

University of Mary Washington

Eagle Scholar

Student Research Submissions

Spring 5-2-2018

Por Sangre

Emma Cahoon

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cahoon, Emma, "Por Sangre" (2018). *Student Research Submissions*. 233.
https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research/233

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by Eagle Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research Submissions by an authorized administrator of Eagle Scholar. For more information, please contact archives@umw.edu.

Emma Cahoon
ENGL470C-01
Professor Rafferty
May 2, 2018

Por Sangre

It was a longer trip and a cloudy day, so my grandmother drove carefully, without her usual preferred classical station playing. It was a Saturday in early October and we were creeping down I-95 to get lunch with my cousin Sofi, who went to Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. Conversation had slowed – after Grandma asked me how I’d been and how my classes were going, and I’d talked about the newly found ins and outs of apartment living for a while, we had nothing more to say.

It wasn’t an uncomfortable silence. As I grew older, I found myself to be more like my Grandma Ofelia than I’d originally realized. Despite the generations between us and her bent towards conservatism, we had similar outlooks on life and even more similar temperaments. We both tended to mediate between others during disagreements and get snappy when we were stressed. With all of that, plus the fact that I was probably the grandchild most likely to answer her calls on any given day, we shared a pretty healthy relationship.

In spite of the companionable silence, I told myself *not yet*. Pick the right moment. Maybe at the restaurant with Sofi – we were even going to a small Cuban place in Richmond called Kuba Kuba. Surprisingly, I’d never actually been to a Cuban restaurant. It would make for a nice backdrop, I thought. I didn’t want to just blurt it out – it had to come up at least fairly organically. I wanted to make this good.

Grandma switched her glance from the steady road ahead of us and her wrinkled hands on the wheel to me. “So, have you been looking at where you want to study abroad?”

My eyes widened a little. The moment would be now, apparently.

“Oh, yeah, I was actually going to talk to you about that. I’ve been looking into a bunch of programs, and none of them have really interested me in particular...” I turned my hesitation into a pause for effect. “But the other day I went to an interest meeting for a trip to Cuba,” I said, going over this last word slowly. “And I was thinking about doing that.”

I looked over at Grandma driving, waiting for her to smile or gasp or maybe even reach across to grip my arm in the way she sometimes did when she was excited. I waited for the praise I’d anticipated: for being the only grandchild to take an active interest in our heritage, the only one to keep taking Spanish classes into college, and now the would-be first one to see her ancestral land.

She stared straight ahead, no change in her facial expression, eyes obscured by her scratched-up old sunglasses.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” she said. Grandma had a naturally accusatory tone of voice that sounded like she was reprimanding you even if she wasn’t, often exacerbated by her accent. I knew how to read it, and I could tell this wasn’t anger or disappointment, but something else. Hesitation? Wariness?

I fumbled a bit, throwing out the mental script I’d prepared. “Why? I mean, this is the first real chance I’ve ever had to go, and I think it’d be great. Mom thinks it’s a good idea. Plus, we’d be going over there to connect with the people, maybe actually do some real good...”

She shook her head, mouth a thin straight line. “Unless you go with a church you’re not doing any good. The situation over there is too complicated. I don’t think it’s time yet.”

I sat there, dismayed but not entirely put off. We drove in silence for a few minutes, still several dozen miles from Richmond.

“I will think about it,” she said, looking over at me. “If you really want to go, I will help you pay for it. I said I would help pay for your study abroad and you know Grandma Goofy” – her self-imposed nickname for herself from a trip to Disneyworld more than ten years ago – “she wants you to do what you want to do.”

“Well, thanks,” I said. This, at least, was on par with how she normally was – stubborn, set in her opinions and unafraid to tell you about them, but supportive of her grandchildren. I had a bit of whiplash, but it could have gone worse, I reasoned.

My maternal grandparents, Ofelia Ochoa and Alfredo Recio, had each left Cuba in the early sixties, meeting each other in Florida within a few years of their respective exiles. The Cuban Revolution in 1959 had ousted the authoritarian government of Fulgencio Batista but gave rise to a worse dictator in Fidel Castro, causing thousands to flee to the United States.

