INTERVIEW

"There's a Part of Me That Must Remain Truthful to the Story": An Interview with Juana Valdes¹

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Juana Valdes speaks to Allison Harris about immigrating from Cuba, growing up Black and Cuban in Miami, and how it has shaped her art practice.

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Te-Amo, Atlantic Center for the Arts Residency, New Smyrna Beach, Florida, 2005.

Juana Valdes began her talk at the Mapping Creole Miami symposium with the statement, "Migration itself creates and inflicts trauma." In the last five years, we have seen the rise of one of the largest migration crises in modern history, as violence, poverty, and climate insecurity have led millions of refugees around the world to seek shelter and aid. Images of Syrian refugees in overcrowded boats adrift in the Mediterranean recall the Haitians just a few decades earlier, and the Cubans before them, and the Vietnamese before them.

¹ This quotation comes from Valdes's remarks at the April 2018 convening: "When people learn that I'm Cuban, one of the first things they ask me is *what did it feel like to come from Cuba?* They are expecting the typical *oh, we were on a raft and we were in the sea*, and the drama of the story, but for me it's not that. I tell them, *well, we went to Varadero, we got on a flight, and we landed in Miami at night*. And I can see the disappointment in their face. My exoticness is leaving me by the second – there goes the sale. But there's a part of me that must remain truthful to the story. I'm not a Peter Pan child and I'm not a Marielito; I'm somewhere in between that."

Valdes's life reflects and her work reflects on this trauma of migration. Born in Cabañas, Pinar del Rio, Cuba, Valdes and her family migrated to the United States when she was only seven years old. In some ways, her story is very similar to the hundreds of Cuban immigrants who molded Miami into the city it is today. But as a Black Cuban, Valdes often felt an outsider in both the Cuban community and in the segregated city.

As a mixed-media artist, Valdes's work integrates visualities of migration, colonialism, race and ethnicity. Featured in galleries around the world, she has held prestigious fellowships and residencies in the United States, Cuba, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Her work is part of the permanent collection at the Jorge M. Perez Art Museum of Miami-Dade County (PAMM), and she has recently had exhibits at Art Basel 2019 and at the Miami-Dade College Museum of Art and Design (MDC MOAD) Cuban Cultural Legacy Gallery in the Freedom Tower. Valdes is an Associate Professor of Printmaking at University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Responding to the prompts of the Mapping Creole Miami convening, we talk here about growing up an Afro-Cuban immigrant in Miami and how that has shaped her artistic practice.

"Most people who immigrate under difficult conditions only have a brief moment to reflect and make a decision. They pull immediate belongings and then go. They leave knowing that they may not be able to return; that they may have nothing when they get to where they are going; that their future is as undetermined as it could ever possibly be. And even with this in mind, they make the decision that to go is better than to stay."

Migration

Allison Harris: Your family was part of the early migration of the Freedom Flights, which goes against the dominant historical perception that Afro-Cubans were primarily among the later migration of the Marielitos in the 1980s. Do you know if there was a particular event that prompted your family to leave in 1971?

Juana Valdes: According to my mother, there wasn't a particular moment that led her to coordinate our departure, but rather a series of realizations. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the government was focused

This photo, returned to Valdes by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, is one of the few images that remains from her childhood. Everything earlier than this age was left behind in Cuba. For Valdes, this loss accompanying migration was traumatic: "I lost seven years of my life." Memories of her life in Cuba now come only as "images that blur in and blow out of my mind" that had to be "forsaken and completely erased" to assimilate to the new American experience.

on implementing the ideas of the Revolution— “el socialismo y el hombre nuevo” as Che Guevara defined it—The New Man. They invested in promoting socialist plans meant to move the country forward. The most memorable, the “Zafra de los Diez Millones” – the ten-million-pound sugar harvest – was meant to redefine Cuba’s economy, although it failed in the late 1970s. Another, the “Escuelas al Campo” aimed to cultivate the youth movement by supplementing education with agricultural experience. For two months, Cuba’s youth would work the land, harvesting fruits and vegetables, planting, learning about dairy production. The purpose was to celebrate the social capital of the guajiros who had supported Castro and his men in the mountains and refocus the youth to Cuba’s agricultural heritage and their utility in rebuilding the nation. This was a very pragmatic idea in theory. But as with all great ideas, what matters most is how these ideas are executed in practice.

When my oldest brother was 14 years old, he went to one of the escuelas al campo. My mother visited him and found hundreds of kids living in barracks and really bad huts, sleeping on cots, with sparse food. Because they were young, the kids found ways to enjoy themselves. My mother, however, panicked. The whole premise of the program, how they were supposed to be taken care of and taught, was inadequate. I have two older brothers and an older sister. My mother calculated that if we didn’t leave soon, then my oldest brother would be conscripted into service in the military for anywhere between six to eight years. By the time my oldest brother was discharged, my youngest brother would be starting his service.

Visiting the escuela reaffirmed her own questions about the party and the new government. My mother has told me that she never strongly believed in the ideals of the Revolution, and she never really participated in it. In Cuba, the Revolution, not at the very beginning but once it took hold, was sold to black people as a revolution to bring equality to the mixed race, the poor, los campesinos. But the Revolution was not started by black people. She also never believed that the children belonged to the Revolution or to the party. She was of the mindset that she gave birth to them and so she would raise them in whatever way she pleased and in whatever belief system she chose. Therefore, she began the sort of miracle of connecting with people who connected with people to gain favors and make things happen.

