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**The Impact of Operation Pedro Pan in the Pacific Northwest:  
Issues of Community, Identity and Memory**

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Peter Pan Flies to the Pacific Northwest: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban exile experience  
traveling to and living in Portland, Oregon

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## Introduction:

When Rosita Fajaro traveled to Cuba from Miami, FL in 1962 when she was 13, she could have never predicted that she would not return. Her parents told her to enjoy her time in the United States, always make sure to stay with her older brother and hold his hand.<sup>1</sup> However, once in Miami, Rosita and her brother were separated and sent to different camps for Cuban exile children.<sup>2</sup> She ended up reuniting with him a couple months later along with her parents but she never forgot how much she cried when they had to be separated.<sup>3</sup>

Rosita and her brother were 2 of the 14,048 children that came to the United States as unaccompanied minors from 1960 to 1962. They were sent to the US for different reasons, all of which were related to the political state of Cuba. When Fidel Castro came into power in January 1959 promising to better the country and hold free elections,<sup>4</sup> Fulgencio Batista was out of power after 7 years and many in Cuba were excited for the change. However, in the spring and summer of 1960 when Castro began to execute former Batista officials or send them into exile, and the pictures of these executions were circulated, people in Cuba began to become doubtful of Castro's validity as a ruler.<sup>5</sup> Many argued that “the revolution was a whole lie,”<sup>6</sup> citing that Castro never held a free election and often resorted to violence to solve issues.<sup>7</sup> A rumor, spread by anti-Castro operatives, then began to circulate that Castro would take children out of custody of their parents and place them into custody of the state.<sup>8</sup> Castro then began to overhaul the

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<sup>1</sup> Rosita Fajaro, interview by author, Oregon, July 2th 2022

<sup>2</sup> Fajaro, interview

<sup>3</sup> Fajaro, interview

<sup>4</sup> Victor Andres Triay, *Fleeting Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children's Program* (Florida University of Florida Press: 1998), xi

<sup>5</sup> Triay, *Fleeting Castro*, xii

<sup>6</sup> Jose Calderón, interview by author, Online, August 4th 2022

<sup>7</sup> Calderón, interview

<sup>8</sup> Triay, *Fleeting Castro*, 9

education system, declaring 1961 the year of education, indirectly stripping parents of their control of their children's lives.<sup>9</sup>

Operation Pedro Pan was orchestrated by the US State department and a few religious organizations, mainly Catholic Charities. The two main individual players were Father Walsh who was the head of Catholic Charities in Miami and James Baker who ran a school in Miami. The first children, a brother and a sister, arrived in Miami on the 26th of December.<sup>10</sup> As more and more children began flooding in the US, there was not enough room to house all of them in Miami, so they started being sent to different states across the US. The children were often housed in foster homes and stayed there until their parents arrived in the US. For some children their parents arrived within months, while others didn't see their parents for years or even never again.

Some children were sent to Portland, OR with the approval of Reverend Morton Park, the head of Catholic Charities in the area. From the oral histories I did with Pedro Pans that ended up in Portland, I was able to see the differences and similarities in their experiences compared with the general Pedro Pan narrative. There were ultimately more similarities than differences. The general experience of the Cuban children who ended up in Portland paralleled those in other locations because the majority of them were light skinned, from upper middle class backgrounds, and never returned to Cuba once they left. Their experiences differed due to the demographics of Portland which made it so they stood out more than their counterparts in other places. Yet, many of them remember their time in Portland as overwhelmingly positive. These Cuban children and their families were able to create community in Portland, and leave their mark, though their histories were not and have not been prioritized in the broader history of Operation Pedro Pan.

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<sup>9</sup> Triay, *Fleeting Castro*, 7

<sup>10</sup> Triay, *Fleeting Castro*, 19

### Similarities:

The one big similarity that Portland Pedro Pans held with Pedro Pans more generally was that they came from upper middle class backgrounds. This is for a number of reasons, the most obvious being that these people likely had the most resources to get their kids out of the country. They also had the most to lose, ie. money and property, from the new system of communism being put in place.<sup>11</sup> Often, lower class families were more invested in the changes Castro said he would bring because of his promises to better their economic situation.<sup>12</sup> The flight of middle-class Cuban families was actually encouraged by US officials with the hope it would strip Cuba of its professionals and those that helped to keep the economy going as a way to destabilize the government.<sup>13</sup> The middle class in Cuba was also fairly large, as it made up one-fourth to one-third of the island and was often close culturally with the United States.<sup>14</sup> This allowed immigrants from the Cuban middle class to later align with white conservative middle class people and more easily assimilate into US mainstream society.<sup>15</sup>

