POV
Community Engagement & Education
DISCUSSION GUIDE

Voices of the Sea
A Film by Kim Hopkins

www.pbs.org/pov
I co-founded the documentary department at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Television in Cuba in the late 1990s. During my time at the film school I accompanied documentary students to various filming locations as we pushed, sometimes naively, at the envelope of what was and was not permitted to be filmed in Cuba. The subjects of cigars, rum, architecture, old American cars, dance and Cuban music became the staple diet of these wannabe documentary filmmakers. Also, all things Ernest Hemingway were seen as safe documentary propositions that would get green-lighted by the tightly controlled film school.

During one of these student documentary scouting trips, I visited Cajio Beach, a small rundown fishing village that was off the tourist track on the unfashionable south coast. Here, the beaches were covered in red mud rather than white sand and a solitary hotel had long ago been blown away by a typhoon. Dozens of lithe, weather-burnished fishermen rowed tiny skiffs with peeling paint, each with an identifying number daubed on its bow, out into the bay of Batabanó, only returning once their iceboxes were full of snapper. It was a scene Ernest Hemingway might have imagined when he penned *The Old Man and the Sea* in 1951.

I had first read Hemingway’s novel at age 8. As I surveyed the scene at Cajio Beach, I realized its elegiac atmosphere and epic themes had stayed with me.

Fast forward to 2014. A film about adoption I was working on had collapsed, and I was looking for another subject to steal my heart, rob me of five years of my life and leave me teetering on the edge financially. Most things I do aren’t really planned—they just happen. That’s when my Cuban interpreter’s name popped up on my Skype window. We hadn’t spoken for years, and we reminisced about my time at the Cuban film school and our days fishing in Cuba. I’ve always been a keen fisherwoman.

There I had it, my next project—fishing, Cuba, Hemingway and a reacquainted Cuban friend to arrange it. My years working at the Cuban film school enabled me to wangle unfettered access under the guise of a cultural exchange. That December, after President Obama announced to the world that America and Cuba were restoring diplomatic relations, my Cuban fixer friend left the island along with thousands of his compatriots. Cuba was once again in flux. This triggered us to get on the ground in Cuba as fast as we could, as we knew every documentary maker and their dog would soon converge on Havana.

Years later, I was back at Cajio Beach. Tiny fishing skiffs bobbed in the cobalt blue bay. Nothing had changed. It was as if I’d drifted back into Hemingway’s world, but this time with a camera. I met and befriended Orlando, an enigmatic Cuban fisherman, his much younger wife, Mariela, and their four children. I entered their simple, proud, pre-industrialized world that was bereft of technology, but rich in family values. On the horizon, however, the specter of change loomed in the shape of the American illusion. Whereas Hemingway’s old man fought to hold onto a giant fish, I would soon see Orlando fight to hold onto his values and loved ones.

**Kim Hopkins**

Filmmaker, *Voices of the Sea*
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The Voices of the Sea film team
Revealing stark realities for the poorest rural Cubans, *Voices of the Sea* tells the story of a thirty-something mother of four who longs for a better life for herself and her children. Mariela yearns to escape the unending hardships of a remote Cuban fishing village and go in search of a romanticized notion of the American dream she believes awaits those who are willing to risk arrest, persecution and even death to reach U.S. shores.

Gorgeous images of Orlando, Mariela’s aging husband, on his small fishing boat at sunset, are fused with family stories rife with turmoil. The tension between wife and husband—one desperate to leave, the other content to stay—builds into a high-stakes family drama after Mariela’s brother and the couple’s neighbors escape. Those tensions provide an excellent springboard for dialogue about U.S. immigration policy, poverty, the role of government and the deep power of parents’ dreams for their children.
Voices of the Sea is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- Your local PBS station
- Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to Cuba or immigration, including 90 Miles, 4.1 Miles, Al Otro Lado, Well-Founded Fear and Dalya’s Other Country
- Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the “Key Issues” section
- High school students, youth groups and clubs
- Faith-based organizations and institutions
- Cultural, art and historical organizations, institutions and museums
- Civic, fraternal and community groups
- Academic departments and student groups at colleges, universities and high schools
- Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as local libraries.

Voices of the Sea is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

- Cuba
- Cuba-U.S. relations
- economics
- family structures
- immigration
- poverty
- public policy
- sociology

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use Voices of the Sea to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit www.pov.org/engage
Immigration and U.S.-Cuba Relations

Over two million Cuban immigrants currently live in the United States. About two thirds live in Florida, where Miami’s Little Havana section is home to a vibrant Cuban-American community. Despite close personal ties between the two countries, their immigration and travel policies have been restrictive—and contested—for almost 60 years. A short history of the two countries’ relations can help viewers understand the challenges Cuban migrants face today.

