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Boy exile turned saint: Elián Gonzalez as a contested religio-ideological symbol among cuban-american catholics

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

BOY EXILE TURNED SAINT: ELIÁN GONZALEZ AS A CONTESTED RELIGIO-
IDEOLOGICAL SYMBOL AMONG CUBAN-AMERICAN CATHOLICS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

by

IKAM ACOSTA

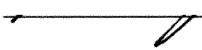
2001


To: Dean Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Ikam Acosta, and entitled Boy Exile Turned Saint: Elián Gonzalez as a Contested Religio-Ideological Symbol Among Cuban-American Catholics, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

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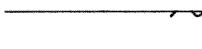
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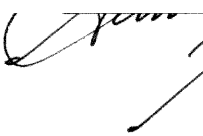
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my loving family, who has always stood by me and supported my efforts. I am eternally grateful we were placed on this earth together, in our search for the sacred. And to Michael, whose loving words have gotten me through the worst.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

BOY EXILE TURNED SAINT: ELIÁN GONZALEZ AS A CONTESTED RELIGIO-
IDEOLOGICAL SYMBOL AMONG CUBAN-AMERICAN CATHOLICS

by

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Florida International University, 2001

Miami, Florida

Professor Terry Rey, Major Professor

This Master's thesis explores the hypothesis that Elián Gonzalez functions as a religious and ideological symbol for Cuban-Americans similarly to La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. Both La Caridad and Elián are contested symbols among most Cuban and Cuban-American individuals, meaning both groups appropriate them toward their religious and ideological ends. The Virgin aids in the formulation of a collective identity for members of the Cuban exile community. Her shrine in Miami bridges the spatial and temporal gap between the exile community and the homeland of Cuba and represents the exile's hope for a return to a free Cuba. Elián functions as a metaphor of the Cuban exile experience, and thus a multi-leveled, transnational, religious and ideological symbol. In order to assess this, theoretical and journalistic materials are used, along with personal interviews and participant observation. This methodology is used to determine the function Elián serves for this community.

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INTRODUCTION

La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre functions as an important transnational symbol for the Cuban exile community in Miami, one with serious religious and ideological undertones contributing to Cuban exilic identity. This thesis explores the hypothesis that Elián Gonzalez functions as a religio-ideological symbol for Cuban-Americans in much the same way as La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. In an award-winning monograph, Thomas Tweed demonstrates how Caridad, Cuba's national patron saint, serves as a transnational, translocative, and transtemporal symbol, transporting the Cuban-American exile community back and forth between their homeland of Cuba and their host country of the United States.¹ She also represents the exiles' leading religious hope for the realization of a *Cuba libre* (a "free Cuba"). Caridad is thus contested transnationally, since the Cuban-American exile community in Miami appropriates her toward ideological ends that are opposite to those of the Castro regime. Since the regime's communist ideology has never permitted full exploitation of Catholic symbols in Cuba, Elián has emerged as an even more contested transnational symbol than Caridad for pro-Castro Cubans; in this case Elián represents a powerful counter-ideological symbol for the Castro regime.²

La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre is also contested interreligiously between the Roman Catholic Church and the Santería community. For Catholics, she is an iconic manifestation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, whereas for practitioners of Santería, she represents the Yoruba-derived river goddess Oshún. In either case, the symbol of la

¹ Thomas Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. James C. Scott coined the term "counter-ideological" in this book.

Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre aids in the formulation of a collective identity for members of the Cuban exile community, whatever their ideological or religious stance.

The Elián Gonzalez saga is rich in religious and mythological undertones, Cuban exile politics, and ideological discourse. The boy is said to have undergone the ultimate hero's journey, culminating in his rescue from sharks by dolphins, and later by unsuspecting fishermen. He has been likened to Jesus and Moses, and some sources report that he has been the focus of Santeria rituals. He has been claimed in litigation by both the government of Cuba and his Miami relatives, elevating a custody battle over a six-year-old boy into an international political drama that attracted global attention. Within days of his rescue, Elián Gonzalez was quickly transformed from a child fleeing Cuba with his mother into a symbol appropriated by both Fidel Castro and by the Cuban exile community in Miami. During the five months Elián was in Miami, from November 25, 1999 to April 22, 2000, there were numerous instances where people gathered to express their ideologies, both in Cuba and in Miami. The nature of these events ranged from political rallies in the streets to candlelight vigils laden with prayer and emotion. In Miami and in Cuba, every Elián rally became a ritual performance of an ideological stance. Many opposed the struggle to keep Elián in Miami to express their opposition to the city's Cuban power structure. The boy culturally became a multi-leveled, transnational religio-ideological symbol of extraordinary force, one of even broader relevance than Caridad—a symbol that is largely limited to Cuban and Cuban American significance.

For many Cuban-Americans the Elián controversy is viewed in a religio-ideological light reified by the mass media, suggesting that the situation extended far

beyond the issue of parental custody and created a space in which to contest politics, religion, national identity, and ideology. The Elián-Caridad connection was actually explicitly articulated in the popular exile mythology that developed during the saga. Some Cuban Catholics claim that it was la Virgen de la Caridad who had really rescued him at sea, as she had once rescued the three fishermen (Los Tres Juanes) who found her floating off the Cuban coast in 1513, as seen in her statuette at La Ermita, her Cuban Catholic shrine in Miami.³ It was no surprise, then, that there were reports of apparitions of the Virgin near Elián's Little Havana home, even one in the mirror inside the Gonzalez Miami home.⁴ Thus from the very beginning, the Elián story has been draped in mythological and religious symbolism. The sociological result of this, I argue, is that Elián functions in the same way for Cuban-Americans as La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre and is thus used and appropriated in sometimes explosively confrontational ways.

In some ways, Elián is the quintessential Cuban exile, since his story has been so religiously mythified, evoking more meaning to the collective community of exiles than the portrayal of the events the media has depicted. The story began with Elián's rescue at sea, but did not end with his seizure by the United States government six months later. It is still unfolding even in, for example, the Miami relatives' recent celebration of the one-year anniversary of his arrival to Miami, and his birthday shortly thereafter. The Miami home, moreover, has been turned into a veritable shrine, which is still daily frequented by visitors. (At one point, there was a painting displayed near the house depicting Caridad holding Elián at sea, surrounded by dolphins). News footage showing Fidel Castro attending

³ Ermita de la Caridad, 3609 South Miami Avenue, Miami, FL 33133. There is a snack bar outside the

Elián's birthday party back in his elementary school in Cuba was recently broadcast in Miami, much to the dismay of Cuban exiles.

This thesis employs contemporary theoretical interpretations of religion and the “new immigrants,” such as those of R. Stephen Warner and Robert Anthony Orsi, who have conducted sociological and anthropological research on immigrant religion in Los Angeles and New York, respectively. Anthropological and sociological research on immigrants in Miami also guides this inquiry, especially the work of Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick. A critical summary of Tweed's analysis of Cuban American devotion to Caridad del Cobre helps assess whether Elián Gonzalez functions as a symbol in the same way as does Caridad.

This assessment takes the form of a theoretical interpretation of data generated by interviews I have conducted among members of various South Florida media groups, religious leaders in Miami, and Cuban-Americans, focusing on the issue of contested ideological and religious symbols within a transnational context. This study also draws from extensive participant observation of Cuban-American religious events; a careful review of journalistic accounts of the Elián affair, as found in the *Miami Herald*, *El Nuevo Herald*, and the *Sun Sentinel*, South Florida's most prominent newspapers; and online accounts of scholarly journal articles and other national and international publications.

In sum, this thesis critically surveys the Elián story with a focus on the religious and ideological implications of the case, in turn comparing the functions of the Elián and Caridad symbols. The interviews and participant-observation that I conducted in the field,

chapel of the Miami shrine of La Virgen de la Caridad called “Los Tres Juanes.”

along with a critical media survey, constitute the substantive data under analysis, with the aim of determining whether Elián Gonzalez fits Tweed's model of a religio-ideological, transnational, and contested symbol for the Cuban diaspora (or exile community) in Miami.

⁴ The Gonzalez family home was located in Little Havana at 2319 NW 2nd Street, Miami, FL.

