

Comments on “The Iconization of Elián Gonzalez”

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How is it, Marshall Sahlins asks, that truly ordinary people – say, an unemployed auto mechanic with an alcohol problem, a community-college dropout, and a janitor with an evangelical bent and a history of domestic violence – become historical agents? How was it possible that, for a few months in the winter of 1999-2000, the likes of Lázaro and Marisleysis Gonzales or Donato Dalrymple rose from utter, and possibly well-deserved, anonymity to a position where their whims and fancies came to impact the national and international politics of two states, Cuba and the U.S.? What was it that endowed the petty histrionics they enacted around an otherwise fairly unremarkable child custody battle with such truly extraordinary portent? Part of the answer Sahlins gives is that, for seemingly circumstantial reasons, the sequence of events in which they figured became widely readable not just as a storyline, but as the plot of a “good story” – one that almost immediately triggered a host of disparate, often mutually contradictory, but nonetheless synergistically productive allegories shuttling back and forth meanings between the private and the political, the cosmic and the mundane, the trivial and the truly transformative.

Clearly, what underwrote the fleeting passion and eventual redemption by oblivion of a six year old washed into the limelight of near-global attention on Thanksgiving Day 1999 (only to exit the stage of history, like a departing demigod, in time for the vernal equinox of 2000) was its conformity to a number of cultural scripts; a structure of the conjuncture, in Sahlins’s terms, that allowed for the condensation of a dense symbolic fog around an otherwise insignificant event. Enshrouded by it, little Elián’s fate became the elephant of History – eagerly groped by journalists, politicians, and other diviners who, in doing so, inadvertently fused widely divergent misapprehensions into prolific, and often momentous working misunderstandings. As a result, and to mention only a few examples, the American right found itself caught between the rock of family values and the hard place of rugged consumer choice, the Cuban National Foundation

faced an uneasy choice of expending its anticommunist political capital on the antics of the Gonzales clan, and Miami's Catholic archdiocese, reluctant to write itself into the script of a cosmic drama to begin with, found its eventual prayer vigils merging with the vigorous drumbeats emerging from the Afro-Cuban "casa de santo" on the opposite side of the street from the Gonzalez residence.

Whence, however, the motivations for such compounded symbolic cathexis? And what about the selectivity involved? Take the issue of timing. Surely, the fact that Dalrymple, the janitor-turned fisher of boys scooped up little Elián from his allegedly dolphin-guided inner tube on Thanksgiving Day might have triggered the writing of this particular part-event into narratives informed by, and in turn actualizing, "mythopractical" (to again use Sahlins's term) templates traceable to Greek, Christian, and uniquely North American sources. Yet the fact that Elián's final rescue/abduction by federal officers occurred not just on an Easter Saturday, but on Lenin's birthday as well (or Earth Day, for that matter), went unnoticed even in the Cuban press. Public symbols, we know, work because of their capacity to bridge different domains of experience – metaphorically conjoining the seemingly disparate, and metonymically narrowing the divide between the ostensibly incommensurate. But what is so conjoined or rendered commensurate, and how, is a question of a different order.

As David Carr has argued in response to Hayden White's postulate of an inevitable relativity in narrativistic forms of historical apperception, there may be something – and what it is would still have to be specified – that makes for a pre-thematic apperception of unfolding events as stories: a way in which we live our lives as potentially (or, at least, hopefully) tellable tales. But what is tellable in one cultural context may not be a story at all in another, and the way in which the buildup of literally dozens of culturally heterogeneous storylines reached a critical point of partial allegorical fusion in the Elián Gonzales case may hold a lesson for other instances of the fortuitous (or not so fortuitous) insinuation of one culture's plot lines into the story of another; as, for that matter, for the way in which relays between different, and seemingly finite,

provinces of meaning come to be constituted intraculturally. For someone like me who works on cultural phenomena often described as “hybrid,” “creolized,” or “syncretistic,” this is an intriguing question. Yet if syncretism, religiously speaking, is the issue here, we might well think of how the usually unremarkable, and often quite routine, intertraffic between disparate domains at times becomes constituted as a problem, or even only something worth taking notice of. After all, events, including symbolic ones, are events only under a description¹. They are, if you will, discursive structures that we collectively endow with the capacity to call forth material consequences. But the point is that we don’t just know them when we see them in an unmediated fashion. What journalists might call a “natural story” has nothing natural about it – except that it is “naturalized” on a metanarrative level.

What is at issue, then, is not just cultural constitution of agency but also the cultural specifications for its recognition: both what enables the individual making of history and the collective consuming of it – and that would include the experience of being interpolated into patently dubious, but contextually overriding, storylines from which “event” after “event” is generated as “historical output” irrespective of one’s own resistance to the seemingly relentless

¹ Think here, for example, of the infamous pamphlet alleging Castro’s need to sacrifice Elián to the deity whose avatar the boy supposedly was. None of this made any sense at all within the universe of discourse constituted by contemporary Afro-Cuban religion. But it undoubtedly jived with what every Miami Cuban knew: namely a story of the alleged sacrifice of white children to African deities (presumably for the benefits of elderly ex-slaves) that has long, in fact since 1904, been a staple of a peculiarly Cuban discourse on the relation between racial and cultural difference in the constitution of Cuban national identity. Now an exiled nation conceiving of itself as “white” in increasingly North American terms pegged its future to an involuntary child refugee (of sufficiently “Caucasian” appearance to satisfy even US standards) from a country ruled by the son of a Galician immigrant suspected of having allied himself with the mystical forces of “darkest Africa.” Contrariwise, the much-described Miami mural depicting (among many other things) Cuba’s national protectress, the Virgin of Charity of Cobre, hovering over little Elián and his inner tube – or, for that matter, Marysleysis’ raptures and the Virgins in the Totalbank Windex-smears – made sense only on the grounds of the suppression of a long history of the transplantation of Iberian traditions of “inventiones” to the New World, and their strategic appropriation by “racial others” – such as, in the case of Cuba’s national protectress, the African slaves of the mines of El Cobre who used a Mariolatric template to write the story of their freedom into the archive of His Catholic Majesty, and the Vatican. No syncretism here, or was there?

(mytho-)logic of the plot (we might call this the Janet Reno dilemma). By the same token, once the relays (multiple specifications) of such “stories” become uncoupled, its protagonists sink back into the oblivion afforded by predications of ordinariness. Thus in the end, and perhaps appropriately so, little else but Elián’s mountain of toys (and – one presumes – the SUVs the Gonzaleses bought) remain as relics of the child savior’s brief visit to Planet Miami.

By now, most everyone involved in the epic has exited the stage of history, or at least returned to the humdrum of regularity. Having lost his million dollar lawsuit against the Federal Government, Donato Dalrymple now lives out his calling in saving our “unborn brothers and sisters in danger of abortion,” as he stated on a Priests for Life website in 2001. Marisleysis Gonzales will by now have run out of the locks of little Elián’s hair she was selling for fifty dollars a strand on the internet in the summer of 2000. Bill Clinton has opened a law practice in Harlem, and Fidel Castro remains poised to survive yet another US president in office. Who wants to hear about that? In the end, perhaps consuming history is much like eating sausage: ultimately an act of faith, as Charles Beard once famously put it in reference to the historian’s craft. Surely a sobering thought. But one, as Sahlins reminds us, we might well want to seriously ponder lest we overlook the method in the madness.