My mom has always been a very resourceful woman. We had family in the countryside who still grew their own food but didn’t have other necessities like soap, oil, and butter. She started traveling back and forth exchanging food for toiletries and household items. Because she was a seamstress, she traded clothing with people in the interior farmlands who could only get certain supplies in town. Through this trade and barter system, she was able to contact someone – I believe from the Swiss embassy in Havana. They were one of the last countries providing visas for Cubans to leave. With her resourcefulness, she managed to find this person, explain our situation, and get paperwork for all of us. After the visas were secured, it was a very quick turn-around. We were out of the country I think in less than three months, maybe just two weeks after we received our papers. I came home from school one day and the next day we left to Varadero. Literally we were on the last of the flights from Varadero Beach to Miami. We left everything we had behind and came to the United States.²

“As Cuban but yet black, we didn’t fit the norm of the standard Cubans coming to Miami at the time.”

There weren’t many people of color on the Freedom Flights or the earlier migrations in the 1960s. In Cuba, they played public videos of what was taking place in the United States – how black people were being lynched, how horribly they were being treated – to try to deter mulattos and dark-skinned Cubans from leaving. It was predominantly a white population that migrated as the first wave and settled in the outskirts of Miami. At the time, really nobody wanted to live there, in the poor section of town. The city was divided; there was downtown and Overtown, and Little Havana became the barrier between the predominantly black community and the better-off enclaves of white people in Coral Gables, Coconut Grove, and Pinecrest. Those white Cubans who had money and could pass or had higher education could move into Coral Gables. But this late-1960s/early-1970s migration pattern rooted Miami’s geographical division according to race and social class.

² The flight from Varadero to Miami was only 45 minutes long, but for a little girl, it must have seemed like crossing an entire ocean. Commercial departures from Havana had been suspended after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, so LBJ’s administration approved two chartered flights a day every weekday from 1965 to 1973. The Miami Herald maintains the only public database of the names and arrival dates of the 265,000 exiles who came to the United States via *los vuelos de la libertad* (Yanez).

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HOURS
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ES EXTREMADAMENTE IMPORTANTE QUE USTED LLEVE ESTA
TARJETA A LA CLINICA DE SALUD PUBLICA DONDE USTED
RESIDA Y COMPLETE LAS VACUNACIONES DE SUS HIJOS

FAVOR GUARDE ESTA TARJETA COMO PARTE
DEL RECORD DE LA SALUD DE SU HIJO

MSP - 22

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C23027X MICHEL WASSPOT

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CITY: MIAMI STATE: FLA.

PAROLEE NO. A20 752 074 BIRTH DATE: 11/25/63

TURNOS Y RECORD DE VACUNACION

TRAIGA A LA CLINICA ESTA TARJETA
EN CADA VISITA

YOU ARE TO RETURN TO CLINIC

DAY	DATE	HOUR
DEC - 9 1971	DT #	
DEC 4 1972	Enter DT	
DEC - 9 1971	Pelosi	
FEB 1 1972	Pelosi	

DOSE	IMMUNIZATION DATES	OTHER	BOOST-ER	BOOST-ER	BOOST-ER	3	2	1
DIPHTHERIA TETANUS								
DIPHTHERIA TETANUS								
POLIO								
SMALL-POX								

Valdes and her family arrived in Miami on November 9, 1971. This immunization card, issued on the day they arrived at the Cuban Refugee Center (now the Freedom Tower) lists her parolee number. Cuban immigrants were granted entry into the United States under humanitarian parole programs rather than requiring traditional visas.

Mothers

JV: My mother left Cuba without a single dollar in her purse and zero connections. She decided to come to Miami because this was where everyone else was going. She didn't speak English, and she had four kids from the age of seven to fourteen, but she managed to get us all here.

When we first arrived, we stayed with a family that my mother had worked for as a maid in Cuba. She found work out in Sweetwater in west Miami-Dade County as a farm laborer handpicking cucumbers and lettuce. Before she married and lived with my father in the town of Cabañas, she had grown up on a farm in Cuba. She now found herself back in the field, harvesting the land. Eventually she went from working in agriculture to the clothing sweatshops. She worked in the garment factories in what was at the time called variously Puertorican Town, El Barrio, and Little San Juan, now areas intersecting Wynwood and the Design District. A recession in New York City in 1969 resulted in many designers relocating their operations to Miami, where the recent Cuban immigrants became their major source of "cheap" labor. Many of the older Cuban women started sewing at home. To make ends meet, they bought an industrial sewing machine and took in piece-work for five cents apiece and a penny per button. They could work from home and help sustain the family while maintaining traditional gender roles. They did what was needed and expected of them.

Looking back, is hard to reconcile the madness of leaving your home with nothing, moving to a new country, and having to take on these low-paying, manual labor jobs to help feed your family. One must empathize with all the personal sacrifices mothers make for their children. It's the same reason why people are walking across Latin America, why they are getting in boats in the Mediterranean knowing they might drown, why they are undergoing horrible humiliations and deprivations. They desperately want to offer their children a possibility at something better—even if it is just a better chance at surviving.

