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Re-imagining Home: Operation Pedro Pan in the Cuban-American Imaginary

By Yvette Fuentes

From December 1960 through October 1962, over 14,000 Cuban children traveled alone to the United States as part of Operation Pedro Pan. The program, organized by the Catholic Welfare Bureau of Miami and the U.S. State Department, came about at the request of Cuban parents who feared their children would be indoctrinated in Marxism by the new revolutionary government. Under the program, children, whose ages ranged from infancy to adolescence, were placed in the care of family members, or in the case of those without family, into camps, orphanages, boarding schools and foster homes in over thirty states. Separated from their parents for the first time in their lives, the children experienced trauma on various levels. In addition to homesickness, they suffered culture shock and linguistic barriers, and in some cases physical and sexual abuse at the hands of those who were left to care for them. Everyone involved believed that their stay in the U.S. would be short and that reunification with their parents quick. Although the majority of Pedro Pan children ultimately reunited with their families, it took months and even years to do so. For some, however, the reunification never happened. Not surprisingly, historian Maria Christina García explains that the views of the now-grown children of Operation Pedro Pan vary, “. . . some are grateful for the care they received, while others remember those years with bitterness” (Alvarez- Borland 166).

Perhaps what is most amazing about Operation Pedro Pan is that despite the countless difficulties these children faced at such an early age, many ‘Pedro Panes’ grew to become successful adults, excelling in myriad areas including the arts, business, education, politics and religious life. This paper focuses on the portrayal of Operation Pedro Pan in children’s literature. In these creative works, the personal and the political merge and both home and nation are re-imagined. As Louise de Salvo maintains in *Writing as a Way of Healing*, creative works help us deal with hurt and sorrow and “through writing, we allow ourselves to move through the most important aspects of mourning—but at a safe and symbolic distance. We use our imaginations to

revisit difficult experiences deliberately in an attempt to master them” (56). The creative arts offers those who experienced Operation Pedro Pan firsthand the opportunity to “master” an experience in which they had no choice, and for those influenced by the movement, the opportunity to represent a painful historical moment to others.

The portrayal of the Operation in literature aimed for children or young adults is not surprising, given the nature of the Operation. What is significant, though, is the fact that Operation Pedro Pan, which occurred over fifty years ago, continues to be present in the Cuban-American imaginary in works written by authors belonging to different generations.¹ *Kike* (1984), *90 miles to Havana* (2010) and *The Red Umbrella* (2010), are three children’s books that take on the topic of Operation Pedro Pan. Although the authors of these texts belong to three distinct generations of Cuban-American writers, each turns to this specific event in Cuban and Cuban-American history.² Though different in style, these children’s works delve into the operation and its effects on the child protagonists. In these novels, the experience of Operation Pedro Pan becomes a metaphor for Cuban assimilation to U.S. society, and the creation of a distinct Cuban-American culture.

In “Narrative Theory and Children’s Literature,” Peter Hunt argues that children’s literature is centered on what is in effect “a cross-cultural transmission” (191). Or as he explains, “The reader, inside or outside the book, has to be a constant concern, partly because of the adults’ intermediary role, and partly because whatever is implied in the text, there is even less guarantee than usual that the reader will choose (or be able) to read in the way suggested” (191). For Hunt, children’s literature centers on ‘narrative’ even in cases where there is another genre in play. Roderick McGillis, in “What is Children’s Literature?” goes further by suggesting that “children’s books demonstrate repetition in a variety of ways: in plots, in recurring character types, in language, in patterns, and so on. They do so to educate their readers, repetition being an efficacious pedagogical device, and the variation that creeps into the repetition is a way of deepening what the reader learns” (256).

Hunt and McGillis’ ideas on children’s literature are quite useful when analyzing Perera’s *Kike* and Flores-Galbis’ *90 Miles to Havana*. Both novels present readers with a fictional narrative of a historical event from a small boy’s perspective. They rely on literary devices, including repetition, as a way of teaching both young and adult readers about Operation Pedro Pan, and by extension, Cuban-American culture, history and identity. One may argue, in fact, that the texts serve a dual purpose: on the one hand they aim to educate non-Cuban readers about the history of Operation Pedro Pan, while on the other, foment Cuban culture and history among young Cuban-American readers. Both texts attempt to recreate the broad changes brought about in Cuba during the early revolutionary period, as well as 1960s American society. In

both novels, the notion of “home” fluctuates between these two spaces (Cuba and the U.S.) to suggest an identity beyond one specific space.