Many Portland Pedro Pans seem to look back fondly on their childhoods. They often lived in the suburbs of Havana and both of their parents had good jobs (banker, accountant etc.) or their mother stayed home while their father worked. They also had the means to travel around often to visit their family and go to the beach. One woman who was interviewed for this project, spoke about how her family even had a second house at the beach.<sup>16</sup> When Castro came into

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<sup>11</sup> Triay, *Fleeting Castro*, 2

<sup>12</sup> Triay, *Fleeting Castro*, 3

<sup>13</sup> Anita Casavantes Bradford “Remembering Pedro Pan: Childhood and Collective Memory Making in Havana and Miami, 1960—2000.” *Cuban Studies* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press:2016) 288

<sup>14</sup> Triay, *Fleeting Castro* xi

<sup>15</sup> Bradford, “Remembering Pedro Pan” 286

<sup>16</sup> Fajaro, interview

power many upper middle class Cubans began to lose their property and money.<sup>17</sup> For some, they didn't realize their level of privilege until they came to the United States and everything was stripped away from them.<sup>18</sup> The boys especially had to learn to do chores because they often had servants or female members of their families to do it for them. For example, when Evelio Prieto was attending University of Portland, he had a house mother who taught him to sew buttons on his shirts and iron his pants because in his house in Cuba other people always did it for him.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, many of the Pedro Pans came from economically privileged backgrounds that allowed them to participate in the program.

The majority of the Cuban children who came over through Operation Pedro Pan were light-skinned Cubans, and Portland Pedro Pans were no exception. The race of these Pedro Pans was often tied to their economic situation. In Cuba, like many other places in the world, whiteness is and was tied with economic privilege, as racism can negatively impact countless aspects of one's life. Anti-blackness was prevalent in many aspects of 1950s Cuban life from the existence of Whites only clubs to the media where darker skinned characters were always portrayed as "crime-prone, anti-social and backwards."<sup>20</sup> Areas of Cuba that were primarily poor were also primarily Black.<sup>21</sup> Castro's regime created laws like the Agrarian Reforms and Urban Reforms that most negatively impacted White Cubans as they were the ones that owned the most land collectively.<sup>22</sup> It was also these laws that shut down the Whites only clubs and beaches as Castro had a goal to create a more race-neutral society.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, it was primarily light

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<sup>17</sup> Consuelo Rodriguez, interview by author, Oregon, July 9th 2022

<sup>18</sup> Evelio Prieto, interview with author, Online, August 1st 2022

<sup>19</sup> Prieto, interview

<sup>20</sup> Ricardo E. Gonzalez Zayas, *Black Pedro Pan*, (Independently published, 2020), 30

<sup>21</sup> Zayas, *Black Pedro Pan*, 30

<sup>22</sup> Zayas, *Black Pedro Pan*, 37

<sup>23</sup> Zayas, *Black Pedro Pan*, 37

skinned Cubans that both had the means and more glaring reasons to send their children abroad and eventually leave themselves.

All of the Pedro Pans interviewed for this project would be considered light-skinned or White Cubans. This again ties back into their economic privilege and ability to come to the United States. It is important to note that there were exceptions like Ricardo E. Gonzalez Zayas author of *Black Pedro Pan*, who came from a lower-class background and traveled to the U.S. under Operation Pedro Pan in 1962. Zayas discusses how his Black father was reluctant to send his son to the United States because he was aware of the violent racism Black people faced there, a concern that light-skinned Cubans likely did not have.<sup>24</sup> Zayas never ended up in Portland, but this isn't to say that there no Black Cubans. An Oregonian article from the Nov 15th, 1962 issue tells the story of a young Black Cuban who was trying to pay for his parents to make it to the United States.<sup>25</sup> Omar Maden, who was 17 at the time, went to high school during the day and would then work as a floor cook in a hotel restaurant until 11:00 pm.<sup>26</sup> This article not only illustrates the presence of Black Cubans in Portland, but also that they likely had a different experience than their White counterparts. The fact that Omar had to work to pay for his parents to travel and also had to wait a year to leave Cuba shows that he was in a more difficult economic situation.<sup>27</sup> All of the light-skinned Cubans interviewed for this project did not have to work to pay for their parents' airfare nor did they have to wait a particularly long time to get out of the country. This evidence once again illustrates how intertwined race and economics were for Pedro Pans, and how it drastically impacted their experiences with the Operation.

