



He Disagrees with His Family on the Meaning of Being Cuban

Because of his progressive political views, Max feels a disconnect with his conservative Cuban-American family. And Ana Sofia Pelaez, an organizer in Miami, shares her insights on speaking with parents about contentious home countries.

Juleyka Lantigua:

Hi everybody. Today, we welcome Max. Max grew up in a conservative Cuban American household. His liberal politics clashed with those of his relatives, making him sometimes question his cultural identity and even doubt his sense of belonging in the broader Cuban American community. Let's get into it.

Max:

My name is Max Ramos. I am Cuban descendant from Miami. I currently live in Atlanta, Georgia, and in my house we call my parents, mom and poppy, or dad. It depends on the day. Growing up I was always known as the white guy, the white kid. Even though I was born in Puerto Rico, my name is Max Milano [inaudible 00:00:47], my family is from Cuba, like all these things, a lot of the Cuban or the Hispanicness was never really enforced or reinforced in my household. We didn't have the, you only speak Spanish in the house. We spoke English. We watched football and not baseball. I always kind of felt like a fish out of water growing up in Miami, just like the entire exile experience of like being staunchly anti-communist, staunchly anti-socialist, whatever that definition means to you. Being like over the top pro-American, but also being Cuban or an idea of Cuban the entire time.

My father and a lot of family members, always holding these political beliefs in part because of their experiences with Cuba, the Cuban government, what have you. My grandfather, my father's dad, fought at the Bay of Pigs against Castro's government. He was jailed for years. My great uncle on my dad's side was jailed for years. My grandfather on dad's side, abandoned by his family. His entire family were all supporters of the regime. My dad always told me, he is like, "I brought you up to be a Republican, and then you go to college and you come back and you're a raging Democrat. What happened?" And the civil answer would be like, "I don't know, I met people. I met other people from other places."

And the thing is as I got older, my political identity and my belief system got further established. Honestly that also affected my relationship with my father especially, but my family at large. Voting for certain people, like when I voted for Joe Biden, it

was being called a “socialista”. It was being called a “comunista”. It was things like that. My identity as a Cuban American has been fraught with the idea of like, what does it mean to be Cuban when being Cuban, at least in the eyes of many people, doesn't align at all with how you view the world?

Max:

So a few years ago, I took a trip that is considered a cardinal sin in the Cuban community in the United States, especially in Miami. I was dating someone at the time that had family in Cuba and she said, "Hey, would you like to go with my family and I to Cuba?" And when I started explaining to my family that I had made this decision, I had mixed reactions from extreme disappointment to apprehension to, I wouldn't do that. I would never go back. I won't go until that government is out of power.

In my personal opinion, the Cuban government has failed. The economy has ...this. is mind you this is before COVID, this is before the pandemic, before all of that, and before all the protests that had recently happened. This was 2016 and things were a shamble. But honestly, when it finally happened and I finally did it, it was extremely eye opening in the sense of like, okay, so I know what I am, because I see where my family's from now.

I saw the baseball stadium my grandfather visited. I saw the markets my grandmother used to buy food at. The cars they used to drive, because literally they're the same cars. It was reaffirming of like, okay, I am this, but I'm also not this. Because I was also explicitly feeling that I am an American, because I was seen as an American even though my name said one thing and my background said something. It's like, okay, you are American. You're very much American and there's no doubt about that.

When I got back to Miami, I talked to my family and I even showed them all the pictures I took because I took a million. My father, what he saw was reaffirming of his beliefs. He's like, "I was right." And I'm like, "Yes, this is terrible." I also got to talk to my grandparents about it and they were of course apprehensive because they were personal victims of the revolution, but I got to show them what Cuba looked like now. And there was a lot of graciousness and gratitude in that I got to do that, and also I was able to tell them thank you for experiencing the hardships of leaving to make sure that this wasn't going to be your life because I saw what it did to people.

I think the biggest thing about being Cuban American is that we are not Cubans. When people talk about a free Cuba, it's a very different conversation that would be had between Cubans here in the United States and Cubans who live in Cuba and what they would see, what they would want with Cuba. And the thing is that even my dad, my dad doesn't have a connection to Cuba. He doesn't have anyone in Cuba. My family doesn't have anyone in Cuba. It tells you how long it's been

going on. Even though we no longer have a connection to it, the attitude and the feelings are still there even after all this time.