This is the focus in my work. To acknowledge the value in the labor of those brown and black bodies, especially of women, and how their bodies are the support of this social system. Women who forsake beauty

for labor. Society has created this dichotomy of either/or. You either cultivate beauty or you use the body for labor. So these black and brown bodies become either an object to be exoticized or a physical resource. One or the other, that's it. The in-between space for women of color hardly exists. It's something we're trying to negotiate at this moment, that ability to just be.

And for my mother, a married, middle-aged, immigrant woman, she just blinded herself and worked tirelessly to raise her kids.

Although this is not my story, I am struck because it is one I've heard before. My grandmother, born in the late 1930s, grew up poor in rural south Alabama. She and her siblings were bounced around between family members because her parents could not provide for them. She was taken from school in the ninth grade in order to work full-time in the fields, picking cotton, beans, whatever was in season. At sixteen, she began to work in the sewing factory making men's pants. Married a few years later and then soon widowed, she found herself alone with a two-month old child. When she married my grandfather, she stayed at home with my uncle and my mother. Looking to help make ends meet, she took herself down to the local sewing shop and with no business experience, advertised her services as a seamstress. Hemming pants and sewing band uniforms for the local high school, she provided for herself and her family. When her marriage dissolved, she went to the local junior college and completed her GED and an Associate's degree. She reinvented herself. I am always inspired by my grandmother's tenacity and strength, to be able to change the course of her life through the skill of her hand. These are the stories of women kept outside of the boundaries of privileged capitalism, whether because of race, class, nationality or myriad other categorizations. They do the sewing, not the shopping. But they provide for their families, and in the process, they instill in their children the value of hard work, education, and perseverance.

Miami

"We ended up on the edge of society, which set up a framework as to how and possibly why I became an artist. Because I'm on the edge, forever looking in, on multiple societies and ethnic groups, I think a lot about how to navigate that in my work."

JV: My siblings and I, me being the youngest of four, arrived in Miami at the time when it was still a sleepy little town. When you could drive the backroads and see no one. There was still much of the "old South" in Miami.

AH: That's so surreal because it's so different than how we think about it now.

JV: I know! It's hard to compare the Miami of the 1970s and early 1980s to the metropolis it has become. People don't know that under it, there's a Southern soul to Miami. It is now a tropical mirage overlaying cosmopolitan internationalism, but Miami had that rural Southern feel to it when we first arrived. It was just a collection of small communities dispersed between the ocean and the Everglades, and there was still space for people to move in and develop as each group claimed an area. Miami was a quiet, sleepy, small rural, southern town when we arrived. The downtown was always too small to be significant. Most white Americans lived in southwest Coral Gables, Coconut Grove, Vizcaya. The Jewish community lived mainly on the Beach and to the north. African Americans lived predominantly in Overtown, Richmond Heights, Allapattah, and Liberty City. Sometimes people moved around and crossed these invisible color lines, like on Halloween when kids could go house to house in these different neighborhoods collecting candy. Except for these rare occasions, people would stay in their neighborhoods. In that way, Miami has always been a segregated city.

Neighborhoods would develop with each new waves of migrations over time. First the Cuban migration, then I can't remember if it was the Argentinians who followed next, and then Nicaraguans, Haitians, Hondurans, Colombians and Brazilians. Most recently, Venezuelans. It seems as if every time a country in Latin America has a crisis, people immigrate to Miami. Every eight to ten years there is another migration. It layers one culture on top of another. Even when the US government returns them to their home country, a few manage to stay. They invest in their communities; they have families and create lives interwoven into the fabric that is Miami. These lives as "threads" are distinct but indivisible from how we perceive Miami today.

People think of Miami through the lens of the 1980s Cocaine Cowboys and Miami Vice, but from the 1970s to the early 1990s, each new immigrant group had to adjust to being in America and the dynamics of

mainstream American culture. When we arrived in Miami at the beginning of the 70s, Miami was a safe place for kids to grow up, Miami was perfect. You could explore, walk around and roam the city. You could drive the roads, or ride your bicycles through neighborhoods. It was a safe environment in which to be a kid. It had that rural Southern vibe where everybody knew each other, especially within the Cuban community. We would go to the store for our parents, and people would stop to ask us, *"oh you are so and so's kids, how are your parents, say hello to your mother for me."* They created a simulacrum of their life back in Cuba in Little Havana, whether you want to call it an enclave or ghetto.

As Black Cubans, my parents had few choices as to where we could live. My mom opted to stay, even if it was at the edge, within the Cuban community rather than moving completely into the African American community, in part because she never had the opportunity to learn the English fluently. This aspect of being at the edge has remain a significant component of how I perceive the world. We were part of that Cuban community. But we were literally at the edge of the edge of the neighborhood.

"We found it hard to find a place to live. We were actually on SW 18th Street, which was a really poor, poor section of Miami at that time."

JV: For my family, because we were not only immigrants but black, we didn't have the opportunity to move into those better neighborhoods, so we ended up, by some bizarre coincidence, living in an outsider enclave of shotgun houses.

AH: Which is also a very Southern thing. That sort of stereotypical Southern house—incredibly narrow, usually with about three to five rooms stacked one behind the other, requiring passing through each room to get to the next. You see them all over the South in both black and white neighborhoods, most often in rural and poor areas. Supposedly they're called "shotgun" houses because people said that if all the doors in all the rooms were open, a person could shoot a bullet right through the house and out the other side without hitting anything.

