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# Lost Boys and Girls: Navigating Experience and Identity during Operation Pedro Pan

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*Lost Boys and Girls: Navigating Experience and Identity during Operation Pedro Pan*

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in  
History.

By

Caleb Still

Under the mentorship of Dr. Christina Abreu

ABSTRACT

Over 14,000 unaccompanied children came from Cuba to the United States during Operation Pedro Pan. Once they arrived they were faced with an entirely new living situation and were forced to adapt. One of the remaining similarities to their Cuban home was the Catholic Church. The Church played a significant role in shaping these children's fluid concept of their ethnic, national, and religious identities. Previous scholarship has not addressed the role of the Church in the program or the issue of the fluidity of identity among these children. This study builds on the existing scholarship and aims to fill in a missing piece of the historical memory of Operation Pedro Pan and its participants.

Thesis Mentor: \_\_\_\_\_

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The histories of Cuba and the United States have long been intertwined. Louis Pérez argues that Cuba has been the “laboratory” where the United States has tested and developed varying methods used to create a global empire.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, these methods included economic and military interventions framed within an American neo-imperialism context. More recently, the history has been dominated by an ideological battle between views of American democracy and capitalism against Cuban repression and communism. This battle commenced when Fidel Castro, leader of the Cuban Revolution, rose to power in 1959. Over the next few months, Castro’s socialist leanings and practices frightened many middle-class and elite Cubans and Americans. Cuban parents feared Castro would indoctrinate their children with communist political doctrine.<sup>2</sup> Even worse, rumors spread throughout the Cuban population that Castro planned to take parental rights away from parents and give them to the Cuban government.<sup>3</sup> These factors paved the way for Operation Pedro Pan to develop in 1960. Visas for Cuban children were waived by the United States government, and the Catholic Church began to make arrangements with those inside of Cuba to fly Cuban children to Miami. Many Cubans who had already left Cuba found the Church to be a great help

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<sup>1</sup> Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Bryan O. Walsh, “Cuban Refugee Children,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 13, no.3/4 (July-October 1971): 383, accessed November 11, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org.libez.lib.georgiasouthern.edu/stable/pdf/174929.pdf>; Arlene Geller, “Fly Away....Home?,” *Multicultural Review* (Fall 2009): 29, accessed February 16, 2016, [http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/GellerFlyAwayHome%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/GellerFlyAwayHome%20(1).pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Richard H. Wall Jr., “Operation Pedro Pan: An examination of the factors that resulted in 14,048 Cuban children being sent to the United States” (master’s thesis, California State University, Long Beach, 2011), 24, accessed February 16, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com.libez.lib.georgiasouthern.edu/docview/924526167/fulltextPDF/4CE3F85CA7564FD6PQ/1?accountid=11225>.

once inside the United States.<sup>4</sup> The airlifts were designed to bring children into the United States in small numbers so as to not draw the attention of the Cuban government. According to one report in 1962, the final year of Operation Pedro Pan, 20 children were coming into the United States a week.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the program, over 14,000 Cuban children had been brought into the United States. The children were placed in foster care in 35 states under the care of 95 different child welfare agencies.<sup>6</sup>

This study examines the role of the Catholic Church in Operation Pedro Pan. Anthony Stevens-Arroyo argues that “religion is absent from many accounts of contemporary Latino history.”<sup>7</sup> Specifically, Cuban religious experience within the United States has not been as extensively examined as other components of Cuba and its diaspora.<sup>8</sup> I argue that the Catholic Church played a significant role in developing the sense of national, ethnic, and religious identity among Pedro Pan children. The Church controlled their living arrangements and their religious experience. Often, the Church was the only direct tie to home that the refugee children had. The Catholic Church placed, provided for, and influenced the children throughout their participation in Operation Pedro Pan. As one article put it, “These refugees didn’t merely attend church, they lived

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<sup>4</sup> María Cristina García, “Exiles, Immigrants, and Transnationals: The Cuban Communities of the United States,” in *The Columbia History of Latinos in the United States Since 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), edited by Davi G. Gutiérrez, 152.

<sup>5</sup> “Tidal Wave of Cuban Children Flows Silently Out of the Country,” *Oregonian*, March 8, 1962. [http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/of\\_Cuban\\_children\\_flows\\_silently\\_out\\_of\\_Cuba\\_Mar\\_8\\_1962.pdf](http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/of_Cuban_children_flows_silently_out_of_Cuba_Mar_8_1962.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Walsh, “Cuban Refugee Children,” 389-413.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo, “From Barrios to Barricades: Religion and Religiosity in Latino Life,” in *The Columbia History of Latinos in the United States Since 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), edited by Davi G. Gutiérrez, 303-354.

<sup>8</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *La Lucha For Cuba: Religion and Politics on the streets of Miami*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 15.

with their pastors.”<sup>9</sup> The role of the Catholic Church has only been mentioned in passing in previous scholarship. Close analysis of various memoirs and autobiographies offer insight into the influence of the Church in these children’s lives.

The majority of scholarship devoted to Operation Pedro Pan discusses the factors that led to the program, the program itself, and the politics and ideologies that shaped the exodus.<sup>10</sup> This study will shift focus towards the experiences and resulting concepts of ethnic, national, and religious identity among the refugee children. Their concepts of their ethnic, national, and religious identity played a significant role in how they viewed themselves as refugees, Cubans living within the United States, and as human beings. Many Pedro Pan participants have led highly successful lives in several different professional careers such as law, medicine, and academia. However, others have turned to alcohol and drugs in their later lives. Victory Triay wrote that an exploration of Pedro Pan children’s success and failures after the program would be a “timely and enlightening work.”<sup>11</sup> A look at case studies of a few Pedro Pan children will help explain and provide a better understanding of these outcomes. The differing concepts of identity among these

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<sup>9</sup> Beatrice Pavia, “A Wing and A Prayer,” *University of Illinois Alumni Magazine*, December 14, 2009, accessed April 12, 2016.  
[http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/University\\_of\\_Illinois\\_Alumni\\_Magazine\\_Dec\\_2009\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/University_of_Illinois_Alumni_Magazine_Dec_2009_pdf.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Anita Casavantes Bradford, *The Revolution is for the Children: The Politics of Childhood in Havana and Miami, 1959-1962* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Yvonne Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14, 048 Cuban Children*, (New York: Routledge, 1999); María De Los Angeles Torres, *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); Victor Triay, *Fleeing Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children’s Program* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998); Richard H. Wall Jr., “Operation Pedro Pan: An examination of the factors that resulted in 14,048 Cuban children being sent to the United States” (master’s thesis, California State University, Long Beach, 2011), 24, accessed February 16, 2016.  
<http://search.proquest.com/libez.lib.georgiasouthern.edu/docview/924526167/fulltextPDF/4CE3F85CA7564FD6PQ/1?accountid=11225>.

<sup>11</sup> Triay, *Fleeing Castro*, 104.

children are influential in the “success and failures” they experienced as adults. However, these children’s lives cannot be summed up into a binary notion of “successes” or “failures.” Instead, each faced unique situations that contributed to a fluid concept of identity which, in turn, shaped and influenced their adolescent and adult lives.

The primary source research for this work is based on memoirs and other kinds of first-hand accounts from Operation Pedro Pan participants. Two key texts are, *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy* and *Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy*. In these autobiographies, Carlos Eire, a Pedro Pan child, details his experiences within Cuba and the United States. Eire discusses his notions of ethnic, national, and religious identity at length in *Learning to Die in Miami*. Close analysis of memoirs and firsthand accounts of Pedro Pan children provide insight into their concepts of their own ethnic, national, and religious identity. This is important because it allows for comparison between the texts that can be used to determine how different notions of identity developed in individual experiences. Many Pedro Pan participants underwent various experiences once inside the United States. They allowed their concepts of self-identity to guide and direct them throughout their lives. I also use one historical fiction book titled *The Red Umbrella*. Although this book is fiction, it is based on the author’s mother’s experience in Operation Pedro Pan and is useful in my discussion of identity. Other memoirs have been posted to various online Pedro Pan groups. These groups provide a forum to discuss and publish a large number of Pedro Pan children’s experiences.

