

**The Elián González Discursive Template:
Mediating Children in Multiple Spheres of Conflict.**

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Abstract

The highly publicized Elián González custody battle of 1999/2000 was often treated as an unprecedented instance of one child's fate at the hands of state ideologues and media-apparatuses, this frame of reference determined by the Cold War standoff between Cuba and the USA. However such explanations do not explain why Elián's case—and the lessons it poses for understanding the conflicted mediation of childhood—continues to resonate widely years after his return to Cuba. We proceed by discussing the role played by the Elián case in rupturing the myth of Cuban exile exceptionalism, thereby ensuring that US Cubans became prey to the nativist discourses that have historically targeted other US Latina/o groups as “alien” irritants to the US body politic. We also attend to the media, popular-cultural and international cooptions of the Elián story, and of his childhood, in ways not readily explained by the US-Cuba nexus. Those cooptions indicate that the contests over children, citizenship and nation exposed by the Elián case have endured and evolved since 1999/2000. We argue that the Elián case has come to provide an adaptable, differentially applied, and contradictory template by which numerous border-crossing children have been pressed into symbolic service as “other

Eliás.” Their childhood, like that of Elián, emerges through the crisis-ridden interplay of patriarchal and nationalizing drives, the operations of media and popular culture, and the sociological pressures surrounding immigration. With this focus, we track Elián’s role as an enduring icon of disturbed citizenship in multiple sites of conflict, and analyse the evolution of the Elián discursive template and its applications in cognate custody conflicts centred on the border-crossing child as potential citizen.

Introduction

In May 2007, the USA's most widely circulated tabloid, USA Today, published its list of the top twenty-five "Lives of indelible impact" from the last twenty-five years. The people on the list

(B)lazed trails. They showed courage. They made us cry. They are the 25 on USA TODAY's list of people who moved us in the past quarter-century. Most are famous, but some are ordinary folks in extraordinary situations. Many became accidental leaders, even heroes, whose spirit enriched our lives. (Koch 2007).

Occupying first place were the "9/11 heroes," followed by such figures as Nelson Mandela, Princess Diana, Lance Armstrong, Pope John Paul II, the lone, unidentified "Man at Tiananmen Square," Mother Theresa, Oprah Winfrey, Muhammed Ali, and Steve Irwin. Coming in at number twenty-five, however, was the Cuban Elián González, his ranking justified by the following summation of his "impact:"

He was 5 when the small boat carrying him and 13 others escaping Cuba sank in 1999, killing his mother. He survived on an inner tube and was taken in by relatives in Miami. His father in Cuba wanted him back, and Attorney General Janet Reno ordered his return. When the relatives balked, armed federal agents stormed their house and found Elian hiding in the closet. He lives with his father. (Koch, 2007)

This laconic narrative does not begin to indicate the extraordinary mass-mediated fate of the child who, for six months in 1999/2000, centred a bitter international custody battle that generated enormous volumes of media coverage in the USA, Cuba and many other countries. Yet, USA Today's list does remind us that Elián was, and remains, the “world's most famous refugee” (as numerous journalists in 2000 dubbed him), if not the most mass-mediated child of the new millennium. Elián's case -- and the lessons it poses for understanding the conflicted mediation of childhood -- continues to resonate widely years after his return to Cuba.

In 2000 many media commentators explained the Elián affair as a historically specific instance of one child's fate at the hands of state ideologues within the context of the Cold War standoff between Cuba and the USA. That standoff, it was argued, explained the charged local coordinates of the custody battle, with the most antagonistic players being the Cuban state and people versus US Cuban exiles in south Florida, a location that embroiled the US state in the custody proceedings. In this essay, however, we push beyond such explanations in order to track Elián's iconic life beyond the Cuban-US nexus, and beyond the historical period of the custody battle itself. The Elián icon did not fade with the boy's repatriation to Cuba, and mass-mediating attention to Elián has continued since 2000. Our aim is to plot how Elián was made into an enduring icon of disturbed citizenship and a discursive model applied to cognate international disputes over childhood citizenship.

We begin by discussing how Elián's mass-mediated fate developed in line with the

resurgence of nativism vis-à-vis immigrant communities and the strident debates over the purported latinization of the USA. After tracking Elián's changing iconic function in that context, we attend to the discursive life of the Elián case since 2000, which suggests that Elián's disputed childhood has come to provide a malleable discursive template for explaining the fate of "other Eliáns," a term first used in the US Spanish-language press (Frievenh, 2000; Campa and Martínez, 2000). The presence of "other Elians" speaks to the increasing numbers of children in the Americas and elsewhere whose disputed citizenship status emerges through the conflicted interplay of identity-shaping discourses and the operations of media and popular culture. That interplay animates the "Elián" discursive template as a transnational, but contradictory, differentially applied, and protean resource for deployment in other child-centred moments of national crisis.