JV: Another of those Southern commonalities. There was a series of five or maybe six of these houses forming a cul-de-sac in a single vacant lot between two new apartment buildings. In this enclave, there was one other Cuban family, from Matanzas and also phenotypically darker and struggling. The rest of the people in these houses were white, but they were *poor*. They were considered "white trash." We grew up in this neighborhood surrounded by these small group of white poor American families, inside but outside of the Cuban neighborhood. Because of this, we didn't become part of that insular Cuban community. We were able, to learn English quickly in part because we spent most of our time playing with these white kids after school. When you're poor, with no money to spend and little or no access to other kids, you're willing to play with whoever is around, regardless of their skin color.

As a child, you will break any barrier to find playmates, and for us that was the ability to speak English. So my siblings and I learned English in less than a year.

AH: Even while the city was predominantly segregated by Jim Crow, did you feel like there were class intimacies that happened in this enclave of outsiders?

JV: Yes, completely. We were all so poor that everything was shared. If there was a bicycle, everybody rode the bike. Whoever got the best toy for Christmas, they would not only show it off, but they would also share it.

Living where we did allowed us to attend predominantly Hispanic schools, or the schools which housed predominate Spanish speakers. This kept us within the Cuban community. But then when we came home, we were in this other reality. People often wonder why and how Cubans have maintained their accents and why South Florida Spanish is different than in other Cuban immigrant cities. In Miami, the Cubans clustered together, living amongst each other, so the accent was accommodated for and there was little incentive to speak English. In our cul-de-sac, that was not an option for us, so we learned English quickly by imitating native-born speakers and from watching television. The transition happened in such a way that we were unaware that we spoke English differently than the Cuban kids who mainly spoke English at school, unaware that we were not holding on to the Spanish accents like some of our peers.

AH: Did you find a generational difference between your experience of learning English and, in some ways assimilating, and your parents' experiences, as is common with children of the 1.5 generation?

JV: Of course. My father arrived a year after we did. He shared the same mentality as some Cubans at the beginning; they all thought of this period in Miami as an interval that would end in a year. They thought the Revolution would never last. Many of the older men of my father's generation had a harder time adjusting because of it. They waited and waited to return to the land of their birth as if it had been a *promesa* made by the Saints. Much of their lives was spent waiting for the return to the way it was before. Some eventually settled and developed roots and established themselves in Miami, but that eternal hope of return always endured. Some gave up their hope and dreams of returning sooner than others and focused in building a new life in Miami. Others grudgingly let those dreams go when they couldn't hold on to them anymore. It was different for us kids. It really depends on your age when you left and the memories you held on to.

The language divide was also reinforced by class. Even as most of the immigrants were struggling to stabilize themselves, there was also an elite class of Cubans coming to Miami. These wealthier Cubans were able to institute a similar social lifestyle as they had in Cuba and to establish themselves financially. They came from an already educated class and had money, and they could afford to pay for private schools and tutors to learn the language. They sent their kids to private Catholic schools as they did in Cuba.

If you could learn to speak English fluently, this opened up the possibility of white-collar jobs in libraries, schools, and doctor's offices. If you were poor and were able to attend night school or take remedial English classes, being fluent in English, even if it was broken-English with a heavy accent, gave you access to better jobs. But when you had no money, no resources, and a family to support, school was not a possibility. You didn't learn the language. Therefore, there were many who gave up the opportunity of an education and long-term mobility for the immediate support their families. This was not necessarily generational. It depended on the resources available, whether it was a grandmother, a mother, or the oldest child. There was a generation who had to work to support the family, who never learned the language and gained access to the culture. Their assimilation was never complete.

This is my parents' story. They arrived in Miami and started working, to support four kids, putting food on the table and clothes on our backs. Paying for private buses to drive us to public school – what a silly notion that seems to me now. They worked to find a decent home for us to grow up in, a neighborhood where people could deal with our blackness. They understood English enough to get by, but they never learned to speak it well.

We mostly lived around the area where the Orange Bowl used to be. This was during the era of Don Shula, the most iconic NFL coach in history. Shula and the Dolphins were perennial powerhouses, going to the Super Bowl in 1971, 72, and 73, even going 17-0 in 1972 – the only team in the NFL to ever go undefeated. In the early 80s, the Dolphins dominated again with the combination of Shula and Dan Marino. These guys were Miami legends; everyone knew who they were, and people still speak of them with reverence. Because of this, the Orange Bowl stadium was always packed. This meant an influx of white and African Americans regularly coming into Little Havana for the football games.

AH: Miami's popular history is mostly overshadowed by the exceptional Caribbean migration narratives from the 1960s to the 1990s, but Miami had a long-standing black presence and contentious race politics, as shown in the work of historians like Marvin Dunn and Chanelle Rose. Shortly after Miami was incorporated in 1896, Overtown was established specifically as a segregated neighborhood to house African Americans, and that segregation lasted well into the mid-twentieth century. The beaches were segregated until the late 1950s. During the 1968 Republican National Convention on Miami Beach, civil rights groups organized a segregation protest rally that escalated into a riot. Miami was as Jim Crow as any other Southern city, but with the added layer of a very large immigrant population.