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<sup>24</sup> Zayas, *Black Pedro Pan*, 42

<sup>25</sup> "Young Cuban Labors to Fly Parents Out", *The Oregonian*, November 11th 1964

<sup>26</sup> "Young Cuban Labors to Fly Parents out"

<sup>27</sup> "Young Cuban Labors to Fly Parents out"

A common sentiment to hear from Pedro Pans is that they have reverence for their country but plan to never return as long as it is under communist control. Much of the exile community believed that by traveling back they would be legitimizing a system that uprooted their lives and “foreclosed the futures they envisioned.”<sup>28</sup> This was also the case for Portland Pedro Pans. Many of them want to hold onto how they remember their country instead of going back to see how it is now.<sup>29</sup> Cuba was a country that formed their childhoods but the United States is their country now.<sup>30</sup> The lack of interest in returning to Cuba is influenced by the disapproval that many Pedro Pans hold of the current Cuban government but also by their often steadfast commitment to uphold the idea that the United States is the best country in the world.<sup>31</sup> To admit that the United States may have faults that outweighs its strengths would be to say that their parents may have not made the best choice in sending them away.

The resistance to traveling back to Cuba was often more strong within the parents of Pedro Pans than Pedro Pans themselves.<sup>32</sup> Their efforts to send their children to the United States were a result of their disapproval of the political system and state of the country. Though most Pedro Pans held the same stance as their parents there were and are of course exceptions. It would make sense that some Pedro Pans would have some want to return, to see the country they left at such a young age. Often because of their “Americanization” Pedro Pan kids were more independent and defiant than their parents wanted.<sup>33</sup> Though their parents wanted them to continue to practice Cuban traditions they didn't want their children to return to Cuba. This was

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<sup>28</sup>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 Books, 2003) 217

<sup>29</sup>Fajaro, interview

<sup>30</sup>Bertica Ferran, interview by author, Oregon, July 29th 2022

<sup>31</sup>Consuelo Rodriguez, interview by author, Oregon, July 9th 2022

<sup>32</sup>Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 217

<sup>33</sup>Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 217



the case for María de los Angeles Torres, author of *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future*. Torres was a part of the Antonio Maceo Brigade, an organization that fought for the right of exiles to return to Cuba.<sup>34</sup> They were invited by the Cuban government to Havana to begin the process of having a dialogue between the exile community and Cuba.<sup>35</sup> Due to the political nature of the Pedro Pans exit from Cuba, their return could not simply be accepted as a way to return home but rather a statement of their views on Cuban politics.

#### Differences:

The first main difference between Portland Pedro Pans and their counterparts is that most of the Portland Pedro Pans parents arrived in the United States within months of their children. This was generally uncommon as according to a survey done by author Yvonne Conde which found only roughly 29% of children were only separated from their parents for under a year.<sup>36</sup> Parents stopped being able to as easily leave Cuba after flights stopped to Miami on October 23rd 1962.<sup>37</sup> Parents were then forced to go through other avenues to make it to the United States. Some people were able to make it to Miami on the return journey of planes and ships sending supplies to Cuba from the United States.<sup>38</sup> The supplies were sent as a ransom payment for the brigade members that Castro had imprisoned after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion.<sup>39</sup> After these ships and planes stopped, parents resorted to taking small boats across the ocean. Then, an

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<sup>34</sup> Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 218

<sup>35</sup> Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 220

<sup>36</sup> Yvonne M. Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus* 14.048 *Cuban Children*, (New York, Routledge, 1999), 223

<sup>37</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 176

<sup>38</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 176

<sup>39</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 177

agreement made in November 1965 allowed 3,000 to 4,000 Cubans to leave the country every month on what were dubbed the Freedom Flights.<sup>40</sup> Priority was given to parents who already had children in the United States under 21, and men who were military age were excluded.<sup>41</sup> The flights lasted until February 1 1970.<sup>42</sup> Parents that had the means to leave close behind their children up until 1962 were the best off because it became more difficult to leave until 1965 when the Freedom Flights started. Even if they left on the first Freedom Flight they would have been away from their children for a minimum of three years. Due to the politically contentious nature of the relationship between the United States and Cuba as a result of the Cold War, the ability to travel was constantly changing.