Mediating Childhood in the Re-productive Nation

The Elián custody battle in all its conflictive complexity illustrates how children function socioculturally as floating signifiers. Across the globe, children are asked to occupy multiple meanings for multiple audiences. But those meanings shift over space and time as part of the historical formations of nationhood and the nation. In Western societies, medieval constructions of children as an exploitable source of labour evolved into modern notions of children as precious commodities and embodiments of pre-adult innocence. Moreover, as the symbolic and biological reproducers of national citizens, women are often at the heart of tropes about the nation itself (Alarcón et al, 1999; Shohat & Stam, 2003; Zacharias, 2001). Consequently, children as the literal, figurative and

biological future of the nation -- literal national subjects in training -- embody the physical and symbolic ground upon which idealized and gendered notions of citizenship are fought. In the USA, for instance, underlying the on-going Culture Wars between social conservatives and progressive education activists over multicultural and queer inclusive curricula are competing constructions of children, citizenship and national identity (Molina Guzmán, 2002; Moeller, 2002). While social conservatives imagine children as empty vessels to be filled with the normative values, beliefs and knowledge that will produce a “good” US citizen, progressive activists claim that children are complex subjects who should be recognized and acknowledged for the unique life experiences they carry with them, experiences that may challenge dominant ideologies about citizenship and the nation.

The formative semiotic role played by contemporary media and popular discourses about children both activates and informs on-going contestations over the changing status of the patriarchal family, immigration, and the ethnically and racially homogenous nation.

Given those discursive struggles Elián’s mass-mediated fate, at least while on US soil, is unsurprising. As Sarah Banet-Weiser emphasizes, “The figure of the ‘innocent’ child has enormous symbolic value in America’s cultural, political, and economic history, and is often used to invoke and fuel political battles over the ‘fate of America’s future’” (2003, 153). Embedded in the US conflicts over Elián in 1999/2000, then, were rival, yet equally troubling, gendered and racialized narratives of familial definition and national futurity. Those competing narratives were evident in public opinion polls conducted in 2000, which revealed stark ethnic and racial divisions over the symbolic status of Cuban

Americans, with US Cubans on one side, and Anglo American, African American and non-Cuban Latinos on the other (Moore, 2000; Newport, 2000). These racialized divisions were fueled by competing notions of identity, citizenship and nation (Stepick et al, 2003). Elián became the ground upon which different groups fought over what it meant to be “American.”

In that definitional struggle, the historical formation of exile Cubans as a model constituency is significant. Since 1959, media narratives of Cuban exiles presuppose their location in a discourse of “model” citizenship informed by the privileges of whiteness and masculinity. That status was, and to a degree remains, in stark contrast to the “alienized” receptions of US Mexicans and Mexican immigrants, and the ambivalent “national” status of US-resident Puerto Ricans, the largest Latina/o populations. The favoured status of Cubans closely followed the Cuban Revolution of January 1959 with the flight of the island’s elite and professional, and largely white, sectors to the USA and other destinations. The persistence of the discourse is a public relations success of the Cuban exile political movement, and is bolstered by the association of exile politics with strong religiosity (Fernández, 2000; De La Torre, 2003), which melds with a predominant US discourse of nation and faith. In turn, the exile narrative is undergirded by the socioeconomic “success” of the Cuban community in South Florida and its attendant political influence at local, state and federal levels.

Despite ethno-racial faultlines within the US Cuban exile community, particularly notable with the less than favourable reception of the Marielitos in 1980,¹ since the 1960s

the US media has circulated a homogenizing vision of the Cuban exile community as politically conservative, law abiding, religious, patriarchal, economically dynamic and enterprising, white, and middle to upper class. That vision has also accorded Cuban exiles a pivotal role in defining the symbolic politics of Latinidades as marginal to US history.² The symbolic centrality of children in this narrative of “model” yet marginal community was established in the early 1960s with Operation Pedro Pan, by which parents opposed to Castro’s government sent their unaccompanied children (14,048 in all) to the USA (Torres, 2003, p. 2). US news accounts of the program published emotional photographs of Cuban parents tearfully saying goodbye to their children, as well as of young, unescorted Cuban children, most light-skinned and impeccably dressed, debarking planes in the USA. At the time, the media narratives surrounding the exiled status of these children served the USA’s ideological and symbolic goals by providing a dramatic visual iconography of Communist repression. Yet, popular support for the young exiles was tied to the belief that their presence inside US borders would only be temporary; Cuban exiles, whatever their age, would remain on the national margins as political guests (Torres, 1999). The narrative established with Pedro Pan that parents could, and should, sacrifice family unity for the sake of their childrens’ future has survived for decades as a Manichean logic of good versus evil, a religiously overburdened mode of exilic difference by which Cubans off the island regard their island counterparts (Fernández 2000; De La Torre 2003).