IMMIGRANT RELIGIONS

Religion aids immigrants in formulating a sense of identity by allowing them to maintain a connection with their homeland while grounding themselves in a new environment. Evidence of how this occurs is found in the traditional immigrant neighborhoods of more established cities such as New York as well as in the newer immigrant communities like Miami's. Miami's immigrant makeup is diverse, consisting of persons primarily from Latin America and the Caribbean, so its predominant religions are Catholicism, Protestantism, and Afro-Caribbean religions such as Vodou and Santeria. These systems of beliefs and rituals provide the framework for immigrants' approach to most aspects of life. Religion also functions as a means for immigrants to either establish or maintain a connection with their homeland. Certain imported values are reinforced in churches and religious services, which are also important for individuals to uphold in order to maintain a connection with their culture and form a community. Thus because immigrants have been displaced from their countries of origin, voluntarily or involuntarily, they often depend upon religion for a sense of identity and grounding.

Immigrant Religions and Transnational Symbols

While reasons why people immigrate to the United States widely vary, most are economic and political in nature. For example, in the 1870's, New York's East Harlem became home for thousands of Italians seeking to support their families back in Italy. By the 1820's, the neighborhood was mostly comprised of Italian immigrants. As a central part of their culture, they brought their religion, facilitating the transition from their

homeland to America, as demonstrated by Robert Orsi.⁵ Attachments to Italy would typically endure until the entire family was brought overseas to America. If some family members stayed in Italy, the immigrants would either travel back and forth or keep close contact with them until they were financially secure. In America, imported family and religious traditions were the heart of Italian Harlem, and to the first generation of immigrants, maintaining these were even more vital to them than becoming a part of the American culture. This formed significant cleavage between first and second generation immigrants, whose values and customs sometimes clashed, with elders clinging to their Italian upbringing while the youth felt they had to become American and thus assimilated.⁶

Our Lady of Mount Carmel is the patroness of Italian Harlem, referred to by Italians as “Our Mother;” her church is known as “mamma’s house.”⁷ As Robert Orsi describes it, she serves to bridge the physical and symbolic gaps between the new land and the homeland. Annual feasts in honor of the Madonna in Italian Harlem transpose the community back to Italy, and to the familiarity of the homeland. The Virgin becomes the focus of the feast, serving as the symbol and narrative for Italian immigrant myth. The feast of Mount Carmel (every July 15th) connects the first and second generations by passing on Italian tradition and identity from one generation to the next.

Miami is the setting for a similar story: Cuban immigrants also came to the US seeking freedom and a better life for themselves and their families. The 1960’s brought the first major wave of immigrants from Cuba, planting the seeds for what would

⁵ Robert Anthony Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 14-20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

eventually transform Miami into the “second Havana.”⁸ A second major wave followed in 1980, when the Mariel boatlift took place, bringing thousands of Cuban refugees to the shores of Miami.⁹ Many of the 125,000 refugees had left their families behind in Cuba, but unlike the Italians of East Harlem, most could not return to Cuba for fear of persecution. In their case, religion functions as a means of reliving the place they left behind and becomes a way for the displaced to formulate a collective identity in Miami.

The Cuban national patroness is the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre, or Our Lady of Charity. She is often referred to as the mother of all Cubans, particularly those in exile or those oppressed by the communist regime. Cuban devotees appeal to her with petitions for the healing of sick relatives and friends, and hence it is not unusual for individuals visiting Mercy hospital, located next to La Ermita, the shrine of la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, to stop by the shrine and make their petitions. Most of all, she is looked to by the displaced because she embodies the identity and struggle of this collective and serves as a national and transnational symbol among Cuban exiles. This is one of the central themes in the study of diasporic religions.¹⁰

Theories of Diasporic Religion

Much as the Madonna of 115th Street functions for Italians in New York, for Cuban exiles the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre is a national symbol that connects the displaced immigrant community to their homeland. Tweed discusses “place” in relation to

⁸ Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 107.

⁹ Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile*, 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

“mapping,” “meeting,” and “migration” when referring to his theory of diasporic religion. The theme of place affects Cubans, as well as other political exiles, in that when a people are unable to return to their land, they must map a new land that will serve as their home.¹¹

Tweed postulates that a meeting place where exiles can come together and share their culture maintains identity and solidarity for those in the diaspora. La Ermita, the shrine of the Virgin in Miami, serves as this place; here immigrants share their values and feel a powerful sense of belonging within the collective. Other immigrant groups, such as the Italians of East Harlem and the Haitians of Brooklyn, also create a religious space in order to express the culture and ideologies of the collective as well as to maintain their common values.¹² The feast of Mount Carmel in Harlem today serves as such a gathering place for both Italians and now for Haitians, who settled in New York half a century later. These groups come from different cultural backgrounds, but are nevertheless drawn to the same place by the symbolic importance of the annual feast. This meeting place serves as the diasporic center, where the dispersed can unite and communicate shared experiences.

Tweed’s theory of diasporic religion culminates with a discussion of the diasporic group’s shared language and symbolic bridge between the homeland and the new land. He argues that a common struggle gives the people a shared meaning, and it is the shared experiences of the group, not merely a common homeland, which contribute most to the immigrant group’s collective identity.¹³ He adds that a religious institution offers a sense

¹¹ Ibid., 136.

¹² Orsi, 164-5; Elizabeth McAlister, “The Madonna of 115th Street Revisited: Vodou and Haitian Catholicism in the Age of Transnationalism,” In Warner’s *Gatherings in Diaspora*, 131-9; Tweed, 136.

¹³ Tweed, 138.

of unity, “metaphorically and pragmatically,” in the diaspora.¹⁴ It offers members of the diasporic community ideological and psychological support as well as a channel into the civic community.

Diasporic religions, according to Tweed, are both translocative and transtemporal. In addition to symbolically transporting the individuals between two lands, they suggest the symbolic movement of the individual between the past, present, and “an imagined future.”¹⁵ He compares the functions of diasporic religions to the notion of *tirthas* (crossing places) of the Hindu, arguing that these serve as the symbolic bridges not only between the old land and the new land, but also to the past and the future.¹⁶ As symbolic gathering places, they transpose people from their current reality to an ultimate reality with which they can better identify.

Assimilation

Assimilation is “the process by which immigrants and descendants can become incorporated into the host society through intermarriage, adoption of host language and culture, etc.”¹⁷ Some of the immigrants’ original cultural identity is unavoidably compromised as a result of assimilation. Abusharaf explains how the Islamic Mission in New York facilitates, for Muslims of different nationalities, this transition from homeland

¹⁴ Ibid, 139.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 139-40. *Tirtha* means “crossing place.” It is referred to as a place of pilgrimage in Hinduism, or a “transitory place,” where certain groups go to cross from the profane realm to the sacred realm. Tweed suggests diasporic religions function as a crossing place to bridge “the collective past and future” as well as “the homeland and the new land.”

¹⁷ Karen J. Chai, “Competing for a Second Generation: English-Language Ministry at a Korean Protestant Church,” In Warner (ed.), 325.

to host culture by modifying religious practices to satisfy both, adding that this is not Americanization but an effort to modify one's identity to include elements from the homeland as well as elements from the host country.¹⁸ Chai agrees, stating that Koreans in Boston maintain ethnic identity through religion. Paxton Korean Church, in the Boston suburbs, works to bridge the gap between generations by incorporating elements from the homeland while gradually adopting elements from the new culture.¹⁹ The most important mechanism of survival for these churches and their immigrant communities is resilience and adaptation to the changes encountered during assimilation.

Immigrant Religions in Miami

Today, Miami's immigrant population consists mostly of individuals from Latin America and the Caribbean. During the 1950's, however, Hispanics comprised only 4 percent of Miami's total population. By 1980 this figure rose to over one-third, and by 1990 half of the citizens of Miami were Hispanic.²⁰ The Cuban Revolution in 1959 and the Mariel boatlifts in 1980 mainly account for this dramatic increase. In the interim, the ethnic composition of Miami has greatly diversified to also include Nicaraguans, Haitians, Mexicans, and West Indians. While the arrival of such a wide variety of immigrant communities in such a short span of time has led to power struggles and ethnic tensions within the city, it simultaneously has given Miami its uniquely diverse cultural flavor.²¹

¹⁸ Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, "Structural Adaptations in an Immigrant Muslim Congregation in New York," In Warner (ed.), 258. Abusharaf discusses immigrants from Morocco, Africa, and the Caribbean.

