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***¡Que Maravilla!* A Phenomenological Analysis  
of Awe in the Cuban Diaspora**

By

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### Abstract

This study offers a critical evaluation of existing theoretical frameworks on the emotion of awe by exploring how awe is culturally mediated within the Cuban diaspora. Through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of semi-structured interviews with seven Cuban American participants representing 1.5, second, and third-generation diasporic experiences across Chicago, Miami, and New York City, this research reveals that awe operates as both an individual emotional experience and a collective cultural practice deeply embedded in Cuban identity and diasporic belonging. Three interconnected themes emerged: *Cubanidad in Diaspora* revealed how Cuban identity serves as the foundational interpretive framework for awe; *Elicitors of Awe* demonstrated that profound awe emerged from everyday moments participants described as "the little things"; and *Embodiment and Expressions of Awe* highlighted awe as a fundamentally somatic, pre-conscious phenomenon. A key breakthrough finding reveals that the so-called "little things" are not little at all when understood through a Cuban cultural lens. Rather, they possess inherent cultural magnitude that challenges Western distinctions between extraordinary and ordinary stimuli. This suggests dispositional awe may reflect culturally transmitted frameworks for recognizing inherited significance rather than individual traits, contributing to understanding of culturally constructed emotions within transnational communities.

**Keywords:** awe, Cuban diaspora, constructed emotion, interpretive phenomenological analysis

### **¡Que Maravilla! A Phenomenological Analysis of Awe in the Cuban Diaspora**

I think that a really big part of like Cuban culture is that sense of like community because like all you have is each other...my neighbor is my family. Like you come coming asking you for like sugar or like if you need something, I'm there for you...and when you find another Cuban in the wild, it's like finding a shooting star, because you see me. And Cubans can still find beauty and awe in little things despite devastation. We appreciate a cup of coffee, going to the grocery store... little pleasures that any other person would overlook.

– Sol, second-generation Cuban American

From the sublime to the mundane, experiences of awe can transform our perception of the world. Although awe has long been considered an ineffable emotion, psychologists have narrowed its essence to two core features: a perception of vastness and a need for accommodation, or an expansion of one's mental schemas through the integration of the awe-evoking experience (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). As a self-transcendent emotion, awe has been linked to increased well-being, prosocial behavior, and heightened sense of purpose (Monroy & Keltner, 2022). Unlike other emotions that are also known to promote well-being (e.g., joy and gratitude; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Fredrickson, 2001; Algoe, 2012), awe uniquely shifts attention away from the self, fostering a sense of humility and connection to something larger (Piff et al., 2015; Stellar et al., 2017). Monroy and Keltner (2022) emphasize that this shift in perspective is what makes awe particularly powerful—it disrupts habitual ways of thinking and allows individuals to connect with broader social, moral, and even ecological systems in transformative ways. Therefore, understanding awe offers insight into the pathways of finding meaning, connection, and purpose.

Awe is also culturally mediated, manifesting both positive and negative valence depending on the cultural context (Nakayama et al., 2020). For example, a cross-cultural study found that American participants more frequently reported feeling awe in response to individual

achievements (e.g., excelling on an exam), whereas Chinese participants were more likely to report awe directed towards others' accomplishments (Stellar et al., 2024). These findings challenge outdated universalist models of emotion (e.g., Ekman, 1992), which assume that emotions are biologically hardwired and expressed similarly across cultures. Cross-cultural research highlights awe as a culturally constructed phenomenon. Variants such as “threat-based awe,” which blends awe with fear or uncertainty, are more commonly reported in non-Western cultures, where mixed-emotion states are prevalent (Shiota et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 2017; Nakayama et al., 2020). However, much of the existing literature continues to rely on Western, particularly U.S.-based, samples, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of how awe is experienced in multicultural and diasporic identities (Stellar et al., 2024).

This gap is particularly pronounced for Latine populations, the largest ethnic minority in the United States, accounting for nearly 19% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Latine cultural frameworks emphasize values such as *familismo* (family loyalty and collective well-being), *respeto* (respect for elders and communal harmony), and *personalismo* (valuing warm, personal relationships), which promote relational and community-centered ways of experiencing and interpreting emotions (Calzada, 2010; Calderón-Tena et al., 2011; Sabogal et al., 1987). Within this broader Latine cultural framework, Cuban communities exhibit a distinct emotional landscape shaped by specific sociohistorical narratives. Political upheaval, migration, and economic scarcity have cultivated a cultural ethos known as *resolver*, meaning “to resolve” or “to figure things out,” reflecting creative ingenuity and communal solidarity (Henken & Espina, 2021; de la Fuente, 2001).

This raises critical questions: How do sociocultural factors shape the experience, understanding, and elicitors of awe among Cubans in the diaspora? How might the

conceptualization and language of awe in the Cuban diaspora align with or expand upon current psychological frameworks?

Examining awe within the Cuban diaspora not only deepens our understanding of this emotion's cultural variability but also challenges dominant Western-centric models of awe that prioritize nature, individual achievement, and aesthetic beauty as its primary elicitors. In diasporic contexts, awe often emerges from collective memory, intergenerational storytelling, and moments of cultural continuity or contrast—experiences seldom captured in mainstream psychological frameworks. By centering Cuban diasporic voices, this study aims to illuminate how awe is embedded in narratives of migration, resilience, and identity formation. Such an approach broadens the scope of emotion research by highlighting how sociopolitical histories and cultural legacies shape both the elicitors and interpretations of awe, while also contributing to a more nuanced understanding of self-transcendent emotions in multicultural and transnational contexts.

### *Study Overview*

The primary aim of this study is to contextualize the lived experience of awe within the Cuban diaspora, arguing that awe is culturally mediated and deeply embedded in the lived experiences, memories, and narratives of diasporic communities. This qualitative study employs Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how Cuban Americans across the diaspora experience, express, and embody awe as a culturally mediated emotion. The central research question guiding this investigation is: In what ways is the experience of awe culturally mediated by Cuban diasporic identity?

Seven participants representing 1.5, second, and third-generation Cuban Americans from Chicago, IL, Miami, FL and New York City, NY participated in semi-structured interviews

designed to capture the lived experience of awe within Cuban diasporic contexts. Through in-depth phenomenological analysis, this study aimed to understand not only what elicits awe among Cuban diasporic individuals but also how cultural memory, intergenerational transmission, and diasporic belonging shape the embodied experience and meaning-making processes surrounding this self-transcendent emotion.

This research makes several critical theoretical contributions to the field of emotion science. First, it challenges universalist assumptions about awe's triggers by demonstrating that what constitutes "awe-worthy" experience is culturally mediated through inherited frameworks of meaning rather than objectively determined. Second, it reconceptualizes dispositional awe as cultural habitus of Cuban diaspora rather than individual personality trait. Third, it repositions awe as fundamentally relational and communal, emerging through collective care and shared resilience rather than solitary encounters with vastness. Finally, it illuminates awe's embodied, somatic representations and the language used to describe experiences of awe.

Beyond contributing to emotion research, this study challenges the historical erasure of Cuban diasporic voices by preserving oral narratives that remain underrepresented in psychological scholarship. The study's design prioritized cultural specificity and experiential depth over generalizability, seeking to illuminate how awe operates as both an individual emotional experience and a culturally embedded practice of resistance and meaning-making within Cuban American diasporic communities.

This thesis begins with a review of existing literature on awe while identifying critical gaps in Western-centric research. Following this foundation, the Methods section explains the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach used to examine seven Cuban American participants' narratives. Three main themes are explored in the following Results section: how

Cuban identity shapes awe experiences, what everyday moments evoke awe in the diaspora, and how participants embody this emotion. This thesis commences with a comprehensive review of the existing literature on awe, highlighting significant gaps in research that predominantly focuses on Western perspectives. Building upon this foundation, the Methods section delineates the use of the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to examine the narratives of seven Cuban American participants. The subsequent Results section explores three principal themes: the influence of Cuban identity on awe experiences, the everyday moments that evoke awe within the diaspora, and the manner in which participants embody this emotion. To conclude, I will connect these findings to broader theoretical implications, thereby contributing to the understanding of awe as a culturally mediated emotion within the Cuban diaspora.

### **. Literature Review**

Research on awe has grown significantly in recent decades, expanding our understanding of its psychological, social and cultural dimensions. While once regarded as a rare or ineffable experience, awe is now recognized as a distinct emotional state with measurable cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Stellar et al., 2017). This review situates awe within the broader family of self-transcendent emotions (STEs), highlights its historical and cultural underpinnings, and examines its relevance to diasporic identities. These perspectives provide a conceptual foundation for exploring how awe is narrated and enacted by Cubans in the diaspora.

#### *A Brief History of Awe*

The earliest formal investigations of awe were rooted in philosophical, religious, and aesthetic traditions long before it became a subject of empirical study. Western philosophers such as Burke (1757) and Kant (1790) conceptualized awe as part of “the sublime,” describing it as an

emotion evoked by experiences of overwhelming vastness, power, beauty, or fear (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Early psychological discussions of awe, shaped by these philosophical underpinnings, framed awe as a rare, fear-based response to extraordinary phenomena (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). By the mid-20th century, awe was frequently neglected or conflated with other states, such as wonder or admiration. The field shifted with Keltner and Haidt's (2003) theoretical framework, which defined awe through two core appraisals: perceived vastness and the need for accommodation—adjusting one's mental schemas to integrate the awe-evoking experience. This modern perspective expanded the scope of awe to include social, moral, and cognitive functions. Contemporary studies emphasize that awe can be elicited not only by natural or spiritual phenomena but also by social interactions, music, and moral beauty (Gordon et al., 2017; Stellar et al., 2017). As a psychological resource, awe has been linked to prosociality, humility, meaning-making, and well-being (Piff et al., 2015; Monroy & Keltner, 2022).