It speaks to the privileged identities and backgrounds of the Portland Pedro Pans that their parents were able to reunite with them after just a few months of their separation. Often after their parents arrived, the children were able to live with them in a house in Portland. For Bertica Ferran her parents arrived 10 months after she departed at age 13, one of the longer separations spoken about in the interviews.<sup>43</sup> She then lived with her parents in Northeast Portland. Rosita Fajaro's parents arrived 2 months after she left and met her in Miami. They lived in a house across from the refugee camp Rosita lived in, and so she was still able to see her friends. Rosita then moved to Portland with her parents.<sup>44</sup> The purpose of this point is not to argue that because these Pedro Pans were separated from their parents for a shorter amount of time they experienced significantly less trauma, as that would lack nuance. Though Bertica was gone from her parents for under a year when her mom saw her for the first time she exclaimed

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<sup>40</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 179

<sup>41</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 179

<sup>42</sup> Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 180

<sup>43</sup> Ferran, interview

<sup>44</sup> Fajaro, interview

how she had left a little girl and Bertica had grown up.<sup>45</sup> It is however easy to see how it would be difficult for children to live without their parents for years. Luckily many of the Portland Pedro Pans were not unaccompanied for an extremely long time and were able to experience the rest of their childhoods or teen years with parental support.

The differences in experience between Portland Pedro Pans and Pedro Pans from other areas, often stem back to what Portland was like as a city. The struggle to learn English was a common experience for all Pedro Pans, as the vast majority of them traveled to the US without being able to speak English at all. However, the demographics of the places where they lived impacted the way they were treated by those around them. For Pedro Pans that lived primarily in Miami, they were around other Latinos and likely didn't feel as if they stood out too much. By the summer of 1961 there were 116,700 Cuban exiles in the United States, 96,000 of which were in Florida.<sup>46</sup> By 1962 around 250,000 Cubans had arrived in the United States, most of which flew in through Miami. Many of them chose to stay in Miami because of how close it is to Cuba.<sup>47</sup> Due to the fact that there were so many Cuban people moving through Miami from 1960-1962, along with those that put roots down in Miami, Cuban children likely didn't stand out much among the crowd. This isn't to say that their experience was easy, but the vast demographic differences between Portland and Miami, did affect the experiences of the Pedro Pans that lived in either place.

Portland's Cuban population was and continues to be significantly smaller than that of Miami. According to the 1980 Census, there were roughly 160 Cuban born people living in

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<sup>45</sup> Fajaro, interview

<sup>46</sup> Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 124

<sup>47</sup> Jorge Duany "Cuban Communities in the United States: Migration Waves, Settlement Patterns and Socioeconomic Diversity." *Pouvoirs dans la Caraïbe. Revue du CRPLC. Pouvoirs dans la Caraïbe*, October 30, 2010.

Oregon from 1960-1964.<sup>48</sup> Overall, there seems to be some mixed information about the exact number of Cubans in Oregon in the 60s. According to an Oregonian article from 1968 there were 800 Cubans attending a Cuban club<sup>49</sup> but according to the 1970 Census there were about 689 total Cubans in Portland by 1970.<sup>50</sup> The people interviewed for this paper seemed to agree that there were more than 160 Cuban-born people in Oregon from 60-64 but their memory may be affected by the fact that they lived in an area where most of the other Cuban people lived. Though many of the Pedro Pans lived in areas with other Cuban people, they often went to schools with few to no other Cuban students. Rosita Fajaro remembers being the only Cuban in her freshman class in Marycrest School, a private Catholic all-girls school in Portland. Rosita also notably remembers being called “the Cuban” by other students as well as her friends. However, Rosita still remembers this time in her life fondly, and it seems that many other Portland Pedro Pans did as well.