Thus, race and religious politics and the vestiges of Cold War foreign policies have shaped a contradictory set of immigration policies and popular discourses about Cubans

in the USA (McLaren and Pinkney-Pastrana 2001). Cubans, historically coded as temporary whites fleeing a political and economic crisis, a perception deepened by the 1989 collapse of the Soviet Union and a tightened US-imposed trade embargo, were generally guaranteed political asylum, and under the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act become eligible for permanent residency a year after their arrival. The so-called “wet foot, dry foot” law, a 1995 amendment to the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, more overtly distinguishes between Cubans (escapees from Communism) and other immigrants or refugees. The amendment means that Cubans who set foot on US soil, as opposed to being intercepted at sea, are automatically entitled to permanent US residency. By contrast, Haitian arrivals, fleeing the political turmoil that followed the 1991 military coup, are categorized as black, detained and subject to deportation as economic immigrants (Rumbaut, 1994). Similarly Dominicans and Mexicans are constructed as economic immigrants, with Mexicans in particular historically regarded as “alien” contaminants of the US body politic. Haitian, Dominican and Mexican immigrants are thus positioned outside the nationalized ideal space of whiteness (and blackness), while Cubans -- even Afro-Cubans -- are allowed to occupy a space of racial privilege in that racialized national idyll.

Elián and the Rupturing of Exceptional Exile Politics

In 1999 and 2000, however, US news coverage of the Elián case ruptured the romanticized and nostalgic narratives of Cuban exile by making evident more recent and racialized constructions of Caribbean immigrants, such as those surrounding Dominicans

and Haitians. Despite the increased numbers of Afro-Cuban émigrés and the economic exigency driving recent Cuban immigration, Elián's young age, male gender and perceived white racial identity initially conformed to prevailing Cuban exile discourses. Many US Cuban exiles, and political organizations such as the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), which played a leading role in the "Save Elián" campaign, were invested in foregrounding Elián's status as a temporary political exile, and thus as unthreatening to the established political, cultural and racial order (Molina Guzmán, 2006).³ As Torres claims, the intensity of US Cuban responses to Elián reflected how his predicament evoked communal and personal memories of Operation Pedro Pan (2003, p. 2), his bodily and symbolic presence thus reaffirming the purported historical continuity of the US-friendly communal exile narrative itself.

In 2000, then, political leaders in the Miami exile community and the US Cuban news press gambled that Elián's whiteness would insulate and secure him within the realm of exilic Cuban exceptionalism. The gamble failed. Elián's racial privilege was reframed by the general-market media in the broader national context of a backlash against undocumented Latina/o, predominantly Mexican, immigrants. The standard practices of US general-market journalism thus produced a news coverage grounded in the normative standards of objectivity implicitly informed by whiteness (Schudson, 2003). News coverage located US Cuban exiles, and therefore Elián, in relation to anti-immigration discourses that operated through two strategies: the construction of US Cuban actions as outside the law, and the construction of US Cubans as (brown) ethnic and racial outsiders. For instance, The Miami Herald published numerous news stories during the

Elián affair about the protests or threats of protests by Miami Cubans. Noting Miami's simmering racial tensions, one columnist suggested "the Cuban community's inability -- or lack of desire -- to build bridges of understanding and respect with non-Cubans has come to haunt them" (Steinback, 2000a). Elsewhere the same writer stated: "Non-Cubans resent the powerful economic, social and political machine that Cubans built here -- one that virtually excludes them. Cubans, justifiably proud of their achievement, feel little obligation to invite others to the party" (Steinback, 2000b). Other news stories highlighted the longterm divisions between Cubans and African Americans, implicitly countering the narratives of exception and temporary citizenship circulated by Cuban exile leaders.

Like the national general-market media, such stories characterized US Cuban exiles as hyperemotional and ultra-religious, if not fanatical and irrational. These characterizations reified stereotypes about Latina/os as religious, hotheaded and passionate, and socially, politically and economically disruptive (Molina Guzmán, 2005; Molina Guzmán and Valdivia, 2004; Vargas 2000). As the new symbolic representative of the Cuban exile community, Elián became caught in the anti-immigration backlash whose contours complied with dominant definitions of a racially binarized white/black national identity. Miami Cubans were no longer represented as racially white political exiles, or as an exceptional community. Reconstructed as racialized ethnic and national outsiders who refused to assimilate into dominant definitions of US citizenship and belonging, US Cubans' were blamed in the media for exacerbating Miami's racial tensions (Hernández-Truyol, 2001). Consequently, US Cubans became incorporated into some of the same

“alienizing” discourses that have targeted Mexicans and Chicana/os in California and the Southwest (Ono and Sloop, 2002; Santa Ana, 2002), and Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in New York and other northeastern cities. The Elián case fuelled a redefinition of Cuban Americans that enabled their integration by the media into the amorphous category of “Hispanic” as a problem national constituency.