JV: Exactly. In the same way that the rest of the United States went from segregation to a mixed racial ethnic inequality, Miami transitioned from segregation based on race to an ethnic color-line exclusion, with each new influx of immigrants marginalized and entrenched in specific neighborhoods. Each group arrives and is forced to take over the worst jobs in the market. As each generation acclimates, they move up the labor force ladder to better paying jobs. If they have access to education, those jobs might be nursing or accounting; otherwise, they might be working for the city in civil service jobs, driving a cab, or running their own landscaping business.

I remember in the 1970s and 1980s predominantly African Americans worked in civil service and public service jobs which they gained access to after segregation ended. For example, I remember many African American men worked as landscapers because that meant self-employment. They owned their own trucks and equipment, hired laborers, and generally made good money with autonomy. As time passed though, jobs like landscaping were taken over by the most recent immigrants, now those from Central and South

America who bring their own agricultural experience from the fincas or coffee plantations. It's an example of the insular dynamics of Miami, where the establishing social order is always in flux, as one immigrant group after a few years of their arrival is forced to shift by the most recent immigrant group.

When bussing came into effect in Miami, because we were in what was considered to be a predominantly white neighborhood, even if the Cubans were not Anglo-white, we were bussed to Booker T. Washington Senior High School. We were bussed from seventh through ninth grades, and then at the end of ninth grade, I began at Miami High, which was one of the standard high schools for Cuban Americans at that time.

JV: When bussing began, it took place predominantly in the Cuban neighborhoods, which were considered white. So you had all of these "white" kids who are predominantly Latinx now being sent to Booker T. Washington in the black neighborhood to integrate. And everybody's like, *what's going on?*³

AH: It's such a similar and such a different story than integration in the Deep South. The white kids being bussed for racial parity were actually immigrant kids.

JV: It goes to show you how Cubans often read and pass as white.

When I was in high school, we travelled around Miami for athletic meets and clubs, the black kids would ask, *why are you with these white kids?* and we would be like, *they're not white, they're Cuban.* African Americans also read Cubans as white, and the Cubans often take on this whiteness. They may or may not be doing it intentionally but it's happening. They read as white and use the privilege that comes with it. Which is why you have Cubans voting for Trump. Cubans in Miami embraced Republicanism not so much for the ideology as for the fact that the Republicans stood up against Fidel Castro. They didn't necessarily believe the Republican rhetoric, but they believed that Republicans would sustain their political agenda against Cuba. There is now a generation of Cubans who don't even know how to identify: are they Hispanic, Cuban-American, or Latinx? They aspire to the whiteness and benefit from the access and privilege that comes from it, but they don't know that is not the same as being a white Anglo-Saxon.

AH: If they were to go anywhere else, they would be brown.

JV: Which happens to Mexicans! Their indigenous heritage prevents them from being white. It's that myth of Spaniard being part of Europe that allows Cubans to assimilate easier into whiteness.

AH: Then it ties into a much longer colonial history that goes all the way back to Europe. Even though we know that there is an indigenous presence in Cuba, and a large African presence due to these systems of colonialism and slavery.

JV: Correct, but the face of the Cuban migration and the Cuban American presence in Miami is a white Cuban. That's not the way people think about Cuba. I am asked all the time, *where are you from?* When I say Cuba, people always respond, *oh, you don't look Cuban; you don't sound Cuban.* But I am Cuban, and I am part of that colonial history. Moving away from Miami allowed me to understand these dynamics. When I'm in Miami and with my Cuban friends, we can go everywhere and it's fine because their whiteness surrounds me. I'm speaking Spanish so everyone assumes I'm Cuban and it's okay. But when I'm not with my white friends, in these same spaces then I become a suspicious entity.

Mobility

For the three years that he was at Miami High, my older brother played football and basketball. This radically transformed our experience of Miami. At that time, Miami High was considered relatively diverse; it had a significant number of white American and white Latinx students and a smaller number of African American students. This diversity was readily visible in athletics. I grew up with the

³ Although Florida, especially South Florida, often does not factor into conversations of the U.S. South, Jim Crow segregation was significant to Florida's history as well. During Reconstruction, black schools were created in the name of uplift, but these schools entrenched segregation state-wide. In the 1870s, what had been de facto segregation became de jure, putting all schools under white control. Dade County was the first school system to initiate an integration plan in 1959. Bussing started across the state in 1970. See Winsboro and Bartley.

This photo of Valdes's Miami Senior High class illustrates the nominal racial diversity. "You can see there are only few, myself included, black students and the rest are predominantly Hispanic – you can tell from the incredible blown-out hair and the lapels."

basketball team coming to our house after school. My mother fed them, and they took over the living room and the TV, talking about sports. I grew up having this multiplicity in our home. Is this typical for Miami? It was the norm for me.

AH: Do you feel like you code-switched?

JV: As my Cuban friends and I became teenagers, we started exploring Miami and became more cognizant of the African American community. For us it wasn't so much code-switching as embracing the greater totality of the Afro-Cuban identity—a combination of finding yourself and finding that hipness. That cool that has always been a part of African American culture. In the early 1980s, we found ourselves embracing big afros, the flyness. We looked for places where we could go dance, party, hang out and show off our style. And these places were in the African American neighborhoods. Suddenly, being black was not a bad thing. It gave you "street cred"—a sense of feeling chic and cool. I think all teenagers can identify with that feeling.