There is relatively little scholarship devoted to Operation Pedro Pan. Two historians focus on detailing the logistical and ideological origins of Operation Pedro Pan

as well as some of the individual experiences of participants. In *Fleeing Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children's Program*, Victor Triay contends that information regarding Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children's Program has been inaccurate and incomplete.<sup>12</sup> *Fleeing Castro* attempts to provide a comprehensive account of Pedro Pan.<sup>13</sup> Triay argues that the program should be deemed a success, because it provided a way for Cuban children to escape communistic indoctrination and provided the children with a caring environment within the United States. The Catholic Church organized and ran this program. Their care for these children provided many with a sense of home and belonging within the U.S. He also concluded that the United States "lived up to its historic image of being a sanctuary for the oppressed. It also went a step beyond that image by becoming an active participant, a player."<sup>14</sup>

Yvonne Conde does something similar with her book, *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,000 Cuban Children*. Conde highlights the inner workings of Operation Pedro Pan in the United States and in Cuba. She discusses Castro's consolidation of power and the various factors that set Pedro Pan into motion.

In the second half of her book, Conde uses interviews and surveys mailed to Pedro Pan participants to uncover their experiences in the United States. This allowed Operation Pedro Pan children to share their thoughts on the program and discuss how it affected them physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Some developed relationships with the workers at the temporary shelters they lived in upon arrival. After they were sent to

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<sup>12</sup> Operation Pedro Pan was an organized process of getting children out of Cuba and into the United States. The Cuban Children's Program organized the care and placement of the children once they arrived.

<sup>13</sup> Triay, *Fleeing Castro*, ix.

<sup>14</sup> Triay, *Fleeing Castro*, 103.



another location they leaned on these relationships and the spiritual teaching they received to cope as they adapted to their new surroundings. Many Pedro Pan children moved several different times. Each move brought more separation and required the children to find ways to cope. Conde contends that Operation Pedro Pan was a highly organized program that involved the cooperation of many different people. Operation Pedro Pan required dedicated individuals within Cuba to secure the proper paperwork for the children and organize their flights. Other individuals in the United States, led by Father Bryan Walsh, would pick the children up from the airport and bring them into the temporary shelters. Conde also concluded that the children did not have one uniform experience. Instead, they were each presented with a unique situation. Some experienced positive situations with loving guardians while others were subjected to cruelty and difficult living conditions.

Other historians argue that Operation Pedro Pan was a political tool used by the United States to protect their national political ideology. The United States and Cuba were locked in an ideological battle during this time period, not surprising given the broader Cold War context. Many believed that the principles of American democracy and capitalism were being challenged by the Soviet Union, and Castro and his communist leanings were just the latest and closest threat. Americans feared the spread of communism into their part of the world. Several newspaper articles reported on the threat and oppression of Castro's communism in Cuba.<sup>15</sup> Operation Pedro Pan, one could argue

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<sup>15</sup> Dom Bonafede and Raul Rivero, "Cuba Today: Agony, Hunger Fear," *Miami Herald*, March 11, 1962; Al Burt, "U.S. May Send Surplus Food to Hungry Cubans—If Asked," *Miami Herald*, March 21, 1962; William Ryan, "On Surface There's Liberty in Cuba, But Behind Scenes Dictatorship Brews," *Times Daily*, August 13, 1959, accessed March 19, 2017. [http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/liberty\\_in\\_Cuba\\_but\\_behind\\_the\\_scenes\\_dictatorship\\_brews.pdf](http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/liberty_in_Cuba_but_behind_the_scenes_dictatorship_brews.pdf); Jim Collie, Byron Scott, Michael Thompson, "Game of Playing 'Soldier' is Serious One for Thousands of Young People in Cuba," *Star Banner*, February 7, 1960, accessed March 19, 2017.

as María De Los Angeles and Anita Bradford do, was a tactic that would not only foster the perception of the United States as promoting the children's personal safety, but would also position the United States as the savior of their future. According to these historians, Pedro Pan served a political purpose in the broader context of Cold War politics. The United States and the exile community believed they needed to secure hemispheric solidarity, and Operation Pedro Pan became a way to do that.

María De Los Angeles Torres, a Pedro Pan participant along with Victor Triay and Yvonne Conde, produced a work titled *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future*. In this book, De Los Angeles Torres “presents a critical history of Operation Pedro Pan which examines the underlying political agendas of *both* Cuba and the United States.”<sup>16</sup> She disagrees with Triay's claim that U.S. intervention was solely about providing sanctuary for oppressed children. Instead, she argues that both the governments of Cuba and the United States used children to strengthen their respective political ideologies. De Los Angeles Torres argues that the Pedro Pan exodus “tells us about the place of children in modern societies and it suggests that the exodus was not a contest over protecting children but rather about competing state-building projects.”<sup>17</sup> She frames Operation Pedro Pan within the context of the Cold War and describes Operation Pedro Pan as an event that was shaped by the struggle between democracy and communism.

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[http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/ers\\_is\\_serious\\_one\\_for\\_thousands\\_of\\_young\\_people\\_in\\_Cuba.pdf](http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/ers_is_serious_one_for_thousands_of_young_people_in_Cuba.pdf); Thomas Wolfe, “Cubans Still Idealizing Castro and Rebels' Cause,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 26, 1960, accessed March 19, 2017.  
[http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/t\\_Gazette\\_Cubans\\_still\\_idealizing\\_Castroandrebels'\\_cause.pdf](http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/t_Gazette_Cubans_still_idealizing_Castroandrebels'_cause.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> De Los Angeles Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 20.

<sup>17</sup> De Los Angeles Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 22.

Anita Casavantes Bradford takes a more transnational approach towards the subject of using children in national politics. Her book, *The Revolution is for the Children: The Politics of Childhood in Havana and Miami, 1959-1962*, examines the political use of children by Fidel Castro and the exile community in Miami. According to Bradford, the early Revolution period was an “unprecedented four-year period during which Cubans rejected a discredited republican model of nationhood and the quasi-colonial relationship with the United States that buttressed it, embarking on two new and mutually antagonistic nationalist endeavors: on the island, the establishment of revolutionary socialism, and in southern Florida, the creation of a counterrevolutionary exile community.”<sup>18</sup> According to her, Operation Pedro Pan was an effort made by the United States government to undermine the communist government in Cuba. The program would highlight the destruction of Cuban society by combating the evils of Fidel Castro, his abuse of Cuban childhood, and the dissolution of the family by communism.

In contrast, Castro framed his Revolution around the idea of bettering Cuban children’s futures. Cuban citizens were expected to participate in reforms and programs that were designed to specifically help Cuban children.<sup>19</sup> Inequality among Cuban citizens, especially children, would not continue according to Castro. In 1961, the Year of Education, Castro closed the public schools and encouraged Cubans of all ages, school aged as well, to join brigades that would go into the countryside and teach rural Cubans how to read and write. The U.S. media reported that this was an attempt by Castro to

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<sup>18</sup> Bradford, *The Revolution is for the Children*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Bradford, *The Revolution is for the Children*, 85.

indoctrinate Cuban children with communist ideologies.<sup>20</sup> Castro insisted that all Cubans, including children of the low socio-economic class, must be literate in order for Cuba to succeed in the future. Bradford analyzes the different uses of childhood between these two nations and communities and the political ideologies that shaped their politics of childhood and concludes that Operation Pedro Pan was largely an unsuccessful political ploy used to undermine Castro's power in Cuba.