Growing up I knew very little about their lives there. All I remember my mom telling me when I asked was that they left “before things got really bad;” essentially, while it was still legal and relatively easy to do so. Even with my paltry knowledge, I was fascinated with this part of my family’s history – my *immediate* family’s history. I was directly descended from political refugees, tied to a part of history most of my friends didn’t even know about, and to a country

which with, despite its proximity, the United States has one of its tensest, most uneasy relationships.

As a kid, I didn't really understand my heritage sometimes. My family proclaimed ourselves Hispanic, but my siblings and I didn't even speak Spanish. Only my mother did, who either used it when she didn't want us to know what she was discussing with Grandma Ofelia, or with the occasional service worker. We were also white and Latino at the same time, which was something I didn't know was even possible until early adulthood. And did the label really count if only one of your parents was Hispanic? I asked once, in a moment of doubt, convinced that my mother had the math wrong: "If Dad's not Cuban how can we be?"

"Well, I'm full Cuban," my mother answered. "Because both Grandma and Grandpa are. So that makes you guys half."

She went on to explain that Americans, in general, weren't allowed to go to Cuba, but that we could. Well, most of us. You had to be "family," and Dad and my Uncle Scott couldn't go, since apparently marrying in didn't count. I thought this was pretty unfair, but it wasn't like we were going to visit anytime soon. The political climate was still too fraught. When you guys are older, Mom would assure. This was in stark contrast to a half-German friend I had who spent part of nearly every summer I could remember visiting her grandparents in Bremen. It just wasn't like that for us.

I used to picture what it would be like to visit for the first time. I imagined an emotional landing, maybe a tear or two artfully shed. I imagined feeling instantly at ease, like I belonged there. I imagined looking around in wonderment at palm trees and a bright sky, the mystery of my heritage at last clicking into place.

Still, I proudly owned my Cubanness, always perking up when the country was mentioned or when I learned some celebrity or other was Cuban, and eager to explain my family's history whenever the topic of heritage came up. Generally, however, I had very few points of contact. My grandfather, who I would later find out actually went to school with Fidel Castro, died when I was a child, and I never got to ask him anything about life back on the island. My grandmother didn't cook, a common medium for experiencing culture, although I got to experience the wonder of Cuban food here and there throughout childhood, at larger family gatherings. Her way of remembering, instead, was holding on to photographs, tickets, bits of paper – any relic of her youth in Cuba. These she passed on to us over the years, in scrapbooks at significant ages, although the spidery handwriting on the postcards and letters made them difficult to read. My siblings and I quickly gave up trying to decipher them.

In seventh grade civics, I was assigned to write a paper on my family's heritage. I dove into the assignment eagerly, detailing what I knew of my grandparents' escape and sparing maybe a paragraph to the murky mix of European ancestry on my father's side – Scottish, Irish. I still remember the words I used in the last line: that I was "truly proud" of my roots and background. I still remember being handed back the paper and seeing an A in red pen on the front, freezing for a moment in glowing, grinning joy.

I stood on the tarmac at the airport in Santa Clara, Cuba, in harsh late-afternoon sunlight, trying to keep the wind from blowing my hair into my eyes. It was a useless effort; out here in the open, the wind was unrelenting. Amid the commotion of my companions hustling their carry-ons out of the plane and our faculty leader trying to herd us all together, I stood and tried to feel something. The sun was warm and the wind, while annoying, was cool and soothing; tropical air,

like I'd felt on so many family vacations before. We were in the same time zone as back home, the same hot pre-summer. But the familiarity ended there. I couldn't muster up decades of the pain of exile like I thought I should be able to do, only faint disbelief. This was happening. We were really here.

No one in our family had set foot on the island in almost fifteen years. My mother, Aunt Maria, and Grandma Ofelia had gone in 2003, one year after the death of my grandfather from stomach cancer. It was my grandmother's first time back in more than forty years – and, to date, her only time back – and my mom and aunt had never been. My mom told me all about it later. The bureaucracy involved in simply getting there, for one; they'd had to leave on a charter plane from New York instead of a regular commercial flight. How they'd gone to see my grandmother's old house, which had been converted into an embassy – the Chilean one, to be exact – and how she was only allowed in to see it after explaining the situation. The beautiful beaches at Varadero, where they'd spent several days.