Cuban children in Portland also stuck out from their peers because English was not their first language. This was not a necessarily unique experience to Portland Pedro Pans, but coupled with them being the only kids of their ethnicity on their classes, they were often alienated from other kids. Bertica Ferran remembers being afraid to talk because of her accent to the point where another little girl asked her if she could speak at all. In high school Rosita had a crush on her teacher and she told her friend about it, asking her to help her say something nice in English to the teacher. Rosita’s friend told her to tell the teacher “go to hell,” which of course Rosita didn’t understand. Unsurprisingly, Rosita was sent to the principal's office for saying something profane to her teacher. It is once again important to note that both Rosita and Bertica laugh about

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Dellenback, *Oregon’s Cuban-American Community: from revolution to assimilation*, (Portland State University, 1990), 130

<sup>49</sup> “Club Opened by Exiles: place provided for meetings” *Oregonian*, January 29th 1968

<sup>50</sup> Dellenback, *Oregon’s Cuban-American Community*, 129

these stories and don't see them as necessarily traumatic. Nevertheless, one can see how the demographics of the region they were living in may have contributed to these stories and these Cuban children being considered the "other" whether or not their otherization affected them in obvious negative ways.

#### Impact on Portland in the Past and Present:

One of the most clear ways that the Cuban population had an impact on Portland in the early 1960s was through the creation of the Liceo Cubano in Southeast Portland. The Liceo Cubano was a Cuban community center that held many different events such as birthday parties, dinners, and picnics every weekend.<sup>51</sup> Rosita even had her wedding reception there. The Liceo Cubano was a way for Cubans to come together and talk about Cuba as well as listen to their music and eat their food.<sup>52</sup> The center also didn't just positively impact the Cuban people that attended but also the general Portland community. An Oregonian article from January 29th 1969 entitled "8 Pound Boy Receives Gift From Cuban Club" talks about people from the Liceo Cubano giving gifts to a baby that was born at the Multnomah County Hospital.<sup>53</sup> Representatives from the Liceo Cubano gave the baby boy many different gifts from a "silver spook to ample crib."<sup>54</sup> The baby was given these presents because he was the first baby born on January 28th the birthdate of Jose Marti who was and still is considered by many a Cuban national hero. This article shows the ways that the Liceo Cubano not only helped the Cuban community but did community outreach in the greater Portland area as well.

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<sup>51</sup> Fajaro, interview

<sup>52</sup> Ferran, interview

<sup>53</sup> Robert Olmos, "8-Pound Boy Receives Gifts From Cuban Club" *The Oregonian*, January 29th 1969

<sup>54</sup> Robert Olmos, "8-Pound Boy Receives Gifts From Cuban Club"

As the years passed many Cuban people who lived in Portland moved back to Miami or other places, where there are bigger Cuban populations and the weather is more similar to Cuba. Portland being the whitest major city in the United States, is not thought of as a place with a complex history of People of Color, which of course is incorrect. Within the broader story of Operation Pedro Pan Portland is only mentioned in passing or in short quotes from people that ended up there. Not too long ago (the exact year has been difficult to find) a play was performed in Portland that was about Operation Pedro Pan. Bertica Ferran was both on a panel for the play and attended the performance.<sup>55</sup> In the audience she sat next to Kate Brown, who has been the governor of Oregon since 2015. Governor Brown ended up talking to Bertica, telling Bertica that she was the only one she had talked to that she could understand because Bertica didn't have too strong of an accent. When Bertica explained that that was because she had been in Portland since she was 13 due to Operation Pedro Pan, Governor Brown expressed that she had never heard of the Operation before. Perhaps, it is too much to expect the Governor of a state to know all of the history surrounding it, but it is telling that Governor Brown had no knowledge of the Operation. This is all to say that despite having their own impacts on the community around them, the Cuban exile community in the 1960s is too often forgotten about, despite Portland claiming to be an accepting and liberal place.

#### Conclusion:

The history of Operation Pedro Pan is incredibly complex and can be looked at from countless viewpoints. When looking at the history of the Operation from the perspective of the Portland Pedro Pans, one begins to see how the various experiences can be both unique but also

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<sup>55</sup> Ferran, interview

similar.. Generally Pedro Pans were light skinned, from upper middle class backgrounds, and never returned to Cuba once they left. The Portland Pedro Pans experience differed because Portland was and is overwhelmingly white which made them stand out more than their counterparts in other places. Despite the hardships they faced, many Portland Pedro Pans seem to look back on their time fondly in Portland, a place that was so different from their homes. Through organizations like the Liceo Cubano as well as their general involvement in the community the Cuban population did leave a mark on Portland. The history of Operation Pedro Pan ultimately holds over 14,000 different and complex personal stories. Each of these stories are important and worthy to be told including those of the Portland Pedro Pans.

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