Operation Pedro Pan upended the lives of the children and families who participated in the program. These children endured the loss of their families and placement in a new country and culture. The children that participated in Operation Pedro Pan belong to what Rubén Rumbaut termed the “one-and-a-half” generation. This generation is one that was born in a foreign country but raised in the United States. He explained,

Children who were born abroad but are being educated and come of age in the United States form what may be called the “1.5” generation. These refugee youth must cope with two crisis-producing and identity-defining transitions: (1) adolescence and the task of managing the transition from childhood to adulthood, and (2) acculturation and the task of managing the transition from one sociocultural environment to another.<sup>21</sup>

Pedro Pan children were forced to start this transitioning from childhood to adulthood without their families. The missing family structure made the transition more difficult. In his book, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*, Gustavo Pérez

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<sup>20</sup> Jack Ledden, “Year of Education Proves One of Red Indoctrination,” *Palm Beach Post*, June 16, 1961. [http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/-23-49Year\\_of\\_education\\_proves\\_one\\_of\\_red\\_indoctrination.pdf](http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/-23-49Year_of_education_proves_one_of_red_indoctrination.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Rubén G. Rumbaut, “The Agony of Exile: A Study of the Migration and Adaptation of Indochinese Refugee Adults and Children,” in *Refugee Children: Theory, Research, and Services*, ed. Fredrick L. Ahearn, Jr., and Jean L. Athey (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991), 61.

Firmat outlines the stages in which immigrant groups, including Pedro Pan children, navigate acculturation and the transition from different sociocultural environments that Rumbaut discusses. The first stage of transition, according to Pérez Firmat, is “substitutive.” This stage involves creating surrogates for the culture they left behind. This process gives a sense of “home” to the newly arrived immigrants. Even as early as 1961, a large number of Cubans had migrated and settled in Miami and they created Cuban enclaves that mirrored what life was like in Cuba.<sup>22</sup> Pedro Pan participants lived in and around Miami with other Pedro Pan children once they arrived in the United States. The large concentration of Cuban children and the mechanisms they used to cope with their new living arrangement, like the existence of communities that only spoke Spanish or the Cuban businesses and stores that were like the ones in Cuba, provided this “surrogate” that Pérez Firmat discusses. Other children were relocated elsewhere in the country. If possible, they would seek out other Cubans in the area to form their own “enclave” in these new contexts.

The second stage in the process of acculturation is “destitution.” This is when the immigrant begins to feel “estranged and disconnected.” The substitutes of the home culture no longer feel genuine and familiar. The destitution phase creates a feeling of “uprootedness” and a sense of not belonging.<sup>23</sup> Many Pedro Pan children experienced this as they received their placements around the country. Those children who stayed in Miami also experienced this feeling, uncertain of when and where they might be reunited

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<sup>22</sup> Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*, (Austin: University of Texas Press), 7-10; Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami*, (Berkeley: University of California Press).

<sup>23</sup> Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen*, 10-11.

with their families and realizing that their shelters were temporary solutions. Once the children arrived in the United States they were placed in temporary shelters until more permanent residency could be found. They were surrounded by Cuban children who experienced the same trip from Havana to Miami, spoke the same language, and came from the same culture. They were comfortable within this Cuban enclave. However, those sent to different places around the United States from New Mexico, Colorado, and Montana to New York and Chicago, left this enclave of cultural similarity. One Operation Pedro Pan child, Yolonda Cárdenas Díaz, explained, “Some kids went to the homes of relatives or friends. Many more of us were sent to various destinations all over the US. Each ADIOS was soon followed by another, every one as heart-breaking as the goodbyes in Cuba. We had more letters to write and read, more sorrow, more tempering for our character.”<sup>24</sup> The Pedro Pan children faced continual change in location and relationships. This contributed to the feeling of uprootedness and loss of “belonging.”

The last stage in this process of acculturation, according to Pérez Firmat, is “institution.” In this stage an immigrant learns to “dig in and endure.” The focus shifts from the feelings of uprootedness to determination to establish a way of life in this new situation.<sup>25</sup> This can be seen through the careers and success of Pedro Pan participants, who went on to become lawyers, engineers, professors, doctors, business owners, and many other professional occupations.<sup>26</sup> Most made an active decision to establish a new life in the United States, while others opted to retain their total “Cubanness” as they lived

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<sup>24</sup> Yolonda Cárdenas Díaz, “Yolonda’s Story,” *Network for Operation Pedro Pan*, accessed December 4, 2016. <http://pubsys.miamiherald.com/cgi-bin/pedropan/profile/694/story/>.

<sup>25</sup> Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 226.

in the United States. These children, and now adults, refused to assimilate into the American culture to the degree that many of the other Pedro Pan children did. They maintained their rigid concept of a Cuban ethnic and national identity while the others developed a more fluid and malleable concept of their identity. The individuals that developed a more fluid concept of their ethnic and national identity engaged with the process of acculturation that Pérez Firmat outlines. The others attempted to detach themselves from that process as much as possible. Some, like María De Los Angeles Torres, went back to Cuba in order to experience the life they left behind and better understand why their parents sent them away. The competing concepts of their ethnic, national, and religious identity have shaped the way they have lived their lives not only as they were children in the program but also once they became adults. These children faced a dilemma in which they had to choose to what degree they were willing to acculturate and engage with the “1.5 generation” process. Each individual participant chose how to shape their own ethnic and national identity in their unique situation. A battle between Americanization, but never fully identifying as an American, and retaining the concept of their own Cuban identity existed in the mind of every child.

As mentioned before, program coordinators sent Pedro Pan children to live in cities and small towns all across the United States. The Catholic Church arranged for the children to be placed in a variety of living situations. If possible, the children were placed with family members that already lived in the United States. Other possibilities included foster families, Catholic orphanages and agencies, and group homes headed by Cuban couples. The large number of children flown to the United States required the Catholic Church to extend their network of future homes. Children were sent all over the United

States from New Mexico to Delaware.<sup>27</sup> There cannot be one monolithic study that produces a uniform notion of these children's ethnic, national, and religious identities. However, patterns do emerge in the experiences and outcomes of Operation Pedro Pan. The program was a significant event in Cuban-American history and it had a profound influence on the children and families involved. Factors like the ones mentioned above, and especially the influence of the Catholic Church, played key roles in the development of these children's self-identity. Pressure to assimilate and become as Americanized as possible was evident. However, the heavy influence of the Church, a direct tie to "Cubanness," and their previous experiences and concepts of their Cuban identity fought against this pressure. These members of the so-called "1.5 generation" were locked in a battle between these competing concepts of identity. The particular situation and fluidity of their identity guided them as they adapted to life in the United States.

The Catholic Church advocated for full assimilation into American culture. The Church had full control over the children's living arrangements and education. The children were reminded at the airport that they were "American guests now." Social workers emphasized "rapid orientation to American ways" as the best remedy for homesickness.<sup>28</sup> However, the Church was also a symbol of the life they left behind. This placed Pedro Pan children in a unique position where they were encouraged to shed their old national and ethnic identity by an organization that was "an integral part" of their Cuban national identity.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Walsh, "Cuban Refugee Children," 393.

<sup>28</sup> "Cuban Children Helped in Florida," *New York Times*, May 27, 1962, accessed January 25, 2017, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=9F0CE3DC1F3AE632A25754C2A9639C946391D6CF>.

<sup>29</sup> Crahan, "Cuba: Religion and Revolutionary Institutionalization," 321.