The Cuban Revolution and the Rise of Fidel Castro

In 1959, young socialist leader Fidel Castro led an uprising that toppled the regime of President Fulgencio Batista, a longtime ally of the United States. Under Castro’s leadership, Cuba transitioned to a socialist model. The government “nationalized” American companies in Cuba, seizing assets such as sugar factories and oil refineries without compensating their owners and turning them into state-operated enterprises. The United States and Cuba had been close trading partners since well before Batista’s rule, but after Castro took power, relations between the two governments soured. They entered a decades-long diplomatic standoff and trade war that at times threatened to break out into military conflict.

Castro’s administration was a sharp departure from Batista’s, which became clear as Castro rebuffed the United States’ free trade-oriented economic demands. Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. considered socialist Cuba a dangerous adversary and encouraged its citizens to leave through push and pull tactics. The pull took the form of special immigration policies favorable to Cubans. Under the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, Cubans arriving on United States soil were automatically considered refugees and granted legal permanent status after one year of residency. After the revolution many wealthy Cubans left the island to avoid economic changes and political persecution under Castro, whose policies restricted both private enterprise and dissent.

Trade War and Its Consequences

Factors pressuring Cubans to emigrate included trade policies that made life on the island increasingly difficult. While Cuba allied itself with the nuclear-armed Soviet Union, Washington imposed a series of trade sanctions that crippled its economy. Under a broad embargo, the U.S. punished any country that did business with Cuba, cutting the island off from both U.S. products and 95 percent of its exports. As a result, Cubans suffered devastating shortages of food, medicine and other resources, consequences even more severely felt after the fall of the USSR. According to some estimates, most Cuban migrants have not been political exiles, but economic refugees seeking relief from the decades-long embargo.
Cuban leaders blamed the United States for their struggling economy, while the U.S. blamed Castro’s socialist policies and refusal to cooperate with its policy priorities. It is difficult to untangle public opinion from the propaganda campaigns waged by the governments of both countries. From 1961 onward, the U.S. made a number of concerted efforts to overthrow Castro, including dozens of assassination attempts by the CIA. (By some estimates, the U.S. government attempted to kill the Cuban leader over 600 times. He died of natural causes in November 2016.)

**Evolving Immigration Policy**

The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union dealt another significant blow to Cuba. The U.S.S.R. was Cuba’s primary trading partner and provided approximately 4 to 6 billion dollars of subsidies to the island. Although Castro’s government restricted emigration from the island, the U.S. and Cuba reached an agreement through the 1996 “wet foot, dry foot” policy: any Cuban attempting to migrate to the U.S. would be returned if intercepted at sea, but allowed to stay if they reached land. This led to another surge in Cuban emigration to the U.S. which continues to this day.

In January 2017, outgoing President Barack Obama announced that the “wet foot, dry foot” policy would expire, signaling the normalization of relations between the U.S. and Cuban governments.

**Sources**


Poverty in Cuba Today

Cuba is widely considered a poor country, but poverty is difficult to measure in a socialist nation that provides substantial public services. Estimates of Cuba’s poverty rate range from 5 percent to 26 percent. While the state salary is below the international poverty line of $2 per day, this figure does not account for state-provided rations and healthcare, or the remittances many Cubans receive from relatives abroad. The government boasts about Cuba’s high scores in the areas used to score countries according to the U.N.’s Human Development Index. These include education, infant mortality rates and gender parity in the workplace. But official development metrics don’t capture the complexity of life in Cuba. While Cuba’s official unemployment rate is low (around 2.5%), wages are controlled by the government and many find their earnings insufficient for survival. Fishermen and other workers whose revenue is dependent on natural re-
sources can suffer during an unlucky season. Basic consumer goods are difficult for Cubans to obtain, and they frequently experience shortages of essentials, such as food, transportation and Internet access. Many feel hemmed in by bureaucracy, lack of freedom to pursue private enterprise and restrictions on emigration.