#### *Variants of Awe*

Building on their theoretical framework, Keltner and Haidt (2003) identified variants of awe, suggesting that awe can vary depending on its elicitors and accompanying appraisals. These include threat-based awe, which blends awe with fear or uncertainty (e.g., encountering powerful natural forces); beauty-based awe, evoked by aesthetic or natural wonders; virtue- or moral-based awe, inspired by acts of courage, generosity, or moral excellence; collective or social awe, which arises from powerful shared experiences (e.g., music festivals, religious ceremonies); and epistemic awe, which stems from confronting profound knowledge or scientific discovery (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Gordon et al., 2017). These variants underscore that awe is not a monolithic emotion but a flexible, context-dependent experience that can range in valence from deeply positive to unsettling or fear-inducing. Cross-cultural studies suggest that threat-based

awe is more frequently reported in non-Western contexts, where mixed emotions—co-occurring feelings of opposite valence—are more common. (Nakayama et al., 2020)

#### *Awe as a Self-Transcendent Emotion*

Awe belongs to the broader family of self-transcendent emotions (STEs), which includes gratitude, compassion, and elevation. These emotions orient individuals toward something larger than the self, fostering connection, humility, and collective meaning-making (Haidt, 2003; Stellar et al., 2017). While all STEs encourage prosociality and moral concern, awe is distinct in its dual appraisals of vastness and the need for accommodation, which often results in a profound reordering of mental frameworks (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Piff et al., 2015). Awe's unique ability to shift perspective away from the self makes it particularly potent in disrupting egocentric thinking and promoting a sense of interconnectedness (Monroy & Keltner, 2022).

#### *Awe as a Complex, Mixed-Valence Emotion*

While recent literature on awe has primarily focused on its positive dimensions, awe is a complex emotion that lacks a fixed valence and can even evoke a mixed emotional state (Nakayama et al., 2020). Mixed-valence emotions combine contrasting feelings (e.g., sadness and joy) within a single experience (Larsen & McGraw, 2011). For example, Nakayama et al. (2020) found that U.S. participants often experienced awe as purely positive, whereas Japanese participants reported a blend of positive and negative states. Stellar et al. (2024) similarly found that Chinese participants associated awe with fear more frequently than did American participants. These findings underscore that awe's meaning and affective tone are both culturally contingent and historically situated.

Notably, awe-eliciting stimuli also vary by culture: American participants tend to attribute awe to nature, architecture, and the self, whereas Chinese participants are more likely to describe

awe arising from others' actions (Stellar et al., 2024). These findings point to sociocultural differences not only in the emotional valence of awe, but in its elicitors, underscoring the necessity of broader cultural representation in the study of awe. Understanding awe as a mixed-valence emotion opens the door to a deeper question: how do cultural values shape not only its expression but also its very meaning?

### **Awe as Culturally Constructed**

Extending this perspective, research on emotion has shifted from essentialist models—viewing emotions as universal and biologically hardwired (Ekman, 1977)—to social-constructionist frameworks, which argue that emotions are co-constructed through cultural scripts, language, and shared practices (Lutz, 1988). Lutz's ethnographic work demonstrates that emotion categories and expressions vary across societies, challenging the assumption of universality. Barrett's (2017) theory of constructed emotion builds on this insight, positing that emotions arise through interactions between core affect, memory, and cultural mediated conceptual frameworks. Through this lens, awe emerges not solely from a stimulus but from the interpretation and narration of the experience in a cultural context.

Research on dispositional awe, defined as the propensity to seek and frequently experience awe, underscores the role of culture in mediating the experience of awe and its significance in our daily lives. In collectivist cultures, dispositional awe is often cultivated through socialization practices that emphasize communal harmony, respect for moral acts, and reverence for communal traditions (Gao et al., 2018; Takano & Osaka, 2018). In contrast, in individualistic cultures, such as the U.S., dispositional awe may be more closely tied to personal achievements, individual exploration, or aesthetic appreciation of nature and art (Shiota et al., 2006; Nomura & Shimizu, 2022). Scholars argue that valuing awe itself—that is, fostering a readiness to be

moved by communal, spiritual, or moral experiences—can be understood as a cultural orientation (Gao et al., 2018; Nomura & Shimizu, 2022). For example, Gao et al. (2018) found that Chinese participants, compared to Americans, reported greater dispositional awe and were more likely to associate awe with moral elevation and social connectedness. This suggests that the cultural values of humility, reverence, and collective well-being nurture a greater tendency to perceive/seek awe in daily life.

Similarly, within Cuban cultural frameworks, values such as familismo (family loyalty), communal resilience, and the ethos of resolve—the creative ingenuity required to adapt and thrive amid adversity—may foster a heightened sensitivity to awe. Acts of collective perseverance, cultural pride, and intergenerational storytelling often emphasize moments of wonder and gratitude, potentially shaping a dispositional openness to awe that is distinct from Western individualistic patterns.

### *Language and Emotion*

Language is a critical lens for understanding the cultural construction of awe. Emotions are not simply internal states; they are enacted and interpreted through language, social interaction, and narrative. Mesquita and Walker (2003) argue that emotions should be studied as cultural practices rather than as fixed biological responses. The metaphors and narratives people use to describe awe offer insights into the cultural and historical frameworks that shape their meanings (Lindquist et al., 2015). This study builds on these psychological constructionist models by examining how Cuban diasporic participants articulate awe, revealing its grounding in collective memory, cultural heritage, and lived diaspora experience.

### *Diaspora, Cuban Identity, and Awe*

Diasporic contexts offer a unique vantage point for studying awe because they foreground the interplay of memory, identity, and emotion. Diasporic identity is not simply the condition of living away from a homeland but a complex process of identity negotiation, memory reconstruction, and engagement with both host and origin cultures (Hall, 1990; Safran, 1991). Hall (1990) emphasized that diasporic identities are constantly in flux, shaped by histories of displacement and the tension between cultural preservation and adaptation. This ongoing negotiation is not just cultural but also emotional; emotions are both shaped by and constitutive of diasporic consciousness, linking personal experiences to collective histories (Nussbaum, 2001; Ahmed, 2004). For Cuban diasporic communities, the legacy of the 1959 Revolution, political repression, economic hardship, and fraught U.S.–Cuba relations have created a shared narrative of exile, scarcity, and perseverance (Duany, 2011; Eckstein, 2009). that informs the emotional landscape of the diaspora (Duany 2011; Eckstein 2009). Landmark migratory/migration events such as the Mariel Boatlift and the Special Period) affect not only how cultural identity is negotiated in an interactional context but also how emotions are culturally constructed and experienced across generations (Eckstein, 2009; Duany, 2011).

Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) conceptualize diasporic consciousness as the blending of local and transnational identities, shaped by the collective memories and cultural practices of the homeland while rooted in the host country's social, cultural, and political realities. In this framework, awe may arise from moments that affirm cultural resilience (e.g., witnessing Cubans succeed despite adversity) or through stories of Cuban joy despite adversity. These experiences can carry on through future generations, inheriting cultural narratives, values, and emotional frameworks (Hirsch, 2008; Suárez, 2017). This framework recognizes that diasporic identity is fluid rather than fixed, spanning first-generation immigrants, those who arrived as children (1.5

generation), second-generation descendants, and beyond, all inheriting cultural memories through storytelling, traditions, and community network. Thus, awe in the Cuban diaspora may emerge from seemingly ordinary moments— such as walking through a fully stocked grocery store —that contrast sharply with memories of scarcity in Cuba, transforming them into profound, meaningful experiences.

### *Cuba's Historical Context: A Brief Overview*

While this study does not primarily address Cuban history, it is essential to contextualize Cuban identity within the sociohistorical framework that has influenced life on the island and within the diaspora. The 1959 Cuban Revolution precipitated significant emigration, particularly among middle- and upper-class families who opposed the new regime, establishing a narrative of exile that continues to shape much of the Cuban-American experience (Duany, 2011; Eckstein, 2009). The revolutionary government's policies, such as the nationalization of industries, suppression of political dissent, and implementation of strict food rationing systems, fostered both a collective ethos of survival and a sense of profound loss among those who left the island (Perez, 2014).

In the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union plunged Cuba into the “Special Period”—a time of severe economic crisis marked by widespread shortages of food, fuel, and basic goods (Hernandez-Reguant, 2009). This period not only deepened material scarcity but also reshaped the Cuban cultural ethos of *resolver*, meaning “to resolve” or “to figure things out,” which encapsulates the resourcefulness and improvisational ingenuity required to navigate daily life (Henken & Espina, 2021; de la Fuente, 2001).

These historical events have fostered a collective narrative marked by both the profound loss associated with political exile and the perseverance in the face of adversity. Emotional

constructs within the diaspora are frequently rooted in these collective histories, and narratives of sacrifice, survival, and perseverance are transmitted to subsequent generations, shaping not only identity but also the way emotions, such as awe, are experienced. For instance: routine experiences in the United States, such as a grocery store abundantly stocked with fresh produce, can elicit a sense of awe when juxtaposed with recollections or narratives of scarcity during the Special Period.

### *Summary*

The reviewed literature characterizes awe as a culturally mediated, self-transcendent emotion, with its meaning and elicitors shaped by cultural values and collective memories. While previous research has predominantly concentrated on white, U.S.-based samples, the phenomenon of awe within Latine—and specifically Cuban—diasporic contexts remain unexplored. Drawing on cultural constructionist frameworks, this study investigates the emergence, expression, and experience of awe in the Cuban diaspora. This community's emotional landscape is profoundly shaped by migration histories, scarcity, and the resilience, continuity, and retention of Cuban cultural identity. The following section outlines the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach used to investigate these lived experiences, capturing the culturally grounded meanings of awe within the Cuban diaspora.