Historians have argued that Cubans perceive Catholicism more as a cultural practice than a fervent religious experience. Miguel A. De La Torre, however, contends that Cuban religiosity in Miami is unifying, fervent, and is “based on hatred.” De La Torre points out that there are “two Cubas, one *allá* (there) and one *aquí* (here). The Resident Cuban calls you a traitor, a *gusano* (worm), for leaving. The Exilic Cuban calls you a traitor, *un comunista*, for saying anything about the Castro government that falls short of a condemnation.”<sup>30</sup> Due to this strict dichotomy of communities, Miami’s Exilic Cubans form a politically-influenced religion. Exilic Cubans long for the return to *la patria* (homeland). According to De La Torre, they view living in exile as a sacrifice that must be made in order to “represent a grander moral standing.” De La Torre says that religion is used to rid Cuba of its atheist regime.<sup>31</sup> The religious experience for Cubans in Miami can be thought of as a response to the “evil” Castro represented. Cubans in the early 1960s recognized the Revolution was Marxist and “not compatible with the Cuban reality which was Catholic.”<sup>32</sup> Castro and his Revolution forced them out of their homes and into “*el exilio*” Therefore, they constructed a group identity that espoused religious symbolism that supported their political ideologies. Pedro Pan children were placed in this religious and political atmosphere. They realized that they could experience religion as a way to “dig in and endure,” much like Perez Firmat discussed.

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<sup>30</sup> De La Torre, *La Lucha for Cuba*, xv, 13.

<sup>31</sup> De La Torre, *La Lucha for Cuba*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Margaret E. Crahan, “Cuba: Religion and Revolutionary Institutionalization,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 17, no. 2 (November 1985): 326, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.libez.lib.georgiasouthern.edu/stable/pdf/156825.pdf>.

De La Torre compares Exilic Cubans in Miami to the captive Jews residing in Babylon that are mentioned in Psalm 137. Exilic Cubans view their residence in Miami as a forced removal from Cuba by Fidel Castro. The United States was their “Babylon,” and once there, they were forced to grapple with the fact that they no longer belonged to one single nation and looked to themselves to construct their own identities. De La Torre argues that the Cuban community’s attempt to reinvent itself is not only religious but goal oriented for the future.<sup>33</sup> Cubans within the United States, and especially in Miami, felt the need to form a group identity that would bind them together religiously while furthering their political desires. Similarly, Pedro Pan children were involved in an attempt by the Catholic Church to not only “safeguard” their religious heritage but also fight the communist policies of Fidel Castro.<sup>34</sup> Many Catholic Cubans believed it was their moral duty to be counterrevolutionary. They sent their children to the United States in order to maintain their Christian morals and not be “lost” to Marxist doctrine.<sup>35</sup>

Several factors contributed to this formation of community, similar identities, and political thought among Exilic Cubans in Miami. First, De La Torre coins the phrase “*Ajicao* Christianity.” This term symbolizes the attempt of Cuban culture to find harmony in their diversity. This type of religiosity among Exilic Cubans was an effort to preserve

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<sup>33</sup> De La Torre, *La Lucha for Cuba*, 54.

<sup>34</sup> Walsh, “Cuban Refugee Children,” 388.; Anita Casavantes Bradford, “Let the Cuban Community Aid its Haitian Brothers’: Monsignor Bryan Walsh, Miami’s Immigrant Church, and the Making of a Multiethnic City, 1960–2000,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 34, no. 3 (July 1, 2016):108, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/libez.lib.georgiasouthern.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=f7843437-1bdc-4335-b4de-3c9e182bf3bd@sessionmgr101&hid=112>.

<sup>35</sup> Crahan, “Cuba: Religion and Revolutionary Institutionalization,” 326.

their cultural diversities without making it “Eurocentric.”<sup>36</sup> It was important to the Exilic Cuban community in Miami to retain their distinctiveness within their religion, and avoid “melting into” a more mainstream version of Christianity.

Three specific “cultural texts” provided a unique opportunity for Exilic Cubans to establish this *Ajicao* Christianity.

First, the ethnic composition of the first wave of Cuban immigrants, mostly in the higher social class in Cuba, helped them shift their self-identity away from the preconceived distinctions of race and ethnic classifications within the United States. They avoided classification with other Latinos or Hispanics and situated themselves within the “white” class. Second, Cold War realities pushed the United States to secure the economic success of the Cuban refugees. Successful Cuban refugees aided the United States in the propaganda war they waged against their Communist enemies. Finally, the exiled Cubans formed an “economic enclave” that allowed Exilic Cubans to own businesses, work jobs, and experience economic security. This enclave preserved the Cuban culture by creating a basis of economic success.<sup>37</sup> Through these three influences, Exilic Cubans in Miami secured a unique and exclusive cultural identity. Cubans that lived outside of Miami would not experience this sense of group identity in the same way. The children placed in Miami during Operation Pedro Pan experienced this exclusive cultural identity. Those that were sent to different parts of the country could not experience it in the same way, but some clung to their “Cubanness” and the *Ajicao* Christianity while away from the Cuban enclave. Others struggled to maintain their

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<sup>36</sup> De La Torre, *La Lucha for Cuba*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> De La Torre, *La Lucha for Cuba*, 36-39.

distinct Cuban identity. Most found it convenient and useful to form a fluid ethnic and national identity to navigate the American culture while still clinging to their religious identity represented by this notion of *Ajicao* Christianity.

The Catholic Church within Cuba played a significant role in resisting the Revolution. Communism was believed to be in direct opposition to Catholic doctrine. Triay points out that before 1959 Catholic school children “received fervently anti-Communist instruction.” The United States and Spain supplied Cuba’s Catholic churches with priests and nuns. These members of the Catholic leadership, specifically those that experienced the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, were dedicated to “spreading the gospel of anti-Communism.”<sup>38</sup> The Catholic Church in Cuba recognized Castro and his Revolution as a threat to their influence and power. As Castro took more control over the country, Catholics, as well as Protestants, suffered as the government surveilled members, denied them economic mobility, and placed clergy under house arrest.<sup>39</sup> Many middle-class Cubans sent their children to schools run by Catholic priests and nuns, but this religious influence on young people came to a halt when Castro decided to close all private schools in 1961.<sup>40</sup> The political ideologies of Castro’s Cuba were the antithesis of a Christian society. One socialist organization’s objective was “to fight against the growing influence of the clergy and the religious beliefs of the youth.”<sup>41</sup> The Church, fearing that they were losing control of the hearts and minds of the Cuban youth, deemed

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<sup>38</sup> Triay, *Fleeing Castro*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> De La Torre, *La Lucha for Cuba*, 29.

<sup>40</sup> De Los Angeles, *The Lost Apple*, 118.

<sup>41</sup> Carlos Martinez, “Castro Intensifies Campaign to ‘Capture’ Cuban Youth,” *Toledo Blade*, September 14, 1964, *Pedro Pan Group, Inc.*, accessed December 1, 2016. [http://pedropan.org/sites/default/files/Blade\\_Castro\\_intensifies\\_campaign\\_to\\_capture\\_Cuban\\_youth.pdf](http://pedropan.org/sites/default/files/Blade_Castro_intensifies_campaign_to_capture_Cuban_youth.pdf).

it necessary to fight the growing threat of communism taking hold of the island. One *New York Times* article warned about the potential strength of the Catholic Church in Cuba, noting that religious protests could challenge the authority of Fidel Castro.<sup>42</sup> There was a strong association with Cuban identity and Catholicism. Margaret Crahan argued that “while involvement in the churches was greater on the part of the urban bourgeoisie, the nature of religious certitude resulted in counterrevolutionary reactions on the part of strong believers from all classes, even when they were not frequent practitioners.”<sup>43</sup>

In response to the targeted oppression received by the Catholic Church, several youth activists went underground to participate in the counterrevolutionary movement.<sup>44</sup> These youths faced great danger and their parents feared for their lives. Many parents sought refuge for their children through Operation Pedro Pan. This program offered protection from the *paredon* (firing squad) that ended many counterrevolutionaries’ lives.