Saving Elián, Recuperating the Patriarchal Nation

In Cuba, however, the patriarchal privilege surrounding Elián’s familial location paradoxically provided his family and state agents with a different discursive armoury. By foregrounding Elián’s young age and unique location in the heteronormative Cuban family, or *gran familia*, the Cuban regime activated a competing and compelling set of discourses about children, the family and the nation grounded in gender rather than ethnicity or race (Banet-Weiser, 2003; Martínez, 2003). Elián’s Cuban family, his grandmothers, father and stepmother, troubled the location of the child as a Cuban exile and, as a consequence, undermined the racialized exceptional ideologies of conservative US Cuban exile politics.

In the US English-language news coverage, Elián’s Cuban grandmothers maintained the narrative that the mother was forced by her abusive second husband to leave Cuba. They also highlighted the young Elián’s birth in Cuba and, by implication, his singular nationality as Cuban. For instance, Mariela Quintana, Elián’s paternal grandmother, scoffed at US congressional attempts to confer US citizenship upon Elián, claiming in

English: “‘He is born in Cuba. He is Cuban,’ she said. ‘And nobody has the right, [not] even Congress or the President, to change his status,’” (Bartholet et al., 2002, p. 31). Staking their ground as mothers with blood ties to Elián, and as Cubans with “authentic” living ties to their country, motherhood became the politicized terrain and the symbolic weapon in the battle over discursive authority in the news coverage. In that struggle, Elián was renarrativized into Cuba’s native and prodigal son, and remade into an icon of resilience and renewal for a regime and state grappling with the economic downturn following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, an era in Cuba known as the Special Period in a Time of Piece (Período especial en tiempo de paz).⁴ The investment of such revolutionary and ideological capital in and on Elián is clear from one anthology of Cuban press writings, Batalla por la liberación de Elián González (Madan, 2000). The book’s title emphasized that Elián’s “liberation” required his “rescue” from the imperialist-capitalist US state. That rescue would affirm the validity of the “Battle of Ideas,” Castro’s term for the “return Elián” struggle and how its successful conclusion would provide a symbolic focus for Cuba’s new post-Soviet, direction.

More subtle than the Cuban state’s recourse to the rhetoric of an ideological “battle” was its emphasis on Elián’s youthful position in the heteronormative Cuban family. This enabled the Cuban state’s recuperation of his mother as a lost daughter whose son should be returned to his rightful family and national home. That position was adopted late in 1999, and thus early in the case, by a roundtable of Cuban child psychologists and psychiatrists (Báez et al., 1999). Cuba itself was inserted into the news text as a mother figure, and the voices of those who abandoned her were marked as inauthentic, as

national traitors, and as homeless and motherless. This rhetoric provided a counter media image to US Cuban exile arguments that defined Elián as a family-less child requiring political protection from repressive Communism. Images and general-market news stories in the USA that focused on Cuban citizens and Elián's family in Cuba proved powerful because they appropriated and reified the US family values discourse, while also shifting public attitudes towards Cuban exiles as permanent brown, rather than temporary white, citizens.

The patriarchal logics underlying Cuban exile and Cuban island claims on Elián began to collapse because of the weight both sides gave to the function of the maternal in the preservation and survival of the rival national units Elián was said to centre. According to María del Carmen Martínez, the incoherence of these combative logics was evident in “the use of gendered metaphors to advance and defend contradictory nationalistic claims both on the left and on the right -- metaphors that ultimately define and reduce women to their reproductive position” (2003). Elián's mother died trying to “save” him from Communism, thereby making her at once a good mother (sacrificing herself for her son) and a bad one (endangering her son; abandoning the Cuban motherland). Elián's distant cousin, Marisleysis, who adopted a surrogate maternal function on Elián's arrival in Miami, was celebrated as a “a virgin-mother in exile,” yet admonished for being a “harlot hysteric,” the latter position adopted not only in Cuba but in the US media, which avidly reported her many health breakdowns (Martínez, 2003; Molina Guzmán, 2005). At the same time, Elián's father was dismissed by Cuban exiles as an emasculated, brain-washed puppet of the sinister patriarch, Fidel Castro. He was also dismissed as being in

league with Clinton, the antithesis of a good husband and family man. Yet in Cuba, Elián's father and Castro were presented as ideal paternal agents of the nation in a discourse that was presented carefully as an unthreatening Cuban version of the US cultural paradigm of national family values (Báez et al, 1999). The differential treatments accorded to the maternal and paternal embodiments of the split Cuban nation thus confirmed the slippages inherent to attempts at anchoring Elián in his proper, singular national place.