Raúl Castro, Fidel’s brother and successor, met with President Obama in 2015 and the two leaders took steps toward normalizing relations. After this rapprochement, Cubans worried that they would lose their special refugee status and immigration to the United States would become more difficult for them. Since taking office President Trump has rolled back Obama’s normalization policies, but the effect on Cubans’ quality of life is unclear. What is certain is that since the United States withdrew much of its staff from the embassy in 2017, there are severe obstacles for Cubans to acquire visas to travel to the United States or receive refugee status through the embassy in Havana. Furthermore, with the withdrawal of the Wet Foot, Dry Foot policy, Cubans often must be ready to prove in court that they are political refugees in order to obtain the privileges that Cubans enjoyed prior to the withdrawal of that policy.

Sources


Selected People Featured in *Voices of the Sea*

**Orlando “Pita” Garcia** - fisherman, father, husband

**Mariela** - Much younger than Orlando, she married him after her first husband drowned trying to get to the United States, leaving her in her thirties alone with her children

**Kevin, Karel, Cynthia, Orlandito** - Mariela and Orlando’s children
**Selected People Featured in Voices of the Sea**

**Davinson** - Friend who tried to escape to the U.S. but was caught by the Cubans and fined

**Roilan** - Mariela’s brother, who manages to reach the U.S.

**Michel and Estrella** - Orlando’s friends, who have attempted to escape many times. Their initial escape attempts fail, but on their final attempt they are marooned on a U.S. lighthouse platform. They are detained in Guantánamo Bay and eventually resettled in Australia.

**Esther** - Mariela and Roilan’s mother
Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

- If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?
- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you ask them?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?
- Two months from now, what do you think you’ll remember from this film?

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they’ve experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions:

- What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?
- If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What do you hope their main takeaway would be?
- Complete this sentence: I am inspired by this film (or discussion) to __________.

Pita’s family have been fishermen in Cuba for generations.
Photo courtesy of Kim Hopkins
DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Images

What images come to mind when you think of Cuba? Where do those images come from? Do you think you have an accurate picture of the country? Did the film provide you with any new information?

How are immigrants typically portrayed in U.S. popular culture? How are the people you “meet” in the film like or unlike those portrayals?

Compare/contrast the emotions evoked by viewing the footage of sunsets framing small fishing boats on the ocean with the feelings you experience hearing the stories of the subjects of the film.

Mariela has a very optimistic picture of what her life would be like in the United States and how easy it would be to reunite with her children. Orlando is much more skeptical of her ability to find quick success. What evidence do you see that supports each of their positions?

Estrella describes hiding the memory card containing the video of their escape attempt, including their encounter with the U.S. Coast Guard. Why would U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement personnel object to Michel and Estrella’s journey being filmed? Why do you suppose they recorded it?

Orlando’s rejection of Mariela’s request that they escape to the U.S. is based, in part, on his perception of his family’s experience: “All of my family from my father’s side left in the eighties. My cousin was maybe 8 or 9. I used to compare photographs—this is my cousin when she was here. This one is when she left. [Before] the brutality of the United States, she was a flower. After a month, you could see the sadness, the difference.” Contrast his image of the U.S. with the promise of the “American dream” embraced by so many immigrants. Is the American dream a fantasy?

Mariela observes, “It’s incredible how many people are emigrating. Because it isn’t reported here. All you hear about is one here, or one there.” What do you think would change if the reality of emigration from Cuba was widely and openly reported on the island? What difference might a free and independent press make to people like Mariela and Orlando?

The filmmaker made a decision not to present different arguments about the structural causes of Cubans’ economic hardship. Some argue that the policies of the Castro government are to blame, while others place responsibility on the United States’ decades-long embargo. Why do you think
the filmmaker chose not to include this big-picture discussion in the film? What is the effect of representing daily life in Cuba and letting subjects share their own perspectives about the source of their country’s problems? What did you learn from this film that you may not have learned from an informational historical documentary?

**Immigration**

In the past, U.S. immigration policy granted any Cuban who set foot on U.S. soil the right to stay. Normalizing the U.S.-Cuba relationship has put an end to that special status. How do you think the U.S. should treat current immigrants from Cuba? In what ways (if any) did the film influence your thinking about this issue?

Orlando’s family members on his father’s side, as well as many friends and neighbors, have fled to the U.S., but he has elected to stay in Cuba. Now his wife is intent on making the dangerous journey. She says, “Sometimes I tell Orlando that there has to be something more. He says, ‘There’s nothing else. Don’t look for anything else.’” What factors make some people want to leave their countries while others want to stay?

What did you learn from the film about the role that poverty plays in sparking migration?