As the number of Cuban arrivals in the United States increased, an anti-Communist and anti-Castro Catholicism took shape within Cuban communities, and the nation as a whole. De La Torre argued, “To be an Exilic Cuban Christian meant to participate in the crusade against communism and Castro, period.”<sup>45</sup> The Catholic Church saw Operation Pedro Pan as a religious, humanitarian, and political endeavor. Catholic priest Bryan Walsh, one of the chief organizers of Pedro Pan, “embraced the opportunity

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<sup>42</sup> Ricard Eder, “Castro Runs Risk In War Against Church, *New York Times*, September 24, 1961, accessed January 28, 2017, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9E03EFD8123BE13ABC4C51DFBF66838A679EDE>.

<sup>43</sup> Margaret Crahan, “Salvation Through Marx or Christ: Religion in Revolutionary Cuba,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 21, no. 1 (February 1973): 179, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.libez.lib.georgiasouthern.edu/stable/pdf/165694.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> De Los Angeles, *The Lost Apple*, 129.

<sup>45</sup> De La Torre, *La Lucha for Cuba*, 29

to play an active role in the global political battle between democratic capitalism and communism.”<sup>46</sup> Cubans, and especially Pedro Pan children, viewed their religious beliefs as direct opposition to Castro. Catholicism was the antithesis to Castro’s communism and active faith meant not only religious zeal but political zeal as well. Many Pedro Pan children arrived in the United States because of their parents’ fear that counterrevolutionary activities by both the parents and children would bring dangerous repercussions.

Upon arrival in the United States, the Cuban children were placed in temporary shelters until their long-term living situation could be finalized. These temporary shelters were located in various places. Camp Matecumbe was located alongside tomato fields in the Florida Keys, Florida City, the largest shelter, was located 35 miles south of Miami, and Kendall Children’s home was in Dade County.<sup>47</sup> The dynamics of the children’s experiences depended largely on the shelter in which they found themselves. Camp Matecumbe was located in the Florida wilderness and was fiercely overcrowded. The Cuban boys lived in a small building and World War II era tents that would flood when it rained. There they received a small allowance each week, an education, and the reminder that the situation was only temporary.<sup>48</sup> A more permanent home would be found, and again, the children would be forced to move to an entirely new place. The Florida City shelter opened in October 1961 and housed girls and boys together.<sup>49</sup> Florida City was different from many of the temporary shelters in that it allowed children to live with

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<sup>46</sup> Bradford, “Let the Cuban Community Aid It’s Haitian Brothers,” 108.

<sup>47</sup> Yvonne Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 76-91.

<sup>48</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 71-85.

<sup>49</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 91.

foster-parents in apartments as opposed to dormitories run by Catholic priests and nuns. This is not to say that Catholicism did not play a major role in the day to day operations of the Florida City shelter. According to one foster-parent, living as a family within an apartment resulted in a quicker process of adaptation than in other shelters.<sup>50</sup> The children were enrolled in a Catholic school where they were taught English and “the differences between American and Cuban cultures.”<sup>51</sup> Almost immediately, the Cuban refugee children were instructed on how and why they were different and taught that assimilation into American culture was necessary. Assimilation and adaptation to an American culture and language, coupled with an evolving and fluid concept of identity, would play major roles in the lives of Pedro Pan participants.

These concepts of necessary assimilation and adaptation significantly influenced the Cuban refugees’ notions of their own personal ethnic and national identity. Several refugee children were placed with family in the United States, and this situation allowed for the preservation of Cuban traditions, culture, and language, which prolonged, and in some situations established forever, the “substitutive stage” of acculturation. Many, however, did not have family within the United States and were forced to live with and accept differing cultures, food, language, and traditions. Often, the only remaining Cuban tradition that was presented to them in the United States was religion. The overwhelming majority of Cubans in the 1950s and 1960s were Catholic. When Fidel Castro expelled the majority of priests from Cuba, many Cuban parents felt a need to preserve and protect their Catholic heritage. The Cuban Children’s Program and

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<sup>50</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 93.

<sup>51</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 95.

Operation Pedro Pan worked with these parents and assured them that their religious ideals would be protected in a safe environment, away from Fidel Castro.

Many of the children sent away in Operation Pedro Pan clung to Catholicism as a way to remain connected to their parents and the lives they left behind. For example, Guillermo Vidal was sent to the United States with his brothers, Juan and Roberto. After a stay in a temporary shelter, they were sent to a Catholic orphanage in Pueblo, Colorado. Vidal made sure he would make it to early morning Mass and all the celebrations of the Catholic Church. He was encouraged by the clergy at the school to be thankful for the safety and provisions he had received in the United States. Vidal wrote in his memoir, “And although over time my daily attendance dwindled and then virtually ended-as was the case with the others-I did feel for a time that I was doing something on Mami and Papi’s behalf, and praying for them, whether in Mass or rolled in my blankets in bed, was a way to remain connected to them.”<sup>52</sup> Through his prayers, Vidal believed that he could preserve his vital connection to his parents and family in Cuba as he lived his life in a very disconnected way within the United States.

Carlos Eire also discussed his relationship with the Catholic faith once he was in the United States in his memoir, *Learning to Die in Miami*. He and his brother arrived in the United States and were placed in the Florida City temporary shelter. Shortly thereafter they were placed in an American family’s foster home. This family, the Chait, was Jewish, but they insisted Carlos go with Tony, his older brother, to St. Brendan’s Catholic Church.<sup>53</sup> Eire notes he had “hated church,” but after that first visit in the United States,

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<sup>52</sup> Guillermo Vidal, *Boxing for Cuba: An Immigrant’s Story*, (Ghost Road Press, 2007), 86-87.

<sup>53</sup> Carlos Eire, *Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy*, (New York: Free Press, 2010), 41.



Sunday Mass “became our lode star, the sole point that linked our present and our past. Mass became our strongest bond, even though we never said much to each other.”<sup>54</sup> He would pursue his Catholic faith both spiritually and professionally as he became a professor of Religious Studies at Yale University with a focus on both the Protestant and Catholic Reformations. Religious beliefs can be a useful coping mechanism in unknown and stressful situations.<sup>55</sup> As these unaccompanied children made the short plane ride from Havana, Cuba to Miami, Florida, the feelings of loneliness, loss, abandonment, and fright gripped their hearts. Catholicism was a way to cope and remain somewhat connected to the life they left behind. Catholic priests and nuns, schools, churches, and traditions were familiar aspects of Cuban culture and the presence and prevalence of Catholicism in the United States helped in easing the refugees’ anxiety and apprehension.

Father Bryan Walsh, a strong Irish Catholic, organized and oversaw Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children’s Program. He was interested in preserving their spirituality while tending to their physical needs. He, too, was an immigrant. Walsh was born in Ireland in 1930 and came to the United States in 1949 at age 19.<sup>56</sup> His status as an immigrant helped him relate to the Cuban refugee children, as these children had no one to care for them once they arrived in America. Walsh made sure that they were fed, housed, disciplined, and educated, while they were under his care. He even took on the responsibility of house father at St. Raphael boys’ home in Miami. He cared for the

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<sup>54</sup> Eire, *Learning to Die in Miami*, 38,44.

<sup>55</sup> Peter C. Hill and Kevin S. Seybold, “The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Mental and Physical Health,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 10, no. 1 (2001): 21-24, accessed March 18, 2016. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-8721.00106>.

<sup>56</sup> Bradford, “Let the Cuban Community Aid Its Haitian Brothers,” 102-103.