¹⁹ Chai, 296-301.

²⁰ Portes and Stepick, 211.

²¹ Ibid.

Immigrants from different nations import to Miami a variety of religions, the most common being Catholicism, mainstream Protestantism, Fundamentalist Protestantism, and Afro-Caribbean Religions such as Santeria and Vodou. These immigrant religions preserve the identity of a diasporic collective and ease the transition between the past and the present. Immigrants thus maintain the same religious symbols and practices they did in their homeland, and these become shared symbols and practices for the new diasporic community.²² Often through churches, diasporic communities in places such as Miami offer support for new immigrants and thereby contribute to the maintenance of identity and a sense of belonging in the wider immigrant community. Religion preserves the connection to the homeland while facilitating life in the new land. It situates the individual in a community that shares his/her culture, values and ideologies, and remains a source of power and support in a strange land.²³

General immigration theories and methodologies may not effectively apply to Miami's immigrant religions and the impact these religions have on the individual and the community because of Miami's unique immigrant makeup and sociocultural peculiarities. Miami's sociocultural structures affect deviation from patterns found in other immigrant cities, as for instance in Miamian immigrants' tendency towards biculturalism over and above acculturation. This "acculturation in reverse" secures the possibility of individuals maintaining their ethnic practices and customs instead of being forced to adopt the

²² Tweed, 85.

²³Stepick et al, 6. Several religious organizations in Miami have made efforts to integrate immigrants into the society, creating a safety net of support and guidance for various ethnic groups. One Methodist Mission in Sweetwater, Mision Metodista Unida- Chispa, for example, has a program that helps newly arrived immigrants find jobs and homes. Missionary Assembly Elim, a church in Kendall, has a free program offering basic job skills such as computer training and English classes for those who need them.

practices and customs of the host society, as has usually occurred in other immigrant urban centers.²⁴ Thus new theories need to be developed on immigrant religion in Miami, and this thesis is intended to contribute toward this.

²⁴ Portes and Stepick, 8.

LA VIRGEN DE LA CARIDAD DEL COBRE

The story of La Virgen de La Caridad del Cobre began in 1513 when some fishermen allegedly saw an apparition of the Virgin on the high seas off the Cuban coast. According to devotees, a statue of the Virgin was found floating in the water shortly thereafter by the three fishermen, known as Los Tres Juanes (The Three Juans)— an African slave, a mestizo Indian, and a white Spaniard. The different ethnic backgrounds of the fishermen represent the main ethnic groups found in Cuba, thus contributing to Caridad's status as Cuba's national patroness.

The fishermen picked up the mysterious plaster statue, which was eventually enshrined in Cobre, in the far eastern coast of Cuba. The statue depicts a Virgin holding a baby, mounted on a wooden base that read "Yo Soy La Virgen de la Caridad" ("I am the Virgin of Charity"). The statue was mysteriously dry. The name given to this Virgin literally means "Our Lady of Charity of Cobre," referring to the town, where copper (*cobre*) mines were located. The mythic story of the statue found by the three fishermen at sea in the bay of Nipe traces the beginnings of the cult of the Virgin of Cobre, a national patroness and protector of the Cuban people.

La Caridad is also known as "La Virgen Mambisa" by the Cuban people, since during the war of independence between Cuba and Spain (1895-1898) she was appealed to by *los mambises*, the proponents of Cuban independence leading the revolt against

Spain. “Veterans of this conflict successfully petitioned Benedict XV to proclaim her Cuba’s national patroness.”²⁵ Her followers affectionately refer her to as “Cachita.”

Because the communist government opposes religion, in Cuba Caridad takes on more of an ideological than religious role as a national symbol. As James Torrens demonstrates, at the time of the Marxist Revolution in Cuba (1959) and the Bay of Pigs (1961), Castro closed down Catholic schools in the country and forced religion underground, “to control the outlook of young people and convey [the government’s] revolutionary perspective.”²⁶ Another writer explains, “this situation created a reduction in the public practice of religion because not everyone dared to openly express their faith.... There were people who didn’t come to church, who didn’t practice their faith. But they were carrying inside their souls the Virgin of Charity (patroness of Cuba), whom they venerated in the privacy of their homes.”²⁷

At the time of Pope John Paul II’s visit to Cuba in January of 1998, La Caridad played an important role in the preparations for his arrival, which began on her feast day, September 8, “and drew on what is called the ‘gathering power,’ or *convocatoria*, of the Virgin of Charity.”²⁸ Torrens describes this phenomenon as a tactical step to bring those who had no knowledge of the Catholic religion closer to the church, since they would no doubt have some knowledge of this saint. He explains that even Castro, an avowed atheist, wears a medallion of La Caridad on his person.

²⁵ Timothy M. Matovina, Review of Tweed’s “Our Lady of the Exile,” *The Catholic Historical Review*, Jan. 1999.

²⁶ Torrens, James, “Cuba Awaits the Messenger,” *America* v.178, 1998, 5-7.

²⁷ Marc Alan Olshan, “Return of the Repressed,” *Commonweal* v.124, 1997, 10-11.

²⁸ Torrens, 5-7.

For the Cuban exile community in Miami, Our Lady of Charity is central to national identity. The Virgin herself is in exile, since her statue was smuggled out of Cuba in a suitcase and brought to Miami on September 8, in 1961.²⁹ She arrived just in time to attend a ceremony organized by Cuban exiles held in honor of her feast day, with a mass celebrated by Archbishop Coleman F. Carroll in a baseball stadium in Hialeah.

The Virgin's exile followed the pattern of many Cuban exiles since the 1960's. This community created a heroic myth out of the story of the Virgin, and her story became their story by personifying their struggle. The new myth had awakened certain values held in common by this collective, and a new identity had been created: that of the Cuban exile community. This new collective consists of a people nostalgic for a land they were forced to leave behind, but also entails the possibility of beginning anew. The story connotes fleeing one's homeland to come to a new place filled with opportunities and illustrates the persistence of a people and their ability to take on a variety of obstacles in order to adapt to a new way of life. Additionally, the story takes on a powerful ideological force in exilic anti-Castro Miami.

Tweed's Theory and Methodology

Tweed's *Our Lady of the Exile* examines the theme of religion, identity, and place for Cuban exiles living in Miami, while focusing on the "identity of the involuntarily displaced, or 'diaspora nationalism.'"³⁰ Matovina explains how Tweed "examines the shrine as a focal point for contested religious meanings and... as a hallowed center where

²⁹ Tweed, 15.

Cubans construct their national identity in exile.”³¹ Diaz-Stevens adds that individuals visiting the shrine are involved in “a process that creates a space where Cuban Americans can pray and construct an identity as a community in diaspora.”³² Tweed proposes a theory of “diasporic religion and its transtemporal and translocative symbols.”³³ In the five years he worked on this project while living in Miami from 1988 to 1993, Tweed was able to familiarize himself with the larger Cuban cultural context by listening to Spanish-language radio, making regular visits to the shrine, frequenting places with a largely Cuban population, and making acquaintances. Gaining a broader knowledge of the culture helped to situate his research into a more comprehensible framework. His methodology consisted of historical and ethnographic studies using information gathered on Cubans and Cuban-Americans from census figures, devotional letters written to La Caridad, documentary archives, survey protocols, periodicals from La Ermita and the Archdiocese, and other publications such as newspapers, books, and poetry. He also looked at material objects of the religious community such as key chains, holy cards, statuettes, and religious paintings; he believed that these objects reflected attitudes formulated by individuals about religion and place.

According to Diaz-Stevens, *Our Lady of the Exile* documents “processes by which a community designates a certain place as the occasion to evoke memories of Cuba and of Catholicism, entangling culture and religion.”³⁴ Tweed argues that while the shrine is a real physical space, it is also a discursive space in which the Cuban exile community can

³⁰ Ibid, 5.