In the introduction to *Little Havana Blues: A Cuban-American Literature Anthology*, Virgil Suárez contends that in Cuban-American literature, “Cuba has become a creation of the imagination, a fictional space pieced together from recollections, fading photographs and family anecdotes. Cuba is always el allá, the elsewhere” (11). No doubt that in these two children’s novels, Cuba becomes “el allá” (the elsewhere) upon the children’s arrival to the U.S. as part of Operation Pedro Pan. Nevertheless, Cuba’s presence permeates “el aquí” (the here) of U.S. culture. In fact, the child protagonists in these works must learn to negotiate both spaces in order to survive their particular circumstances. The negotiation of cultures is precisely what political scientist and author María de los Angeles Torres, herself a Pedro Pan, explains in her essay “Donde los fantasmas bailan el guaguancó” (Where ghosts dance the guaguancó). As she explains, “We seek a place, a home that cannot be fabricated within a singular locale, either U.S. or Cuban, but within both. We need to accept and act upon the multiplicity of places in which our identities have been constructed” (52). At the end of the essay, she adds that with time, “I came to understand that I had not lost my Cuban past; it was with me regardless of where I resided physically” (55-56).

Hilda Perera’s 1984 novel, *Kike*, delves precisely into the process of the construction of identity in a Pedro Pan child. First published in Spain 1984 by Ediciones S.M. of Madrid, this 123-page children’s novel focuses on the life of an eight-year-old boy that arrives in the U.S. with his older brother as part of Operation Pedro Pan. Narrated in the first person, the novel was written in Spanish and later translated into English in 1992 by Pickering Press (*Kike: A Cuban Boy’s Adventures in America*). Though the book’s jacket states that the book is suitable for readers eight and above, the subject matter in some sections of the book appears rather intense for young readers. According to scholar Antonio Fernandez Vazquez, the short novel *Kike* “pertenece a estas obras de posible lectura doble que pueden ser leídas por jóvenes o adultos de acuerdo con el grado de conocimiento extratextual aportado por el lector” (47) [belongs to works where a double reading is possible, they can be read by youth or adults according to the degree of extra-textual knowledge provided by the reader].³ Or as Wilma Detjens explains, though the style is designed for young readers, “también contienen profundos y complejos mensajes para los adultos que las leen” [these works also hold deep and complex messages for the adults who read them] (47).

The story begins with Jesus, better known by the nickname Kike, and his older brother Toni on a “Cubana de Aviación” airplane headed to Miami. Also on the plane are several of Kike and Toni’s cousins, ranging in age from about four to seventeen. The narration alternates between the present and past with flashbacks of Kike’s life in

Cuba. The novel, which lacks chapters, can nevertheless be divided into four major parts, which go hand in hand with Kike's process of development.⁴ The first focuses on Kike's arrival and life with his senile grandfather, the second turns to his life in a foster home with a poor, lower-class Anglo family, the third centers on his life with the wealthy Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton, and the last section turns to his readjustment to living with his parents upon their arrival. In the conclusion, we find an adult Kike finally at terms with his Cuban-American identity.

In *Kike*, Perera presents her readers with the young boy's life in the U.S. and his encounter with its multicultural society. And though the book has many humorous sections, many of the Kike's so-called adventures are not at all funny. In fact, although fictional, the work narrates many of the actual experiences Pedro Pan children faced when arriving to the U.S. Kike, his brother and cousins were fortunate in that they had a family member in the U.S. to care for them. However, as the story unfolds, it's obvious that *el abuelo*, Kike's grandfather is unfit to care for the children and they are taken away from him by Social Services. The children end up separated and placed in foster homes, something that political scientist Maria de los Angeles Torres explains was quite common given that oftentimes the children's actual blood relatives refused to take on the responsibility of caring for a child they barely knew. Kike and Toni, therefore, are taken to live with a lower class American family, Mike and his wife, who live on the fringes of the Florida Everglades. Mike, an alcoholic, and his wife, though not abusive, were clearly more interested in the paycheck than in caring for the young boys. There the boys live a carefree life, and befriend Juanito, a Puerto Rican orphan who also lives with the couple. Juanito teaches Kike and Toni about life in the Everglades and introduces them to Native American Miccosukee tribe members, as well teaches them about the vast wildlife of South Florida.