The Mass-mediation and Cultural Appropriation of Elián

Despite Elián's iconic cooption by rival and contradictory discourses of the nation, neither Havana nor Miami, nor Washington, could contain the mass-mediated and popular-cultural circulations of the Elián signifier. The Elián case exposed the tenuousness of patriarchal national claims over him as a putative and singular "national" subject. Cuban American author Achy Obejas, for instance, chronicled how the Elián affair became a hot topic in her exile family, the competing passions and rages the case inspired serving as a catalyst for familial and relationship breakdown, and for political differences among Cuban Americans to erupt into public view (2000). Rival national claims over Elián were weakened further by the evolution of the case into a hypermediated event, and by popular-cultural appropriations of the Elián icon in ways not explained by Cuban-US antagonisms, or by orthodox imaginaries of national community. In the performance-fable, to name one example, "With What Ass Does the Cockroach Sit?" (2004), by the Cuban American Carmelita Tropicana, national

orthodoxies are queered. This is evident in the performance's detailing of Elián's miraculous rescue at sea by two dolphins, whose subsequent attempt to adopt him, and thus give him "two mamis," is vetoed rudely by sharks. The proposal here of an alternative "queer" Elián story was never countenanced by the various claimants in the custody battle. But the proposition is in keeping with Carmelita Tropicana's career-long exilic aim to challenge heteronormative and masculinist ideals of cubanidad (Cubanness) irrespective of their location or origin.

If Carmelita Tropicana's reworking of the Elián story confirms that a notable feature of the Elián icon's circulations was its extraordinary lack of resistance to continual cooption and renarrativization, that process was also facilitated by the barrage of media coverage about Elián produced in the USA and picked up by the international media. The Washington-based Center for Media and Public Affairs (2000) which tallies the news output from the three largest US English-language TV networks, claimed that only the O. J. Simpson case generated more coverage to date about a non-political figure in US history. Across the USA Elián's case inspired heated popular debate in the print media, television, radio, the internet, homes and the street about numerous issues: family values; immigrant rights and ethnic tensions; media voyeurism and consumption; justice, democracy and citizenship; family custody, immigration and international law; media ethics; the "American" mythos itself; and the operations of popular and national culture. Paralleling the astonishing volume of coverage and analysis was the construction of Elián into an enduring pop-cultural icon. Numerous websites, works of fiction, films, performances, music, art works, clothing, car-stickers, and TV shows such as South Park,

reacted to and dealt with the Elián case, in some cases reconfiguring Elián into new comic form (Allatson, 2004).

At times, the comicality of cultural responses to the Elián affair was unintended. Guyana-born, Canadian-resident Frank Senauth's vanity novel, A Cry for Help: The Fantastic Adventures of Elian Gonzalez, features Rachel, a white witch and student of writing, who travels back in time in order to save Elián's mother and her fellow travellers from drowning in the Florida Strait. Rachel's efforts ensure that the boat's occupants find safety on a US Coast Guard vessel. Convinced of divine intervention Elián's mother speaks for her fellow survivors when she applies "for political asylum in your great country, the USA" (2000, p. 65). Its narrative idiosyncrasies aside, the novel is of note for tapping into an aspect of the American Dream mythos, and physical access to it, which is often overlooked in the USA. That is upholding and perpetuating the Dream is not a US preoccupation and enterprise only. Millions of people in the Americas and across the world invest their lives, futures and desires in that mythos, and its material promises. For Senauth the Elián story is not explicable as a mere hot moment in the history of Cuban-US antagonisms. Rather, it becomes a myth-bearing tale that epitomizes the American Dream in all its contradictions. The sacrifice of Elián's mother in trying to get her son to "America" reenacts the traditional Dream teleology. Elián's return to Cuba, however, is legible either as the Dream's failure and illusoriness, or as a morality tale of someone whose access to the Dream was foreclosed by anti-Dream forces, hence Senauth's licence in fictionalizing an Elián journey that culminates safely, and permanently, in the desired mythic destination.

Other Elián cooptions foreshadowed future national and international insecurities. In one notable trend, Elián became the focus for speculation on the conspiracies purportedly perpetrated by the media and government alike. Michael John's self-published Betrayal of Elian Gonzalez casts Elián as the victim of the Castro-Clinton "monster" in transnational league with the Communist-dominated world media (2000, p. 143). Such rhetoric became more extreme after 9/11, 2001, on a spate of fundamentalist Christian websites that redefined the Elián story as the first salvo in the new-millennial war on terror. On pages loaded onto Revlu.com in 2002, for example, Elián is mourned as the beleaguered Christian world's poster-child, the archetypal victim of the terrorist threat now confronting the USA and its allies. Interpreting Elián's repatriation to Cuba in light of Biblical prophecies about the Final Judgement, the website proposes that Elián's fate typifies how "The satanic spirit of Jihad is moving close to our shore" via Cuba (Without a trial, 2002). Such rhetoric is in keeping with that adopted since Elián's repatriation by Cuban exile political organizations, including the CANF, and by the Bush Republican administration.

In George Miller's film *Happy Feet* (2006), to mention a more recent Elián reference, the "Latino" penguin Ramón (voiced by Robin Williams) has a conversation with his friends that riffs from "alien" to "Elián." This citation confirms that Elián's name continues to register in popular-cultural texts as a sign of how ontologically fraught the conflicts over displaced or border-crossing children can be. There is a media-historical lineage here as well, as John Carlos Rowe notes: "In the U.S. mass media, Elián's name was routinely

mispronounced to sound like alien, reinforcing the many different borders he had not only crossed, but threatened” (2002, p. 196). The transformation of the Elián-as-alien affair into a globally recognized hyperevent, and of Elián into a pop-cultural icon, clearly transcended the ideologically charged borders between Cuba and the USA.