³¹ Timothy M. Matovina, Review of Tweed, *The Catholic Historical Review*, 1999.

³² Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens, Review of Tweed, *Sociology of Religion*, 1999.

³³ Tweed, 5.

participate in worship and in the construction of a diasporic identity. Tweed's analysis identifies how elements of Cuban culture, history, and religion are "reconstructed to fit the Cuban exile experience in the United States."³⁵

National identity is rediscovered and confirmed through the exiles' interaction with such symbols, which hold immense emotional power because others have participated in the same process in the past. Tweed argues that these symbols and practices are dynamic, as is Cuban identity, since "nationhood is dynamic, not fixed, and created, not given." He mentions that for the exiles, this is especially true since they have been removed from their physical boundaries; the concept of "nation becomes deterritorialized. It is a supralocal or transregional cultural form, an imagined moral community constituted by the diaspora and those who remain in the homeland."³⁶

Cubans attend church more frequently in exile than they did in pre-revolutionary Cuba, which Tweed attributes to the Cuban-Americans' increased accessibility to churches and to the perceptions Cuban-Americans hold of the church being in opposition to Castro's regime. In Cuba, the church has historically sided with those in power or has remained silent. In Miami, the Catholic Church has had a history of helping Marielitos and other Cuban exiles adapt to the new host society. Tweed adds that suffering leads people to religion, which eases the confusion and distress of those individuals who are in crisis or who may feel disoriented.

Cubans are able to internalize the symbol of La Caridad because she is historically identified with the homeland by virtue of her title as national patroness. But the story of

³⁴ Diaz-Stevens.

this national Virgin is the epic quest of the Cuban exiles themselves. “As devotees in Miami now narrate it from the diaspora, the biography of the Virgin and the history of the nation are so connected that they seem indistinguishable... ‘Cuba and the Virgin are the same thing.’”³⁷ Her story is their story, and by being able to relate to this mythic journey, individuals are able to identify with this national Virgin as if she were one of their own. Building the shrine in Miami made it possible for individuals having the same story to gather at one place and share their collective experiences. At the dedication of La Ermita de la Caridad in Miami on December 2, 1973, a new sacred center for the Cuban diaspora was born. The internalized symbol of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre was externalized and contributed to the formulation of a collective identity for the members of this diaspora, independent of ideological or religious stance.

Most Cuban exiles ground their identity in a common ideology and struggle. This allows them to differentiate themselves from the rest of the Cuban community, especially those in Cuba, who have not necessarily subscribed to the same mythology. The point of view of the individual who is not oppressed by communism will greatly differ from the political prisoner who has left Cuba in hopes of finding freedom in a new land.³⁸ The making of a people requires a differentiation between that group and the general population. The “We” who have suffered, in this case, are separated from “Them” who have not suffered in the same way and thus would not subscribe to the same reality or the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Tweed, 85-6.

³⁷ Ibid, 32.

³⁸ We can see this in the differing opinions of Elián’s father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, who did not want to leave Cuba, and the Cuban exile community in the United States who believed any fate is better than returning to their homeland and its dictator.

same myth. The “We” becomes a people with a like reality and a shared ideology who adopt the same identity and symbols. This group is not necessarily formed by people of the same race or country, but by those who adopt the same ideology as a result of their perceptions, beliefs, experiences, and memories. These factors contribute more to a social construction of reality than physical boundaries such as country or race. In order to have a common public opinion, there must be a people with a common story. Caridad and Elián each function to solidify this construction.

La Caridad as a Contested Symbol

Nevertheless, La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre is a contested symbol for Cubans. To those in Cuba, her national patronage is appropriated towards political ends. Because she is, at least originally, a religious symbol, her force for pro-Castro Cubans is obviously curtailed. As the Reverend Jose Luis Menendez, Cuban-American pastor of Corpus Cristi Church in North Miami explained, “Caridad is a symbol herself.... The only national symbol Mr. Fidel Castro could not prostitute.... She symbolizes for us what [Castro] could not defeat in the Cuban soul.”³⁹ Menendez also added that in her lies the collective memory of Cuban exiles, the source of their nationality and patriotism. “In her are our roots.... And in our distance [from the homeland] is when our love grows. Our distance makes us appreciate that great significance she holds for all Cubans.”⁴⁰ In Miami Caridad represents the exile’s hope for the realization of a “free Cuba.” The Cuban exile

³⁹ Interview with Reverend Jose Luis Menendez, Corpus Cristi Church, North Miami, January 25, 2001.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

community appropriates her toward the fight against Castro's communist regime and regards her as an important ideological symbol of liberty and rebellion.

Tweed mentions still another contest over Caridad, one between the clergy and the laity, in the negotiation of religious identity and the meaning of shared symbols at the shrine. She is contested interreligiously, by both Catholics who regard her as a manifestation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and by Santeros who view her as a representation of the Yoruba-derived river goddess Oshún. Tweed notes that the Cuban Catholic clergy have hopes that visits to La Ermita will provide an entryway into Catholicism for the "unchurched" and for those indulging in ritual aspects of Santeria and popular devotion.⁴¹ Matovina comments on this interreligious contest at the shrine: "The shrine is under the auspices of the Miami archdiocese. However, Santeria rituals are also practiced there despite the clergy's attempts to discourage these practices."⁴²

Devotion to La Caridad is common to both Santeros and Catholics. She is a traditional sacred symbol for both groups and thus functions as a significant unifying force. Although the church does not officially recognize certain aspects of popular devotion to La Caridad, such as the placement of offerings on her altar, such practices are intermingled with orthodox Catholic traditions to comprise a body of practices common among the majority of Cuban and Cuban-American devotees. Santeros who place offerings on her altar are venerating her as a goddess, a tradition that Catholic doctrine does not condone. Although the Blessed Virgin Mary is not viewed as a goddess by the Catholic orthodoxy,

⁴¹ Tweed, 47.

⁴² Matovina, Review of Tweed.

popular devotion suggests otherwise. In effect, she is contested by both groups and plays different roles for each.

Cuban nationalism is another important feature of the Miami shrine, as the shrine naturally (and purposely) evokes Cuban nationalistic sentiments. Seeking to include other Latin American groups, clergy endeavor to increase participation at the shrine. Every October, immigrants from all over Latin America are formally invited to the shrine and a special mass is said each night in honor of a different Latin American country. This is done to increase nationalistic feelings among the immigrant populations and to welcome new members into the community and into the church.

But mostly the shrine functions as a gathering place for the Cuban diaspora. Cubans in exile are “drawn to the national patroness as a unifying and liberating force. The Virgin helped militarily and politically before... and she can do it again.”⁴³ Tweed discusses how traditionally men have appealed to the Virgin for political matters, whereas women have a tendency to appeal to La Caridad for personal concerns such as health, marriage, and childbirth.⁴⁴

Religion and Cuban Diasporic Identity at the Shrine

For the people who visit it, the physical structure of the shrine is important in conveying the collective memory of this community. La Ermita is not only a chapel where people worship, but it has become a tourist attraction and a social site. The shrine is an open book, reporting historical and geographical information from the island of Cuba to

⁴³ Tweed, 63.

those who come to read it. It has six sides and six corners, representative of the six provinces of Cuba from which the exiles emigrated. Under the altar lies the cornerstone of the building, blessed at the December 8, 1971 inauguration. This cornerstone is visible to visitors and contains dirt, sand, and rocks from the different provinces of Cuba. It was infused with water transported on a raft found floating over from Cuba on which fifteen individuals died attempting to reach liberty.⁴⁵ The mural behind the altar, titled “History of Cuba at a Glance,” is a painting done by artist Teok Carrasco depicting La Caridad at the center holding the baby Jesus, surrounded by images of various figures and events in Cuban history.⁴⁶

In phenomenological terms, the shrine acts as the site of an “axis mundi,” linking the sacred and profane realms together within the created space.⁴⁷ Exiles in the diaspora are also symbolically united with the individuals in the homeland, creating a transnational “Cuban nation.” The shrine in Miami is located on the sea, which is of course a central element of both the Caridad myth and the Cuban exile experience. While facing the shrine’s icon, believers are facing Cuba, and hence their prayers are directed towards the homeland. As one visitor told Tweed: “Today I feel as if I am in Cuba. Even the sky resembles the Cuban sky.” Another described how the shrine itself has become the other Cuba, adding: “It is the Cuba which Castro separated from their families, the Cuba which

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “¡Virgen de la Caridad, Salva a Cuba!” Informational booklet, 48.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 49.