## **Methods**

### *Recruitment and Selection Criteria*

For the purpose of this study, *1.5 generation* refers to those who emigrated from Cuba during childhood or early adolescence (before age 13) and retained formative memories of their homeland while undergoing primary socialization in the U.S. (Rumbaut, 2004); *second-generation* refers to individuals born in the United States to Cuban immigrant parents; and *third-*

*generation* refers to those whose grandparents emigrated from Cuba, but both of their parents were born in the United States. Including 1.5, second, and third-generation participants allowed for the examination of how awe, identity, and cultural memory may vary across generational experiences of immigration while still reflecting a distinctly Cuban diasporic lens (Kasinitz et al., 2008). Cuban diasporic community (Chicago) (Duany 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

Participants were recruited from Chicago, IL. Miami, FL, and New York City, NY. These cities were selected to represent both historically significant Cuban diaspora hubs (Miami and New York City) and a smaller, underexplored Cuban diasporic community (Chicago) (Duany, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Recruitment was conducted through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to reach individuals who met the inclusion criteria of identifying as Cuban American and residing in diasporic communities within the selected cities. Purposive sampling ensured that participants reflected the cultural identities central to this research, while snowball sampling via social media networks (Instagram) helped with the initial reach of Cuban diasporic community networks.

Following IPA's idiographic approach, this study emphasized participants' lived experiences and self-identified cultural positioning over external demographic categories. The research design prioritized how participants themselves understood and articulated their Cuban identity and diasporic experience. However, it is noteworthy that six out of seven participants self-identified as LGBTQ+ during the course of the interviews. While LGBTQ+ identity was not a criterion for inclusion, this demographic alignment may be indicative of my positionality as an LGBTQ+ Cuban American. Given the nature of snowball sampling and digital flyer distribution through social media recruitment, it is likely that the study reached participants within queer and

allied Cuban diasporic circles. Although unintentional, this demographic convergence is not treated as incidental; rather, it is engaged analytically to consider how experiences of awe may be shaped by Cuban and queer identity within the context of queer Cuban diasporic subjectivity.

Because IPA prioritizes idiographic, in-depth exploration rather than generalization, small and focused samples are optimal for capturing the phenomenology of awe in Cuban diasporic context. The use of these sampling methods allowed for a nuanced understanding of how awe emerges within the Cuban diaspora while honoring the diversity of migration histories and generational identities represented among participants.

### *Participants*

Seven participants ( $n = 7$ ) were interviewed, all of whom identified as Cuban American and were between the ages of 24 and 36. The sample included two 1.5 generation Cuban Americans ( $n = 2$ ) who emigrated from Cuba as children (at ages 4 and 11), four second-generation Cuban Americans ( $n = 4$ ), defined as individuals born in the United States to Cuban immigrant parents, and one third-generation Cuban American ( $n = 1$ ) who was the grandchild of Cuban immigrants. This small sample size is appropriate for interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), which values a deep, idiographic examination of each participant's lived experience rather than large-scale generalizability (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Table 1 provides an overview of participant demographics and generational identity.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Generation</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Current City</b>
Luz	1.5 generation	20s	Miami
Sol	Second generation	20s	Miami
Eva	Second generation	20s	Miami
Rio	Second generation	20s	Chicago
Mari	Second generation	30s	Chicago
Lyra	1.5 generation	30s	New York City
Vita	Third generation	30s	Chicago

**Table 1.** Participant immigrant generational identity, age range, and diaspora location.

*Procedure*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture participants' lived experiences of awe and its intersection with Cuban diasporic identity. This approach aligns with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes a participant-centered, idiographic exploration of how individuals embody and interpret their lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Each interview lasted approximately 50-70 minutes and was guided by a flexible, semi-structured protocol.

Interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom to comply with IRB guidelines, which prohibited interviews in public settings to ensure confidentiality. Zoom's end-to-end encryption also protects data privacy (Zoom Video Communications, 2023). To ensure high audio quality and mitigate the risk of technical issues such as internet instability or incomplete recordings interviews were documented using a Tascam DR-05X digital recorder. Verbal informed consent was obtained at the start of each session in accordance with the IRB protocols. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were chosen from a curated list of gender-neutral Latin American names. They/them pronouns were used in the transcripts to maintain anonymity and inclusivity. Names of family members or peers mentioned during the interviews were also anonymized.

*Interview Protocols*

The interview protocol was designed to encourage narrative depth and open-ended reflection, allowing the participants to describe their experiences in their own words. The questions focused on two primary domains: awe experiences and Cuban identity (see *Appendix A*).

*Experiences of Awe*

Questions were developed to explore how awe is felt, expressed, and situated within the participants' Cuban heritage and diasporic experiences. The questions were informed by validated measures exploring awe, including the Awe Experience Scale (AWE-S; Yaden et al., 2019), Dispositional Positive Emotion Scale (Shiota et al., 2006), and conceptual models of awe as a self-transcendent emotion (Bonner & Friedman, 2011). These items supported an in-depth exploration of both the emotional and sociocultural dimensions of awe.

*Cuban Identity*

Questions examining Cuban identity were designed to investigate how participants navigated cultural belonging, intergenerational memory, and diasporic identity. This protocol was informed by Duany's (2011) ethnographic work on the Cuban diaspora, Phinney's (1992) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (as a conceptual foundation), and qualitative studies exploring diasporic experience (Ramos-Zayas, 2001; Gonzalez et al., 2003).

Following these models, open-ended questions were created to encourage reflection on migration, cultural practices, language, belonging, and identity. As Duany (2011) highlights, diasporic identities are shaped by a complex web of family histories, transnational ties, and cultural symbols. Phinney (1992) and Ramos-Zayas (2001) emphasize the importance of exploring subjective identity formation rather than imposing rigid categories. Thus, this interview protocol was well suited to capture the nuanced interplay of heritage, memory, and emotional experience.

*Justification for Protocols*

These protocols were particularly appropriate for this study because, like cultural identity, awe is a highly subjective and contextually mediated phenomenon. Prior research has

demonstrated that awe is best studied using methods that allow participants to narrate and interpret their lived experiences (Yaden et al., 2019). Similarly, diasporic identity studies emphasize the importance of allowing participants to define their own cultural frameworks and affective ties (Ramos-Zayas 2001). By integrating established measures with open-ended, narrative-based inquiry, this protocol ensures both theoretical grounding and flexibility to capture the complexity of awe within Cuban diasporic experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

This study is grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative methodology designed to explore how individuals make sense of their lived experiences within their sociocultural context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; van Manen, 1997). IPA's exploration of phenomenology and interpretation makes it particularly well-suited for this research, which aims to examine how awe is elicited, embodied, and narrated by Cubans in the diaspora. This analytic framework examines both the descriptive content and interpretive processes of participant narratives. Thus, IPA facilitates a nuanced understanding of awe as a cultural mediated emotion intertwined with cultural identity, memory, and diasporic experience.

Importantly, this study does not seek to produce generalizable conclusions about the phenomenology of awe in all diasporic Cuban Americans. Rather, IPA emphasizes a nuanced understanding of individual accounts. As is established in qualitative research traditions, particularly in phenomenological analysis, small-sample, in-depth studies are especially valuable for illuminating the complexity and variability of lived experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; van Manen, 2007; Polkinghorne, 2005). This research aims to highlight the layered, contextually situated ways that awe is constructed and experienced by Cuban Americans. The

sample of seven participants (n = 7) allowed for an iterative and detailed exploration of each transcript.

Following IPA guidelines, interview transcripts were analyzed through a multi-stage thematic process techniques to capture conceptual, descriptive, and interpretive patterns within participants' narratives. First-cycle coding involved a line-by-line reading and coding of transcripts using a combination of in vivo, descriptive, and process codes to remain close to participants' language and immediate meaning-making (Saldaña, 2021). Reflexive memos were documented throughout this process to save analytic comments, bracket researcher assumptions, and note emerging insights. I then utilized pattern and axial coding during the second cycle coding phase, clustering initial codes into broader conceptual categories (Charmaz, 2014). These grounded theory techniques were only used as structural tools to deepen phenomenological interpretation and organize complex narrative insights. As Saldaña (2021) notes, a grounded-theory coding approach can be flexibly adopted across qualitative methodological paradigms when applied reflexively.

Superordinate and sub-themes were refined iteratively, moving between individual transcripts and cross-case comparisons to capture both and shared experiential patterns and unique personal narratives (Smith et al., 2009). By integrating both phenomenological analysis and systematic coding strategies, this analysis examines how awe is experienced and how the sociocultural niche of the Cuban diaspora mediates its experience.

### *Positionality*

As a queer, second-generation Cuban American born in Miami and raised in Chicago, my own diasporic identity deeply informs my perspective in this study. My shared cultural background and sexual identity with participants offers unique advantages, such as an insider

perspective that facilitates rapport, trust, and nuanced interpretation of language, humor, and cultural references that might otherwise be overlooked by researchers outside of the community (Chavez, 2008). Conversely, I recognize that my own experiences' values, and memories may influence how I interpret participants' narratives. For example, my personal connection to my Cuban American identity and own inclination towards dispositional awe may influence thematic patterns I find in participants' experiences of awe, characteristics of Cuban diasporic identity, and more. To address these potential biases, I engaged in reflexive memoing throughout data collection and analysis, intentionally bracketing my assumptions while critically examining how my own identity shapes how I make meaning of lived experiences (Berger, 2015). However, my position as a first-generation Cuban American is not a neutral backdrop, but rather a dynamic role in this research that enables a richer, deeply embedded empathetic understanding of participants' experiences and requires ongoing self-awareness and reflection. Rather than seeking to erase this influence, I aim to acknowledge and integrate it as part of the co-construction of meaning that underpins IPA research.

## **Results**

The findings of this study reveal that awe, as experienced by Cuban Americans in the diaspora, is not confined to extraordinary experiences but emerges through everyday practices of connection, presence, and cultural memory. Through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), three interconnected themes emerged that illuminate how awe operates within Cuban diasporic communities: the cultural foundation of *Cubanidad* through which awe is interpreted, the specific everyday contexts that consistently evoke awe, and the deeply embodied ways participants physically experience this emotion.