AH: Right, and so thinking about the mid-to-late 1980s and the early 1990s, that's really a moment where the cache of blackness, especially American blackness, took on global popularity.

JV: Yes. African American music dominated the airwaves. Earth, Wind, and Fire stayed on the hit charts. Luther Vandross's voice became the definition of sexy. Having a sense of style and coolness played an influential role in how you identified. White and Latinx people started emulating blackness.

It wasn't until we became teenagers or young adults that we exercised the freedom to explore this part of our identity. It was impossible as kids to question the complexity of our heritage and explore our personal identity. To ask, who am I or want to be? If I don't fit into the predominantly white Cuban experience, if it doesn't accept the totality of who I am, is there something else? As a teen you start exploring other aspects of yourself and you realize that there's this whole world out there that you can "identify" with.

My parents could never see themselves within the African American community. It was really hard for them to leave their Cubanness behind; they had already left so much. Holding on to their Spanish and their cultural practices was one of the last ways to sustain their ties to Cuba. For them to take on this other identity would have deprived them of what little they had left to claim as Cubans. For us, it was easier because we didn't have the same level of attachment to the memories of our past lives in Cuba.

This too impacts generations differently. My oldest brother's experience was very different. Every immigrant community has what I call a "lost generation" – the transitional generation that migrates around the age of 12 or older and never completely integrates into the new social system. They are not kids, so they can't really transform the way that kids do, but they're not adults either, so they don't have a strong sense of self. They are caught in-between. They cannot escape it. They're lost in the sense that they repress their own desires to meet family expectations. They repress their own desires to meet the family's expectation. They follow tradition, get married, find a decent 9-to-5 job, have a family; they will meet the norms of their community even if it feels like a deception.

AH: So, in a way they are having to reproduce what was left behind in the next generation.

JV: Yes, whatever traditions we left behind in Cuba. I can see the difference between my oldest brother and myself. We are eight years apart. For me, growing up in the United States gave me the belief that I could do whatever I wanted. I could be an artist, just as long as I didn't ask my parents for financial support. Even with the lack of financial resources, it felt like freedom. A sense of self-determination that my brother didn't really have. He got stuck with all of those expectations of sustaining the norm to make my parents happy.

By the time I was a teenager, my parents were more indoctrinated into the American's cultural norms. For example, my sister wasn't allowed to go out socially without a chaperone, but by the time I started dating, it wasn't such a big deal.

AH: That's the benefit of being the youngest child in any family! It doesn't matter!

JH: I think that by the time I came along, my parents were exhausted. They were happy that I studied and I came home in one piece. It allowed me the freedom to explore, to become an artist and surround myself with an artistic community.

Miami Senior High School Self-Portrait circa 1980.

Materials

I've been fortunate to have teachers who saw my artistic potential. When I started high school, I joined the art club. By the time I finished at Miami High a year early, I had this artistic desire that I wanted to fulfill. I told my parents that I wanted to go to New York, to Parsons School of Design, and become an artist. At the time I was only 18, and they said I was too young to be in New York alone and that we didn't have the finances to cover my education. I decided to take a year to find myself, as many other artists do. My version of a gap year.

This group of young local Miami artists participated in the *Surrounded Islands* installation by Christo and Jeanne-Claude. For two weeks in May 1983, the shorelines and waterspace of eleven islands in Miami's Biscayne Bay were draped with 6.5 million square feet of pink, floating polypropylene fabric. According to the artists, "*Surrounded Islands* was a work of art underlining the various elements and ways in which the people of Miami live, between land and water." Valdes cites this project as part of an introduction to what Miami means to her art. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Surrounded Islands*, 1980–1983.⁴

J: Miami has always had a really strong artistic and creative community but for a long time it lacked financial resources. There was no support for young artists⁴ in Miami the way there is now. There was some support but in too small a quantity. It was not enough for the number of creative people living in the city. There weren't enough arts educational programs or alternative spaces for artistic development. It seemed that sooner or later people left to pursue careers, gain professional experience, and national recognition. It wasn't happening in Miami then, which was very different from the Miami that hosts Art Basel now. Today, there are multiple institutions supporting cultural production long-term. Artists can make a living from their art, have successful careers and lives.

A: Having PAMM seems like it changes the entire game. You have the tradition of the Lowe Art Museum, which opened on the University of Miami campus in 1950, but there have not been many major museums in Miami until PAMM really put Miami on the map. So how has PAMM influenced your experience of the city?

J: Having an international museum of PAMM's rank is a very recent phenomenon. The way was paved by smaller artistic ventures. Like the South Florida ArtCenter, the Bakehouse, Ice Palace Studios and Tigertail. Miami has always aspired to be a cultural center and creative destination, to be more than just a city in the tropics.

I had exceptional artistic experiences growing up in Miami. I met Andy Warhol in 1981 at a solo exhibition sponsored by the Lowe Museum at University of Miami. I remember him signing the exhibition catalog for *Jews of the 20th Century*, but my friends and I brought our little Campbell soup cans and our Velvet Underground albums to be signed. We met Keith Haring when he came to do a public project on South Beach. When I started college at Miami-Dade Wolfson Campus in downtown, I felt lucky and inspired by the professors I had, who

⁴ <https://christojeanneclaude.net/projects/surrounded-islands>.

were amazing. They launched the Miami Waves Experimental Media Festival. I saw Nan Goldin and *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* for the first time in Miami. Our professors encouraged us to work with Christo on the *Surrounded Islands* project. As young artists in Miami all of that was nourishing our artistic selves.