⁴⁷ Mircea Eliade. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Harcourt Brace & Company: San Diego, 1957, 36. An axis mundi, or universal pillar, “connects and supports heaven and earth.” Eliade argues that an axis mundi functions as the center of a sacred space and in essence transforms this space into the center of the universe. Eliade remains the most influential figure in the phenomenology of religion.

has wept and bled to live in exile.”⁴⁸ In effect, Cuban exiles at the shrine “reinforce a pre-existing national identity [through] public devotions and celebrations for their patroness.”⁴⁹

La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre thus symbolizes a dispersed people and the ideals that bind them. The fact that these individuals are identified as the “exile community” indicates that the dispersion was not voluntary. Caridad represents national unity for the people and their hope for a return to a nation and an ideal from which they had been removed. When a people such as this refers to a nation, they are not referring to a physical location, but the collection of a people with the same ideals, beliefs, memories, and experiences. For the Cuban diaspora, Caridad embodies all of these things and helps them identify themselves as a people.

⁴⁸ Tweed, 100.

⁴⁹ Timothy M. Matovina, “Our Lady of the Exile (Book Review),” *The Catholic Historical Review*, Jan. 1999.

THE ELIÁN GONZALEZ SAGA

Before he was allowed to go back home to Cuba with his father seven months later, Elián would be anointed savior, victim, cause, and symbol... The struggle over his fate would mesmerize and polarize Miami... and much of the country, and it would engulf two long-hostile nations, Cuba and the United States, in a tense legal and political brinkmanship.⁵⁰

Chronological Summary

The story began with a rescue at sea on Thanksgiving Day. On November 25, 1999, Elián Gonzalez was found floating on an inner tube in the Atlantic Ocean, three miles off the coast of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, by two fishermen, Donato Dalrymple and Sam Ciancio. They radioed the US Coast Guard for help and little Elián was consequently saved. The boy had just lost his 29-year-old mother, Elizabeth Brotons, and had watched his other raft mates slowly drown.

Just a couple of days before, on November 22, 1999, Elián and his mother had left Cardenas, Cuba, with twelve other refugees and were headed for the United States, the land of milk and honey referred to as “la yuma” by Cuban exiles. On November 23 the boat capsized and Elián’s mother drowned along with several others. Elián was found two and a half days later and was taken to Joe Dimaggio Children’s Hospital in Hollywood,

⁵⁰ Andres Viglucci, “Elián Story Waits for Ending,” *Miami Herald*, November 23, 2000.

Florida, where he was treated for sunburn and dehydration. He gave the name of Juan Miguel Gonzalez, his father, along with his address in Cardenas. The next day Elián was released from the hospital, and the United States Immigration and Naturalization Services handed him over to his great uncle, Lazaro Gonzalez, who took him to the soon-to-be-famous Little Havana home where he shared a bedroom with his cousin Marisleydis Gonzalez— repeatedly described by the media as his “surrogate mother,” over the next five months. The idea of letting Elián stay in the United States rapidly grew and took on political overtones.

Juan Miguel Gonzalez soon wrote a letter to the Cuban government asking for his son to be returned. The Cuban government responded by sending a diplomatic note to Havana’s United States Mission on November 26, asking for Elián’s prompt return to his father in Cuba. On November 27, Juan Miguel demanded to see his son returned to Cuba, beginning the six-month custody battle that eventually gripped the international media. The tension grew between Juan Miguel Gonzalez and his Miami family after he publicly accused them of kidnapping Elián after the rescue. Juan Miguel mentioned to the media that the Gonzalez family refused to let him talk to Elián on the telephone, and they replied that Juan Miguel was being pressured by Fidel Castro to have the boy returned so that he could be used as a political pawn against the United States. The Miami family expressed their desire to determine whether it was Juan Miguel’s idea to have the child back in Cuba or Fidel’s political maneuvering. On November 28, Juan Miguel filed a complaint with the United Nations regarding his custody demands. The Cuban Foreign Ministry submitted a statement that the Miami relatives were illegally holding Elián against his father’s wishes.

On November 30, the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), America's leading anti-Castro organization, organized a protest in front of Seattle's World Trade Organization. Posters were circulated with pictures of Elián as he was being taken to the hospital after his rescue, on a stretcher looking dehydrated and weak. The posters read: "Another Child Victim of Fidel Castro." The protesters had made Elián Gonzalez into a poster child for their cause. On December 8, Castro threatened the United States with protests and boycotts if the boy was not returned within seventy-two hours. He made public claims that the Miami family was trying to indoctrinate Elián and brainwash him into rejecting Cuba and his father.

In the days following these events, attempts were made by Elián's Miami family to gain custody of him and keep him in the United States. Lazaro Gonzalez submitted an application on December 10 to the INS for Elián to gain political asylum. Several members of the government voiced their opinions to the media. The Miami Herald quoted United States Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen as saying: "The court should take into account his mother's wishes. You know that her last breath and prayers to God must have been for him to reach liberty and live in freedom."

During the following holidays, Elián was taken to Disney World, given a puppy, and showered with gifts. The Miami home where Elián stayed while in the United States soon became a tourist attraction (and a shrine of sorts), as people flocked there to watch him play with his puppy, which he named Dolphin in honor of his supposed companions at sea. On January 4, Elián was enrolled in Lincoln-Martí school in Little Havana and began his education in the United States. Lincoln-Martí, named after both former United States

president Abraham Lincoln and the famous Cuban poet Jose Martí, is owned by Demetrio Perez, a leading anti-Castro Cuban exile and Miami political figure.

Many Miami family supporters stopped by the Little Havana home, where religious candles were lined up in front of the house, and paid a visit on their way to the Three Kings' Parade. A nine-year-old girl who had just arrived from Cuba with her mother remembered her life there vividly and commented on the mandatory marches Fidel Castro used to have. "Fidel orders the schools to be closed, and everyone has to attend the marches.... They tell us what to chant: 'Devuelvan a Elián'." ⁵¹ Another member of the exile community commented: "He's a symbol of all the Cuban children.... I have a feeling he will be the one... who brings change to the history of Cuba.... I feel such emotion, such warmth in my heart for him. He's a special child." ⁵²

The next day the family was notified by the INS that Elián should be immediately returned to his father in Cuba and that they had to hand the boy over by no later than January 14. In response, the Miami family began proceedings to appeal this decision. On January 6, INS notified the Miami family's attorneys that Elián's asylum applications would be denied and that the boy must be subsequently returned to INS. Meanwhile, the Port of Miami was filled with anti-INS protesters blocking access to the port and holding demonstrations in the streets and in the surrounding areas. Many protesters were arrested and charged with misdemeanors by Metro-Dade police.

Following the INS notice that the applications would be denied, the Miami Gonzalez family filed for temporary custody of the child in a Florida State Court. Attorney

⁵¹ Eunice Ponce and Elaine de Valle, "Mania Over Elián Rising," *Miami Herald*, January 10, 2000.

General Janet Reno denied the petition, explaining that the government could not overturn the decision made on January 5 by the INS commissioner. Lazaro Gonzalez reacted by filing a federal lawsuit in hopes that this would potentially overturn the INS commissioner's ruling.

Soon thereafter, Elián Gonzalez's paternal and maternal grandmothers took a plane from Cuba to the United States in order to meet with Janet Reno and ask for Elián's prompt return to Cuba. Lazaro Gonzalez expressed his wish to have the grandmothers visit the Gonzalez home and talk things out over dinner, but the grandmothers refused. On January 26, Elián's grandmothers met with Elián at the Miami Beach home of Sister Jeanne O'Laughlin, president of Barry University.