After a series of unfortunate incidents involving teenage Toni's romantic relationship with a Miccosukee young woman, the boys are ultimately separated and Kike is sent to live with a well-to-do American family, Dr. Hamilton, his wife, and their two daughters. For the first time since his arrival, Kike begins to feel at 'home' and loved. At one point, he admits that "No era mi familia, pero me lo parecía" [It wasn't my family, but they seemed to be for me] (93). Although still defensive of his Cuban culture, especially at school, Kike begins the process of Americanization. He begins to forget his Spanish and begins calling Mr. Hamilton "dad." The years in the Hamilton household are crucial since by this point Kike is an adolescent, and he struggles to fit into the larger North American culture. As he attempts to become popular at school, he begins to lose his Cuban identity. He even admits "Quizá por eso empecé a pensar que sería mejor hacerme el americano. Traté de quitarme el acento por complete y alguna vez llegué a no contestar, como si no hubiera oído si me hablaban en español" [Perhaps that's why I began thinking it was better to pretend to

be an American. I tried to remove my accent and more than once I refused to answer, as if I hadn't heard someone speaking to me in Spanish] (101). Kike, who is light skinned, assimilates into the Anglo world of the Hamiltons and begins to believe, in fact, that "dad" was his real father and that "siempre me iba a quedar con ellos" [I was always going to stay with them] (106). He no longer missed his Cuban food as before and could barely remember his real parents' faces. Moreover, he even becomes ashamed when encountering recent Cuban arrivals, and even pretends not to speak Spanish. When "dad" arrives to tell him that his parents are finally in the U.S. and are going to pick him up, Kike is enraged and resentful (108-09). They arrive in a beat-up Plymouth, with brother Toni, and thus, another era of Kike's life begins.

Kike's reaction to his parents was typical of many Pedro Pan children. One Pedro Pan, Mario Sánchez, whom Ivonne Conde interviewed for her book *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Story of 14,048 Cuban Children* explained it as follows: "It was a very difficult readjustment; I really didn't know who these people were! I had lived without them half of my life and I had to learn to love them. And I never really loved my mother. To this day I don't. I respect her. I loved my father because I gained his respect, but I didn't know who these people were" (186-187). In the same way, Perera's fictional character Kike struggles to reacquaint himself with his parents whom he hasn't seen for years and works to adapt himself to life within a Cuban exile family. An adolescent Kike even threatens to leave home but, in the end, both he and his parents must accept their new life and come to a mutual understanding of each other.

The novel concludes with 27-year-old Kike in Key West helping the new Mariel refugees upon their arrival to the U.S. It's at this point that the readers come to realize that the tale that they've been reading is in fact an adult Kike's flashback, a recollection of his childhood experiences. Having at last accepted his multicultural identity, one marked by loneliness and exile, Kike recalls his own arrival years before as a child, seeing himself in the faces of the children arriving in the boatlift. In her analysis of Perera's work, Wilma Detjens argues that "orphanhood and exile, then, rather than being seen as completely negative phenomena are seen as trials which strengthen, a chain of love that can bind people in adverse conditions. They complement and intertwine so that they serve to strengthen and clarify a person's identity, increase loyalty to the adoptive society, affirm the possibility of survival, and in the final analysis increase self-esteem" (31). I would go one step further to contend that for Kike, the notion of home is not the "allá" of Cuba that he left behind as a child, nor the "aquí" of the Florida Everglades, the Hamilton's posh Coral Gables home, or even his poor exile Cuban parents' Miami dwelling. For Kike and other Pedro Pan survivors, home is somewhere between those two spaces. With time, they come to realize, as María de los Angeles Torres argues, that [one] "could not change

that past, it was what it was. The heritage, the memories, the fate. I did not have to forfeit my link to the past to become one with my present. I merely had to find a peaceful place where I could enjoy my memories. And where my ghosts could once again dance el guaguancó.” (56)

Almost fifty years after this historic event, in 2010, two children’s works were published dealing with Operation Pedro Pan. The first, *90 Miles to Havana* was written by Enrique Flores-Galbis, a Pedro Pan survivor who arrived to the US in 1961. The second, *The Red Umbrella*, written by Christina González Díaz, a second-generation Cuban-American whose mother-in-law was a Pedro Pan child. Both works were well received by critics and in fact, *90 Miles to Cuba* was the recipient of the Pura Belpré Honor for Narrative and the Bank Street Best Book Children’s Book of the Year, both in 2011. In this paper, I focus solely on Flores-Galbis’ work as it goes one step beyond *Kike* in its view of home and identity. *90 Miles to Havana* is narrated in the first person in English, by a nine-year boy, Julian, who travels with his two older brothers to the U.S. as part of Operation Pedro Pan. Though both *Kike* and *90 Miles to Cuba* have distinct similarities, including the process of assimilation and adaptation to U.S. culture by two young Cuban boys, Flores-Galbis’ *90 Miles to Havana* offers us a more in-depth view of Cuba than Perera’s *Kike*. Indeed, the protagonist’s growth and identity are only possible by his physical ‘return’ to Cuba and identification with Cubans and Americans of different political, social and ethnic backgrounds.