Things had changed since then, for sure. With the slightly-more relaxed relations between Cuba and the United States as established by the Obama administration (which were later to be reversed by the Trump administration), travel to the island was a little bit easier, although my group was traveling under a State Department exception that had always existed. It was one of twelve categories of authorized travel that had technically always allowed me to be able to go; “family visits” was first on the list.

We had to move along off the tarmac, fourteen college students and a faculty leader, into the slow, nerve-wracking process of customs. As we stood under lazily spinning ceiling fans, lugging our heavy bags inches ahead in line and clutching our passports, a simple truth came.

This was all new to me. I had never been here before, so what right did I have to expect anything in particular?

I did have my doubts about the trip beforehand. I'd always pictured that the first time I went to Cuba, I'd be with my family. Did I really want to experience it for the first time with fifteen strangers? In addition, ours was to be something of a service trip – the plan was to spend several days a week helping out the community with several small projects and teaching English in the evenings. We'd spent a good portion of the course we were required to take the semester before the trip discussing ethical ways to do service, but I still wasn't convinced that any collaboration between our two countries could be genuinely productive, given the United States' imperialistic history towards Cuba.

But if Grandma's lukewarm response had been any indication, this might be the only chance I'd ever get. And I didn't know if I'd be able to live with myself, had I chosen not to go. Plus, I had a right to be here, didn't I? Maybe I didn't have the best Spanish among my group members – I counted myself maybe fourth-best – but I was the only one with any Cuban heritage. So here I was.

Soon enough, we got on a bus to take us to Ciego de Ávila, our host city for the majority of the trip. I grabbed a window seat towards the back and sat with my water bottle and camera strewn awkwardly around me – I'd pulled it out of my bag already, not wanting to miss a thing. We traveled over flat, rural ground, marked only by road signs bearing nationalist propaganda and endless palm trees. The sun went down, further stranding me in panic and apprehension. I

didn't know this place or these people. I, who had always thrived on familiarity and routine, was stuck here for the next two weeks. Irrationally, all I wanted was to go home.

On our first full day, we went on a tour of Ciego, viewing in broad daylight what we'd seen snatches of in the dark as we arrived the previous night. I was shaky and culture-shocked, but excited nonetheless. We walked dusty sidewalks pockmarked with broken tiles and potholes, marveling at the sun-splashed buildings in bright pinks, blues, and yellows. We learned as we walked that Cuba's colorful palate was largely born out of necessity, like almost everything else in the country. Its famed abundance of vintage cars, for example, is due to the long-running ban on foreign imports. People painted buildings in whatever color was on hand, often resulting in vibrant two- or three-toned houses that would make the homeowners' association in my suburban neighborhood back home blush. The streets were filled with people riding bikes and horse-drawn carriages, a common way of getting around in Ciego, but a sight that certainly took some getting used to.

I walked haltingly, enthralled, taking a picture every few feet with my beloved but underutilized Canon, readjusting my settings every few shots to reckon with the blazing sun. Architecture remains one of my favorite things to photograph, and I tried to capture every Corinthian-columned building, every bit of artfully chipped paint or latticed window I saw.

I remembered how my photography often suffered from a lack of humanity. I tended to forget to include people in my shots, so I tried to incorporate them from a distance or just out of focus when possible. They weren't my only subjects – stray dogs trotted down the street

wherever we turned, seemingly traveling with such purpose, such intent, that we couldn't help but laugh every time we saw them.

Monday morning we began work on our separate projects, settling into a routine by the end of the week. Breakfast: *tortillas* (not the bread kind; tortillas were what they called omelets) and Cuban bread and freshly squeezed fruit juice. Generous applications of sunscreen. Working in gardens or painting walls. Lunch and then downtime, which we usually filled with card games or sightseeing. Then dinner, and then English tutoring, followed by exhaustion and going to bed at a respectable hour. Occasionally, small-group treks to get ice cream or go shopping in the town. We talked and laughed and enjoyed each other's company and the company of our hosts.

But despite our busyness and the genuine beauty of Ciego de Ávila, I struggled with loneliness, frequently battling my own emotions. I had found allies in several of the other girls, but still felt as though I had no true friends on the trip. Beyond that, I constantly grappled in the first few days with what I thought I should be feeling. Pride? Nostalgia? The sense that I was home? I shook off the thought. This wasn't even the city my family came from; that was Havana, where we'd be in a week and a half. Maybe it'd be different there.