There were reports that members of CANF were stationed in the house next to O'Laughlin's, awaiting the grandmothers' visit. Once this was confirmed, they were promptly asked to leave. Given the organization's history and ideology, it may well be that CANF manipulated the Elián case to serve political ends. Since this is a right wing anti-Castro organization, CANF sought to exploit Elián's meeting with the grandmothers at Sister Jean's home in order to assert their political influence. By stationing its agents near her home that evening, CANF fused the political and religious dimensions of the Elián saga in an attempt to strengthen its influence over the Cuban exile community. CANF has also been accused of manipulating the Elián issue in such a way as to bring younger

⁵² Ibid.

Cuban-Americans into its fold by choosing a new younger director with whom these generations could better identify.⁵³

Rumors spread about the grandmothers' attempts at telephone communication with Fidel Castro back in Cuba, which breached previous agreements to have no outside communication and interference. The cellular phone of one of the grandmothers rang, and it was believed to be Juan Miguel in an attempt to talk to Elián. The phone was quickly confiscated. Both grandmothers made their return to Cuba on January 29, empty-handed. After their interview with a Cuban television station, rumors circulated about inappropriate contact between the grandmothers and Elián, causing a scandal in the media and in the community. One of the grandmothers mentioned how she "playfully bit Elián's tongue and unzipped his pants during the Miami reunion," and claimed it was common practice among the Cuban community.⁵⁴ People reacted by stating it was not common practice and took this a step further by claiming it was a of Santeria spell (*trabajo*) designed to keep Elián quiet through sympathetic magic.

Before this meeting, Sister Jeanne reported that she was in favor of returning the boy to Cuba. After the meeting, however, she reconsidered her stance and commented that the boy would be better off in the United States, a position she reportedly stated in a letter to Janet Reno.⁵⁵ One of the things that changed her mind about this issue, she claimed, was that one of the grandmothers admitted to wanting to defect to the United States. The grandmothers had also allegedly spoken about how Juan Miguel and his family

⁵³ Elaine De Valle, "In the Fight for Liberty, It's Never Too Late," *Miami Herald*, May 21, 2000. This was apparently CANF's motive for hiring 35-year-old executive director, Joe Garcia, on May 21, 2000.

⁵⁴Ellis Berger, "Case Brought Out Submerged Tensions," *Sun Sentinel*, June 29, 2000.

knew about the plans for Elián and his mother to come to the United States even before they embarked on their journey. There was also word about one of the grandmothers mentioning to Sister Jean that Juan Miguel had been physically abusive to Elizabeth, the boy's mother.⁵⁶

On February 4, Juan Miguel Gonzalez asked Attorney General Janet Reno to return his son to Cuba immediately, adding his wishes for the prompt removal of Elián from Lazaro Gonzalez's Little Havana home and for the boy to be placed elsewhere in the interim. On February 14, the Miami relatives' team of lawyers argued that Elián could not be sent back by INS until he had received a proper political asylum hearing. Four days later, Janet Reno refused to meet with either Elián or his Little Havana family while in Miami. In late February, U.S. District Judge Michael Moore was formally assigned to the Elián case. Judge Hoeveler, the federal judge who was originally assigned to this case had unexpectedly suffered a serious stroke the day of the case, which various individuals perceived as either divine intervention or the result of a *trabajo*.

On March 29, Fidel Castro announced that he would be sending Juan Miguel to the United States to claim his son. Elián's Miami relatives responded to Castro's announcement by refusing to hand Elián over to either the United States government, the Cuban government, or to Juan Miguel Gonzalez. The United States government approved Juan Miguel's visa, along with the visas of five others: his wife and child, and Elián's teacher, pediatrician, and cousin. They immediately took a plane from Cuba to Washington DC and arrived in the United States on April 6. The original petition from

⁵⁵ Questions have been raised concerning this issue, and whether Sister Jeanne was really reacting to

Cuba was for twenty-four visas, which was denied by the United States government (one of the visas would have been for Elián's school desk!).

On February 20 the *Miami Herald* reported that Marisleydis had been hospitalized for “‘mental exhaustion,’ the second time in two months.”⁵⁷ One Thursday afternoon, afraid the government would forcibly seize Elián from the home of Lazaro Gonzalez, protesters broke through the barricades outside the home and instantly formed a human chain while chanting: “*Elián no se va!* (Elián is not leaving!).”

Most of the exile community in Miami clearly identified with this boy: “Elián reminds them of all the impotence they’ve ever experienced.”⁵⁸ During this period, Cuban-American youth could be seen protesting at the Gonzalez household, alongside mothers and grandmothers, to show their support for Elián remaining in the United States. Members of the community who had previously not expressed an interest for any particular exile cause were involved in the vigils and protests surrounding Elián, and even the elderly members of the community took their places in a human chain. It is no surprise some passionate individuals reported to the media they were willing to die for him if it came down to it.

On April 12, Attorney General Janet Reno met with the Miami family at Sister Jeanne O’Laughlin’s house and ordered Lazaro Gonzalez and the rest of the family to immediately hand Elián over to Juan Miguel Gonzalez. The Miami relatives ignored this demand, insisting that Elián remain in the United States. They refused to hand the boy

political and financial pressure from the exile community.

⁵⁶ Meg Laughlin, “Sister Jeanne: Grandma Wanted to Defect,” *Miami Herald*, February 20, 2000.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Margaret D. Wilde, “Cuban American Dialogues,” from *The Christian Century*, May 17, 2000, 557.

over and claimed the federal government agents would have to come and get him themselves by force. The court order had now been extended until May because of the ruling of a federal appeals court.

On April 13, various Cuban-American celebrities, such as Gloria Estefan, Andy Garcia, Arturo Sandoval, and Willy Chirino, visited the Gonzalez home. Since his rescue, Elián Gonzalez had himself become a celebrity. He was invited to drop the ball in Times Square on New Year's Eve by New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, was the highlight of the Three Kings' Parade in Miami, and even received a hug from Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez, a Cuban exile pitcher for the New York Yankees.

The infamous home video of Elián claiming that he wanted to stay in the United States was also aired on this day, causing more controversy in the community and throughout the rest of the United States. Allegations that the boy was coached to say certain things were widespread (and fairly obvious), and the media commented on Elián's eyes continually drifting to someone behind the camera as if he were being instructed on what to say.

Fueled by rumors concerning a US government ploy to reunite Elián with his father, another mass prayer vigil took place in front of the Gonzalez home during the week before his seizure. The vigil was organized by supporters of the Miami family because of growing concerns that the boy would be forcibly taken from the Gonzalez home.⁵⁹ The area around the home was filled with religious iconography, candles, flowers, and various posters of Elián. One residence near the home set up a life-sized statue of San Lazaro with

a photograph of Elián at his feet accompanied by a note which read: “God make the impossible possible.”⁶⁰ Paintings of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Jesus graced the Gonzalez home and religious paraphernalia such as rosaries and crosses covered the fence in front of the house.

Despite the federal court-ordered ruling granting a May extension, Elián was seized from the Gonzalez Little Havana home just before sunrise on Saturday, April 22. During the raid, some individuals outside the home were tear-gassed. The streets of Little Havana were immediately filled with protesters, and several small fires broke out, along with sporadic rioting and destruction. Some individuals publicly burned and defaced the American flag in a fit of anger. These actions resulted in further divisions within the Cuban community, since most individuals protesting the seizure were not in agreement with this and opted for a more peaceful reaction. Most Miami citizens did choose to vocalize their anger, however, and opinions were expressed nation-wide. The exile community in South Florida called for a work stoppage for the following Tuesday, April 25, in protest of the event.

