

Article

OPERATION PEDRO PAN: A TALE OF TRAUMA AND REMEMBRANCE

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Abstract

Engineered by the US Central Intelligence Agency in cooperation with the Catholic Church working in the US and underground in Cuba, Operation Pedro Pan airlifted more than 14,000 Cuban children between 1960 and 1962 from Havana to Miami without their parents, with the purpose of safeguarding their minds from Castro's revolutionary ideology. Cuban American political scientist María de los Angeles Torres (The Lost Apple, 2003) and playwright Melinda López (Sonia Flew, 2004) highlight the emotional traumas children experience when they are made to represent the ideology of nations at the expense of their childhood. They consider the difficulties of remembering and understanding individual traumas when governments and societies are invested in the silencing of that memory for the sake of maintaining widely held political and ideological beliefs. Their works are excellent expressions of human remembrance and reconciliation.

Keywords

Operation Pedro Pan; Cuban exile community; trauma; memory; childhood

Engineered by the US Central Intelligence Agency in cooperation with the Catholic Church working in the US and underground in Cuba, Operation Pedro Pan airlifted more than 14,000 Cuban children between 1960 and 1962 from Havana to Miami without their parents, with the purpose of safeguarding their minds from Castro's revolutionary ideology. Cuban American political scientist María de los Angeles Torres (2003) and



playwright Melinda López (2004) highlight the emotional traumas children experience when they are made to represent the ideology of nations at the expense of their childhood. They consider the difficulties of remembering and understanding individual traumas when governments and societies are invested in the silencing of that memory for the sake of maintaining widely held political and ideological beliefs. Their works are excellent expressions of human remembrance and reconciliation.

Operation Pedro Pan: A Tale of Trauma and Remembrance

Operation Pedro Pan airlifted more than 14,000 Cuban children to the United States without their parents, to flee Fidel Castro's mandate "to mold future generations with a spirit of love for the fatherland, love of neighbor, love of justice, and love of the revolution" (qtd. in Torres, 2003, 116). The children who arrived between December 1960 and October 1962 are now writing novels, plays and analyses depicting the political, cultural, and personal ramifications of what for many was a deeply traumatic event (Brisk, *Del otro lado del cristal*, Eire, Leyva, López, 2006, Triay). By approaching the subject of the children's exodus from a multidisciplinary point of view, I hope to come to terms with the political forces that brought me here as a child of the Operation, and then reach some clarity about the trauma that defined the lives of my contemporaries. To do so, as an academic, I have been fortunate to count on the work of the political scientist María de los Angeles Torres, whose comprehensive research has allowed her to offer as complete an analysis of Operation Pedro Pan as is available to date. In the second half of the essay I concentrate on an analysis of Melinda López's play *Sonia Flew* in light of the work of humanist Leigh Gilmore, of social scientists Charles R. Figley, Bessel van del Kolk and associates on the representations of personal and national traumas, and on Maurice Halbwachs's definition of collective memory.

This essay deals with the difficulties of remembering and understanding individual traumas when governments and societies are invested in the silencing of memories for the sake of maintaining widely held political and ideological beliefs. In order for individual Pedro Pan children to heal the memory of the traumatized separation from their parents and country, they must rely on knowledge about the political and historical contexts of their personal experience. Only after they have contextualized past experiences in a collective memory, can they go forth with their present lives. In her book *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the US and the Promise of a Better Future*, María de los Angeles Torres unveils information about Operation Pedro Pan that was classified by the US Central Intelligence Agency for national security reasons. Through her research and analysis, she provides comprehensive information about the program to allow Pedro Pan children to access their personal histories. Most importantly, she exposes the social consequences (to



both individuals and society) of maintaining secrecy about events during the Cold War. Torres's description of Operation Pedro Pan as a traumatic event (because repressed) for the entire Cuban exiled community begins the process of healing through remembrance and reconciliation. In a most eloquent manner, Torres summarizes her own research journey:

This book is a research journey throughout which I have learned not only about events but also about how we come to know what we know.... It is also an effort to understand the politics of memory and identity. And finally it's a quest to create room so that, we, the Pedro Pan children – “the most defenseless of refugees,” as we were called at the time – have the space to explore and reexamine memories of events that changed the course of our personal histories. (2003, 12)

After presenting Torres' information about Operation Pedro Pan and her analyses of the relationship between individual and collective memory, this paper goes on to explore the dramatic ways in which the Cuban American playwright Melinda López presents an individual character's response to Operation Pedro Pan. López created *Sonia Flew* (2004), a play that proceeds from the presentation of a conflict between personal and national crises to the consideration of how the disclosure of past histories may enable individuals to become more engaged actors in defining their personal identities, as well as those of their families and nations.

