Time to Restore the Rich Cultural Ties Between the U.S. and Cuba

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After 20 years working to promote academic and cultural exchanges with Cuba, I would not have imagined that in 2014 the U.S. embargo would still be so solidly in place.

The granddaughter of an American raised on the island, I first traveled to Cuba to conduct research in 1992. I was investigating my family's history and soon discovered the long, shared connection between Cuba and the United States. Our countries and people have influenced each other since before we each became nations. By the 1920s, U.S. citizens and companies owned the majority of land and property on the island. There was extensive trade and travel, and mutual influence in many spheres, including music, film, boxing, literature, architecture, theater and, of course, baseball.

You could trace the beginnings of Latin Jazz to the moment Chano Pozo began to play with Dizzy Gillespie in the 1940s. Josephine Baker danced in Cuba. Nat King Cole recorded "Cole Español" in Cuba in 1958 with the great pianist Bebo Valdés. Cuban film has also caught the eye of great American directors and actors. Stephen Spielberg, Spike Lee and Benicio del Toro have been to the Havana Film Festival.

Expanding educational and cultural exchanges would benefit both nations. We have much to learn from Cuba – after a massive literacy campaign in 1961, they retain one of the best literacy levels in the hemisphere. They have also developed a highly successful hurricane response system and boast one of the most well-preserved submarine coral reefs on the planet, Jardines de la Reina, off the southern coast.

I've had the opportunity to take many American students to Cuba, and it's always fascinating to see them rethink their initial notions. Cuba defies their stereotypes. Cuban people speak to them everywhere, in the classroom, the streets and on Havana's Malecón. They are often openly critical of the government, to my students' surprise. My students come from diverse backgrounds and political orientations, and they offer their own criticisms of the system there, but they also see Cuba opening. And they inevitably question our policy of punishment. Recently one of them, a public policy major, said to me: "My generation wants to move forward. Our current policy is an outdated, inhumane relic of the cold war."

It's high time for President Obama to exercise his executive authority to make changes toward normalization of relations with Cuba. Removing all travel restrictions would be a good place to start. Our cultures will be richer for it.