The “Other Eliáns”

In “Happy Feet,” the “Elián/alien” conjunction is played for tangential laughs, but in doing so the film reminds audiences how centrally Elián figures in ongoing debates over immigration, and immigrant children, in the USA. Since the late 1980s media and popular cultural debates about documented and undocumented immigrant children reveal a bifurcated attitude to such children and their citizenship potential. Children, especially Latina/o children, are defined as innocent, empty vessels requiring protection as they wait to be filled with the values, beliefs and practices of the receiving nation. Yet they are also regarded as already formed threats to the imagined stability of the sending and receiving nation-state alike. The symbolic functions attached to immigration children as contested embodiments of citizen potential, are also of note for adapting to changing historical conditions. In the USA and many other states the events of 9/11 2001, and subsequent pursuit of the “War on Terror,” have provided an ideological climate in which flourish nativist viewpoints that regard immigration and terrorism as cognate, and twined, threats to the national body politic. In this setting, the custodial battle between the USA, US Cuban exiles over Elián, therefore, was always symptomatic of wider discursive and historical-material struggles and anxieties over immigrants and their reception. Those

receptions and anxieties backdrop the Elián icon's evolution into a "living" template—the "other Eliáns"—by which numerous other cases of transborder child custody conflicts have been compared and mediated.

The term "other Eliáns" (los otros Eliánes) was first used in the US Spanish-language press in early 2000 (Frievenh; Campos & Martínez). Since that time numerous "other Eliáns" have garnered media attention, and not simply in the USA. The term "other Eliáns" has been used respectively to designate the Pedro Pan children sent from Cuba to the USA in the early 1960s. As María de los Angeles Torres, herself a Pedro Pan refugee, describes the connection in terms of "the origins of exile—where Operation Pedro Pan is the principal metaphor for the flight—from a regime so oppressive that parents were willing to send their children into exile alone, not knowing whether they would ever be reunited" (2003, 2). Yet another Pedro Pan refugee, Carlos Eire, provides a postscript to his autobiography Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy, in which he defines himself as Elián avant la letter (2003). Gigi Anders makes similar connections when chronicling how the Elián case threatened to end her relationship with her Anglo-American partner: "Don't you get that I saw myself in little Elián? It's the story of so many Cubans" (2004).

Beyond its applications among US Cubans, the term "other Eliáns" has also been used abstractly to define lone immigrant children who have yet to cross state lines, as well as thousands of children who do cross state lines, attract media and legal attention, and yet are repatriated without their names reaching public discourse. The generous comparative

application of “Elián” to cognate cases is illustrated by three news headlines from 2000: “Elián’s peers treated differently” (Baldauf), “Not all get the Elian treatment” (Goering), and “No room for 5000 Elians.” The rhetorical linking of Elián González to “other Eliáns” was a complex affair, and was often intended to highlight the special treatment accorded to Elián (before his return to Cuba) when compared to the repatriated fate of thousands of other children who were not Cuban-born.

During the same timeframe as the Elián news coverage, print and television journalists covered several stories emphasizing the racial and ethnic politics of differential immigration policies toward other children from Latin America and the Caribbean. As Anne Teresa Demo demonstrates with regard to Haitian children refugees in south Florida, explicit links were made between nearly all such cases and Elián (2007). Contrasting the warm reception of Cuban children during Operation Pedro Pan, a Christian Science Monitor (Baldauf, 2000) report focused on the impending deportation of a young Honduran boy, Eber Sandoval Andino (the “Honduran Elián”) with no living relatives in the USA or Honduras. The experiences of two deported children, a Mexican girl Elizana González (McGirk, 2000), and a Guatemalan boy, David Juan Sebastian (Gonzalez, 2000), were again read through the lens of the Elián affair. A few months after Elián’s return, The New York Times (Bragg, 2000) published a front-page story about undocumented Haitian immigrants faced with deportation and separation from their US-born children, the latter legal US citizens by virtue of their birth in the USA and thus entitled to remain in that country.⁵

In light of such cases, Demo proposes that the Elián affair established a new media template by which news stories not directly related to the case proliferated from, and because of, its enormous hypercoverage and status as a “news spectacle.” Demo’s term, the Elián “afterimage,” refers specifically to the ways that the Elián story provided the trigger or newspeg for legitimating secondary stories about immigration disputes and custody cases (2007, p. 35). The Elián afterimage generated stories that either plotted the fate of other immigrant children in direct relation to Elián’s story, or that foregrounded Elián’s story only to emphasize the different immigrant-apparatus treatment received by other children. So powerful was the Elián news spectacle in generating afterimage stories in 2000, Demo argues, that those afterimages also include “a policy afterimage: the Unaccompanied Alien Child Protection Act of 2001 (S121/H.R. 1904), which was reintroduced in 2003 (S1129/H.R. 3361) by Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and Representative Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) after the post-2001 restructuring of INS under the Department of Homeland Security” (2007, pp. 44-45). As Demo notes, in her commitment to the Act Senator Feinstein not only reproduces the “narrative form featured in the [Elián] afterimage stories,” but refers explicitly to the Elián case as the key symbolic “referent for the legislation” itself (2007, p. 45).