Origins of Operation Pedro Pan

Operation Pedro Pan began in 1960, when Cuban counterrevolutionaries were afraid of what would happen to their children should they be apprehended. Some of these parents approached James Baker, head of the Ruston Academy, an American school in Havana educating the children of Americans and preparing the children of the Cuban elite to attend US colleges and universities. Cuban parents wondered whether Baker could secure scholarships for their children in the US while they worked in the underground. In December of 1960, Baker traveled to Miami and met with the Havana-American Chamber of Commerce to try to secure funds for about 200 children whose names he had put together from parents' and Catholic Church requests. After that initial next meeting, Baker saw Monsignor Walsh, then Director of the Catholic Welfare Bureau, to discuss the care of the unaccompanied children. Walsh later described the Operation:

I organized a project for bringing to the United States a group of children whose parents wished to save them from the danger of communist indoctrination. They received student visas. A committee of the American Chamber of Commerce of Havana and a group of Cubans raised funds for their passage from Havana to Miami. The Catholic Welfare Bureau of Miami

assumed the responsibility of caring for the children in foster or group homes.
(qtd. in Torres, 2003, 66–67)

The first child arrived on 26 December 1960. The operation had to be kept secret to safeguard the identity of the children's parents against risks of detention by Cuban intelligence. Early in January 1961, the Eisenhower administration broke diplomatic relations with Cuba and the Operation was faced with the new problem of how to secure visas for the children in the absence of an American embassy in Havana. Later in January, Baker and Walsh met at the State Department in Washington to petition the Department to waive visa requirements for children traveling directly from Cuba. Walsh was then given authority to grant visas to Cuban children between the ages of 6–16 (Torres, 2003, 62–76).

What began as an operation to safeguard the children of the Cuban underground movement, turned into a much larger program as events unfolded in Cuba in 1961. In January, Castro founded “youth camps” where children of the elite would be instructed as agricultural workers and revolutionary leaders. In the spring, Fidel Castro announced that secondary schools would be closed so that students could be sent to the countryside to participate in a literacy campaign throughout the island: “We shall terminate the school year and mobilize all the students from sixth grade up. We shall organize an army of teachers and send them to every corner of the country” (qtd. in Torres, 2003, 108). Many parents saw these measures as a way for the government to indoctrinate their children and to retrain teachers for the coming school year. Parents' concerns were aggravated by the Cuban government's arrest of over 200,000 people and the execution of eight young men in April, days before the Bay of Pigs Invasion. The invasion, headed by Cubans who trained as “freedom fighters,” failed, and most participants were imprisoned as political prisoners. In May, the government took control of all private schools, and in September it expelled large numbers of priests and nuns from the country. By the end of the year, 800 Cuban students were studying in Soviet Block countries. Alarmed by the government's control of education, and as part of Cuban underground activities, the women of the underground organization Rescue distributed thousands of leaflets in churches and other centers, disseminating a rumor that the government would institute a *Patria Potestad* law, effectively taking away the right of parents to determine their children's future. Torres defines the legal term thus: “*Patria potestad* is a Roman legal concept regarding the authority to make decisions for children.... By the early twentieth century, it was well established that this authority, including how to educate children, fell on the parents” (2003, 89). Parents from the middle class regarded all of these events as a threat to their family unity. They saw the youth camps, the literacy campaign, the closing of private schools, the “scholarships” to study in the

Eastern block, and their possible loss of control over their children as a call to send their children to study in the United States with Operation Pedro Pan. Several pastoral letters read in churches responded by defending the right of the Catholic Church to educate children. Even though in the United States the Operation was considered top secret, in Cuba many middle-class parents were aware that Church clergy and former members of the Ruston Academy could be contacted for visa waivers. Most parents viewed the separation from their children as temporary, and felt that their children would fare better in American than in Cuban schools. By April of 1961, 657 children – 402 boys and 255 girls – had left Cuba with Operation Pedro Pan (Torres, 2003, 75–137).