In a moment of downtime, I wrote in my journal, doing what I had always done to make sense of things. I sat at the table where we ate breakfast and sketched, getting some observations down, some reflections. There's a quote from Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie that hung over me while I journaled. In describing her relationship to her adopted country, the United States, she says "I like America, but it is not mine." I could not force a feeling, or a connection

that wasn't there, I wrote. I was going to feel whatever I was going to feel. I capped my pen, closed my journal, and headed upstairs.

One thing I could definitely rely on in Cuba was the food. We had our choice of the same few dishes every night for dinner – ropa vieja, a rotating menu of fish, pork, or chicken, and usually some kind of rice dish – but no one was complaining since it was all so delicious. There was also the plantain, which I'd come to worship in only a few short days. I'd only previously eaten it in chip form, but here, there were three kinds: a sweet fried version called maduros; savory rounds called tostones, and chips, usually hot out of the fryer. It became a game to see which restaurant in town had the best ones, as well as the best dessert or best food overall.

My favorite restaurant came to be a little rooftop place that we found ourselves at for the second time towards the end of our time in Ciego. It was beautifully decorated with pink mosaic tiles and we had a view of the street below as the sky tilted into sunset. As the night went on, the sky darkened further into the first rumblings of a Caribbean thunderstorm.

I sat with several others in my group, commenting on the deliciousness of the maduros and black bean soup, buoyed and comforted by the cooling air around us. The breeze felt the exact same temperature as my skin, slowly wicking away the sweat from the day's activities. The plantain was sweet and salty on my tongue. Our days were long and exhausted us, but we were always revitalized by the food.

I sat serenely as the wind picked up. I was settled, used to our routine after having been in Ciego for a week, not afraid of anything anymore – my peers, my surroundings, the weather.

Thunderstorms used to scare me as a child, but I loved them now. I twisted around in my chair to watch.

One night, three other girls and I went with our faculty leader and our guide to the local hotel to dance. We walked giddily down to the hotel's ballroom and onto the sparsely populated dancefloor, taking in the pulsing green and red laser lights and pounding music, party not quite started. We took our drink tickets to the bartender and I watched in keen anticipation as he poured us all very generous shots of rum to go with our Cokes. Back at our table, we toasted to Ciego and drank, giggling at the illicitness.

The dance floor filled and the music kicked up soon enough, mostly Spanish hip hop, the occasional American song, and then-nascent international hit "Despacito." I hardly knew any of the songs and I'd never been able to dance, relying on a sort of tango one-two step routine, but as my drink tipped further and further to empty, I stopped worrying about my moves. The other girls and I kept dancing steadily, our clothes glowing under the blacklight, making eyes at anyone who came close.

I tipped my head up, silly grin plastered on my face, having decidedly passed into the realm of intoxication, and thought, "I'm Cuban." Maybe it wasn't enough for these people. I'd been met with disbelief by locals when I explained my background, which didn't really upset me; I supposed it was fair that my fifty years of disconnect didn't exactly mean I was one of them. And maybe it was an American thing, the way we choose to identify. We tend to refer to our heritage alongside our nationality to describe ourselves, instead of simply calling ourselves by where we were born. Asian American, Italian American, Cuban American. Maybe it's

because America, although chock-full of immigrants, is equally populated by people like me, searching for something more, for a connection to someplace else.

I had definitely done a lot of ruminating on identity in the past year or so. But in that moment, none of that mattered to me. The music was loud and infectious. The rum was potent and sweet. Lights danced across our bodies, my face, my flowery tank top. I was over the moon just to be making contact at last.

I boarded the tour bus, hugging my backpack to my chest, completely soaked after just a short sprint outside. It was absolutely pouring rain on the second half of our only day in Havana. We had spent the morning and part of the afternoon walking around Havana's historic downtown in what was by far the most touristy part of the trip, sampling street churros and buying souvenirs in one of the small shops that lined the city's many squares. Then, we had had to work to keep hydrated enough to stay on our feet; now, the sky was unleashing an absolute deluge of rain, flooding the gutters with torrents of water, heavy drops glancing off the rooftops and soaking the shoulders of my shirt. It only made me feel more awkward as I stood alone at the front of the bus, the only one there besides the driver and our guide, Maru. This would be my own little adventure.