Yet, if the Elián afterimage was an epoch defining media and legal legacy of the Elián case, as Demo convincingly argues, the case has been even more historically enduring and internationally influential than Demo proposes. Aside from the appearances of the Elián icon as a pop-cultural afterimage in numerous cultural texts, Elián-like debates continued to frame media responses to many new “Eliáns” after 2000. This discursive

reprise occurred with 5-year old “Danielito” (“The Mexican Elián” adopted by a Michigan family), whose destitute Mexican father sought the boy’s repatriation to Mexico in 2005 (“Danielito,” 2005). The disputed status of another “Elián,” 11-year old Linda Berrera Cano, a Mexican girl of indigenous Mixtec background living in Tennessee, extended the debates over rightful location by introducing the question of indigenous identity and rights into the mass-mediating forces that now attend international custody battles over children in North America (Dewan, 2005).

Elián’s name was also evoked in 2006, in the wake of the Immigration Rights marches across the USA. These, the largest protest demonstrations in the country since the 1960s, were notable not simply because of their size. Children were prominent participants, and many marchers bore signs in English and Spanish saying, “We are workers, not terrorists.” The marches confirmed the symbolic function of the “child” as embodiment of national futurity in the aspirations of innumerable undocumented workers. They also showed a canny redeployment by millions of immigrants of a child-centric US family values discourse in order to counter, and hopefully disarm, the immigration = terrorism equation. Since the demonstrations, newspapers throughout the USA have documented cases of “reverse-Eliáns,” our term for the increased deportation of undocumented Mexican parents and their difficult separation from their US-born children. One highly mediatized example of this phenomenon centred on 31-year old Elvira Arellano, who sought sanctuary in Adalberto United Methodist Church, Chicago, on August 15, 2006, in an attempt to avoid deportation to Mexico. Accompanying her was her 7-year old son Saúl, a US citizen. Arellano was deported to Mexico without her son on August 19, 2007,

after abandoning her sanctuary in order to attend an immigration rally in Los Angeles. Until then, however, Chicago immigration and police authorities refrained from arresting Arellano in case that action evoked the seizure of Elián in April 2000. But in this “reverse Elián” scenario, it was the mother, not the child, at the embattled centre of claims and counter claims as to national place and belonging.

The Elián story also reverberated beyond the Americas. In April 2000, after Elián’s seizure by representatives of the INS, BBC News created readers’ reaction sections on Elián on its “Talking Point” web pages (“Was Force Necessary?,” 2000). While most postings came from US residents keen either to endorse or demonize the Clinton administration for its handling of the Elián affair, the pages also featured opinion from dozens of countries. One post from Romania opposed Elián’s return to Cuba on grounds determined by the author’s personal experiences of life under a Communist regime: “Reuniting a family is an important thing, but one must also think of Elian’s ‘future’ in communist Cuba. Does anybody care what will happen to Elian in Cuba?” An American stationed in South Korea echoed those sentiments: “As someone who was stationed in West Berlin during the height of the Cold War, and a witness to what Communism can do, I am disgusted with what our government did with Elian.” A contributor from Vietnam took the opportunity to provide a terse assessment of the USA: “Using force is the American way to get democracy [sic].” A post from AIDS-ravaged South Africa noted how the Elián case had deflected media attention from the predicament of other “orphaned” children across the globe. And an ex-pat resident of Kuwait made connections between the case and the broader “problem” of immigration: “The Miami

Cubans seek to live in America, but are not prepared to obey American laws they do not like. Surely this is a lesson for all countries willing to absorb large numbers of refugees?”

The diversity of posted opinions revealed how Elián’s experiences were interpreted by other residents of a US-dominated global order, many of whom adopted the Elián icon for their own often ambivalent narratives of self and imagined nationality.

Similar local uses of Elián occurred in the highly public debates over the child in Latin America, typified by the intervention of Colombian Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez, who made use of the case in a New York Times opinion piece to bemoan the US embargo of Cuba, defend the achievements of the Cuban Revolution, and attack US foreign policy in the Americas (2000). The insertion of Elián into such local, regional and transnational narratives supports Flores’s observation (2000, p. vi) that geopolitical relationships beyond the Miami-Havana axis must be addressed in accounts of the Elián case, and, by extension, of congruent cases. Tellingly, in China, Elián made the top ten of the “Annual Celebrity Roster” for 2000, ahead of then US presidential aspirant George W. Bush.⁶ The explanation for Elián’s newsworthiness in China had little to do with the US-Cuban standoff. Rather, the case was adopted by Chinese authorities who supported Elián’s return to Cuba as a way of indicating their displeasure, but without generating international censure, at India’s refusal to return the fourteen-year old Ugyen Trinley Dorje, the Karmapa Tibetan lama who fled Tibet in early 2000, thus becoming “the Elián González of the Himalayas” (Cunningham, 2000; Zimmer, 2000).