Mixed feelings abounded nationally over the Attorney General’s decision to seize the boy at dawn, despite arranging for negotiations with the Gonzalez family over the telephone. Polls showed that a great percentage of the nation was in favor of the raid, while some others were shocked and outraged by the means by which the boy was seized. George W. Bush, Jr., then governor of Texas and Republican presidential candidate,

⁵⁹ Brendan Farrington, “Peaceful Protests in Little Havana Amid Growing Concern,” *Miami Herald*, April 21, 2000. The overall opinion at this vigil was that the government would not take any action during Easter weekend, but growing anxiety resulted in their precautionary methods nonetheless.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

commented to the *New York Times*: “I am profoundly saddened and troubled that the administration was not able to negotiate a resolution, and instead decided to use force to take a little boy from the place he calls home in the middle of the night.”⁶¹ Bush described the event as “chilling” and commented the raid was “not an image a freedom-loving nation wants to show the world.”⁶² Other Republican leaders also condemned the action, such as Mayor Rudolph Giuliani of New York and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi.⁶³ Lott commented: “My first thought was that this could only happen in Castro’s Cuba.”⁶⁴

Some members of the religious community in Miami were also outraged that the seizure took place during the Saturday of Holy Week, the day before Easter Sunday: “The government chose to conduct a raid in the middle of the holiest season for Christians, trampling the religious sensitivity of our community and nation.”⁶⁵ Cuban religious leaders were concerned about the effects the seizure would cause. They expressed their concerns and urged the exile community to channel their outrage into “solemn prayer and peaceful demonstration.”⁶⁶

⁶¹ Don Van Natta Jr., “Bush Faults U.S. Decision to Use Force to Take Boy,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2000.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ The fact that these individuals were members of the Republican Party explains the tendency of the Cuban-American community in South Florida to vote mostly Republican in the 2000 presidential election. Various individuals I interviewed, including Father Jose Paz, Reverend Jose Luis Menendez, Barbara Gutierrez, and Juan Carlos Espinosa, all suggested that the discontent over the Democratic Party’s handling of the Elián event provoked this community to vote for the Republican candidate, contributing to Bush’s presidential victory.

⁶⁴ Van Natta Jr., *New York Times*.

⁶⁵ Reverend Jose Pablo Nickse, Saint Brendan Parish. “Seizure a Disappointment to Priests.” *Miami Herald*, May 6, 2000.

⁶⁶ Daniel A. Grech, “Pastors Join Criticism, But Appeal for Calm,” *Miami Herald*, April 23, 2000.

After he was turned over to Juan Miguel, Elián's Miami relatives flew to Washington in hopes of seeing the boy, but their pleas were repeatedly denied. There was controversy regarding a photograph taken of Juan Miguel and Elián, and rumors began to spread claiming that Elián was being prematurely taken from the United States. On May 11, the Atlanta Federal Appeals Court heard the case of the Miami relatives, but denied it. On May 25, Elián, Juan Miguel, and the rest of the friends and family relocated to Washington, DC's Cleveland Park neighborhood for the remainder of their stay in the United States.⁶⁷ On June 1, the Atlanta court gave its final ruling that Elián's biological father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, should have sole custody of the boy and could return to Cuba with him. Because Elián was also denied political asylum by the federal courts, the Miami relatives and their attorneys appealed; the appeal was denied. Elián's injunction to remain in America soon expired on June 28, and despite the Miami relatives' efforts to block his return, Elián and his family and friends returned to Cuba that day.

Aftermath of the Elián Seizure

Following the Elián seizure, the Cuban exile community experienced a mixture of melancholy, powerlessness, anger, and betrayal. People in the community felt violated by the turn of events. The outrage felt by protesters after the seizure culminated in sporadic incidents of rioting in Little Havana, as some set car tires on fire and burned newspaper vending machines. Demonstrators overturned dumpsters and newspaper boxes, inciting the police to take action. Police officers tried to control the crowds and fired tear gas

⁶⁷ Ibid.

canisters at angry protesters, which resulted in further backlash against the Miami-Dade Police Department. Some individuals in the community equated this to the raid on the Waco, Texas compound of David Koresh, also ordered by Janet Reno. Demonstrations continued to employ religious symbolism; for instance, “several people held up crosses, one with a baby doll nailed to the wood, red paint smeared across its body.”⁶⁸

The Cuban exile community was broadly criticized by much of the nation over the events that took place in the months of the Elián saga. Continuous protests and intense media attention resulted in a polarization of the community, and many citizens of Miami grew tired of the continual coverage of the Elián story. An April *Miami Herald* poll revealed “Whites and African Americans in South Florida overwhelmingly favored sending Elián back to Cuba with his father,” and letters and telephone calls revealed the majority of the people wanted to hear about the other news going on in Miami instead.⁶⁹ WFOR-CBS news anchor Elliott Rodriguez alleged bias on the part of certain national news networks: “Cuban Americans are not getting a fair shake in the national media. We’re looked upon as a bunch of wild-eyed fanatics.”⁷⁰

There were reports in the international media, particularly from Latin America, commenting that the Cuban exile “hardliners have suffered ‘numerous setbacks’ over the Elián story, and that growing numbers of young Cuban exiles are beginning to rebel against the established exile political leadership.”⁷¹ One Colombian magazine described

⁶⁸ Juan Forero and Felicity Barringer, “Police Fire Tear Gas as Hundreds of Angry Protesters Take to the Streets in Miami,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2000.

⁶⁹ Mike McQueen, “In the Cauldron,” *American Journalism Review*, June 2000.

⁷⁰ Terry Jackson, “Journalists Gripped by Passionate Issues, Too,” *Miami Herald*, April 20, 2000, 25A.

⁷¹ Andres Oppenheimer, “Custody Drama Scrutinized in Latin America,” *Miami Herald*, April 20, 2000, 21A.

South Florida as a “hotbed of intolerance and rejection.”⁷² Some in the Cuban exile community worried about the opinion held by the rest of the United States in light of the rioting after the Elián seizure. One woman outside the Gonzalez home during a protest after the seizure commented that she agreed with what the outraged community was saying, but that she would say it differently. To this, a man responded, “Then why don’t you? Who stole your tongue?” The woman, shaking her head, says to the reporter, “People like that. They do all the talking. We don’t even try anymore.”⁷³ Some felt that instead of reuniting the community in the wake of this event, the protests divided an already splintered exile group.

The issue of whether the Elián saga was a positive or negative event for the Cuban exile community in Miami is contested. Within the exile community, a newfound sense of solidarity resulted. For the rest of the nation, however, there was a negative external perception of South Florida’s Cuban-American community that splintered Miami from the rest of the nation. Some journalists have described the culmination of the Elián saga not as a riot, but as a catharsis. At the very least, Elián opened the lines of dialogue within the Miami community and the rest of the nation. “Some people say they are angrier than they’ve been in years, but they are also talking and listening to each other more. If that continues, there is hope of dialogue within the Cuban exile community—which is probably prerequisite for dialogue with the rest of the city.”⁷⁴ Barbara Gutierrez, an *El Nuevo Herald* reporter, explained that Elián served to unite the exile community, including American-born youth, in Miami and to raise the consciousness of various people regarding

⁷² Ibid.

the experiences of the exile community over the past 40 years. He made Cubans “aware that [their] pain is not shared by the entire world.”⁷⁵ She also claimed that Elián revived the love exiles had for Cuba. “It has always been there, dormant, our love for Cuba, and it awakened in a lot of young people a love that they had never felt.”⁷⁶

Reverend Menendez of Corpus Christi Church is an exile himself. He also felt that the consequences of the situation resulted in a positive outcome for the exile community. He admitted that the events caused a lot of criticism from the rest of the nation; nevertheless, he did not believe the Cuban community was embarrassed before the country as a result of the Elián saga. Menendez thought that acceptance of the Cuban community by other Americans was already low, and the events surrounding Elián caused this group to become aware of this reality:

I think what we did was see the reality. We found out we didn't have that much acceptance. Elián has shown us that we are the same as any other Latin American community. In the end we were nothing more than one more Hispanic [group]. We were given a dose of humility...that helped us realize that in the end it doesn't matter. We will be what we are until we die.⁷⁷

Menendez added that this event gave the exile community a dose of insight and realism, allowing them to reflect upon their roots and their identity. Traditionally, this community

⁷³ Margaret D. Wilde, “Cuban-American Dialogues,” *The Christian Century*, May 17, 2000.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Personal Interview with Barbara Gutierrez, Miami, January 25, 2001.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Personal Interview with Reverend Jose Luis Menendez, Corpus Christi Church, Miami, January 25, 2001.

had been viewed as “a bunch of nostalgic old people that would one day die out, and that new generations would not feel in their hearts why their parents had come here. [As a result of this event], the older people were able to pass this on to the youth... and awaken that love for Cuba and that sense of Cuban identity. It fused the younger and the older generation in a common cause.”⁷⁸

Several Cuban-Americans in Miami commented on how alone they felt during this time, especially given the reactions of their peers in the workplace and in the community. Concerns were expressed about divisions in the community resulting from the differences in opinions. However, there was a bright side to the situation. Some felt the community gained unity and strength, bridged generational and religious gaps for the good of “the cause,” and took the opportunity to look within themselves at the aspects of their lives that had been buried deep or forgotten. The contest over Elián had united many in the broader Cuban exilic struggle, forcing them to turn to their collective experiences in order to rediscover their common ground.