While everyone else was listening to a lecture on the Cuban education system, I had a request from Grandma Ofelia to fulfill. She wanted me to meet her cousin Alina (which made her a cousin of mine too, I supposed), who still lived in Havana. It was slightly unfortunate that this task had fallen to me, her most socially anxious grandchild, given that I was now sitting on the bus shivering out of both cold and nerves.

Maru directed the bus driver to the address I'd been given. As we lumbered through the rainy streets of residential Havana, I caught bits of their conversation in Spanish. I could tell she was explaining to him the reason for my solo outing, how I was Cuban. He seemed confused, like many other Cuban citizens before him. "No por nacimiento," Maru clarified. "Por sangre." Not by birth, but blood.

We stopped in front of a house that looked like all of the rest; tall, almost townhouse-style, an air of wornness about it. An old woman stood at the front gate under an umbrella, grinning. Irrationally I looked around, wanting to make sure it was her, but remembered myself as soon as she spoke.

"Are you Emma?" she asked.

"Yeah, hi, Alina?"

We finally reached each other and hugged, me giggling a little at the strangeness. She led Maru and me up the steps to her home, a small apartment scattered with miniature rugs across the floor and ceramic knickknacks on side tables, much like my grandma's apartment back home. We sat on a cushy couch, taking care not to drip on anything, while Alina flipped through family pictures on a tablet, showing us her daughter, the daughter's husband, her sister. It was no one I'd ever heard of, but I *oohed* and *ahhed* at each one, marveling a little at the scope of my family tree.

Maru took some photos of us, a couple each on my phone and my camera. I wrote down Alina's email and promised to send them to her once I got back to the States.

We didn't stay long, having to get back to the group for dinner. "I wish I had something to give you," Alina said as we stood up and brushed off our clothes.

“It’s okay,” I said, and meant it. “The pictures are enough.” As we walked down the steps and outside, my mind went back to that morning, the image it had been settling on all day.

Our *casa particular* in Havana, a privately-owned home rented out to travelers, had a balcony and a bidet and a TV. Our group was spread across several different casas, a welcome change from the way we’d been packed in one room in Ciego. We had almost reached the end; tomorrow we would head to the airport, our adventure completed. So today our slate would be completely packed as we tried to experience as much of the city as possible.

I woke up early before my roommate, freezing cold. We had been too polite to ask for thicker blankets in the heavily air-conditioned room and knew by now not to question air conditioning when we had it anyway, and I had the distinct feeling of having slept using a tissue for a blanket. I was bleary-eyed but fully awake, quietly delighting in being the only one awake, something I had enjoyed since childhood but that rarely happened anymore. I grabbed my Canon and slipped out of the room and onto the balcony.

The view from the outside of our casa faced the low roof of another house, with several towering palm trees reaching behind it, like the template of a postcard. Cuba’s gorgeous architectural colors came through once again. The floor and lip of the balcony were a soft brick red that felt friendly under my bare feet, and the other house featured a bright poppy stripe beneath its windows. Dark green metal-wicker chairs and a table sat in the center of the balcony, surrounded by spidery potted plants that were painted in the same color as the floor. The air was pleasantly warm, the severe sun not yet fully risen, sky bright and blank with a light haze of wispy clouds. There was no sound apart from the faint chirping of birds.

I was, in fact, in my grandmother's old neighborhood, Alturas de Miramar – she had me write down the address before I left, and I'd cross-referenced it with our itinerary. Miles from where she grew up.

I was momentarily left breathless, in the early morning air, with the revelation that this was some of what she saw and felt every day. It's possible it was just the simplicity of proximity, but it felt like something more. I couldn't explain it. It just was.

I messed with my camera, adjusted my settings, unsure of how to frame the scene. I snapped a couple pictures, one on landscape mode, the other manually, couldn't decide which one I liked more. I want to know this place, I had also written in my journal.

So maybe Cuba didn't belong to me, but it was something I could work at. I went back inside, shutting the balcony door quietly behind me, before getting dressed to explore Havana.

Months later, Grandma tells my siblings and me that she wants to go back again. She's going to take us after my brother and I graduate. The story continues.