Of the 14,000 children who arrived in Miami, about 6,000 were met by friends or family, while the remaining 8,000 were met by a man they knew as “George” who took them to one of several camps scattered in the Miami area (Kendall, Maticumbe, Florida City). From there, they were distributed throughout the United States (in 41 different states) and placed in foster homes, orphanages, and religious boarding schools. Even though children wrote to their parents complaining of institutional neglect, and people both in Cuba and in the United States supported their claims (Torres, 2003, 103–104), their collective concerns were often not investigated because they ran counter to the official US government line which stated that “they were saved from communism, well-adjusted, and grateful to be in the United States” (Torres, 2003, 179). Torres speaks of her own personal experience: “the language of politics would not allow us to speak of the pain of separation, or, for that matter, question whether or not that separation had been necessary. The separations were justified by the need to have saved us from communism” (2003, 216).

The Cuban government’s position on the Operation is summarized by Ramón Torreira Crespo and José Buajasán Marrawi (2000, 72):

[Operación Peter Pan] se trató de una de las más secretas acciones de subversión y guerra psicológica desarrolladas por la CIA, el departamento de Estado e instituciones religiosas de Estados Unidos, ... creadas con propósitos subversivos, donde las principales víctimas serían indefensos niños y padres muchas veces engañados o hábilmente confundidos por falsos rumores, con fines desestabilizadores.

[Operation Peter Pan] was one of the most secret actions of subversive and psychological warfare developed by the CIA, the Department of State and religious institutions in the United States ... created with subversive ends, where the principal victims would be defenseless children and parents, often deceived or cunningly confused by false rumors, with destabilizing ends. (translation mine)

At the other end of the political spectrum, Yvonne Conde (1999, 56), quotes Katherine Brownell Oettinger, chief of the Children's Bureau in the United States: "In the long run, the peace of the world and the preservation of free societies depend on the development of the individual capacities of children and of a vast 'common market' of ideas, knowledge, cultural interchange, and good will. The program for the displaced children of Cuba represents a long-term investment on this side of the ledger." Through well-chosen rhetorical summations, these writers state how they believe each political system hoped to inscribe their values in the minds of children. Torres states: "the exodus was not a contest over protecting children but rather about competing state-building projects" (2003, 22). The CIA, Catholic Charities in Miami, and the Catholic Church in Cuba all conspired to prove to the world that the Cuban revolution had failed. In fact, Torres maintains that given the political investment on the part of the exiled community in the United States, the children's traumatic experience of separation was translated into "a tale of heroism" (2003, 10).

Both Cuba and the United States benefited as nations from the exodus. Torres explains: "Once in the States, the children did provide cannon fodder for propaganda wars" (2003, 242). And for Cuba, "It helped to denationalize the disaffected" (2003, 242). For both nations, the children's exodus served distinctive national purposes. For Cubans in the underground, the Operation was one of several plans to overthrow Castro, leading up to the Bay of Pigs Invasion (Torres, 2003, 78). In the process of doing research for her book, Torres ran into the problem of files on the Operation being classified by the CIA. She concludes that "the CIA may fear that any information on Pedro Pan could lead to unraveling the entire anti-Castro tapestry" (2003, 238). In her Introduction, Torres states: "I was baffled by the secrecy of the operation – the propaganda and the misinformation I was uncovering both from the US and Cuban governments" (2003, 18). She speaks of the relentless work of people like Elly Chovel, the founder of the Operation Pedro Pan group, who began to disseminate information about the Operation, and who brought together former Pedro Pan children to speak about their experiences.

In the Prologue to *The Lost Apple*, Torres concludes: "I do not only question government policies but also try to understand the philosophical framework within which government officials, activists, and parents were able to stage such a dramatic exodus of children, one which made them believe that family separations were necessary in order to protect the innocence of their children and the future of their nation" (2003, 5). According to Torres, Operation Pedro Pan is an excellent case study of how in the 1960s children's needs were manipulated in a staged face-off between democracy and communism during the Cold War. Both the US and Cuba believed that the education of children ensured "the future of nations."

In a self-reflective moment of her book, Torres summarizes the exodus and its memory thus:

Pedro Pan became such a clearly symbolic element of the exile experience that there was little need to question or reflect upon it. Until recently, few people outside the Cuban community knew of our exodus or questioned its meaning. We, on the inside, had no real points of reference to understand how unusual it had been. The dramatic events of these family separations, confined in such a closed context, faded into a *repressed collective memory*, to be recalled only by a political rhetoric that resisted ambivalence or contradictions and portrayed our flight as a tale of heroism. Thus, while we could readily recount the factual episode of our early migration from Cuba, the emotional travails and complexities were now inaccessible – including mine (10). [Italics mine]