Lantigua: Max's story made me think about what we as first gens inherit from our parents. Stories about their experiences back home, their conflicted feelings about the homeland, their cultural identities, even their political ideologies, so much gets passed down, almost by osmosis. But what happens when we begin to develop our own identity and our own ideologies, especially when they're based on our own experiences in the U.S.? How do we reconcile who we are with who and where we come from? To help us figure it out, I did what I always do. I called in an expert.

Ana Sofia Pelaez:

My name is Ana Sofia Pelaez. I am the co-founder and executive director of Miami Freedom Project based in Miami, Florida. And we work with creating a space for Miamians to talk about progressive issues. It's really about enabling and creating those kinds of avenues for political action and advocacy.

Lantigua: So I predictably ask the same question, which is, when you heard Max's story, what did you hear?

Pelaez.: To be honest, my first thought was, are we related? When he was talking about his own family and telling his story, I felt like he was telling my story in so many ways.

Lantigua: And what was so familiar to you in the dynamics that he described?

Pelaez: In the family history, in the biography in a very factual way of having that experience of having people in your family, in your extended family, who had that experience in Cuba. And in that just the empathy and the understanding of what that was like for them and wanting to honor that and really having that be centered in your upbringing and in your understanding of the world and what it means to be here and how you relate to politics and these events that some of us if we're lucky, can see it as something very apart from us, but that if you come from a family who's experienced that kind of hardship experience, that kind of trauma that's made them leave their country and seek out safety in another, it's a very much lived experience and a very formative experience in the way that you grow up.

Lantigua: So for someone who maybe didn't grow up around Cuban Americans, who might not have Cuban Americans in their lives, what is the simplest possible way to understand why being connected and not being connected to the island has for decades been such a source of tension for those who are in the United States and their generations?

Pelaez: So just to be clear, do you mean having gone back to the island, which is part of his story?

Lantigua: Yes. Exactly.

Pelaez: I think that experience in Cuba for our parents or grandparents was one of, in some sense being gaslit. The revolution came. In many ways they didn't anticipate the direction it would take. There was a great deal of political diversity, difference of viewpoints within families, among friends, within the community. So they responded to the revolution in different ways. And then what happened happened. People aligned differently. There was this rupture within the community. Things broke apart.

And I think that sense that they didn't anticipate it, they didn't foresee it, they took a very hard line in a certain sense of, that's not going to happen again. I'm going to take this position that's very immovable. And for some of them that was, "I'm leaving this country as a refugee because of my life, my livelihood, the safety of my family, so how can I go back as a tourist, as a visitor, as a guest, to a country that I fled?" And that position was transmitted to their children. I can't go back. You shouldn't go back.

It's a choice, and it's a choice I think many of us understand that they made, but it's not necessarily a choice we feel that everyone should be able to make for us. I decided differently. I decided that I would go back. I had my reasons to do it. Not everyone in my family understood them, but I was willing to make that choice and have that conversation with them.

And very similar to Max, and this is something that I tell everyone who is curious, who wants to understand more about Cuba, whether or not people agree with you, when you come back, there is that point of them wanting to understand what you saw, what you felt, what you thought. And that in many ways can start the conversation that you may not be able to have before, you can have it after.

Lantigua: Thinking of other Latinos and other people from around the world, places like Afghanistan, places like Nicaragua, places like Myanmar, where their families fled for their safety, and years later or the kids later, it is safe to go back. But the parents who came over have no interest, while the kids want to establish some kind of connection. How did you even broach the conversation with your parents? How did you prepare to have that conversation? And what were the points that you were prepared to make to not get their permission or their blessing, but to at least be heard?

Pelaez: Well, I think every family has their own kind of dynamic. I'm a younger sibling. So I didn't go, I was taken. So in many ways I had the older sibling who made that leap first. But I do think it was about just being honest that you do understand that it was difficult for them. You do honor that history. You do recognize it. You do

believe them. I don't think anybody is going to, or anybody that I've had these conversations with, is going back to Cuba in a way that they want to disallow or disprove what their family's experienced. They just want to know what that was. And they want to have that deeper understanding of where they came from. And it really is a kind of leap of faith that families have to take together.