I think Perez Art Museum Miami brought the city to another level of refinement that didn't exist before. I have to give credit to Jorge Perez for funding a museum that surpassed people's expectations. It is a world-class international museum. I guess it's part of his own ambitions—I mean, the Guggenheim, the Whitney, Carnegie, the Getty, those institutions are people's personal ambitions to leave a legacy. PAMM may be the only art museum of its caliber in the United States named after a Hispanic person and it's about time that happened. PAMM's exhibitions made Miami art scene a step up in a way that no one and nothing else had done. In the past, it wasn't a big deal to see an amazing show one day and an utterly unremarkable show the next, but now a standard has to be maintained.

The other thing that makes PAMM exceptional is to have an African American as the director, Franklin Sirmans. I was surprised but delighted he was hired. The Miami of my childhood would have struggled with this socially and racially. It was too racist, too segregated, too classist, too self-conscious. You can see the development Miami has undergone from where it was in the 1970s and 1980s to now. It's a new city for the twenty-first century and Franklin brings an international contemporary perspective on art to PAMM. It's not just about local artists, Cuban art, predominantly Latin American art, or modernism; he seeks to bring global contemporary artistic discourse to Miami.

Immense Darkness. Cotton Handkerchief with Screenprint.

Colored China Rags. Porcelain Bone China.

Valdes employs diverse materials in her artwork, creating sculptures and site installations especially in screen-printed fabrics and ceramics. She brings her perspectives on migration, exile, and identity in conversation with contemplative histories on colonialism and diaspora, knowledge-making and world-making. The motif of boats recurs in her works: as tiny paper origami launched on the Havana Malecon, as massive sails from Spanish ships, or as small porcelain vessels arranged in mass exodus on a gallery floor. Valdes plays with words, often using linguistics and literature to analyze cultural memory. Many of her works seem to juxtapose the hard and soft. Fabric and porcelain co-exist and co-define as metaphors to mark the intimate entanglements of race and imperialism. In *Colored China Rags*, she deconstructs pigmentocracy with a series of bone china sculptures shaped as hanging fabric squares of various gradient skin tones. “Colored” invokes the vocabulary of the global trauma of racial hierarchies, employing the pigment necessary to make color while also exposing the arbitrariness of epistemologies of race. The bone china, valued for its translucent whiteness and signifying wealth and culture, evokes at once the dissonance between the brittleness of the material, the elasticity of skin and the fragility of both as material and episteme. The rags disturb the economic primacy of this emblematic colonial product, using a material reserved for the most delicate and costly of luxury goods to construct a ubiquitous piece of refuse. The piece invites viewers to raise their arms and locate their standing on the scale of history, considering how many shades they might find themselves away from whiteness.

A: One of the artifacts from your migration history is the dress that your mother made for your flight to the United States. As a seamstress, your mother created art through fabric. The presence of different types of fabrics also strikes me in your work. What do you see in the fabric as a medium of expression?

J: I started manipulating fabric in my work because of my mother. I appreciate its textural dimensionality. As a material, it is two dimensional, but once constructed it becomes three dimensional. I'm interested in structural forms and the relationships that can be achieved by combining fabrics. I wanted to pay tribute to my mother and her history as a seamstress. Before I became an artist and conceptually thought about art in abstract terms, I could sew. I could use my hands to make beautiful things. I wanted to acknowledge her contribution to my own artistic practice and recognize the value of the skill and manual labor of women. It allows me to connect the relationship between art and craft.

A: Your mother taught you to sew?

J: Yes.

A: We see then how this knowledge is passed down through the generations. It becomes a representation of how your mother and many working women created art in the spaces they could and brought that beautiful, quotidian art into the home. And your art practice carries this history – her labor, your migration, all of the ways women protect and encourage their creative abilities in the materials they can access.

Valdes wore this dress and matching overcoat of blue corduroy sewn by her mother, with the image of a determined and perhaps even angry balsera embroidered by a friend, as she and her family flew from Varadero to Miami in 1971.

J: I gained a love for materials from the time spent with my mother in fabric shops, learning by touch. I know how the fabrics feel on your skin, the difference from cotton to silk, organza to chamois. I know how these fabrics feel and flow on the body, how to make them represent different shapes and silhouettes. There's a tactile understanding when I'm molding and shaping the material. It's about the relationship between the folds and shapes to the body. When I manipulate the materials, they imitate the sensation of when you wear something so tight that it's constricting the body or when something falls very delicately to accent the body. It was necessary to convey that, to generate a visual relationship to those sensations, and ultimately for it to become the skin.

A: We see that particularly with the *Colored China Rags*, being able to stand there in front of it and look at your own skin and think, how do I compare?

J: I love when I can observe people going up to rags and comparing their own skin color. Which means they get it. They didn't have to sit in a postcolonial studies class to figure out how the art is working. For me that is the beauty of the work. People are cognizant to what's unfolding. They automatically make the relationship to skin, to the body, and to the fact that there is a comparison from lightness to darkness in relation to their skin and where they fit in that scale. It happens automatically. It's important for me to articulate that knowledge isn't only obtained in academia.