### *Cubanidad in Diaspora*

To situate participants' experiences of awe, it is essential to first understand how they experience and interpret their Cuban identity, which I will refer to as *Cubanidad*, in diaspora. For many, their sense of identity, marked by cultural pride, resilience, and collective memory, formed the foundation through which awe was both interpreted and felt. Participants repeatedly described their Cubanidad not as a passively inherited cultural identity, but a conscious identification and engagement with Cuban identity and community. Cubanidad emerged as both a source of pride and complexity, forged in relation to family, place, and sociopolitical context. Luz, who emigrated from Cuba at 4-years-old, reflected on the unique historical relationship between Cuba and the United States that explains some of the differences between Cuban and non-Cuban Latine identities:

As much as I relate to Puerto Ricans and Dominicans and stuff, the Cuban experience is so, like, it's almost so distinct. I think because of the particular relationship that America and Cuba have, like, the governments we live under, it creates, a very particular experience, being Cuban... For me personally, there's lot of gratefulness, but also a lot of resentment and a lot of pain. It's very hard trying to live in both worlds. Or trying to figure out what I can take from both to create my own world where I can live with these multitudes. (Luz)

Here, Luz's language conveys a nuanced emotional experience, one of "multitudes", that captures the complexity of diasporic Cuban identity. Raised in Miami, home to the largest Cuban diaspora, and now living in Chicago, they found the transition between diasporic hubs especially difficult:

Most of my friends were Cuban... I was personally, like, very, very much immersed in my culture. So moving here, I still kind of find it difficult. I don't really know how to be friends with American people... the social etiquette is just so different. (Luz)

This sense of cultural displacement—of feeling "othered" even among fellow Latines—was echoed across interviews. Participants described the Cuban experience as historically and

politically unique, shaped by the 1959 Revolution, history of being used as “political pawns” during the Cold War, and ongoing U.S.—Cuba political tensions that further alienate Cubans of the diaspora from those on the island. Sol noted that while they felt solidarity with other Latine groups, being Cuban is a distinct lived experience:

I don't feel American for the most part because growing up in Miami, it's a bubble. Like, you might as well almost be growing up [in Cuba] too. There's Spanish speakers everywhere, there's fucking Cubans everywhere, your food is everywhere... it's so doused in Cuban culture. So when I came to Chicago, it was like, oh—I'm not just Latine. I'm Cuban. And it feels different. (Sol)

Luz and Sol's experiences underscore how Cubanidad often resists monolithic categorization within the broader U.S. Latine umbrella. Their relocation to Chicago from Miami, a saturated Cuban diasporic hub, revealed how Cubanidad can become more sharply defined when there is less Cuban cultural immersion. In contrast, Mari, who grew up in the Midwest, recounted a markedly different experience of diasporic Cubanidad, expressing a sense of revelatory wonder when they experienced this type of immersion while visiting Cuba for the first time:

I didn't have a Cuban community outside of my family. My dad had friends who were Latino, but they had very different cultural backgrounds and experiences. So for me, it is interesting because I guess this is grounded in a recognition or familiarity, but it felt more like a wonder going [to Cuba] and seeing so many people who looked like my family members spoke with a Cuban accent. That was revelatory because we have family in Miami, but we never spent much time there. So it was the first time where I felt surrounded by people who had shared customs and traditions and ways of talking. Being feeling surrounded by that was a really powerful thing for me that I had not had as someone who grew up in the midwest. (Mari)

Mari experienced Cubanidad as something rare and thus imbued with a sense of novelty and revelation. These contrasting accounts illustrate how diaspora is not just defined by distance from Cuba but by one's proximity to Cuban cultural practices and communities. The absence of these anchors can foster feelings of cultural dislocation, while their presence can evoke awe and belonging.

Participants also spoke of how generational differences and migration histories shaped their relationship to Cubanidad. Some felt more connected to their Cuban identity than their parents, especially when their parents' harbored resentment or trauma tied to their departures from Cuba:

Growing up, it's always been a struggle to, like, feel fully connected to my culture because, like, how much resentment my parents had for Cuba... I feel more connected to my Cuban, like, culture than anything. (Sol)

Others reflected on how their parents' or grandparents' migration histories shaped family narratives. Mari discussed how Cold War politics structured her family's embrace of U.S. identity and grief over Cuba's loss:

For them, I mean memories of Cuba and being Cuban were shaped by a sense of grief... they really embraced American identity... their status here doesn't have that same... safety. They weren't pawns during the Cold War in the same way. (Mari)

These reflections also unveiled how the trauma of political exile manifests in intergenerational attitudes. Luz noted how her father's anti-communist trauma leads to reactionary beliefs:

He knows communism... and his experience has traumatized him so deeply that anything that looks close to communism... sets off alarm bells. It's a lot of trauma that needs to be undone as a community. (Luz)

Rio similarly described the psychological and political aftershocks of her parents' respective migration experiences—her mother via the Mariel boatlift, her father as an infant:

My dad came here when he was three months old... for him, going back was like a fun, learning experience. But my mom, who came on the Mariel at 17, says she would never go back. She still has trauma-based dreams about the boat sinking and sharks. (Rio)

These narratives illuminate how Cubanidad in diaspora and connection to the homeland is often cultivated by participants despite their family's complex and ruptured relationship with Cuba. For Lyra, whose queer identity further complicated their relationship with their father, Cuban identity was something they had to reconstruct for themselves due to their father rejecting their queerness. Instead, they found their true lineage of Cubanidad through archival work dedicated

to preserving the legacy of queer and trans Cubans:

When I started this archival project in 2023, I had just had a big rupture with my family. I had just decided to stop talking to [my dad]. He had kicked me out of the house in Cuba. But I was like, you know what? This is kind of the queer narrative I had always imagined was going to happen. My mother was also on thin ice at that moment, so I really thought my relationship with my biological family was going to be completely erased... I had to find a way to make queer Cuban authors my family because I didn't have one. The archive was for me a way of making up a lineage and feeling like I came from somewhere. (Lyra)

Lyra reframed their family's estrangement as an opportunity to author a new sense of belonging through queer, Cuban lineage. This practice of making their own lineage reflects how diasporic Cubanidad—especially for queer participants—is not merely inherited but can also be reconstructed through both the preservation and continuation of shared legacy.

Many participants also reflected on how their relationships with Cuban identity were distinct from their parents'. While some parents distanced themselves from Cuba due to traumatic memories of communism or displacement, their children often sought to reclaim or reimagine that connection. As Sol shared:

Growing up, it's always been a struggle to feel fully connected to my culture because of how much resentment my parents had for Cuba... It was sad because I feel more connected to my Cuban culture than anything. (Sol)

For others, like Eva, the pride in Cubanidad was a source of joy:

I never say I'm American. I always say I'm Cuban... My mom will wear a Cuban shirt, or my dad will wear a Cuban shirt, and I'll wear the Cuban flag. We know we're Cuban and we're proud. (Eva)

This cultural preservation often took the form of communal care, hospitality, and humor. Participants repeatedly contrasted the collectivist ethos of Cuban social life with the individualism of the U.S., describing acts of everyday solidarity as culturally Cuban and emotionally moving. Vita recounted seeing men dance and hold hands in Cuba, an image that, as a queer person, they found especially powerful:

Men were holding hands, they were dancing with each other... We don't get that in the U.S. without somebody being like, 'I'm afraid to be seen as gay.' (Vita)

Vita described this as a “communist sentiment”—a kind of communal tenderness that resists Western notions of masculinity. Similarly, Mari recalled a moment in Cuba when a group of neighbors mobilized to rescue abandoned puppies:

It was just such a different sense of collectivity that I had never experienced here, and it really took me by surprise. (Mari)

Participants also expressed that this ethos of communal solidarity permeated through everyday acts of hospitality, humor, and tenderness. As Sol noted:

Cuba's history is a very tormented and brutalized island... but it's also filled with joy and closeness, and a sense of intimacy with each other that is almost unmatched. (Sol)

In sum, participants' narratives reveal that Cubanidad is more than an inherited cultural identity—it is an active, lived practice characterized by communal care, resilience, and pride. Whether expressed through food, language, humor, or collective acts of solidarity, this cultural ethos formed a foundation for how participants interpret and experience awe. The intertwined legacies of scarcity and ingenuity, grief and joy, appear to shape a distinct emotional framework in which awe is not limited to moments of grandeur but emerges from everyday acts of connection and perseverance. As Vita reflected:

To be a part of something that's so much bigger than you is really special. And I think it shows just how sacred life is, how sacred being Cuban is. (Vita)

By foregrounding these narratives of identity and community, we can better understand the conditions under which awe arises for Cuban diasporic individuals. Rather than existing as a universal emotion, awe is filtered through the lens of Cubanidad—through the pride of representing one's culture, the bittersweet weight of historic memory, and the wonder of collective care. This cultural grounding sets the stage for the next theme, Elicitors of Awe, which

explores the specific moments, settings, and experiences that participants identified as awe-inspiring.

### *Elicitors of Awe*

Building upon the previous theme of Cubanidad as a foundational lens to understand how participants interpret and experience awe, this section explores the moments and settings that evoked awe in members of the Cuban diaspora. While psychological frameworks often conceptualize awe as a response to perceptual vastness or the extraordinary (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), participants in this study described awe emerging just as powerfully in the seemingly mundane. Whether evoked by nature, community, food, or nostalgic memory, experiences of awe were deeply embedded in cultural values, diasporic memory, and intergenerational resilience. What follows is an analysis of key elicitors of awe: the everyday and “little things,” nature and the ocean, communal joy and solidarity, and Cuban ingenuity in the face of adversity.

#### *Awe in the Everyday: “The Little Things”*

The predominant theme emerging from the interviews was the profound sense of awe evoked by what participants consistently described as “the little things.” These were not grandiose events but rather ordinary encounters—a familiar scent, a flowering plant, or a moment of stillness—that gained depth through a cultural inclination towards appreciation and attentiveness. This disposition aligns with research on dispositional awe (Gao et al., 2018), which suggests that individuals' propensity to experience awe is shaped by values such as appreciation, beauty, and gratitude for the fulfillment of basic needs.

