



Morning rush hour, Camagüey



School boy, Trinidad

# LENS My return to a place I'd never been

BY OMAR VEGA

I was born in the United States to parents who were both born in Cuba, and I've spent my life balancing on the hyphen between Cuban and American. Early on, out of a child's instinct to survive, I learned to fit in at school by assimilating. So much so that I felt like I turned my back on my family history and heritage. Until a few years ago, when I decided that it was time to explore my Cuban-ness by visiting the island.

While preparing for my first visit, in 2015 — interviewing my family, collecting old photos — I often found myself saying “going back” when referring to the upcoming trip. The thing is, I had never been there. My cousin Jessica felt the same way — as if she were returning to the place. It was then that I realized that the memories our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had been passionately sharing with us over the years had become our own. Their love of country had been passed down — along with their sadness over what could have been for the isle and its people.

And so it was that I found myself in 2016 traveling by car in Cuba, from Havana to Cienfuegos, then to Camagüey, Las Tunas, and Trinidad. I witnessed the dai-

ly lives of the people through dusty windows and heard stories from them wherever we stopped. I took it all in and searched for myself — my roots — in the faces and lives of strangers.

I photographed the Cubans with a distance between us filled with my fears of not belonging, and my longing to belong. I collected images of them, as if possessing these snapshots of their lives would fill the gap that left me teeter-

ing between the two worlds of my hyphenated identity.

It took those years after my first visit, and countless hours spent poring over the photos I made there, to see what was in plain sight. In my photographic menagerie I saw their stories, and mine, and that of us all.

The space I inhabit on that hyphen isn't a void, it isn't a confusion of identity. It is my identity.

Omar Vega is design director at the Globe. For more photos, go to [bostonglobe.com/2020/09/18/opinion/hyphen](http://bostonglobe.com/2020/09/18/opinion/hyphen).



Performer at Cabaret Las Vegas, Havana



Man smoking a cigarette, Havana



Young girls on El Malecón, Havana



Sunrise, Camagüey

*The refrain  
'nada es fácil'  
(nothing is easy)  
is heard  
everywhere in  
Cuba.*