Cuban refugee children like they were his own. He invested in their individual lives as they came of age in a new and foreign country. Upon arrival, the children were faced with having to learn a new language and adapt to new cuisine, new culture, and new life. Walsh's caring demeanor and loving personality provided stability to an unstable situation. He became the surrogate father for many during their important formative years. One Pedro Pan participant, Juan Pujol, wrote that "although he [Walsh] was not a father he became a true Father to many of us."<sup>57</sup> His life influenced several thousands of Cuban children that remain grateful to this day.

Many children respected Walsh because he did not have to do what he did for them. Walsh provided "a sense of belonging" to the children that were under his care.<sup>58</sup> As a house father in the St. Raphael boys' home, Walsh invested in the lives of many refugee children. He became well-liked, and the St. Raphael boys' home became a coveted placement within the program. Walsh became a mentor and friend to the lonely Cuban children in the United States. One Pedro Pan member, now an adult, said that Walsh was "the wisest and kindest man I had ever known. I always felt at ease to come to him with any problems or questions. He always had an open door for all of us."<sup>59</sup> Another participant wrote,

The word that most connotes Monsignor Bryan Walsh to me is "there." He was there when I arrived from Cuba, a frightened boy of 15, to give me a home in which to live.

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<sup>57</sup> Juan Pujol, "Father Walsh," June, 2013, *Pedro Pan Group, Inc.*, accessed November 21, 2016. [http://pedropan.org/sites/default/files/FatherWalsh\\_English-%20by%20Juan%20Pujol-%202013.pdf](http://pedropan.org/sites/default/files/FatherWalsh_English-%20by%20Juan%20Pujol-%202013.pdf).

<sup>58</sup> Marily A. Reyes, "Our Place in History in Relation to Father Walsh," September 3, 2012, *Pedro Pan Group, Inc.*, accessed December 1, 2016. <http://pedropan.org/category/pedro-pan-stories?page=3>.

<sup>59</sup> Eddie Dulom, "Monsignor Bryan O. Walsh: True Father and Best Friend," September 3, 2012, *Pedro Pan Group, Inc.*, accessed December 1, 2016. <http://pedropan.org/category/pedro-pan-stories?page=2>.

He was there (with paddle in hand) when I needed discipline, and there with an open heart to give advice when I needed that. He was there, too, to get me out of trouble when I messed up.<sup>60</sup>

The children in Operation Pedro Pan realized that Walsh cared for them and wanted the best for them. They loved him for his presence and influence in their lives. Walsh's kindness was driven by his desire to help these children as well as his religious convictions. He helped preserve their religious faith by demonstrating faith in action as he shielded them from Castro's powerful communist ideologies.

Although Catholicism and Father Walsh provided a sense of familiarity and home inside the United States, the Cuban children faced many aspects that were vastly foreign and very different. These factors are the major contributing forces in shaping Cuban refugees' concepts of their ethnic and national identity. One initial culture shock was the absence of Cuban cuisine and the presence of an American diet. The Cuban children were forced to leave behind their traditional diet and accept the more bland food of the United States. This was one of the first problems encountered upon entering the temporary shelters managed by various officials of the Catholic Church.<sup>61</sup>

Guillermo Vidal discussed his experience with Cuban food after years of being away from it. Vidal visited his extended family in Miami during a break from college in Colorado. He recalled, "After a decade without them-even at home with Mami and Papi, where TV dinners were our diet staples- I loved eating arroz con pollo and moros y cristianos, plátanos fritos, and flan at Elda's (his aunt) table and in neighborhood

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<sup>60</sup> Jorge Armando Pardo, "There," September 3, 2012, *Pedro Pan Group, Inc.*, accessed December 1, 2016. <http://pedropan.org/category/pedro-pan-stories?page=3>.

<sup>61</sup> Eire, *Learning to Die in Miami*, 1-5.

cantinas.”<sup>62</sup> While in Miami with his family, Vidal would acquaint himself again with both his Cuban identity and his mixed sense of self. He was struggling to identify fully with either notion of Cuban or American identity. As a member of the “1.5 generation” he was experiencing the shifting and fluid process of acculturation that Perez Firmat outlined.

Eire discusses his dislike for American food in relation to “dying” his first death. He left behind his family, possessions, and native land when he came to the United States and he equated this loss with death.<sup>63</sup> This idea of “dying deaths” to who you are as a person plays a significant role in Eire’s life after he leaves Cuba. At major points in his life, he outlines how he kills that sense of identity to produce a new one that will fit his new situation. He describes these deaths in terms of his experiences. For example, Eire wrote a history essay while he was in school. His teacher was very impressed with his writing abilities, even though his first language was Spanish. He worked to perfect his English because he saw this as a way of “killing” his Cuban identity. He was engrossed in becoming American. Eire explained, “Everything changes for me after that essay. I know for sure that I can be an American, that not only can I pass for one, but be one, for real. I don’t have to be a refugee or an exile who happens to speak without an accent. I can own the accent and the language, and let it own me. I can sell my soul to it.”<sup>64</sup>

He experienced this “dying” several times throughout his life in the United States. This appearance of a “Cuban self” and an “American self” signifies the fluidity of ethnic

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<sup>62</sup> Vidal, *Boxing for Cuba*, 166

<sup>63</sup> Eire, *Learning to Die in Miami*, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Eire, *Waiting to Die in Miami*, 163.

identity among Pedro Pan children. For many of them, there is no dichotomy of identities where the boundaries are solid and there is no crossing over. These children experienced a continuous movement between Cubanness and Americanness. The fluidity of identity signifies the transition between the “destitution” stage and the “institution” stage of acculturation that Pérez Firmat describes. A sense of not belonging requires Pedro Pan children to adapt and find ways to appropriately self-identify themselves based on their current situation. When Carlos moved into the Chaits’ house, he adopted the Americanized name Charles. He shed his old Cuban identity and embraced a new and American notion of identity. However, family friends who migrated out of Cuba, Juan Becquer and his family, began spending more time with Carlos and Tony. When together, Carlos noticed a change in his sense of identity: “I begin to feel my split personality surface, intensely. I am no longer just ‘me,’ but Charles and Carlos. Here, in this shack, it’s impossible to deny the inferiority of American cuisine.” Carlos spends more time with the Becquers and he realizes that his sense of identity is becoming more fluid. He says during this time, “Charles begins to feel oddly at peace with Carlos and allows him in.”<sup>65</sup>

Another factor contributing to differing concepts of identity, and one that was largely controlled by the Catholic Church, was location. As mentioned before, Miami was the city where the unaccompanied children landed in the United States. From there, the Catholic Welfare Bureau placed the children in homes, orphanages, or temporary shelters. Due to the influx of children, all residences in Miami filled quickly. This required the Catholic Church to extend their areas of potential placement. The Church

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<sup>65</sup> Eire, *Learning to Die in Miami*, 33, 71-72.

had complete control over their future living arrangements and worked within their Catholic networks to place the children.

The temperature was a major shock for the refugee children that were sent to places in the north. One article in the *Spokane Daily Chronicle* reported that the Cuban girls at the Holy Names College were “afraid” of the snow.<sup>66</sup> Many were not prepared for the drastic change in temperature. Gene Miller reported that Cuban boys stepped off the plane in Evansville, Indiana wearing four shirts because they did not own an overcoat.<sup>67</sup> Eire equated northern places with goodness and purity, when he lived in Havana. He wrote, “I would look at maps and long for northern latitudes. All that white ice, all that snow and cold air. So pure, so good. Snow was grace itself, falling from heaven; it didn’t simply hide evil, but vanquished it. And I longed for it, fervently, there in Havana.” Later, when living in Illinois and New England, he wrote, “Soy Cubano. (I am Cuban) And even in New England I wait for snow.”<sup>68</sup> This again speaks to the fluid concept of identity among the refugee children. Eire believed that the United States was a place of complete goodness. Once he arrived in the United States, through Pedro Pan, he realized that he could never fully fit in. Instead he was forced to navigate his experiences and determine his ethnic and national identity through the acculturation process of the “1.5 generation.”