This participant's experience vividly illustrates the concept of “little things” evoking profound awe. Luz's encounter with a fully stocked grocery cart represents a seemingly ordinary

sight that gained extraordinary significance due to her cultural background and personal history. The abundance of food options, a common occurrence for many, became a source of wonder for Luz and her mother. Luz (1.5 generation) reflected on her first experience in a U.S. grocery store:

I have pictures of me and my mom standing in front of a grocery cart full of food. Because it was the first time me and my mom had ever seen anything like that before. [...] You have no idea what it's like to not have any option. No option. It's like 'lo que hay es lo que hay' [what you have is what you have]. That in itself will cause awe in someone. They have options. (Luz)

Luz's reflection of the contrast between scarcity and abundance highlights how encountering a new sense of vastness can broaden one's perception of the world, inspiring a sense of awe. This dichotomy, encapsulated in the expressions "no option" versus "They have options," acts as a potent catalyst for awe, particularly when encountered in the context of fundamental necessities such as food. The cultural context, emphasized by the Spanish phrase "lo que hay es lo que hay" (what there is, is what there is), starkly contrasts with the abundance typically found in a U.S. grocery store. This juxtaposition transforms an ordinary shopping experience into a moment of profound realization and wonder. The overwhelming variety of cereal boxes becomes emblematic of choice and possibility, challenging preconceived notions of availability and attainability of resources in Cuba.

This experience illustrates that awe can arise from unexpected sources, not necessarily from grand or extraordinary sights, but from everyday scenarios that challenge one's established understanding of the world. The grocery store encounter serves as a microcosm of a broader shift in perspective, demonstrating how exposure to new environments and opportunities can expand one's sense of what is possible in life. This expansion of horizons, prompted by the simple act of

observing abundant food choices, underscores the transformative power of experiences that bridge the gap between scarcity and abundance.

Rio, conversely, attributes her propensity to perceive awe in everyday minutiae to her "grand inner world." They considers themselves a seer and believes they acquired and inherited this inclination from their family, who would often sit together and listen to the birds. Indeed, Rio explicitly attributes this characteristic to being a Cuban trait.

It's in the little things... the way to get by is to find awe and beauty in the little things because of lacking some of those bigger things—comfort, access, material things. It's deeply ingrained in the community.

Eva (first generation) echoed this insight, suggesting awe was learned through scarcity:

I think the part where [Cubans] appreciate their food and stuff like that is because they had nothing [...] they've learned how to appreciate what they do have.

These narratives highlight that participants perceive their propensity and capacity to experience awe in everyday minutiae as intricately linked to their Cuban heritage. This heritage is transmitted through community, shaped by historical adversity, and sustained by values of beauty, appreciation, and resilience. The mundane is rendered sacred through a cultivated disposition of attentiveness. The ability to find awe in the mundane is influenced by multiple factors: some individuals intentionally slow down to notice beauty, while others perceive this orientation as inherited from Cuban cultural values or developed through experiences of scarcity. In this context, awe in the "small things" is not merely a cultivated stance but also a dispositional sensitivity and a culturally mediated perspective—transmitted through intergenerational memory and the social practices of the Cuban diaspora. Awe emerges at the intersection of sensory perception, inherited values, and the conditions of diasporic life.

*Awe in Nature*

This cultural predisposition to find awe in everyday experiences is further exemplified in participants' reports of awe when engaging with nature. Participants frequently reported experiencing awe in everyday details, particularly in natural phenomena such as flowers, birdsongs, and sunsets. Participants frequently reported experiencing awe in everyday details, particularly in natural phenomena such as flowers, birdsongs, and sunsets. This finding suggests that the role of nature as a common elicitor of awe, as proposed by Keltner and Haidt (2003), may extend to Cuban Americans. Notably, while only two participants specifically mentioned the ocean as an awe-evoking stimulus, their descriptions were particularly significant. These individuals characterized the ocean as the "epitome of awe," even invoking the concept of the sublime to convey its profound impact. Although these experiences align more closely with traditional psychological conceptualizations of awe, they remained deeply embedded in cultural and familial contexts.

The ocean emerges as a particularly powerful and significant source of awe, serving as a recurrent site of cultural memory and spiritual connection. It is a place where individuals experience both a sense of smallness and a profound connection to something greater than themselves —key characteristics found in existing research on awe. As Sol articulated:

I feel very connected to nature, especially bodies of water. I perceive it as the most grounding element of all. I enjoy immersing myself in the lake [in Chicago] during the summer because the coldness makes me feel truly grounded in the moment and present...I have a deep affinity for the beach, having grown up near it [in Miami], so it is unsurprising that this is where I feel most connected. It serves as a valuable reminder to feel small in a positive way. (Sol)

Sol's expression of "feeling small" in the presence of the ocean aligns with other participants' narratives, which describe the ocean's vastness as an invitation to recognize something greater than oneself. Participants recounted experiences involving the daily ritual of observing sunrises and moments of interpersonal connection through shared experiences of entering or submerging

in the ocean as a means of emotional release and healing. Río recalled an instance when an elderly woman entered the ocean "fully dressed, just to be with the ocean," a moment that encapsulated the intimate, almost spiritual relationship that Cubans maintain with the sea. For Río, the ocean serves as the ultimate elicitor of awe and the sublime:

I don't think you can ever be at the ocean and not experience this feeling of awe and this feeling of the sublime. Like vastness and mystery and spirituality and sentimentality. I don't know what the water holds...there's an unknown science to it. (Río)

These accounts illustrate how awe inspired by nature constitutes a profoundly introspective experience, facilitating emotional release and transformation. In this context, the ocean, or nature, serves as a medium for an intimate dialogue between the natural world and the individual, reminding participants of their position within a broader, interconnected network. Río and their family perceive the ocean as a uniquely spiritual and culturally inherited force. They recounted an instance when their mother was instinctively "called" to enter the ocean during a particularly challenging period:

And so that was when [my mom] really registered her diagnosis...they drove to a beach, So my mom stopped the car, rolled her pants up, and walked into the ocean as a thing... she had to do in that moment. It's just such a cultural thing, you know, like in a spiritual way. (Río)

This overarching theme highlights the manner in which awe is elicited through both the grandiose (the vastness of the ocean) and the minute (birdsong, flowers) among Cuban Americans of the diaspora. Their interactions with nature appear to be spiritual experiences that foster a sense of connection to something greater while simultaneously anchoring them in the present moment. In this context, discovering awe in the ordinary emerges as a subtle yet potent expression of Cuban cultural values. These small acts of observation affirm the beauty of life amidst adversity, establishing a continuum of awe found in nature that encompasses both the sublime and the everyday.

*Awe in Community and Collective Joy*

Throughout all the interviews, participants consistently described awe as a profoundly relational experience frequently emerging in moments of collectivity and shared humanity. In these contexts, the presence of others, particularly fellow Cubans, evoked a profound sense of connection, solidarity, and cultural pride. This form of awe was intrinsically social and relational, frequently associated with acts of communal care, spontaneous joy, or the experience of being surrounded by individuals with shared sociocultural backgrounds. Whether encountered in Cuba, among Cuban diasporic communities, or within multicultural Latine solidarity, community served as both a catalyst for awe and a source of resilience, belonging, and shared meaning. As members of the Cuban diaspora who navigate the cultural landscapes of both Cuba and the United States, participants who have visited Cuba highlighted the contrast between Cuba's communal ethos and the more individualistic orientation of the United States. They characterized Cuban social interactions as being imbued with interdependence, warmth, and mutual care.

Vita recounted that observing Cuban men openly holding hands and dancing together was particularly striking, given the homophobic stigmatization of such expressions of intimacy within U.S. culture.

Men were holding hands, they were dancing with each other, and it was like, I'm like, we don't get that in the U.S. without somebody being like, I'm afraid to be seen as gay. (Vita)

This difference not only reflects varying social attitudes towards gender and sexuality in Cuba, but also points to deeper societal values around community, intimacy, and care. Elo also states:

... the other thing is that the family code in Cuba is one of the most progressive lgbtq plus laws...so really being amongst that was this feeling of feeling complete... of feeling the sense of something bigger than me. (Elo)

This observation linked awe to both an emotional and political force, suggesting that communal expressions of care are not only natural but also vital for survival and joy. Vita described this as “the communist sentiment [that] is really with the Cuban people... just seeing how people really show up for each other.”

Vita’s examination of the interaction between queer identity and community in Cuba reveals a multifaceted relationship that challenges conventional Western conceptions of sexuality, gender expression, and social norms. This expression of affection between men challenges Western notions of masculinity and homophobia, suggesting a more inclusive and less restrictive approach to male relationships. Furthermore, Vita’s interpretation of these displays of affection as a manifestation of “communist sentiment” underscores the interconnectedness of political ideology, social structures, and interpersonal relationships. The transformative experience of observing these community dynamics challenges preconceived notions and broadens the understanding of queer identity and expression, illustrating how community structures, political systems, and cultural norms profoundly influence the acceptance and expression of queer identities.

Additionally, the emphasis on communal care and mutual support observed in Cuban society offers a compelling alternative to the individualistic ethos often associated with capitalist societies like the United States and ways in which political systems can infiltrate everyday interactions and sociocultural norms of what it means to be in community with others. Moreover, participants encountered various expressions of collectivism that inspired awe during their visit to Cuba. Instances such as neighbors coming together to care for abandoned puppies, strangers breaking into song, or friends sharing meals were frequently highlighted as distinct

sources of awe. The principle of "being there for one another," particularly in Cuba, stirred a profound sense of admiration and wonder in Mari:

In the place that I was staying, someone found an abandoned litter of puppies on the street and like the entire block mobilized together to figure out where these puppies had come from and what we could do with them. It was just such a different sense of collectivity that I had never experienced here, and it really took me by surprise. (Mari)

Mari also shared a profound memory of witnessing a group of elderly women celebrating in Havana on International Women's Day:

We were walking just through the streets in Havana and happened upon this group of women in their like 70s and 80s together and they were like singing and clapping together and like holding their little bags... it seemed like they had spontaneously just, like, arrived and erupted in celebration. Some of them were crying but like they were still singing. And one of my friends there started sobbing and we were all really affected by it. I think in part because it was my first experience of like a holiday where there was nothing to buy, no advertisements, no commercial merchandise. It was truly just people gathering and being moved by a sentiment they were feeling. (Mari)

This moment illustrates how awe may emerge from witnessing a moment of authentic collective emotion based purely in connection and void of capitalist or consumerist distractions. Mari interpreted this as "revelatory... like there is this world that could be different, that could be arranged differently." Such experiences of awe often expanded participants' imaginations of what is possible, linking awe to both wonder and resistance.