Responding to those who want to understand why people like her would risk their lives and their family’s well-being to escape from Cuba, Mariela says, “We don’t have other options.” Bottom line, she says, “A better future for my kids, that was the idea.” How do her explanations compare to the motives of other immigrants you know or your own family’s stories?

Mariela says, “A Cuban doesn’t leave because he hates the country. Everyone’s proud of their country. It’s something you’re born with. They leave [to] get a job, do their best, save some money…come back and start a business.” Did any part of that statement surprise you?

Mariela worries, “I’ve already had to take my eldest out of school. And the others I might have to do the same. We’ll never do anything or be anybody.” She is concerned that her children “have no hopes for anything else” beyond the life they currently live. In what ways is immigration an expression of hope? In what ways is it an expression of desperation?

Family friend Davinson summarizes the retribution he experienced after his failed attempt to flee: “If you ever try to leave illegally, that’s it, your future’s done [in Cuba].” Why would Cuba—or any nation—be so intent on preventing people from leaving that it would make leaving a crime and/or...
make life permanently difficult for those who tried to leave but were unsuccessful? Note: Cuba has recently made a legal shift to allow reentry by Cubans who left the country illegally.

Orlando says, “Here it’s not easy for kids to learn to read and write. A teacher’s salary is not enough, so they don’t turn up. Sometimes they’d rather solve their own problems rather than remain in class.” What would you say to someone who cited this as a reason to leave Cuba and come to the United States? Do you think that some children in the U.S. experience similar educational inequities?

As of 2013, Cubans no longer needed permission to leave the country and could stay away for 24 months without losing their status as “Cuban Resident” on the island. However, people often leave without notice. Orlando wishes his friends well but feels abandoned: “Imagine, when you open your eyes after 4, 5 or 10 years, you realize, I’m alone. It’s quite painful.” Many people in the film clearly respect and love Orlando. Why isn’t their veneration of him enough to sway them to stay in Cuba?

Lessons from Life in Cuba

What did you learn about Cuba that you didn’t know before viewing the film?

Orlando follows in the footsteps of his father and grandfather as a fisherman. But the government won’t permit him to fish with a net and his catch with a line is inevitably meager. How could policy makers balance the survival needs of the poor (like Orlando) with government’s responsibility to preserve a healthy ecosystem and prevent overfishing?

Like many people who live at an economic subsistence level, Orlando makes the most of what he has. What examples did you see of resourcefulness? How do Orlando’s routines compare to common stereotypes of poor people?

What explanations are offered by people in the film for their economic distress? How do these compare to the explanations for poverty that you typically hear?

Orlando observes that the government doesn’t provide enough food to live on, and then criminalizes the ways that people obtain additional food: “They give you a bit of rice, yes. If you buy it in the street, it’s illegal. If you buy beans in the street, it’s illegal. That means we always live illegally. So you don’t learn to live legally.” Can you think of any other in-
stances where a government encourages law breaking by creating policies that impede survival?

Several people in the film are wary of possible normalization of relations with the United States. Mariela predicts that life "will improve for those on top. And for us down here it will be the same or worse." Michel says, "It's us that'll pay the price." What do you think he means? How might a tourist economy, or a move toward capitalism be a boon for some but make things worse for others?

Mariela is diagnosed with stage 3 cervical cancer. How do you think that might influence her desire to leave Cuba?

Orlando says, "In 1959, Cuba was very happy. We were happy. I was a little child, but I saw it in my parents, my grandparents. Cuba was truly happy. People in the streets, beautiful. But we were cheated. It means nothing to me now. That was a moment in history and nothing else." What happens when a revolution promises change and can't deliver (or can't deliver change equitably)? What do governments owe their citizens?

Mariela discusses her former husband, who is thought to have drowned while trying to escape from Cuba.

Photo courtesy of Kim Hopkins

**Family**

After a discussion of his love for Mariela and how he courted her, Orlando admits, "If it wasn't for these little moments and the days you earn some money, life has no meaning." How does family sustain Orlando and the others in the film?

Based on what you see in the film, what's the impact of emigration on family, friends and communities left behind?

Roilan says, "Sometimes I'd rather not call Cuba because I feel bad. No amount of money is worth having your family far away." Do you agree? What do you think you would do if you had to choose between providing financial support from far away and providing emotional support as you watched your family struggle financially?

Additional media literacy questions are available at:
www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
• Develop a list of places from which large numbers of people migrate to the U.S. and research programs or organizations working to alleviate poverty or conflict in those countries. Contact one (or more) of the organizations to find out what you could do to help.