Throughout her book, Torres brings to light the social and political motivations to repress knowledge about the Operation, and then performs the archeological task of unearthing the documents and testimonies that could expose “the emotional travails and complexities” for herself, and for others like her. What interests me most about her work lies in the complexity of her project, as she explores both the emotional needs of former children who experienced trauma, and the politics of those invested in maintaining “a repressed collective memory.” Isolated in their lack of knowledge about their experience, children were left alone to repress their painful memories. Their personal act of repression was later mirrored in the US and Cuban governments’ refusal to reveal information about the Operation. Torres’s reflections on the relationship between the silence surrounding the private and public experience of the exodus of children from Cuba in the 1960s concerns me primarily as a former Pedro Pan, but also as a scholar engaged with issues of trauma and memory in literature and the arts.

Individual trauma and collective memory

To better understand the relationship between private and public trauma as it finds expression in artistic representations, I turn to the work of Leigh Gilmore. She defines trauma thus: “Trauma, from the Greek meaning ‘wound,’ refers to the self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury, and harm” (Gilmore, 2001, 6). Gilmore also considers Freudian definitions of the consequences of trauma:

It is worth taking a moment here to point out the double meaning of trauma in Freud, which surfaces in Brown and Haaken: it may signify either a new wound or the reopening of an old wound. The relation between the wounds, and the extent to which trauma can be understood as repetition, raises an important question: where does harm done in the past end? The power of trauma to outlast the duration of its infliction is crucial to the sense of wounding that makes the term so resonant. For example, as an historical

event the Holocaust is over, but its power to harm is not. Slavery no longer exists in the United States, but the wound it represents has not healed. Certain historical harms as well as injuries done to children suit the double meaning of trauma especially well. (27)

In the experience of individual trauma, the subject forgets so as not to experience the pain of the trauma, yet unknowingly repeats painful experiences so as to come to terms with the initial forgotten event. Furthermore, young children who experience trauma often do not have the language to name their experience. In *Traumatic Stress*, Bessel A. Van Der Kolk, Lars Weisaeth, and Onno Van Der Hart state that “The memory traces of the trauma linger as unconscious ‘fixed ideas’ that cannot be ‘liquidated’ as long as they have not been translated into a personal narrative; instead, they continue to intrude as terrifying perceptions, obsessional preoccupations, and somatic reexperiences such as anxiety reactions” (van der Kolk *et al.*, 1996, 52). In order to tell stories of trauma, victims must find receptive audiences. But often society may not be ready to either listen or empathize with the victim’s overwhelming emotions. Alexander C. McFarlane and Bessel A. van der Kolk maintain that

Although people are capable of profound bursts of spontaneous generosity to victims as victims of acute trauma, the continued presence of the victims as victims constitutes an insult to the belief (at least in the Western world) that human beings are essentially the masters of their fate. Victims are the members of society whose problems represent the memory of suffering, rage, and pain in a world that longs to forget. (1996, 28)

Healing entails narrating a repressed memory and having a sympathetic listener. More concerned with the reworking of fictional narratives to deal with trauma, Gilmore maintains that “narrative, with the requirement of what I would call here a good-enough listener, is necessary” (2001, 31). Any traumatized subject who wishes to construct a healing narrative, whether therapeutic or fictional, must first piece together the fragments of his/her repressed memory.

In his introduction to Maurice Halbwachs’s *On Collective Memory*, Lewis A. Coser presents Halbwachs’ distinction between autobiographical and historical or collective memory:

He [Halbwachs] develops a sharp distinction between historical and autobiographical memory. The first reaches the social actor only through written records and other types of records, such as photography. But it can be kept alive through commemorations, festive enactment, and the like. ... Autobiographical memory, on the other hand, is memory of events that we have personally experienced in the past. (Coser in Halbwachs, 1992, 21, 22)

In either case, recollection alters the past to give it coherence and is shaped by concerns of the present (Halbwachs, 1992, 183). Furthermore, individual memory relies on collective memory for its conception: “We can remember only on condition of retrieving the position of past events that interest us from the frameworks of collective memory” (Halbwachs, 1992, 172).