Four years after the Elián custody dispute, in February 2004, the Taiwanese government stormed the temporary home of Iruan Ergui Wu -- the Taiwanese or Brazilian Elián, depending on the national media source -- on a court-mandated order to return the nine-year old boy to his Brazilian grandmother. Iruan Wu, whose Uruguayan mother and Taiwanese father were deceased, was, like Elián, left in the middle of a transnational custody dispute that first erupted in 2002 (Lin, 2002). The maternal grandmother in Brazil had legal custody of the child, but a paternal uncle in Taiwan, who claimed custody of the child during a holiday visit, refused to turn him over. After a three-year court battle, the Taiwanese government forcibly removed the child from the uncle's home, and Iruan Wu left Taiwan for Brazil in his grandmother's care as hundreds of Taiwanese tearfully waved goodbye. Overdetermined by public passions in Taiwan and Brazil, discussion over the child's fate was locked onto his surrogate function as an icon of national futurity, the literal stake in a discourse in which children are reified as reproductive symbols of singular national identity. In a canny repeat of the discourses of rival national community that fought over Elián, the Iruan case similarly exposed the cultural logics by which many commentators in Taiwan and Brazil regarded patriarchal and national authority as morally innate in the (male) child's person (Lin, 2002).

The Elián story, to which Iruan Wu's and numerous other cases have been compared and assessed, has come to be perhaps our era's most iconic representation of the semiotic role accorded to children in imagining the nation in locational and discursive crisis. These crises emerge precisely because the disputes over the child's custody and national status are inaugurated with the child's crossing of geopolitical, and other, borders. Yet the

conflicts at work in the Elián case also indicate powerfully how representations of children are ambivalently modelled in media and popular culture through an array of competing discourses: fatherhood, motherhood, gender, race and ethnicity, class, and nationhood. While the receptions, media treatments, and ultimate return of thousands of children to various countries of origin -- in the USA and elsewhere -- do not exactly follow the Elián story, Elián's name continues to be linked to many of these children. Such links make of these children an amorphous set of "Eliáns" whose individual familial and national stories are retold as congruent allegories of national crisis in both receiving and source countries. The Elián case was an unprecedented and yet typical instance of one child's mass-mediation and construction in multiple spheres of conflict. As a protean, malleable and cooptable template, the Elián icon and its attendant media, cultural, legal, and international afterimages continue to resonate widely in the contemporary epoch. Contradictory, differentially applied, and enduring, the Elián template appears discursively whenever certain border-crossing children are pressed into service as the symbolic centres of the reproductive family and national community alike.

Endnotes

¹ Marielito is the term for any of the estimated 125,000 Cubans who, during a temporary lifting of exit requirements in 1980, left Cuba by boat for south Florida. The Marielitos were demonized in the US press, with widely reported claims that Castro had simply emptied his jails and given the nod for the island's deviants (hard-core and petty criminals, and homosexuals) to leave. The mass arrival of the Marielitos, who were predominantly Afro-Cuban and working or lower middle class, challenged existing typologies of Cuban exile along race and class lines (Allatson, 2007, 155-156).

² For our purposes, Latinidad designates “the panethnic Latino/a identifications, imaginaries, or community affiliations that encompass, but do not supersede, diminish, or destroy, national origin or historical minority identifications” among US residents and citizens with origins in, or familial connections to, Spanish-speaking Latin American states (Allatson, 2007, 138).

³ For details of CANF’s involvement in the Elián affair see Bardach (2002).

⁴ The Special Period was declared by Fidel Castro in 1991, and appears to have ended, quietly, around 2004. A response to the economic downturn that hit Cuba with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the Special Period also coincided with the balsero (rafter) phenomenon, by which Cubans left the island by raft or small boat. Elián is the most famous balsero.

⁵ US-born children of undocumented parents, most Mexican or other Latin American, are often called “anchor babies” by anti-immigration advocates. Such children live with the threat of separation from their parents if the latter are detained and/or deported by immigration services. Current estimates of the USA’s undocumented immigrant population range from 10 to 14 million, with Mexicans accounting for some 60 percent (Passel, 2005, p. 1).

⁶ The Annual Celebrity Roster is maintained by the Language Information Sciences Research Centre at the City University of Hong Kong (www.rcl.cityu.edu.hk). The roster for 2000, its debut year, was compiled from analysis of name citations in the print media in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Beijing. In 2000, Elián ranked seventh (Hong Kong), ninth (Taiwan) and sixth (Beijing). In 2001, the list covered the “Top 25 celebrities with the greatest media exposure in those cities plus Shanghai (where Elián ranked sixteenth).

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