• Help your community create opportunities for immigrants, old and new, to share their stories and use them to find common ground between various communities.

• Host a panel discussion on Cuba-U.S. relations and/or the current U.S. rules governing Cubans who try to enter the country.
Immigration from Cuba

**MIGRATION POLICY INSTITUTE:**
“CUBAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES”
migrationpolicy.org/article/cuban-immigrants-united-states

An overview of Cuban migration to the U.S. provides context and basic facts.

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER: “SURGE IN CUBAN IMMIGRATION TO U.S. CONTINUED THROUGH 2016”**

This page offers details of Cuban immigration to the U.S. since the Obama administration began normalizing relations with Cuba.

Cuba Today

**CUBA STUDY GROUP**
cubastudygroup.org

This independent group dedicated to the transformation of Cuba into a democratic and capitalist country offers a helpful and comprehensive set of links to a variety of researchers and research reports, blogs, statistics, news, Cuban government websites and more.

**HAVANA TIMES**
HavanaTimes.org
This Cuban site publishes independent writing from Cuba.

**U.S. EMBASSY IN CUBA**
https://cu.usembassy.gov/
Consult the official embassy website for current information on travel, visas and immigration policy, as well as a useful overview of the Embassy’s history.

Cuban History

**AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: “PRE-CASTRO CUBA”**
pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/comandante-pre-castro-cuba/

This article outlines the divisions of wealth and poverty in pre-Castro Cuba. See pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/castro/ for additional background pieces.

**UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI CUBAN HERITAGE COLLECTION**
https://library.miami.edu/cht/
Photographs, oral histories and more items can be found in this archive documenting the experiences of Cubans and Cuban immigrants.

Original Online Content on POV

Visit http://www.pbs.org/pov/voicesofthesea to view a streaming video trailer for the film; an interview with the filmmaker; a list of related websites, articles and books; a downloadable discussion guide; and special features.
HOW TO BUY THE FILM

To order **Voices of the Sea** for home use, visit [http://www.catndocs.com](http://www.catndocs.com)

**POV**

Produced by American Documentary, Inc., POV is public television’s premier showcase for nonfiction films. Since 1988, POV has been the home for the world’s boldest contemporary filmmakers, celebrating intriguing personal stories that spark conversation and inspire action. Always an innovator, POV discovers fresh new voices and creates interactive experiences that shine a light on social issues and elevate the art of storytelling. With our documentary broadcasts, original online programming and dynamic community engagement campaigns, we are committed to supporting films that capture the imagination and present diverse perspectives.

POV films have won 37 Emmy® Awards, 21 George Foster Peabody Awards, 12 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, three Academy Awards®, and the first-ever George Polk Documentary Film Award. The POV series has been honored with a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking, three IDA Awards for Best Curated Series and the National Association of Latino Independent Producers (NALIP) Award for Corporate Commitment to Diversity. Learn more at [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov).

**POV Spark** ([www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov))

Since 1994, POV Digital has driven new storytelling initiatives and interactive production for POV. The department has continually experimented with web-based documentaries, producing PBS’ first program website and the first Snapchat-native documentary. It has won major awards for its work, including a Webby Award and over 19 nominations. Now with a singular focus on incubating and distributing interactive productions, POV Spark continues to explore the future of independent nonfiction media through its co-productions, acquisitions and POV Labs, where media makers and technologists collaborate to reinvent storytelling forms.

**POV Engage** ([www.pbs.org/pov/engage](http://www.pbs.org/pov/engage))

The POV Engage team works with educators, community organizations and PBS stations to present more than 800 free screenings every year. In addition, we distribute free discussion guides and standards-aligned lesson plans for each of our films. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

**American Documentary, Inc.** ([www.amdoc.org](http://www.amdoc.org))

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia arts organization dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation. AmDoc is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization.

Major funding for POV is provided by PBS, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Endowment for the Arts and the Wyncote Foundation. Additional funding comes from The John S. and James Knight Foundation, Nancy Blachman and David des Jardins, Bertha Foundation, Reva & David Logan Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Chicago Media Project, Sage Foundation, Lefkofsky Family Foundation, The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, New York State Council on the Arts, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, Ann Tenenbaum and Thomas H. Lee and public television viewers. POV is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KQED San Francisco, WGBH Boston and THIRTEEN in association with WNET.ORG.

Front cover: Pita, Mariela and their four children.
Photo courtesy of Kim Hopkins

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