

# A Pool of Water: Backyard Borders between Cuba and the United States

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As everyone knows, one of the material manifestations of the American Dream is the construction of a private pool in the backyard, where the family will gather in the summer. The kids will play in the water, the men will do their laps, and the women will bask in the sun, their faces being covered by broad-brimmed straw hats while they lavishly read a hardcover mystery bestseller.

This typical scene of the American Dream is rendered with a tongue-in-cheek sense of humor and irony by Cuban artist Glenda León. In her installation artwork *Sueño de verano (el horizonte es una ilusión)* (*Summer Dream, The Horizon Is an Illusion*) (2012), it is metaphorically transformed to represent the Strait of Florida, the pool of water separating Cuba from the United States.<sup>1</sup> The two sides of the pool are altered to mimic the two cities of Havana and Miami, with the cement decks being covered over with gridded maps dotted with street names. The two cities are aligned so closely that they could literally look at each other across the pool. The horizon would truly vanish as an illusion. For Cubans, this would be the time for the “sueño de verano,” thinking how eventually they might do a lap and swim to the other side.

Waves of Cuban immigrants have dreamed of the “sueño de verano.” In the historical context of Cuban migration to the United States, this pool of water had connected the two venues as part of the vast territories of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, which extended from Mexico to the current states of California and Oregon, connecting the Caribbean Sea with the Pacific Ocean. The traffic of “internal” migrations from Cuba to Florida had started as early as 1565, when Spanish Cuban soldiers followed the order of Admiral Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, went north, and became settled in St. Augustine. In 1607, La Habana was designated as the administrative



Figure 1. Glenda León, *Sueño de verano (el horizonte es una ilusión)* (*Summer Dream, The Horizon Is an Illusion*), 2008–2012, public intervention: digital print of Havana city map, digital print of Miami city map, chairs, tables, DJ, music, and drinks. Installation view at FOCSA building, Vedado, 11th Havana Biennial, 2012. ©Courtesy of the artist.

center of the Captaincy General of Cuba, which would eventually include what today are the states of Louisiana and Florida, as well as the island of Cuba.

It was not until the signing of the Florida Treaty in 1819, when Spain ceded Florida to the United States, that Cuba was separated from Florida, the former remaining a Spanish colony and the latter becoming a US state. The ensuing 1898 Spanish-American War officially turned Cuba over to the United States, thus starting the island's colonization by the United States, which endured until the Cuban Revolution broke out in 1959. The Cuban-American confrontation had not lessened until President Barack Obama broke the ice and paid a visit in 2016—the first of its kind in eighty-eight years.



Figures 2, 3. Glenda León, *Sueño de verano (el horizonte es una ilusión)* (Summer Dream, The Horizon Is an Illusion), 2008–2012. ©Courtesy of the artist.

Given the long history of entanglement between Cuba and the United States, the pool of water has witnessed centuries of Cuban migration to *el norte* since the colonial days of Spanish Florida. Caught between the two empires, the island of Cuba may well have been the folded interior of the continental United States. Just like the artificial “wall” separating Mexico from the United States, the watery borders (the Strait of Florida) are as fake and contrived as the territorial ones. They are the “backyard borders” connecting Havana and Miami, as León stages in *Sueño de verano*. That is to say, the watery traffic between Cuba and Florida might have been more “homey” than you realize—just like a lap in the backyard pool.

If León highlights the “*sueño de verano*” of Cuban immigrants who want to go to the other side, Juana Valdes, another female artist from Cuba, pokes fun at the dream from the other shore. In her installation artwork, *Te-Amo (PS: I Love You)*, 2007), Valdes places in Daytona Beach a lineup of flags with pink embroideries spelling out in Spanish “*te-amo.*”<sup>2</sup> The message may go two ways: It could be the host country’s



Figure 4. Juana Valdes, *Te-Amo*, 2007, beachfront installation. Courtesy of the artist.

salutation to Cuban immigrants who finally make it to Florida. Or it could be the immigrant's pledge of allegiance to their host country in North America.

There is no doubt that Cuba has occupied a special place in the history of immigration to the United States. In 1995, President Bill Clinton introduced the “Dry Feet, Wet Feet Policy,” which allowed only Cuban immigrants who made it to US shores to remain in the country, while relentlessly sending back those stranded in the water. The lineup of flags flapping the repeated message of *te-amo*, *te-amo* thus becomes alluring, as if sending out waves of whispers to northbound Cuban immigrants—“just hang in there; continue kicking the water until you reach the shore.” The moment you touch the sand, your feet turn dry, and you will be allowed to stay.

For those who love to swim, drying one's feet may be routine. Yet, in the context of Cuban migration to the United States, it has become an imperative. It is only at the moment you reach the shore, getting your feet dry, you are allowed to stay. You are now on the other side of the pool. Welcome to *los Estados Unidos de América*, the country that murmurs “*te-amo*, *te-amo*” to your ears, as Valdes's work ironically critiques.

The year 2019 celebrates the sixtieth anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, as well as the two-hundredth anniversary of the Florida Purchase. The “country” of Cuba may have been separated from the US, but the pool of water continues to flow in memory of countless “*nataciones*” made from the island to the continent. Taken side by side, the two art installations powerfully demonstrate that generations of Cuban immigrants have tried to reach the other side of the pool, murmuring “*te-amo, te-amo.*” Getting their feet to dry, they hope that the American Dream will not have been just a “*sueño de verano.*”



Figure 5. Juana Valdes, *Te-Amo*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Glenda León, *Sueño de verano (el horizonte es una ilusión) (Summer Dream, The Horizon Is an Illusion)*, installation artwork, Fosca Building, Havana, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Juana Valdes, *Te-Amo (PS: I Love You, 2007)*, installation artwork, 2007.

**Selected Bibliography**

León, Glenda. *Sueño de verano (el horizonte es una ilusión) (Summer Dream, The Horizon Is an Illusion)*. Installation artwork. 2012.

Valdes, Juana. *Te-Amo (PS: I Love You, 2007)*. Installation artwork. 2007.