Deborah Shnookal, *Operation Pedro Pan and the Exodus of Cuba's Children*.

Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020. xii + 326 pp. (Cloth US\$85.00)

Operation Pedro Pan and the Exodus of Cuba's Children promises to move beyond the Cold War lens to interrogate the competing versions of the story—were the children kidnapped from their homeland or were they saved from communism? Deborah Shnookal quotes selectively from a number of publications on the subject, including my 2003 book, *The Lost Apple on Operation Pedro Pan*. But she relies principally on her own extensive research, which includes security files in Cuba that she was given rare access to, papers of Father Bryan Walsh (director of the Catholic Welfare Bureau), and interviews with literacy workers and some Pedro Pans.

Shnookal's framework deploys a two-sited lens: Cuba and the United States. In Cuba, she focuses on the literacy campaign, asserting that, "what makes this story particularly fascinating is that the Pedro Pans and the literacy *brigadistas* were the same cohort" (p. 3). The book begins with the first years of the Revolution and the youthful fervor of its leaders. "They were prophets of the new era, [driven by] rapt romanticism, patriotic passion, and extreme utopian idealism" (Lisandro Otero, quoted on p. 21). The subsequent chain of events constituted a "revolutionary Hurricane" aimed at transforming every corner of society. Shnookal presents the literacy brigades as a countercultural project in which children of privileged families set out to defy their parents and make history. Many people experienced them as such. But missing in this account are the power dynamics behind the mass mobilization of young people. This was not a countercultural movement of culturally radical leaders against traditional Cuban families, nor was it a liberating project since it did not include legal free speech. The aim was not just to dismantle the patriarchal family; it was to set up a conservative, authoritarian, and thus patriarchal regime.

Fidel Castro's actions against the Catholic Church are also mischaracterized in the book. During the uprising, Castro had promised the churches that they could teach catechism in public schools. Younger Cuban-born priests and other Catholics supported the Revolution. Once Castro declared an allegiance to the Soviet Union, the Church found itself on the other side of the Cold War. Shnookal suggests that Castro was not really anti-Catholic, and cites as proof the fact that there were no executions of priests and nuns. But an antireligious campaign ensued which included shutting down Catholic schools and orchestrating harassment of church-goers during Sunday worship. Practicing young Catholics were excluded from the literacy campaign. For decades, believers were not allowed to participate in mass organizations or attend universities.

Shnookal admits that “What is clear is that most (but not all) of the Pedro Pans came from privileged Cuban families” (p. 145) who attended Catholic schools, but there were vast class differences between schools. Although some, like the one that Fidel Castro attended, catered to the elite, most were more diverse. The dissemination of a presumed legal project to take parents’ *patria potestad* (authority over their children) was U.S. and anti-Castro propaganda, but for parents, not being able to send their children to Catholic schools represented a loss of control over them.

This was not the only reason for the exodus. The Operation began as a mechanism both to evacuate young antigovernment activists who could have been shot to death if caught, and to save the children of the underground whose parents were afraid that they might be killed. Only 657 minors were evacuated before the Bay of Pigs invasion. Afterward, multiple factors coincided: massive repression, arrests, firing squads against opponents, and lack of immigration mechanisms through which Cubans fearful of the turn of events could leave the island. The most readily available mechanism was the visa waiver for minors, which did not need a security clearance from the United States. The Cuban government was also eager to externalize dissent. From April 1961 to October 1962, when both governments shut the doors, almost 14,000 minors had left through Operation Pedro Pan. There is no doubt that the CIA and other agencies took advantage of the situation and used it for propaganda efforts. But underlying the actions of *both* governments was the belief that the future could be built by controlling young people. This was a political and subsequently ideological power struggle that was fought out through children.

Despite the massive amount of research it reflects, this book fails to deliver on Shnookal’s promise to go beyond a Cold War perspective. For that reason, the complicated transnational experiences of Pedro Pans and their families are once again manipulated to defend one side and criticize the other.

Maria de los Angeles Torres

Latin American and Latino Studies, University of Illinois Chicago,
Chicago IL, U.S.A.
torresma@uic.edu