In the 1960s, most Pedro Pan children experienced their exodus as an individual event – as a traumatic rupture between themselves and their parents – and were not conscious of having participated in a larger historical event. In the prologue to her book *Operation Pedro Pan*, Yvonne Conde explains that after reading Joan Didion’s *Miami* in 1990 she found out that more than 14,000 children had been airlifted to Miami. Herself a Pedro Pan, she exclaims: “How could there have [been] such a mammoth exodus of Cuban children, and I had never heard of it?” (Conde, 1999, xxii). Only later, as adults, were children able to contextualize their recollections within the framework of the collective memory of the Cold War between Cuba and the United States. Only then did they realize that their suffering did not stand in isolation. This disconnectedness between individual and collective memory encouraged forgetting. Torres’s work falls within the scope of Halbwachs’s definition of collective memory, which relies heavily on historical archives. She works within the political science discipline reexamining the past in the context of a present, viewing US and Cuban involvement in Operation Pedro Pan with a critical eye. By reconstructing a collective memory that had been made secret by government policies, Torres allows the validation of individual memory.

“A shared history between Cuba and America”

Cuban American playwright Melinda López writes a play based on the individual story of her aunt’s traumatic memory of her Operation Pedro Pan experience by also contextualizing it in the historical present. Her adult character Sonia begins to remember and reconstruct her past in the 1960s only when she is faced with her own separation from her son Zak who chooses to fight in Afghanistan in the early 2000s. A family crisis in the present allows the memory of Sonia’s trauma to resurface and be narrated coherently. Melinda López’s play *Sonia Flew*, written as part of the Huntington Theater’s Calderwood Fund for New American Plays in Boston, was directed by Nicholas Martin for its world premiere at the Huntington Theater Company in Boston, MA, in November 2004. López states: “*Sonia Flew* is important to me because it touches on a shared history between Cuba and America, and is about being Cuban and American at the same time” (Huntington Theatre Company Playbill, 2004).

I proceed with the analysis of *Sonia Flew* in light of two questions posed by Gilmore and Torres. Gilmore asks: “[W]here does harm done in the past end?” (2001, 27). Torres asks: “Where is the boundary between the private and the

public, and how can this be defined to protect and ensure children their rights?” (2003, 260). Melinda López engages such questions in her play, which was the winner of the Best New Play and Best Production given by the Independent Reviewers of New England in 2004, and the Elliot Norton Award for Best New Play in 2004. The publication of the script is pending with the Dramatists Play Service.

In her two-act play, Melinda López presents two moments of family crisis as a result of political events in Cuba (in Havana, 1960) and the United States (in Minneapolis, 2001).

The first act presents an adult Sonia faced with her son’s desire to join the Marines during the Afghanistan conflict. Sonia, a successful attorney in the Public Defender’s Office, is married to a Jewish-American man in the Midwest, and is a mother to two children: her son Zak and her daughter Jen. The second act looks back on Sonia as a teenager wishing to be involved in Castro’s revolutionary literacy campaign, just before her middle-class parents send her to the United States. As a 15-year-old in Cuba, Sonia falls in love with a young revolutionary and they hope to travel together to Cuba’s interior to participate in the literacy campaign. Her mother and father disagree over whether to allow her to do so. Her father Orfeo, a college professor who is ultimately jailed and executed, advises her out of fear to participate in the revolution as a way of surviving. Her mother Pilar is completely opposed. Thus, López stages the conflict the parents face. In the case of *Operation Pedro Pan*, parents were placed in untenable situations in which they needed to protect their right to educate their children, but knew that such “protection” would break the family unit and, at an emotional level, break everyone’s heart. Herein lies the dramatic conflict. Pilar and Orfeo are torn emotionally but make an almost instantaneous decision in order to prevent the loss of their child to a government-mandated education. Unable to understand her parents’ decision, Sonia feels forsaken and abandoned.

Main themes of the play include issues of displacement, diaspora, and family reconciliation. At a more universal level, it deals with an individual’s loss of control over her own life and over the welfare of children at pivotal historical moments. The dramatic arc of *Sonia Flew* deals with human conflict through the relationship between forgetting and survival, and between remembrance and forgiveness. The first act stages the conflict between Sonia and her son Zak. Zak wants to act independently of his mother as he makes the decision to enlist in the Marines and fight for American values in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001. Zak’s father and grandfather support him, while Sonia confronts him with betraying her values against the violence of war. In the second act, Sonia’s conflict with her son forces her to recollect a similar scene of conflict in her youth. Through Sonia’s forgiveness of her parent’s decision at the end of the play comes her own ability to trust others with her

past. Each act follows the character of Sonia as she deals with family and national crises so that her past may not infringe on her current life's decisions. By reversing the chronological order of Sonia's life, the playwright traces a dramatic arc that goes from conflict based on the repression of the past, to a realization of the need to remember. With the second act mostly placed in Cuba, both Sonia and the audience are able to confront the causes of her childhood trauma together.