90 Miles to Havana begins with Julian, the protagonist, and his family and friends on a boat, fishing in Havana Bay on December 31, 1958, on the eve of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. Every year the family would participate in a fishing outing on New Year’s Eve and Julian’s father would allow the boys to fish. However, the father had a superstitious belief that if on that night a fish got away, the family would have bad luck the following year. For years, Julian tied his family’s bad luck (the arrival of the Revolution, the family’s marginalization due to their social position, and his voyage to the U.S. with his brothers) to his inability to hold on to the fish he had caught that night. With time, Julian’s childish beliefs are replaced by a realistic and balanced view of the world and his circumstances. The first part of the book, then, centers on the way in which Cuban society began changing under the new revolutionary government and the effects of these changes on Julian and his upper middle class family. An important figure in the work is Bebo, the family cook who is of African descent and who serves as a mentor for the young boy. Though Bebo supports the revolution, he nevertheless remains Julian’s friend, even from the distance of exile. In contrast, we find a neighbor, the mother of the school bully and CDR (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution) leader who continuously causes trouble for Julian and his family. When the family is unable to leave the country together, Julian’s parents

make the difficult decision of sending the boys alone to the U.S. via Operation Pedro Pan. Thus begins the second part of the book, which centers on Julian and his brothers' new life in the U.S.



Figure 1: Cuban Pedro Pan Children lining up at an unnamed camp. Photo: "Exiliocuba2," DFELIX. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Exiliocuba2.jpg>

Much like Kike and Toni, Julian and his brothers are inept at domestic chores. They are met with a rude awakening at Camp Kendall. As Yvonne Conde explains, the camp consisted of old barracks, and there was little privacy. Sleeping arrangements were by seniority with the new arrivals closest to the door (Conde 90-91). This is precisely the atmosphere that Julian and his brothers encountered upon arriving at the camp. But not only do they have to fend for themselves in this makeshift camp, even helping prepare meals in the kitchen, they also found themselves face to face with El Caballo, the camp's bully. Much of the book focuses on El Caballo's abuses and his enemies' attempts to undermine his power. Julian survives his time at the camp by drawing in a notebook that he carried everywhere, as well as by spending time with his two friends from Cuba also at the camp, Angelita and her little brother Pepe. At Camp Kendall children learn about 'democracy' from Dolores, the American cook. Like Bebo, Dolores becomes a mentor for Julian, encouraging the boy's creativity and giving him advice on how to handle the camp bully. Eventually, after an altercation

with El Caballo, Julian's older brothers, Alquilino and Gordo, are sent away to another camp for older boys and little Pepe is sent to a foster home. Julian then carefully plans his escape with Angelita on a weekly trip to downtown Miami where they track down an old friend, Tomas. Though Angelita returns to the camp, Julian refuses to do so and hides out with Tomas who lives on a dilapidated boat near the Miami River.

Here begins another set of adventures for the boy. His biggest adventure, however, will be accompanying Tomas on his secret voyage to Cuba to smuggle several Cuban families off the island. After the money Tomas has saved for the voyage is stolen, Julian gives him a gold pin that his mother had given him to store for a future emergency. Though Julian expected his family to be among those waiting on the dock, they were not there. He does see Bebo, there, however, who gives the boy a paper clip that can be used to help start the boat's old engine, and tells the boy that his mother has left for Miami. As they are about to leave, Julian asks Bebo if he wants to join them. But the man tells him, "Chico, I told you already: they're cooking the omelet just the way I like it" (Flores-Galbis 268). When he turns around, Bebo is already gone, and they head back with the refugees. The novel ends with Julian's reunification with his family and their relocation to Connecticut where Julian must face new challenges, new bullies and new friends.

No doubt, *90 Miles to Havana* goes one step further than Kike. Whereas at novel's end an adult Kike stands on the shore in the Keys looking out to Cuba and awaiting his compatriots arrival, Julian actually travels to the island, albeit briefly and undercover and in doing so reconciles his identity. Though based on his own experiences as a Pedro Pan child, it's obvious that Flores-Galbis did not travel 'back' to Cuba as a child on any undercover operation. Yet, this "fiction" allows Julian (and by extension other "Pedro Pan's) the opportunity to take control of his own destiny. If indeed, the children were sent without their consent, Julian's decision to 'go back' was his own. In that way, then, he was able to control his own destiny. His almost magical encounter with Bebo is significant as well for it allows the young boy a proper means of goodbye to his friend and also lends him the opportunity to comprehend that in life one will always encounter different views and opinions. The author's choice to create a fictional version of Pedro Pan allows him a way to deal with a traumatic experience, or as De Salvo would contend, the "self-righting mechanism" mentioned by Freud and Terr (De Salvo 55). De Salvo goes further, "This is our creative imagination, our ability to take experience and re-enter it and represent it after the fact in some kind of symbolic way" (55).