### *Cuban Humor and Resilience*

Another notable aspect of Cuban culture that inspired awe is the manner in which Cubans maintain humor in the face of adversity. Participants emphasized how Cuban humor transforms suffering into connection and joy, thereby reflecting cultural resilience. Nearly every participant remarked on the uniqueness of Cuban humor and its frequent use to introduce levity in challenging circumstances. For instance, Mari recounted a conversation with a young Cuban woman who facetiously compared hardships across generations.

She and her mom always had this debate about whether things were worse in the nineties during the Special Period or now... [her mom] would say, in the special period we ate condom pizza, and her comeback to that was, and now what are the condoms? We don't have condoms anyway! That was how it felt. It's just there's nothing. So that's terrible but also funny. (Marí)

Río also highlighted how humor in Cuban culture often arises from adversity, noting its connection to awe and appreciation for “the little things” in life:

To me, I feel like something that is a differentiator is that it's in the little things ... like a running joke amongst like, I think Latine people in general of like ‘Oh, like, how are you doing? Like, oh, you know, like so and so died. And I was in the hospital, and I lost my job. Pero todo bien gracias a dios.’ ... I feel like [this] is so deeply rooted in Cubans just because the way to get by is to find awe and beauty in the little things because of ... lacking some of those bigger things like more comfort, like not only material things, but just like access to things that other people have. (Río)

Rather than dismissing pain, humor provides a framework for holding both suffering and joy simultaneously. This duality—what some described as a uniquely Cuban form of *tristeza* (sadness) mixed with joy—fuels Cuban resilience. As Luz explained:

I think that explains joy in like, the most condensed way. Despite the devastation, there's still love, there's still joy, and there's still happiness to be found no matter where you are. (Luz)

Humor also functions as an indicator of shared identity. Vita described a moment of awe connected to playful Cuban wit:

That felt like a big moment of awe for me. Another moment of awe I think was probably realizing the comedy connection or just the sense of humor I share with Cubans... We were walking in Cuba and this guy goes, ‘Does your chicken lay eggs?’ ... And I was like, that is a very Cuban style joke. I felt awe in that moment of, again, just the personability and the charm of Cuban people and the silliness that I think we tend to have and that communal feeling. (Vita)

Through humor and a sense of playfulness, Cubans create micro-moments of awe that bolster both individual and collective resilience. This shared sense of humor not only brings joy but also serves as a powerful tool for building connections and fostering a sense of community. The ability to find humor in everyday situations, even in the face of adversity, highlights the

resilience and adaptability inherent in Cuban culture, allowing individuals to face challenges with a lighthearted attitude. Moreover, these micro-moments of awe through humor contribute to a collective cultural identity, strengthening social bonds and creating shared experiences that transcend personal hardships. The playful nature of Cuban interactions reflects a deeply ingrained cultural value of finding joy in simplicity and human connection, ultimately reinforcing both personal and communal resilience.

### *Embodiment and Expressions of Awe*

While the previous section explored what triggers awe, this analysis focuses on how participants physically experienced and expressed this emotion. Throughout the interviews, awe emerged as a profoundly embodied emotion, with participants characterizing their experiences in somatic terms. The physical sensations were commonly described as swelling sensations in their chest or stomach, waves of warmth, unexpected tears, moments of complete stillness, and the feeling of being suddenly frozen in place. These bodily responses were often accompanied by involuntary sounds—including tears, and Cuban exclamations (e.g., *Ay!*)—emphasizing that awe is experienced as an embodied phenomenon rather than merely a cognitively-appraised emotion.

Participants consistently described experiences as moments when their bodies could finally relax and be at ease. Eva, a second-generation immigrant, described her evening ritual that consistently evoked awe:

I've been really into sunsets recently... I love hammocks because I get to swing and regulate my body while being hugged by the hammock. So I think that's when I feel the most calm, and calm is the word I compare with awe.

Eva's narrative illustrates the multifaceted nature of awe, which engages multiple sensory modalities concurrently. The visual splendor of the sunset, in conjunction with the physical comfort and gentle swaying of the hammock, establishes conditions conducive to what they

characterize as bodily regulation. Vita similarly connected awe to calm, peaceful sensations that were often felt in community:

Honestly, I think it's also just a feeling of safety... when I feel awe around Cubans, it's just this feeling of 'I'm not nervous,' my body isn't tense. I'm just actually able to take in the moment. (Vita)

For Vita, awe was deeply connected to social and cultural familiarity, where being surrounded by her cultural community created the psychological safety necessary for her nervous system to shift into a more open, receptive state. They further described this as a temporary reprieve from trauma's physical presence:

There's an ease to [awe]... while there's trauma present in the body, not in this moment. It's just good vibes. (Vita)

These narratives indicate that awe serves as a form of embodied refuge, enabling individuals to momentarily disengage from the anticipatory stress that often characterizes the diasporic experience. Other participants described awe as a more overwhelming physical experience, where the intensity of feeling necessitated release:

When I'm above like a 7 on any emotion, I just start crying—happy, sad, angry, frustrated... tears. But I definitely can feel [awe] in my chest, like that sensation. And physically, often tears. (Rio)

For Rio, tears functioned as tangible manifestations of emotional intensity, encapsulating the multifaceted nature of awe—simultaneously joyous and vulnerable, uplifting yet overwhelming.

Lyra articulated this experience through the concept of bodily surrender:

For me, awe is a surrender in my body. It's like I said, a release to how it feels. It connects me instantly to my childhood. In so many moments, it connects me to wonder... It feels like trust. It feels like I can relax. It feels like ease.

Lyra's description positions awe as existing at the boundary between different psychological states—both deeply relaxing and emotionally evocative, connecting her to positive memories while simultaneously requiring a kind of vulnerability. However, they also acknowledged awe's potential discomfort:

Sometimes awe is actually uncomfortable... it feels like when you're on top of the rollercoaster and you're about to drop down and you feel like that gut thing, which is uncertainty. (Lyra)

### *The Language of Awe*

A notable finding was participants' consistent difficulty in directly naming what awe felt like. Rather than using the word "awe" itself, participants reached for language that reflected the sensory and emotional dimensions of what they were feeling: "inner peace," "relaxing," "ease," "trust," "safety," "curiosity," and "being moved." Mari described awe as "a warmth in my chest and stomach," while Ríó referred to "swelling," and Vita emphasized "calm" and "safety." These linguistic choices reveal a clear phenomenological pattern: awe is first experienced in the body and only secondarily translated into language. This sequence highlights the connection between awe and presence, as the emotion is genuinely experienced before any conscious thought. Participants often "felt" the emotion through physical sensations before they could consciously identify or articulate what was occurring. The difficulty in finding the right words suggests that awe is primarily an embodied experience that defies easy classification or verbal expression.

The terminology used by participants to describe these moments carries significant cultural and biographical weight. Lyra's conceptualization of "surrender" is shaped by her personal history with control and her engagement with queer and feminist perspectives, which regard vulnerability as a form of strength. This suggests that the language of awe serves as an extension of embodiment, offering verbal expressions for experiences that are inherently corporeal and culturally contextualized. Rather than merely describing emotion, these words function as conduits between private bodily experiences and collective social understanding, enabling participants to articulate fundamentally physical states through concepts imbued with personal and cultural significance.

*Awe as Feminine and Unrestricted Expression*

Notably, two participants described awe as distinctly feminine in its expression and embodiment. Lyra observed clear patterns in how different genders experience and express awe:

When I think of awe, I don't think I've even seen men awestruck in my life... women were verbal, they were expressive. The men that I grew up with, all they were really awestruck by was a hot woman... but women were struck by different things. (Lyra)

This observation points to how awe, as an emotion requiring openness and vulnerability, may conflict with traditional masculine emotional norms that emphasize control and containment.

Mari expanded on this gendered dimension of awe by connecting it to feminist theories of emotion, particularly drawing on Sarah Ahmed's work on wonder. As noted earlier in discussing the physical manifestations of awe, Mari described feeling "a swelling, like a warmth in my chest and stomach," but went on to situate this embodied experience within a broader theoretical framework: "One thing about Sarah Ahmed's work with wonder and with all of what they call feminist emotions, they talk about their connections to the body and movement. They aren't stagnant emotions." Mari's analysis, where they used "wonder" interchangeably with awe throughout our conversation, positions awe as fundamentally characterized by movement, fluidity, and embodied expression. Lyra further developed this concept of awe as unrestricted and inherently feminine:

So when I think of how awe has changed my life... awe and being able to be surprised is a feminine thing, because it's an unrestricted thing. It's funny because I think that people think about femininity in a very restricted way... for me, femininity was always the unrestricted one, whereas masculinity had so many boundaries.

This perspective reconceptualizes femininity not as a limitation but as a form of expansiveness, with femininity, like awe, actually serving as an indicator of this liberation.

For participants who identified as queer, awe took on additional dimensions related to intimacy and bodily receptivity. Lyra, who described herself as "a girl boss" who is "so on top of

my life at every single stage," articulated how awe connects to experiences of surrender and care that transcend her typical need for control. They drew direct connections between awe and kink:

It relates to sex too, in the sense of when you are in this submissive role and feeling like awe is something that is able to surprise you... when somebody genuinely surprises me and takes care of my body. (Lyra)

This framework extends beyond sexual contexts to encompass broader experiences of unexpected care, such as receiving flowers on one's birthday or being cared for in ways previously deemed unimaginable. For Lyra, awe represents a bodily surrender, evoking connections to childhood and moments of wonder. It engenders feelings of trust, relaxation, and ease. Lyra's analysis posits that awe fundamentally involves the capacity to be surprised and cared for, necessitating a form of bodily trust that permits vulnerability, despite their typical desire for control. The interconnection between awe, surrender, and care redefines the emotion as a practice of openness to receiving love and care, necessitating the cultivation of trust and a willingness to be emotionally permeable. Within this conceptual framework, the experience of awe transcends a mere individual emotional response, manifesting as a form of surrender and a lowering of emotional defenses. These findings suggest that awe operates as a complex embodied phenomenon that serves multiple functions for participants from diasporic communities. It provides temporary relief from symptoms of trauma, offers moments of cultural and emotional connection, and creates space for forms of vulnerability and openness that may be difficult to access in other contexts.