The first act presents Sonia as a character who relies on codified behavior and the practice of traditional rituals in order to maintain order in her successful life as a lawyer, wife, and mother. It opens with the celebration of a *Shabbos* as Sonia's Jewish father-in-law arrives from Miami. Herself a non-practicing Catholic, Sonia has adopted Jewish rituals as the mother of the family. Every December, her children decorate the house with both Christmas and Jewish symbols. At the opening of the play, Sonia obsesses over the lack of ingredients for a traditional jello salad, this pointing to the character's need to lead a highly structured life. Could Sonia in fact be creating her own traditions in the United States to compensate for the fact that she has erased her memories of her own mother's family traditions in Cuba?

The first act also divulges both a personal and a family crisis brought about by Sonia's refusal to deal with a past in which she never forgave her parents for sending her out of Cuba. Her parents died on the island before she ever saw them again. Her father was executed for sending his daughter out and the mother committed suicide by drowning in the sea. As a consequence of not having dealt with her traumatic separation from her parents, Sonia recently experienced a panic attack while flying to a professional conference. Because of that, the family has stayed in Minneapolis instead of flying to Florida for the holidays as they have always done. The second crisis develops around Sonia's son's announcement that he will enlist in the Marines to fight in Afghanistan in 2001. At one point in the first act, Sonia declares to her son that she will never forgive him if he goes away, an echo of the words she repeated over and over to her parents when she was sent away from Cuba. To her parents she had said: "I do not forgive you. I will never forgive you. You have broken my heart" (López, 2004, 2.4.123). To her son she now states: "Because the truth is, Zak, if you go. If you go, I do not forgive you. I will never forgive you" (López, 2004, 1.5.52). This repetition marks Sonia's refusal to remember.

As a mother, Sonia often told her son Zak the story of Peter Pan. Zak expresses his bewilderment about a mother abandoning a child thus: "And one day, Peter got sad, and he missed home so much that he flew back there, across the ocean. He flew to the window of his bedroom. But his mother had locked it. And he couldn't get back in. I always used to wonder, what kind of a terrible mother would do that. Even after years and years, wouldn't you keep the window open?" (López, 2004, 1.2.23). In Cuba, at 15, Sonia's parents' decision to send her away precipitated her having to grow up too soon. She never forgave

her parents her loss of youthful illusion with regard to her first love and to her enthusiasm for the literacy campaign. In her mind, they had closed the window to the future she desired. Sonia declares that she's no longer theirs, refuses to say good-bye to her parents, and disposes of the family ring that ties her to generations of women. To survive, children such as Sonia are forced to forget the traumatic event and to grow up much too soon. Spencer Eth and Robert S. Pynoos define "a premature entrance into adulthood" as a principal manifestation of adolescent trauma. (Eth and Pynoos, 1985, 47). Sonia's failure to say good-bye to her parents represents her own attempt to gain control of a situation over which she has no control. Before she leaves she states: "After today, I am grown. And I am not yours anymore. Do you hear this? I am not yours anymore" (López, 2004, 2.4.120). At the airport, she emerges as a young woman who must forget in order to survive.

In *The Limits of Autobiography*, Leigh Gilmore defines the difficulties of remembering trauma: "Crucial to the experience of trauma are the multiple difficulties that arise in trying to articulate it" (2001, 6). Melinda López stages these difficulties in trying to articulate trauma in her play. *Sonia Flew* records the moments of adult Sonia's experiences with the fear of flying because of her refusal to articulate her feelings of having been abandoned by her parents. Sonia's trauma was caused by a lack of understanding, and perplexity as to why her parents would put her on a plane alone to travel from Havana to Miami. Because Sonia subconsciously refuses to remember the moment of trauma while leaving the Havana airport, her traumatic memory surfaces in flashbacks and fragments (Gilmore, 2001, 29). In spite of Sonia's motivated forgetting (Gilmore, 2001, 28) so as not to revisit a moment of pain and confusion, her memory has stored away the scene of betrayal and separation.