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<sup>66</sup> Hazel Barnes, “Cuban Girls Worry About Snow,” *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, July 28, 1962. <http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/Spokane.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> Gene Miller, “Cuban Tots, A Raggedy-Ann Doll,” *Evansville Press*, March 10, 1962. [http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/Article%20Gene%20Miller%20Evansville%20Press\\_0.pdf](http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/Article%20Gene%20Miller%20Evansville%20Press_0.pdf).

<sup>68</sup> Carlos Eire, *Waiting For Snow In Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy*, (New York: Free Press, 2003) 222-223.

Another factor involving location was the lack of Cubans outside of Miami. Many Cubans were concentrated in Miami and this made the transition to life in the United States a bit easier. Those Cubans who were placed outside of this community could not benefit from that familiarity. One article in the *Miami Herald* highlighted a group of Cubans living in Cleveland, Ohio. Only 85 Cubans lived in Cleveland at the time. White Cleveland residents complained about the effect these newly arrived Cubans would have on the economy and job market. These new residents had neither family nor friends to rely on so they had to adapt quickly. Some enrolled in school and language classes were created to teach them English as quickly as possible.<sup>69</sup>

One of the major differences between Cuba and the United States that Pedro Pan children had to contend with was the issue of language. English was taught in schools in Cuba but most of the children were not fluent. Christina Diaz Gonzalez, daughter of an Operation Pedro Pan participant, outlines this language barrier in her novel, *The Red Umbrella*. The main character, Lucía, and her brother, Frankie, are placed in a foster home in Nebraska. Once they arrive there, their foster mother begins to speak to them in English. Lucía knows very little English and struggles to communicate with her. After a few awkward exchanges, the foster mother says that they will begin English lessons the next day.<sup>70</sup> This demonstrates how quickly the Cuban children had to learn and master a new language. English classes became the focus of the children's education. American schools were not bilingual and the children who came from Cuba were often required to learn English while taking other courses that were taught in English. Most Pedro Pan

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<sup>69</sup> Dom Bonafede, "Cubans in Cleveland-New Lives in the Making," *Miami Herald*, March 1, 1962.

<sup>70</sup> Christina Diaz Gonzalez, *The Red Umbrella*, (New York: Yearling, 2010), 150-154.

children attended public school, even though one *New York Times* article stated that many Cuban children wanted to and did attend private school rather than public school.<sup>71</sup> The prevalence of private, Catholic education amongst the refugee children meant an increased influence on the shaping of their personal identity.

Eire experienced American education in a different way. Eire arrived in Florida in late April, 1963, a year behind in his schooling due to Castro shutting down all private schools and requiring public school students to live in the country and teach the poor how to read and write. He enrolled in Everglades Elementary School, which had set up portable classrooms for the incoming Cuban children to learn English as quickly as possible. These classrooms were different and separate from the rest of the school and facilitated the “othering” of the Cuban students by the American students. This played an important role in Eire’s attempts to be more Americanized. He worked hard to eliminate his accent, he learned American pop culture, and he even got rid of his glasses that looked like Fidel Castro’s glasses. By September of the following school year, he identified himself as fully American. He explained, “I went back to Everglades Elementary School in September, ready to begin sixth grade. . . . No more outcast classroom hut on stilts for me: I went straight into a regular class for American kids, in which there were only two other Cubans. I didn’t feel like an outsider as I rode my bike to school that first day.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> “Keating Scores Kennedy Refusal of Catholic School Aid at Miami,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1961, accessed January 28, 2017, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=9B01EFDE1439EE32A25751C1A9649C946091D6CF>.

<sup>72</sup> Eire, *Waiting to Die in Miami*, 95.



Learning English and shedding the Spanish language was a way in which Cuban refugee children shaped their own concept of national and ethnic identity and became more Americanized. Sometimes, the location of their residence played a factor in the language that they embraced. In Vidal's experience, no one that he encountered in Colorado spoke Spanish. The necessity to learn English and learn it quickly was apparent from the beginning. After he lived there for many years, English became his primary and only language, a decision that was reinforced when he reunited with his parents in Colorado. After a few years, Vidal's parents recognized the opportunity that Americanization, and especially speaking English, afforded them. Vidal recalls, "It was simply too costly, too detrimental to claim our Cuban identity any longer....They forbade us to speak Spanish in front of anyone else...and increasingly spoke English with us at home, and neither were we allowed to develop friendships with other Hispanics."<sup>73</sup> Again, his trip to Miami challenged this Americanized version of himself. As he walked throughout the city of Miami, he wrote that he "savored hearing nothing but Spanish on street corners and in the bustling panaderia."<sup>74</sup> He noticed that because of the prevalence of the Cuban community in Miami and the presence of family ties, Spanish was the dominant language. Even when his family did speak English it was with "heavy accents."<sup>75</sup> Vidal was experiencing his trained notion of American identity, one that he developed to adapt to his situation in Colorado, being challenged by his response to his Cuban background and memories. This, again, demonstrates the competing ideas of

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<sup>73</sup> Vidal, *Boxing for Cuba*, 142.

<sup>74</sup> Vidal, *Boxing for Cuba*, 166.

<sup>75</sup> Vidal, *Boxing for Cuba*, 166.

identity, and the back and forth shifting of one stage of acculturation to another, that each Operation Pedro Pan participant struggled with in their lives.

As evidenced by Vidal's and Eire's accounts of their lives in the United States, assimilation was an almost required action. The shelters, orphanages, homes, and American society would not accept the Cuban refugees as they were. Vidal remembered an experience he had after living in the Sacred Heart Orphanage in Pueblo, Colorado, for a year: "I had become American enough that these latest arrivals (of Pedro Pan children) seemed nothing less than exotic to me. The new boys were big and quite mature, and they were still steeped in Cuban culture, of course. To my Americanized eye, their mannerisms and ways of speaking were loud, peculiar, and etched with a kind of pride and self-possession that I both envied and disliked."<sup>76</sup> After only a year within the United States, Vidal could no longer identify with his Cuban brothers. They shared an ancestry but they could not share the same concept of self-identity. Hard times, the need for survival, and fear helped shape this difference in these similar but vastly different boys.

As discussed before, Eire wanted to be just like his American counterparts and was willing to leave behind anything associated with his Cuban past in an effort to embrace a fully American identity. He would realize that this was impossible in the American society he found himself living in. The Becquers, the family that awoke Eire's Cuban identity that he had tried desperately to bury deep inside, were wealthy in Cuba prior to the Revolution. This changed when they arrived in the United States. Juan Becquer was an attorney in Cuba, but was unable to continue his profession in the United

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<sup>76</sup> Vidal, *Boxing for Cuba*, 104.

States because the U. S. government would not recognize his law degree.<sup>77</sup> This was a common occurrence during this time. Vidal's father held a pharmaceutical degree from the University of Havana, but after he reunited with his sons, he learned it would not be recognized in the States.<sup>78</sup> Both Becquer and Vidal's father had to work jobs they were overqualified for just to earn a living. Although the U.S. government offered several programs to assist Cuban refugees due to the politics of the time, they still struggled to fully fit in to American culture and society. This pushed the Cuban refugees even farther in the direction to complete Americanization and disassociation with their "Cubanness." Vidal remembers a situation where he outperformed every contestant in a speech contest but did not win. A judge came up to him to commend his performance and he told him why he did not win. He said, "We're only interested in sending our homegrown boys on in the competition."<sup>79</sup> However, there was not one transition of identities for these Cubans. Instead they shifted their concept of national and ethnic identity and developed a more fluid notion of identity to navigate their experiences.