### **Discussion**

Through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of seven Cuban American participants' narratives, this study identified four interconnected themes that illuminate the cultural specificity of awe experiences in the diaspora. *Cubanidad in Diaspora* revealed how

participants' Cuban identity—shaped by collective memory, intergenerational trauma, and cultural pride—formed the foundational lens through which awe was interpreted and felt.

*Elicitors of Awe* demonstrated that profound awe emerged not from extraordinary phenomena but from everyday moments—"the little things," natural encounters, communal joy, and expressions of Cuban humor and resilience—that carried deep cultural significance. Lastly, *Embodiment and Expressions of Awe* presented participants' moments of awe as deeply somatic experiences and necessitating a vulnerable relinquishment of emotional guards. Furthermore, the analysis identified awe as "somatic translations" of embodied sensations that precede its cognitive appraisal.

This study explores how Cuban Americans in the diaspora experience, express, and embody awe, emphasizing the role of cultural memory, identity, and diasporic belonging in shaping participants' experience of this self-transcendent emotion. While existing research conceptualizes awe as arising from encounters with perceptual or conceptual vastness that challenge existing mental schemas (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), participants in this study frequently described awe emerging not from extraordinary events or grandiose landscapes but from every day, ordinary moments—listening to the bird's sing, the smell of a familiar meal, or witnessing acts of communal care. This emphasis on what participants described as "the little things" fundamentally challenges current psychological models of awe, which tend to focus on distinct or monumental experiences (e.g. exposure to a grand and vast spectacle in nature; a great work of art) (Yaden et al., 2019; Shiota et al., 2006). However, a crucial theoretical insight emerges from this study: for Cuban diasporic participants, these so-called "little things" are not little at all. They represent profound, culturally significant experiences that carry inherent magnitude within the Cuban cultural framework.

This reframing challenges the very notion of "finding awe in the little things." Rather than suggesting that Cubans have developed a capacity to discover wonder in mundane details, the findings indicate that Cuban cultural values—shaped by historical adversity, scarcity, and intergenerational transmission—have elevated these experiences to positions of fundamental importance. What dominant psychological frameworks might categorize as ordinary or minor (a shared meal, a moment of safety, a spontaneous joke) takes on entirely different dimensions when understood through Cuban cultural lenses shaped by experiences of displacement, material limitation, and collective resilience. The cultural relativity of what constitutes "awe-inspiring" becomes central here. Participants were not developing skills to appreciate small details but rather recognizing the vastness and significance of experiences that their cultural history had taught them to value deeply. A grocery cart full of food options becomes genuinely vast when understood against a backdrop of scarcity; a moment of communal laughter carries profound weight when contextualized within histories of survival and solidarity. These experiences possess inherent cultural magnitude that challenges Western frameworks' distinction between extraordinary and ordinary stimuli.

This study's most significant theoretical contribution lies in its challenge to universalist assumptions about what constitutes awe-worthy experience. The findings reveal that awe is not simply about individual encounters with objectively vast stimuli, but about culturally mediated recognition of significance and meaning. For Cuban diasporic participants, experiences that dominant psychological frameworks might dismiss as mundane—the abundance in a grocery store, the sound of familiar laughter, a sunset viewed from a hammock—carry cultural magnitude that transforms them into genuinely transcendent encounters.

This cultural magnitude emerges from what might be understood as "inherited vastness"—the way historical experiences of scarcity, displacement, and survival become embodied knowledge that shapes present-moment perception. When Luz described her awe at grocery store abundance, they was not learning to appreciate small details but recognizing the profound significance of choice and plenty against her inherited understanding of "lo que hay es lo que hay" (what there is, is what there is). The vastness they encountered was not primarily perceptual but cultural and historical—an expansion of possibilities that challenged fundamental assumptions about resource availability and life possibilities. Similarly, when participants described awe in moments of safety, community, or simple pleasure, they were responding to experiences that carry deep cultural weight within Cuban frameworks of value and meaning. The "little things" are only little from perspectives that have not been shaped by experiences of scarcity, exile, and collective struggle. From within Cuban cultural contexts, these experiences represent encounters with fundamental human needs—safety, belonging, abundance, joy—that history has rendered both precious and precarious. This insight has profound implications for the study of awe, suggesting that the emotion's triggers cannot be understood outside of cultural and historical context. What appears as "dispositional awe" or individual sensitivity to wonder may reflect culturally transmitted frameworks for recognizing significance and meaning. The capacity to experience awe becomes less about individual traits and more about inherited cultural knowledge about what matters, what is precious, and what deserves reverence.

*Awe as Cultural Habitus: Beyond Individual Disposition*

Building on this understanding of cultural magnitude, dispositional awe among Cuban diasporic participants appears less as an individual personality trait and more as a culturally embedded orientation toward recognizing inherited significance. Rather than functioning as

personal sensitivity to beauty or wonder, participants' awe experiences reflected a collective habitus (Bourdieu, 1977)—embodied dispositions shaped by shared historical conditions and transmitted through family traditions, humor, and cultural practices. In this sense, awe is not only an emotional state but also a socially ingrained way of perceiving and valuing the world, cultivated through Cuban cultural practices of humor, communal care, and attentiveness to the "little things." This aligns with Bourdieu's (1977) notion that cultural and historical conditions inscribe embodied dispositions, suggesting that awe in the Cuban diaspora is deeply connected to collective cultural memory. Participants frequently expressed appreciation for ordinary comforts like sharing meals with loved ones, feeling safe, and being amongst community that are experienced as sacred precisely because previous generations lived without them. Thus, dispositional awe may be less about individual personality differences and more about a shared cultural stance toward life, one that transforms everyday moments into experiences of wonder and gratitude.

The concept of scarcity as a generative force for awe appreciation emerges as particularly significant here. As Eva noted, "they've learned how to appreciate what they do have" due to experiences of having "nothing." This suggests that awe in the Cuban diaspora operates not despite material limitations but precisely because of an inherited understanding of what it means to live without basic necessities. The cultural memory of scarcity becomes a lens through which abundance—even in its most modest forms—is transformed into sacred experience.

### *Awe, Cuban Tristeza, and Cultural Resilience*

A notable pattern in the data is the coexistence of awe with Cuban *tristeza*. While *tristeza* directly translates to sadness, one participant, Río, used this word to describe the Cuban sensibility to hold both joy and sorrow simultaneously. Participants frequently experienced awe

as intertwined with humor, hardship, and nostalgia, echoing previous scholarship on the emotional complexity of both diasporic identity (Espín, 2006; Ramos-Zayas, 2001). This duality aligns with findings from cross-cultural research on awe, where awe is often reported as a mixed-valence emotion (Nakayama et al., 2020; Stellar et al., 2024). While awe often involves feelings of admiration or elevation, it may also elicit vulnerability, disorientation, or even fear. In the context of Cuban diaspora, participants' awe was often accompanied by a bittersweet emotional tone: moments of reverence were inseparable from awareness of loss, rupture, or historical hardship. Yet what distinguishes the Cuban diasporic experience is the simultaneity of these affective states—gratitude and grief, joy and sadness—as inherently fused. These co-occurring feelings are not merely ambivalent but expansive, suggesting that awe arises from the emotional capacity to hold multitudes. This resonates with the concept of internal vastness—the experience of an inner expansion in which one becomes aware of the depth and complexity of human feeling (Monroy & Keltner, 2022).

The role of humor as both a coping mechanism and an elicitor of awe deserves particular attention. Participants consistently described Cuban humor as transformative—capable of turning suffering into connection and despair into resilience. Mari's account of the generational debate over hardships ("we ate condom pizza" versus "now what are the condoms? We don't have condoms anyway!") exemplifies how humor creates awe through its capacity to reveal human ingenuity in the face of absurdity. This aligns with theories of incongruity in humor (McGraw & Warren, 2010) but extends beyond mere cognitive surprise to encompass a profound appreciation for the human capacity to find lightness in darkness.

In this study, awe was most powerful when it reflected ingenuity in the face of scarcity in various forms, whether through resourcefulness (e.g. fixing a broken fan with extremely limited

access to tools) or the shared laughter that transforms suffering into interpersonal connection. These moments were moving precisely because they revealed what participants described as an internal vastness—a swelling of pride and reverence at all that their people are capable of. Awe here is elicited not just by perceptual grandiosity but by emotional recognition of human resilience. Participants were often awestruck by the depth of creativity, tenderness, or solidarity arising in contexts of limitation and struggle. This aligns with recent reconceptualizations of awe as not only self-transcendent but also identity-expanding—linked to admiration for the moral, communal, or imaginative strength of others (Monroy & Keltner, 2022; Bai et al., 2022).

### *Phenomenological Awe*

Another significant finding is the instinctual, somatic quality of awe experiences. Participants consistently struggled to name awe directly, instead relying on embodied and metaphorical language that reflected a somatic response to emotional stimuli. This phenomenological sequence—feeling before consciously thinking of awe—challenges cognitive approaches to emotion that emphasize conscious appraisal and instead aligns with embodied theories of affect (Sheets-Johnstone, 2010; Damasio, 1999). The specific language participants chose—Vita's "safety," Lyra's "surrender," Mari's "warmth" were all somatic representations of feeling. The struggle to find adequate language for experiences of awe also points to the limitations of English emotional vocabularies for capturing complex, culturally specific affective states. The Spanish phrase "lo que hay es lo que hay" (what there is, is what there is) that Luz used to describe Cuban scarcity carries connotations that resist direct translation, suggesting that some aspects of Cuban diasporic awe may exceed the conceptual boundaries of dominant psychological frameworks.