Many years later, a similar conflict between private and public spheres arises when she fears that her son will be killed in Afghanistan. Consequently, she's faced with the eruption of her childhood traumatic experience. Toward the end of the play, the adult Sonia remembers: "I stood in the tiny bathroom in the airplane – five miles over the sea – and out of my pocket, I pulled a handful of basil. And I threw it down the toilet. My ring. I took it off my finger, Spanish gold, from my great-grandmother's hand, passed down to me through a chain of pure love. And I flushed it away." And I said, "I do not forgive you. I will never forgive you" (López, 2004, 2.4.123). Because she refuses to forgive, she throws away the ring and forsakes the traditions of her mother's family. She forgets the scene in the plane where she betrays her mother's family line by disposing of the ring. She only remembers her mother having betrayed her, forgetting that her mother's decision needs to be contextualized by the national crisis brought about by Castro's pronouncements on education in 1961. According to Gilmore, "Remembering trauma entails contextualizing it within history. Insofar as trauma can be defined as that which breaks the frame, rebuilding a frame to contain it is as fraught with difficulty as it is necessary" (2001, 31).



Not until Sonia realizes the connection between her parents' private decision and the nation's political pressure on that decision will she be able to forgive. Because Sonia did not have a consciousness of this lack of separation between the private and the public domains regarding Cuban children, she could only blame her parents.

At the crux of the play lies the question of who makes the decisions regarding the future of a young person: the young 15-year old Sonia, the 19-year old Zak, or their parents. In the first case, Sonia's parents make the critical decision; in the second, Zak is allowed to do so after consultation with his parents, sister, and grandparent. As a backdrop to either Sonia's or Zak's ability to define their futures, lies a political crisis of nations (Cuba at the outset of Castro's revolution, and the US response to the Al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center in New York). These major historical events heighten the intensity of each family's conflict, conflicts that otherwise would be resolved within the family with much less tension.

The second act functions, among other things, to establish a parallel between young Sonia's and young Zak's predicament. Not having a choice between participating in the Cuban literacy campaign or studying in the United States became traumatic for Sonia because her parents' choice was made precipitously. Because of their choice, forced by the critical historical moment in Cuba, Sonia lost her parents, her language, her culture, and her country. Likewise, Zak's choice between continuing as a student at Brown University or enlisting in the US Marines implies the possible loss of life if he chooses the latter. In Zak's case, he makes the decision himself over a period of several months, with his father's and grandfather's support. In both cases, the play exposes a conflict of values between parents and children, a conflict that becomes critical in the context of a national crisis. In Cuba, Sonia embraces the new values of the revolution, which favors literacy and education for all its citizens, not just for the children of college professors, as in her own case. Her mother Pilar understands Sonia's enthusiasm, but anticipates the loss of Sonia's ability to carry on with the feminine traditions in her family. Zak feels a responsibility to protect the values of freedom being threatened by terrorism, while his pacifist mother would rather have him protect those freedoms at home where his life would not be threatened, and where violent means to resolution would not be used.

Because, in Minneapolis, Sonia has failed to deal with her traumatic leaving of Cuba, she disrupts the unity of her family by failing to respect Zak's and her husband's decision. Her husband even considers leaving her. In effect, Sonia tries to make the decision for Zak much as her parents had made a decision for her many years before, with catastrophic personal circumstances. Her anxiety resulting from a repetition of loss surfaces first as panic attacks, flying on a plane to a conference, and later as she deals with Zak's leaving for Afghanistan. Her anxious responses endure because she denies that past trauma can influence her present. She says, "It's all in the past and it doesn't have any relevance in my

life any more” (López, 2004, 1.5.49). But clearly, her past is erupting in her present emotional life. Her husband Daniel exclaims, “I see you there but I can’t find you. All this anger. Why?” (López, 2004, 1.5.54). Beyond her denial of the source of her emotions, Sonia refuses to share her experience of trauma with her son Zak, who insists on asking about it. In her own family life, Sonia anxiously anticipates the same cycle of rupture, separation, and loss that she experienced as a young girl. Sonia believes that she paid too dear a price for her enjoyment of freedom in the United States: “The things that I haven’t told you, Zak. There are things that I know about what freedom costs” (López, 2004, 1.5.53). Afraid of the pain involved in remembering and telling, Sonia refuses to share her past with her son Zak. Only when Sonia has a premonition that Zak is in danger in Afghanistan does she promise to tell her story.