A: I am also struck by the juxtaposition of the evocative softness of the fabric and the hard fixedness of the ceramic in *Colored China Rags*. Compare to that the corduroy of your migration dress, which might have been formally appropriate for the occasion but also stiff and uncomfortable for traveling as a young child and certainly more suited for a climate much cooler than Miami. The fabric itself evokes a sort of protection that the dress represented for your travel into this unknown.

J: The dress was everything that it was meant to be. It was supposed to be Northern. Corduroy is a fabric worn during winter. I was dressed in clothes for Northern cold climates. There was a coat to go with the dress, and it was lined to protect against the cold. My mother had imagined this other country in the way you imagine a place from a story in a book. A place she had never been and only had a second-hand knowledge. It was a dress for that imaginary North that had never been experienced in the first person. Even if it was in Miami, it was still north of Cuba.

A: It is also an act of resistance?

J: Yes. When I think about that I wonder what those women were thinking. We could have been stopped! They embroidered that dress with a bunny on a raft. You think officials couldn't figure out the overt political implications.

A: I love it because it's ballsy.

J: It's so ballsy. That's precisely what interested me, and unconsciously, I've held on to that alongside the dress. I love that transgression within a domestic space. It's so powerful. Even if they could not articulate it through action or through vocal resistance, they were committed to this moment of quiet disobedience through the domestic practice. It must count for something.

A: Your mother chose the image of a rafter to embroider on your migration dress, though you came to the United States on a plane. Later, you have repeated nautical themes and boats frequently in your works. Why does the boat seem to be such a central figure in the migration narrative of Cubans and in your work specifically?

J: In part it comes from being on an island. It's a connection to the sea that any islander has. Coming from an island, the water lingers as a constant in your life. It surrounds you. It's endless; it's a barrier with no escape. But you go to it for relief, you go to it for pleasure, you go to it for food. And so you develop a relationship to the sea that is unique for any islander.

The bunny balsera, dressed in a red sailor uniform, paddles a raft floating on a patch of light blue water.

The boat motif complements the water. The boat is a symbol for escape, for mobility, but also for enslavement. It's a stand in for all of the uncharted possibilities. Especially for any group that migrates by sea, they respond to this imagery. They quickly gravitate towards the work. I hadn't recognized it without reflection, but what I detect in my work is a connection to the water, the sea, to the idea of it as an entity, a spirit through the Yoruba religion. A direct connection to life or life's source. The water as a constant symbol of life. I think you have an unconscious connection when you are coming from an environment where there are large bodies of water or any place that has a significant amount of coast.

A: In *The World Upside-Down and Flat* you combine screen prints of Spanish galleons and Joseph Conrad's 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness*, symbols of imperialism both material and ideological. How do we think about what you term "the coloniality of power" in relation to voluntary and involuntary migrations, the entrenchment of global inequality, the continued crisis for Syrians, and the Latin American caravan traveling through Mexico as we speak?

J: A whole country on foot. The world is shifting again from the legacy of colonization. When looking at the Syrian refugees walking across Europe and the Latin American migration through Mexico, are they not the same thing? It's obvious both of these groups have decided that it's better to risk everything than remain in their homelands. They left everything behind, just like we did. What is out of sync is that it is happening at the beginning of the 21st century. I have worked to bring awareness to how the coloniality of power is connected to these present-day experiences. We think about colonialism as a thing of the past, and maybe empires might have been relegated to history. But the impact of colonization, the way social structures are systematically entrenched and dominate our way of life, is still active and present daily. It is sustained through political institutions, global policies, education, social structures, and everyday acts of the nation-state.

This is what my artwork strives to achieve: to create parallels, reveal these connections and make us aware that these inequalities haven't stayed in the past, that they are a current problem. There is a need to reexamine all aspects of society, and nothing can go unquestioned. Technology is evidence of how we replicate these same issues. For example, computer coding is written as native or non-native, integrating colonialist terminology into its language and structure. We are as influenced by that as by the china that you pick up in your house to drink. All aspects of our contemporary culture have been embedded or brought to fruition through the relationship between exploration and exploitation. Our cultural past is tied to the history of colonization, and it is maintained and sustained in the cultural institutions we inhabit. It is embedded in every bit of the fabric, from the cotton to spool. And if we don't unravel it, acknowledge its legacy, then there's no moving forward. It clings to us, and we'll drag it along when we move into space travel. Wherever we go, we'll bring this history of inequality along.

A: It sometimes feels like we cannot get outside of that legacy. We ask what would it look like to really deal with those problems, to really jettison that history. And it would have to look like a new world order.

J: Thank you! And that scares everybody. But the center is not the center any more. The edge has become the center, and we do need realignment. It causes people to feel threatened and scared, but we need to construct a society that will be more equitable and secure for all. I propose through my artworks to address this message that any society built on the exploitation of people because of their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or whatever type of exploitation of another is not sustainable. Systems based on extraction of natural resources and climate safeholds are unsustainable. We are just beginning to understand what that means. Even if there's an incredible pushback now, greater than ever before, to sustain the status quo.

A: Holding on by tooth and nail.

J: Yes, they're sliding down that wall, but they think they're holding it up. We must also be witness to change and understand the panic that any group may have when their world is being radically altered. If we understand this, then we'll be apt to do better. The resistance is gaining traction.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Hanging By. Porcelain Tile (from a set of 9).

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