The Cuban refugee children were repeatedly shown that they were not equal with American children in American society. One Pedro Pan participant refused to pledge allegiance to the United States flag because he felt like he did not belong. When he returned to Cuba, his brother claimed that he was never able to fit in with Cuban society because he did not experience the Revolution like those who had stayed.<sup>80</sup> Being not fully American and not fully Cuban had a profound impact on their ideas of self-identity and

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<sup>77</sup> Eire, *Learning to Die in Miami*, 71-72.

<sup>78</sup> Vidal, *Boxing for Cuba*, 126.

<sup>79</sup> Vidal, *Boxing for Cuba*, 140.

<sup>80</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 198.

how they positioned themselves within their social context. Instead they were the “1.5 generation” struggling to navigate the shifting concepts of identity and stages of acculturation. In an interview, Eire explains his notion of identity as complex: “I try to deal with this complexity, and with the fact that one’s identity is always fluid in exile, and that there are times when the different selves converge or collide. Immigrants know firsthand that the ‘I’ or ‘me’ is not simple or uniform: it’s a riotous mess.”<sup>81</sup> The concept of complexity is vitally important in the discussion of identity and how a group of people identify themselves. These Pedro Pan participants are genuinely refugees and therefore cannot connect fully with a “Cuban identity” just like they cannot connect fully with an “American identity” due to the fact that they were forced to leave their home, their culture, and their traditions.

Guillermo Ricardo Paz Vazquez remembered his arrival in the United States and his encounter with these dueling national and ethnic identities. He stepped off of the terminal in Miami and was escorted to a small room. In that room, he spotted both the Cuban and American flags. He wrote, “Alone in the room I kept looking at the [American] flag noticing that both the Cuban and the American flags were red, white and blue. The Cuban represented my homeland but this one symbolized my freedom.”<sup>82</sup> Vazquez realized in that room that his life would never be the same. He acknowledged the fact that his understanding of his national and ethnic identity would be changed forever. Vazquez mentions that although there is the recognition of the two identities, he

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<sup>81</sup> Eire, *Learning to Die in Miami*, Appendix.

<sup>82</sup> Guillermo Ricardo Paz Vazquez, “My Story: 1950-2012,” 7, *Operation Pedro Pan Group, Inc.*, March 11, 2010, accessed February 20, 2016. [http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/Guillermo\\_Paz\\_Story\\_.pdf](http://www.pedropan.org/sites/default/files/Guillermo_Paz_Story_.pdf).

sees his position as temporary. When asked to define temporary, he wrote, “Well so far it is 50 years but I am still counting.”<sup>83</sup> The influence of Cuba and the United States was evident for those who participated in Operation Pedro Pan. One participant said, “I have constant flashbacks to Cuba, memories of walking by the ocean. . . . The brain doesn’t let you forget. You wish you could, but you can’t. It’s part of our torture of having two identities. We understand the sacrifices our parents did for us, but it left a deep wound in our soul.”<sup>84</sup> Silvia Cerviño Alayón, another Pedro Pan participant, has made the United States her home. She faced her fair share of trials but she chooses to see the positive side of her experience. She explained, “It is my belief that something good comes from every adversity in life. America is my home now. I will be forever grateful to have come to this country, where I can enjoy the freedoms this democracy offers and where the most basic of rights of human beings are respected.”<sup>85</sup>

Participation in Operation Pedro Pan had significant influence on the children as they grew into adults. The separation caused extreme strain on the familial bonds between parent and child. Many children were reunited with their parents but the initial separation lasted anywhere from a few months to several years. It also coincided with key formative years taking place during the child’s life. Additionally, Pedro Pan children were surrounded by an entirely new culture within the United States. They adapted to this new culture and adopted some of its practices. This led to what Triay described as a

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<sup>83</sup> Vazquez, “My Story,” 10.

<sup>84</sup> Pavia, “A Wing and a Prayer.”

<sup>85</sup> Silvia Cerviño Alayón, “Silvia’s Story,” accessed December 4, 2016.  
<http://pubsys.miamiherald.com/cgi-bin/pedropan/profile/208/story/>.

“seemingly unbreachable cultural rift” between some reunited parents and children.<sup>86</sup>

Eire discusses the resentment he felt towards his mother as she rejoined him and his brother in the United States. He was angry that she disrupted his life, and that he was now responsible for her well-being because she had no labor skills and could not speak English. She would ask him if he was glad she joined them in the United States, and he would respond that he was, but in his mind he was very upset. When she would ask the question, and he would answer “yes,” he wrote, “And...she knows she just made me lie.”<sup>87</sup> Families were forced to deal with lingering resentment, cultural differences, and language barriers that presented significant challenges to compatible and joyful reunifications.

Although Pedro Pan children were separated from their families, some reuniting after long periods and some not at all, they gained somewhat of a new family. Participants in Operation Pedro Pan are united in their experiences as unaccompanied child refugees. Their experiences differ but a bond has been forged among them. Much like the *Ajicao* Christianity discussed before, this surrogate “family” recognizes the diversity of an individual’s experiences and concepts of national, ethnic, and religious identity while preserving harmony in the group. Several organizations have been established in order to bring the Pedro Pan community together. The *Miami Herald’s* Network for Operation Pedro Pan, Operation Pedro Pan Group Inc., Cuban Kids 1960s, Camp Matecumbe Veterans, and other groups allow participants to reconnect with each

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<sup>86</sup> Triay, *Fleeing Castro*, 102.

<sup>87</sup> Eire, *Learning to Die in Miami*, 277.

other. They also provide forums for individuals to publish their own biographies. These networks and connections preserve the memory and unity of a largely forgotten group.

The Pedro Pan children did not completely forsake their Cuban identity as they grew up. In a survey conducted by Yvonne Conde, 82% of the responses from Pedro Pan participants said that they have taught their own children Spanish, and 79% claimed that they still keep “Cuban traditions.” Conde also asked if the participants “identify” as Cubans. The respondents answered in several different ways. Few said “very little,” 74 of 417 said “somewhat,” over half said “very,” and a quarter of the responses replied “extremely.”<sup>88</sup> The participant’s experience shaped his or her ethnic, national, and religious identity in a way that was unique to them. Eloísa Echazábal wrote about her experience during Operation Pedro Pan, but she recognized the fact that her story was not true for everyone. She wrote, “My story is unique, as is each one of the over 14,000 Pedro Pan stories. Some are happier; some are sadder.”<sup>89</sup> Many factors, like the ones discussed in this work, have influenced the differing experiences of the participants.

Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children’s Program was an extremely significant part of United States history. It took place in tumultuous times in a tense Cold War period. The historical scholarship devoted to the program focuses on the processes through which it worked, the politics behind the program, and the politicization of the children who came to the United States. This study examined the different concepts of national, ethnic, and religious identity among the Pedro Pan children. The refugee children were separated from their families, their homeland, and their culture and forced

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<sup>88</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 225-228.

<sup>89</sup> Eloísa Echazábal, “Eloísa’s Story,” accessed December 4, 2016. <http://pedropanexodus.com/eloisas-story/>.

to live among an entirely new group of people. One of the only constants was the Catholic Church. For many, Catholicism influenced and shaped their identity. It allowed them to hold on to part of their “Cubanness” while still embracing “Americanness” in other areas of their lives. The Church provided housing, education, food, and support for the refugees. Although the program caused severe heartache and separation, many Pedro Pan participants are thankful that their parents sent them to the United States. Many of the children have experienced great success in their lives post-Pedro Pan. Others have experienced difficulties and have not experienced that same success. The differences in experiences during Operation Pedro Pan have influenced these different paths of life. Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children’s Program forced participants to come to grips with a fluid sense of national, ethnic, and religious identity, one that could change from one living situation to another. Pedro Pan children navigated these experiences in an effort to determine their individual ideas of who they were within American society.



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