, before closing with a dedicated page to the flag that incorporates the ideas of the ocean, beaches and sunsets.

Each book varies widely from the other based on the experiences and memories I have for both. For both books, I wanted to create an experience by going through the city. While Guatemala's book does so in a livelier way, I decided to create this experience in a more archival way for Cuba. Growing up, I had different experiences with each culture, and I feel as though that distinction of present versus past plays a big role. I have grown up with my Guatemalan culture around me in my everyday life, I have visited there, we have keepsakes from there, and we have family there. Although I have grown up with Cuba culture, our culture is found more through reminiscence of stories and our families past in Havana, and we carry those stories with us as they're one of the few things my family could bring back from the country. Especially now since most of my family lives in the U.S., Havana itself feels more like a city of the past, and I

wanted to get that concept across through the book while still staying true to much of the Cuban culture I do still experience with my family today.

Artistic Process

With this history and background in mind, I wanted to create work that would emphasize some of the important aspects of each country. In order to better inform the project and create work that best represented these cultures, I also looked into different artists from within the Latino community and book-making field to see which styles they valued while creating their works. One of my biggest influences on the project was Sarah Pohlman and her book Everything and Everyone: In the End We All Are One. Pohlman's book keeps that similar aspect of an expanded landscape when stretched out. Although her images are more surreal, she maintains a gestural style and incorporates text through simple curves and waves throughout the book. I also took inspiration from artist Alejandro Sainz Ramos and his book Letter of Use: An Introduction to Common Speech. This book relates back to his childhood and Cuban heritage while also teaching by guiding the reader through common Cuban vernacular. This more educational aspect to the book allowed the reader to better engage with the culture through both visual and verbal aspects.

When creating these books, I first started with creating multiple thumbnails. Since this book is an accordion book, all my thumbnails are drawn as one singular landscape to see how these images work as a whole. Once I was able to narrow down my final images, I then began to refine those individually. For these images, I took a lot of reference from family photos, photos of the cities, and foods or items I reminiscent from my childhood. I also decided to work digitally, first creating thumbnails on paper, then importing those images into photoshop where I could then trace and refine the sketches to more finalized images. On paper, I usually work with

inks and gestural drawings, so with this book, I wanted to incorporate and convert that similar style from paper into a digital space.

With the circumstances of this year, working digitally was a more viable option and allowed me to gain more practice and experience working in that space, for I am most used to traditional or more analog work. Working digitally is a lot more flexible with mess-ups being easier to undo. While analog is more permanent, digital allows me to continue to update and refine the images I have currently or continue to add pages if I ever desire to do so in the future. Having digital images also allows them to maintain a sharper image quality, especially if presented digitally online or through my portfolio.

For these books, I also focused on experimenting with typeface and text in order to grant more freedom to the reader. I incorporated the ideas of working with spacing, order, and placement to create movement through the pages as well as put more thought into how the book is read and conceived by the viewer (K. Smith). I plan to take influence from artists such as Marinetti and his use of text as visualization of sound through onomatopoeia as well as his experimentation with the hierarchy of text and playing with the organization of text through "Varying typographic emphasis, words standing out in full caps and larger sizes italic caps" (Drucker). I also hope to incorporate the more pictorial or figural elements found in Apollinaire's works with a play on the appearance and form of the text in relation to the rest of the page. I am still incorporating the text with images, so I tried to incorporate lines and guides in my images to better help the text flow. Since I am experimenting, only a few pages will have this style of text that creates emphasis on certain letters, words, or phrases throughout while others will have short paragraphs for a more educational light to explain some of the visuals and history that will be seen throughout the book.

Although most of this book is created digitally, I still wanted to keep a hands-on approach through creating an artist's book. For the physical book presentation, I created simple hard covers; however, I worked to create that same connect and distinction between my two cultures through the cover fabric. For Antigua, Guatemala, the cover material I used is a traditional Guatemalan patterned fabric. This fabric showcases some of the color schemes incorporated in the book. The vibrant colors set the tone as the Antigua book has a stronger connection to natural and more lively aspects of the city. For Havana, Cuba's fabric however, I used a simpler tan linen. Since my family came from Cuba, they were unable to bring much back with them, so I could not use a fabric from the country as I could with Guatemala. Because of this I had to choose a fabric based more around what reminds me most of the country and culture. I also chose this fabric to showcase more of the tone of this book. While Antigua is vibrant and has more natural connections, Havana is a large city scape and is slightly more urbanized but with a much larger history. The book pages for Cuba also fit this tone. Since a lot of the history I know is from my family's past and many photos I had for reference were in black and white, I decided to incorporate some of this historical aspect into the book, keeping with more tan and neutral colors with pops of brighter vibrant colors in-between.

Conclusion

Many of the traditions I know have brought great joy and experiences in my life. They have taught me to genuinely appreciate my culture and the values that my family has instilled in me. In addition to my experiences and the experiences of my family I hope I can extend my knowledge of Cuba and Guatemala to the audience through visuals of the geographical, historical, and cultural background of each country. With the influences of Latino culture,

Spanish artists, and the experimentation of image and text, I hope to create two artist books that reflect the importance and appreciation of my Cuban and Guatemalan heritage.

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