### *Communal Awe and Collective Identity*

The findings reveal awe as fundamentally relational rather than individualistic, challenging dominant psychological models that emphasize solitary encounters with vastness. Participants consistently described their most profound awe experiences as emerging in contexts of community, whether through witnessing collective care (Mari's puppy rescue), spontaneous celebration (the elderly women on International Women's Day), or shared humor (Vita's recognition of Cuban wit). This communal dimension of awe aligns with collectivist cultural values that prioritize interdependence and group solidarity over individual achievement. The contrast participants drew between Cuban communal ethos and U.S. individualism suggests that cultural context shapes not only what elicits awe but also how awe itself is understood and valued. In Cuban cultural contexts, awe may be less about personal transcendence and more about recognition of collective resilience and shared humanity.

The political dimensions of communal awe deserve particular attention. Vita's interpretation of Cuban men's physical affection as "communist sentiment" connects awe experiences to broader ideological frameworks about care, solidarity, and social organization. This suggests that awe, particularly in diasporic contexts, cannot be separated from political consciousness and resistance to dominant cultural norms. Mari's observation that witnessing celebration "void of capitalist or consumerist distractions" was revelatory points to how awe can expand imaginative possibilities for different ways of being in community.

#### *Awe as Queer and Feminist Emotional Practice*

While this study did not collect participants' gender identities directly, two participants—both of whom identified as queer—spontaneously reflected on awe in relation to gendered emotional expression. Their reflections suggested that awe, particularly in its qualities of surrender, softness, or emotional vulnerability, was culturally coded as feminine and often

socially discouraged in men. These insights open a compelling interpretive thread grounded in feminist and queer affect theory: rather than treating awe as inherently gendered, these participants explored how norms around masculinity, femininity, and queerness shape the ways awe is expressed, recognized, or even permitted. Their queer positionality may be especially significant, as queer individuals often develop heightened awareness of emotional nuance, normativity, and restriction due to navigating cultural and familial expectations around identity and expression (Ahmed, 2006; Love, 2007). This may account for their attention to the politics of awe as an emotion that invites vulnerability.

Sarah Ahmed's (2004) conceptualization of wonder as a feminist emotion—one that disorients and transforms the subject—offers a generative parallel for understanding awe. Both emotions invite openness, receptivity, and a loosening of egoic control. Mari's theoretical framework, drawing on Ahmed's work on feminist emotions as characterized by "movement" and embodied fluidity, positions awe as inherently dynamic and resistant to containment. This mobility—both physical and emotional—challenges static notions of emotional experience and suggests that awe's transformative power lies partly in its refusal to be constrained.

Lyra's connection between awe and kink introduces additional complexity to understanding awe as embodied practice. Her description of awe as "surrender in my body" that connects to experiences of care and surprise extends beyond sexual contexts to encompass broader frameworks of trust, vulnerability, and receptivity. For someone who typically maintains high levels of control ("I'm a girl boss... so on top of my life"), awe represents a temporary relinquishing of defensive vigilance in favor of openness to care and surprise. This observation reveals that for these individuals, awe transcends being merely an emotional experience; In this setting, the capacity to feel awe takes on political importance, representing the ability to accept

vulnerability and openness despite societal expectations to prioritize composure and withhold emotion.

### *Implications for Awe and Diasporic Experience*

These findings have several important theoretical implications. First, they challenge the universality of current awe models by demonstrating how cultural values, historical experience, and collective memory shape both the elicitors and meaning of awe. The emphasis on "little things" rather than perceptual vastness suggests that awe theories developed in dominant cultural contexts may not adequately capture the full range of human awe experience. Second, the communal and relational dimensions of awe in this study suggest the need for more collectivist models of self-transcendent emotion. Rather than conceptualizing awe as individual encounters with vastness, these findings point toward awe as emerging through recognition of collective resilience, shared humanity, and communal care.

Lastly, the embodied characteristics of awe highlight the importance of phenomenological approaches to emotional research. The struggle participants experienced in naming their awe points to the limitations of language-based measures and suggests the need for more diverse methodological approaches to capturing embodied emotional experience. Finally, the findings suggest that awe may serve particular functions for marginalized and diasporic communities, operating as both embodied regulation and cultural resistance. The capacity to find awe in everyday moments of connection and care may represent an important form of resilience in contexts of ongoing displacement and marginalization.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

While this study offers important insights into the lived experience of awe among Cuban Americans in the diaspora, several limitations must be addressed. First, the sample size ( $n = 7$ ) is

intentionally small due to the idiographic and in-depth nature of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which prioritizes depth over breadth (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

However, this also means that findings are not generalizable to all Cuban or Cuban American populations. Future research could expand the sample size or incorporate mixed methods approaches to examine whether the themes identified here resonate across a larger population.

Additionally, the study lacks representation of Afro-Cuban voices, a critical omission given the racialized dynamics of Cuban identity and belonging both on the island and within the U.S. diaspora. Afro-Cubans have historically faced and continue to face systemic racism, economic marginalization, and limited access to the same migration pathways that shaped much of the Cuban exile narrative (Sawyer, 2005). Excluding these voices risks perpetuating the invisibility of Afro-Cuban experiences in dominant Cuban diasporic narratives, which are often framed through a white-Cuban lens. Future research must center Afro-Cuban perspectives to capture the full spectrum of how awe is experienced and expressed within a truly representative Cuban diaspora.

Another significant limitation is that this study did not collect information about participants' gender identities, which represents an oversight in the research design. While some participants described awe as distinctly "feminine" in its expression and noted patterns in how different genders experience emotional openness, I cannot make assumptions about participants' gender identities without having explicitly collected this information. This limitation prevents a comprehensive examination of how gender identity specifically shapes experiences of awe. Future research should explicitly investigate how gender identity, including transgender and non-binary experiences, intersects with cultural identity to shape the phenomenology of awe within the Cuban diaspora.

Furthermore, the study is geographically limited to participants living in Chicago, Miami, and New York City. While these cities represent important sites of Cuban diaspora, the findings may not reflect the experiences of Cubans in smaller or less established diasporic communities, where cultural connections and communal practices may take different forms. Additionally, while awe was consistently described as a positive and grounding emotion in this study, participants' narratives also suggest that awe may carry a bittersweet or complex emotional tone when tied to memories of loss, scarcity, or displacement. This emotional complexity aligns with research suggesting that awe can include elements of fear, vulnerability, or sadness (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Shiota et al., 2007). Future studies might further investigate these ambivalent or layered dimensions of awe, particularly within diasporic and postcolonial contexts.

Future research should also explore the intergenerational transmission of awe practices, examining how different generations within diasporic families maintain, adapt, or transform cultural approaches to finding wonder in everyday life. Additionally, comparative studies across different diasporic communities could illuminate whether the patterns identified here—particularly the emphasis on communal awe and embodied regulation—reflect broader diasporic emotional strategies or are specific to Cuban cultural contexts.

### *Conclusion*

This study challenges dominant psychological frameworks of awe by centering the lived experiences of Cuban Americans in the diaspora. The findings reveal that what mainstream psychology has long positioned awe as an individual encounter with extraordinary vastness is, in fact, a deeply cultural practice rooted in collective memory, inherited resilience, and shared ways of finding meaning as necessary for survival. These insights suggest that well-being

interventions must account for cultural specificity rather than assuming universal triggers for positive emotions.

The implications of this study extend far beyond the field of emotion science. This study illuminates how marginalized communities cultivate embodied practices of awe and gratitude as forms of cultural preservation and resistance through inherited frameworks of meaning. In a time when violent political rhetoric seeks to dehumanize us by erasing our stories, archiving the emotional landscapes of diasporic communities is essential. By centering voices that have long been marginalized in psychological scholarship, this study showcases that Cuban legacy is abundant, resilient, and a source of wonder.

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*Appendix A***Interview Guide**Cuban Identity

- Can you tell me the story of how your family came to the United States from Cuba?  
(Adapted from Duany, 2011, pp. 24-26; explores migration history and context)
- What does being Cuban mean to you? (adapted from Phinney, 1992; used to assess personal meaning of ethnic identity)
- How do you maintain connections to Cuban culture (e.g. cultural rituals, food, holidays, etc.) in your daily life? (Duany, 2011; Gonzalez, 2003; to assess cultural practices and level of cultural transmission)
- In what ways do you feel your sense of identity has changed due to living in the U.S.?  
(Phinney, 1992; to understand ethnic identity negotiation)
- Have there been moments when your Cuban background has felt especially important or noticeable to you? (Ramos-Zayas, 2001; assesses identity salience)
- How does the time period or circumstances of your family's migration from Cuba affect how you see yourself as Cuban? (Gonzalez et al., 2003, addresses historical context of migration)
- What is your family's current relationship with or perspective of Cuba? (Gonzalez et al., 2003, addresses historical context of migration)
- How do you negotiate or balance being both Cuban and American? Is there one you identify with more? If so, why? (Gonzalez et al., 2003; addresses acculturation and diasporic identity)

- When did your family emigrate to the United States? *OR* (If participant emigrated as a child) How old were you when you emigrated to the U.S.?

### Awe

- Can you describe a specific moment in your life when you felt a powerful sense of awe? What was happening? (Yaden et al., 2019; Bonner & Friedman, 2011)
- What physical sensations, thoughts, or emotions did you notice during that awe-evoking experience? (Yaden et al., 2019; Bonner & Friedman, 2011; Shiota et al., 2006)
- How did this experience of awe affect you afterward? In what ways, if any, did it change the way you see yourself or the world? (Yaden et al., 2019; Bonner & Friedman, 2011)
- Do you think your experience of awe is connected to your Cuban background, your family's migration story, or your life in the U.S.?
- Have you experienced awe in contexts where you were speaking Spanish, English, or both?
  - Do you find that the language you are using changes how you experience or express awe?
  - Are there words in either language that feel especially meaningfully connected to awe?
- Are there particular spaces (like the ocean, mountains, large gatherings, art, etc.) that tend to inspire awe for you?
  - Can you tell me about an experience in one of those places?
- How has awe influenced your sense of connection to others, your community, or your cultural identity?