The parents, the grandparents have to understand that this person that they love, that they've shared this story with is not going to go there and come back and say, "You exaggerated. You didn't mean it. It was fine. I had a perfectly..." They're going to really understand why they left and they're going to in many ways just really be able to empathize with them more. And when you go back, when I went to Cuba, when I experienced it for the first time, I felt that any story I had been told about Cuba was wanting because it was more beautiful than I imagined. It was more like home than I could have hoped. It was this experience that in seeing it, I understood more the pain of having to leave it than I would have from just what I had been told secondhand through my family.

And I think that connection, that ability to look at my grandfather when came back and say, "I understand, I understand what you lost and I'm sorry." That brought us closer together in a way that I think if families understood that that was a possibility, that there would be that deeper understanding and that these stories that they have shared with them would have more meaning, they would be more at ease, they would be more at peace with letting their children go and have that experience.

Lantigua: Switching gears a little bit, one of the things that Max talked about repeatedly was the expectation to be Cuban American in a very particular way, especially when he came to his political alignments. And Cuban Americans have a reputation for being more politically conservative, for being more supportive of certain ideologies, et cetera, and he finds that at odds with how he's choosing to live. So talk to me because you are studying the politics mixed in with the identity and all of this, a little bit about how those types of expectations can influence, not just the identity, but also the political awareness and the sort of like the understanding of what your place is in a community for someone like Max.

Pelaez: For someone like Max, the experience in their families of having this dictatorship that defined itself as a socialist communist dictatorship, the reaction to that can be seen as going in the other direction, being conservative. And that is a valid response. If you've had this traumatic experience with an ideology, a professed ideology, I think it's questionable how it was practiced. The other extreme could be seen as safe harbor, but it's not the only response. And I feel that for this generation, that whose parents have come, that they have that one step removed, we've grown up in a different system and we've internalized that to a certain extent. And I think to grow up in the United States is to, until recently, to have a

sense of balance. To have a sense of checks and balances, that there's going to be two parties, that that's the foundation of democracy. And we're comfortable in that.

Pelaez: I have a friend who grew up in Cuba and he said, "Children vote in this country. You go to their house and they say, "Who wants to play basketball? Who wants to play baseball?" That's not what we do in Cuba." It's a different experience. And you see children in some ways, this is a part of our formation. And I think to not really want to explore all ideas, all policy prescriptions, have those conversations, is very limiting. And in many ways, it's almost as though you left a country that was telling you that there was only one way to think, one way to be, one way to live. Why would you accept that in another country that is telling you engage with everything and make up your own mind. We really center the individual and being able to determine how they feel about things, how they align on different issues. How can you not do that? Engaging on different ideologies, that's what our families left for.

And I think that's what we have to hold onto. We have to give ourselves that space to engage on issues in a very honest way. Not limit ourselves to the conversation that we think we should have and have that be dictated by a cultural identity that's aligned to a political ideology, which is not the case. There's nothing about being Cuban that has to be conservative. So as an individual, as a citizen, you should be able to engage on issues in any way that connects to your needs, your understanding what the broader community needs and how you can all move forward.

Lantigua: Thank you so much for coming on the show. What a pleasure to talk to you.

Pelaez: It was a pleasure. Thank you so much. It's a great program. I'm really happy to hear all of these voices.

Lantigua: All right. Here's what we learned from Ana Sofia today.

Reassure them. When speaking with parents about their home country, emphasize that you are not trying to disprove or discount their experiences, you're just trying to understand them.

Talk about your experience. Whether or not your family agrees with your choice to visit the homeland, they will definitely be curious about the actual visit. So talk about what you saw, talk about what you felt and what you thought and use this as an opportunity to foster understanding between you.

And remember, engage with everything. There is no one way to think, to be, or to live. You have the opportunity to explore ideas, issues, and ideologies in ways that

many of our family members simply didn't back home. So seek these opportunities out.

Lantigua: Thank you for listening and for sharing us. How to Talk to Mami & Papi About Anything is an original production of LWC Studios. Virginia Lora is the show's producer. Kojin Tashiro is our mixer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. I'm the creator, Juleyka Lantigua. On Twitter and Instagram, we're @talktomamipapi. Please follow us and rate us on Apple Podcast, Amazon Music, Pandora, Spotify, anywhere you listen to your favorite podcast.

Bye everybody. Same place next week.

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