To enhance the dramatic character development in the play, Melinda López mines the symbolic and emotional value of objects to illuminate Sonia’s traumatic experience. In the first act, a soliloquy has Sonia remember the moment of pain when she left Cuba on the plane. She refuses to say good-bye to her parents, but is conscious of the pain that her new high-heeled shoes cause her. She remembers throwing away her “Cuban” shoes because they hurt her feet. The image of disposing of the shoes so that she may walk alone without pain displaces the emotional pain of exile without her parents. In the first act, the adult Sonia remembers: “I had on a new pair, my first pair of heels. But they rubbed my toes raw. The blister burned so much, it’s all I could think about. I suppose I must have walked right by my parents” “and I took my shoes off there, and threw them away. They hurt me. And they were Cuban shoes” (López, 2004, 1.2.30). The emotional pain is displaced onto the shoes; she disposes of them and neglects to say good-bye to her parents so as to continue to function – so as to walk with and in freedom. Another more important displacement takes place, however. Sonia not only loses her shoes, she’s also aware of losing the ring her mother gave her on her 15th birthday – a ring handed down in the family from mother to daughter for generations. In the first act, Sonia is aware of having lost the ring, but it’s not until the second act, when Sonia’s past has been fully remembered, that she realizes that she herself disposed of the ring in the plane’s toilet. She did so as an angry response to her parents’ decision to send her away. The loss of her shoes allows her to walk in her new country; the loss of the ring represents the loss of family and country, but it also represents her rejection of her past in order to function in the present. The repression of this latter memory symbolizes the anger that surfaces as anxiety as the adult Sonia deals with her son’s decision to go to war.

The end of the second act, when Zak returns from the war injured but alive, records Sonia’s development from a professionally successful woman who denied her emotions and past history to survive a trauma, to one who is capable of acknowledging her trauma and telling her story. With remembrance comes forgiveness of her parents and reconciliation with her son’s ability to make his



own decisions in the context of the family unit. Because Zak demands his right to know and to make decisions, he helps his mother Sonia through her emotional crisis. Once back from Afghanistan, he suggests that they both return to Cuba. Once the windows are opened to the past, Sonia might be able to return in geographic terms as well, but an obstacle remains. The play ends with Zak suggesting that they go to Cuba together:

Sonia: We'd have to fly.

Zak: No, we could – couldn't we take a boat?

Sonia: A boat?

(López, 2004, 2.5.126)

Although Sonia does not make the decision to return, her open-ended question bespeaks the possibility of a return in the future. With a dialogue between the generations, with a teller and a listener, new alternatives arise. The ability to share information about one's past not only unburdens the teller, but opens windows to the listener as well (Gilmore, 2001, 31).

Expressions of human remembrance and reconciliation

With *The Lost Apple* and *Sonia Flew*, Torres and López have invited more than 14,000 former children, now adults, to look back at a shared trauma and acknowledge their loss and pain, and to acknowledge, as well, the high emotional price paid for the American ideal of freedom to choose. As Torres makes clear, Pedro Pan children like Sonia gained freedom of the mind at the cost of denial of their emotions. With *Sonia Flew*, Melinda López opposes denial with revelation, and lack of forgiveness with reconciliation and forgiveness. She also gives a chance to former Pedro Pan children to relate more openly with a next generation by confronting personal and national crises with awareness rather than denial. Both María de los Angeles Torres and Melinda López, in their analytic and artistic responses to Operation Pedro Pan, focus on the emotional well-being of children and young adults caught in the maelstrom of historical events. By revealing information about Operation Pedro Pan that was classified by US government agencies, Torres implicitly points to a collective act of repression that reproduces the wounding of the initial trauma suffered by Pedro Pan children as disenfranchised individuals. I restate Leigh Gilmore's question regarding the relationship between past and subsequent manifestation of traumatic wounding: "The relation between the wounds, and the extent to which trauma can be understood as repetition, raises an important question: where does harm done in the past end?" (2001, 27). According to Torres and López, it ends when the causes of the harm done have been disclosed in coherent narratives that expose society's investment in keeping those narratives silent. Through the process of throwing open the windows of national archives and individual narratives, these authors have tackled the conflicts of their Cuban

historical pasts so that they can better define themselves as a scholar and a playwright in the United States. Their works are excellent expressions of human remembrance and reconciliation.

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Professor Flora M. González Mandri teaches at Emerson College in Boston. Her teaching and research interests include Latin American, Latino and Caribbean Literatures and Cultures. With Rosamond Rosenmeier, she collaborated in the translation of the bilingual edition of *In the Vortex of the Cyclone: Selected Poems by Excilia Saldaña*, University Press of Florida, 2002. She is the author of *Guarding Cultural Memory: Afro-Cuban Women in Literature and the Arts*, University of Virginia Press, 2006. She came to the United States from Cuba as a child with Operation Pedro Pan.

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