In conclusion, Operation Pedro Pan, a traumatic event that took place over fifty years ago, and one in which children were caught in a political crossfire, continues to be an integral part of the Cuban-American imagery. Moreover, as Maria de los Angeles

Torres explains, the Pedro Pan children, who are now adults, “remain a symbol and still affect the continuing tense relations between the United States, the exile community, and Cuba” (*The Lost Apple*, 250). It should come as no surprise that the Operation, then, continues to be represented in works of art and literature, by Cuban-Americans of different generations, especially in the works of those who experienced the event firsthand. For many in that group, art and literature became a therapeutic element in their lives, a way of “mastering” the experience as Louise De Salvo maintains. In recreating Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban-American writers present us with a new means of imagining home and identity, one that moves beyond the island and exile. This re-imagining of home is best represented in children’s works, such as *Kike* and *90 Miles to Havana*, where the young protagonists must adapt to changes in their lives and negotiate their fluctuating identities in order to cope with the traumatic experience of exile. For Perera’s *Kike* and Flores-Galbis’ *Julian*, home is neither here nor there, *ni allá ni acá*. Instead, home resides within the mind, and the imagination. Home is not necessarily a happy, pleasant place either.

Perhaps Pedro Pan survivor Teresita Echazabal says it best in a poem:

Home is not where other people don’t understand me
Home is not where I look or talk funny
Home is not where I wake up in the middle of the night with a pain in my stomach
Home is not where I wake up with a pain in my head
Home is not where I want to be anymore
Home is not where my parents are anymore
Home is... where is home? (Torres 206)

Notes

1. For more on the various generations of Cubans in the U.S. and their literature, see the following works: Isabel Alvarez-Borland’s *Cuban-American Literature of Exile: From Person to Persona* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), Carolina Hospital’s *Cuban American Writers: Los Atrevidos* (Princeton: Linden Lane Press, 1988); Gustavo-Pérez-Firmat’s *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); and Eliana Rivero’s “(Re)writing Sugarcane Memories: Cuban Americans and Literature” *America’s Review* 18.3-4 (1990): 164-82.
2. While *Kike* was written by Hilda Perera, a well-known Cuban author of the first generation, the second work, *90 Miles to Havana*, was written by Enrique Flores-Galbis, a Pedro Pan participant and member of the so-called Cuban-

American 1 ½ generation. Christina González Díaz, a second-generation Cuban-American, born in the US to Cuban parents, wrote *The Red Umbrella*.

3. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
4. The novel can be analyzed as a *bildungsroman*, although as Wilma Detjens observes, the 'coming of age' issues are skimmed over. See "Forging an identity in Exile: Three Novels for Young People and Adults," page 40.

For Further Info

1. Official website of the Operation Pedro Pan Group, Inc.: <http://pedropan.org>. This bilingual site offers readers the history of Pedro Pan as well as resources for researchers, and a media gallery with numerous pictures and videos. The organization's mission statement reads as follows:

To sponsor, aid, assist and promote programs that benefit children in need. This includes children without parents (unaccompanied minors) and the needy, regardless of race, creed, color or religion.

To document our history for the future generations and to spread the knowledge of our exodus as an important chapter of the history of Cuba and the United States.

To locate and reunite those individuals who were part of the unaccompanied Cuban Children's Program and to share our experience.

2. The Miami Herald has an interactive database on Operation Pedro Pan: <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/special-reports/operation-pedro-pan/>. It includes news articles, videos, pictures and a search engine where one can find Pedro Pan records, as well as register and share their own story.

3. Three South Florida universities have Operation Pedro Pan documents:

a) The University of Miami's Library's Digital Collection has various articles and interviews on Operation Pedro Pan: <http://merrick.library.miami.edu/cdm/>

b) Barry University has Monsignor Brian O Walsh's papers: <http://eguides.barry.edu/content.php?pid=285451&sid=2349363>

c) Florida International University holds many personal interviews with important Operation Pedro Pan figures: <http://libguides.fiu.edu/content.php?pid=462017&sid=3832415>

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