Juan Carlos Espinosa, a member of Miami’s exile community and Director of the Felix Varela Center for Cuban Studies at St. Thomas University, commented on how the Elián issue forced the community to face its assumptions in regard to identity and politics. He explained that many more Cuban-Americans were publicly expressing their identity as a result of this and that people’s awareness of certain issues greatly increased as they became more involved, and more introspective. He noted that members of the exile community practiced a “reactive ethnicity” during this time. He explained that there was a

⁷⁸ Ibid.

sudden urgency to find one's roots, which was made evident by the many Cuban-Americans who became involved in these affairs despite having never identified themselves with the exile group.⁷⁹ Elián was described as the catalyzing force that brought about this phenomenon.

⁷⁹ Personal Interview with Juan Carlos Espinoza, St. Thomas University, Miami, January 23, 2001.

ELIÁN AS A RELIGIOUS AND IDEOLOGICAL SYMBOL

To the Cuban exile community in Miami, Elián was more than a child rescued at sea. He was a messiah and a Christ-child; he was envisioned as someone who would liberate Cuba from the clutches of its communist dictator, Fidel Castro. Elián was both a religious and an ideological symbol for the Cuban exile community in that he represented hope for a nation and the salvation of a people. Being an exile himself, and surviving the treacherous journey from his homeland of Cuba to the new land his mother had in mind for him, he reminded the exile community of their own journey, their struggles, and their relocation in a foreign land. At the Freedom Forum in Washington, DC, on November 3, 2000, *USA Today* founder Al Neuharth reflected these hopes: “Elián can become the symbol that will bring about a new relationship between the United States and our neighbors in Cuba. If that happens, a 6-year-old boy may succeed where nine U.S. presidents have failed. . . . Elián will be remembered and revered in both countries long after Presidents Clinton and Castro are gone.”⁸⁰

Castro’s Appropriation of Elián as a Symbol of the Revolution

Elián was also a powerful national symbol for the Castro regime, as exhibited by the massive demonstrations taking place in Havana and other parts of Cuba during the time he was in the United States. As one reporter noted, Elián’s return was a “victory for the Cuban people and the revolution. . . . In Cuba, Elián is hailed as a hero, a prodigal son

⁸⁰ Al Neuharth, “Elián Gonzalez as the Symbol of Free Spirit,” *Miami Herald*, November 13, 2000.

held hostage by the right wing Cuban-American Mafia.”⁸¹ To one demonstrator in Havana, “Elián is another symbol for us to fight for, like our flag or our hymn.”⁸² The exile community in Miami argued that Castro would no doubt use the boy as a political pawn, although Castro responded by assuring journalists that this was not so. Nevertheless, Castro expressed to journalists that this was a great victory for Cuba. One Communist Party member from Cuba, Eddy Machine, told a reporter, “Elián’s return demonstrated that the Cuban leader and his people are invincible.”⁸³

During the month of January 2000, rallies were staged in Cuba calling for the return of Elián, or “the boy martyr,” as he was referred to. School children chanted for Elián, marched through the public park and wrote poetry describing Elián as Cuba’s “boy hero” and a symbolic child. *Granma*, Cuba’s Communist Party daily newspaper, commented on the images of Elián Gonzalez and Ché Guevara, comparing the boy to the revolutionary icon. The paper reported that Elián had been “converted forever into a symbol of the crimes and injustices that imperialism is capable of committing against the innocent.”⁸⁴ “Elián had become the biggest revolutionary symbol since Ché.”⁸⁵

According to Professor Damian Fernandez, Chair of International Relations at Florida International University, the religious and charismatic aspects of Elián, combined with traditional Cuban political folklore dictating that “the youth will save the nation,” resulted in instances of people expressing their political and ideological stances in Cuba.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Vanessa Bauza, “A Community in Celebration,” *Sun-Sentinel*, June 29, 2000, 21A.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ E.A. Torriero, “Castro Claiming Victory,” *Sun-Sentinel*, June 29, 2000, 23A.

⁸⁴ As cited in “Cubans Pay Homage to Martí, Elián.” *Miami Herald*, January 29, 2000.

⁸⁵ Tim Golden, “Just Another Cuban Family Saga,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 23, 2000.

⁸⁶ Interview with Damian Fernandez, Miami, March 5, 2001.

Fernandez explained that there was a romantic notion of the youth being “pure, pristine, virginal,” and that Elián became a focus in Cuba because he embodied all these things.⁸⁷ In Cuba, Elián served and continues to serve as an ideological symbol in a way that Caridad never could. Since political ideology supersedes religious ideology in Cuba, at least superficially, and religion has traditionally been reserved for more informal, eclectic, and personal practices, Elián had emerged as a powerful political and ideological symbol in Cuba because of the ostensibly secular nature of his experience. He could thus be easily converted into a new symbol for the regime. For those in Cuba, he could be viewed as the hero who underwent the treacherous journey at sea, who was found and imprisoned in a far off land, only to be rescued and returned to his rightful home. The archetype of the mythic hero’s journey functions for those in Cuba in much the same way it functions for the Cuban exile community, although each camp appropriates the symbol of Elián towards its desired political ends.

Elián as a Symbol for the Cuban-American Community

During the maelstrom after the Elián seizure on April 22, Max Castro, a political analyst in Miami, was quoted as stating: “When after 40 years of preaching the cause, your neighbors in the community are the least convinced people in the world, it’s time for a reality check and not just better public relations.”⁸⁸ For another observer, “Elián has galvanized a feeling there was in the people, of identity and the need to embrace their roots and understand the plight of their parents. What Elián has done for them is give their

⁸⁷ Ibid.

identity more direction.”⁸⁹ People who had never been involved in Cuban-American politics were rallying in the streets. The Elián story had inspired them to carry the torch passed on to them by their parents and the older Cuban exile generation: “Elián has woken up their consciousness, created an emotional attachment to their families that hadn’t been there before.”⁹⁰

Elián was an ideological symbol among Cuban exiles living in Miami, but people also attributed religious meaning to the events surrounding this boy, such as could not have been done in Cuba. As Wilde notes, “besides political slogans, prayer was the most common language in the struggle for Elián.”⁹¹ Some of the ritualized aspects of the Elián story exhibited during this time included nightly prayer vigils around the home and prayers for Elián’s political asylum.

In one prayer vigil on Wednesday, March 29, 2000, the mantra of “*Elián no se va! Lo dijo su mamá!*” (“Elián will not go! His mother said so!”) was heard among the many attendees. Supporters came with beach chairs, Cuban flags, and candles in a crowd estimated at over 20,000. This vigil was generally perceived to be a peaceful protest despite some demonstrators’ angry signs condemning Reno with harsh reminders of the Waco fiasco. Others held signs reading: “Do not deliver Elián to the Romans,” and “Elián is Christ. Reno is Lucifer. Castro is Satan.”⁹² Jorge Mas Santos, CANF chairman, was in attendance at this event. He was quoted as saying, it was “our responsibility to be united” for Elián. He also added, “praying in a religious ceremony is the best way to show our

⁸⁸ As cited in Wilde, “Cuban American Dialogues,” 557.

⁸⁹ Frances Robles, “Elián Saga Awakens Activists to the Cause,” *The Miami Herald*, May 22, 2000, 1B.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Wilde, “Cuban-American Dialogues,” 558.

support.”⁹³ A woman who had escaped from Cuba thirty-eight years prior mentioned how she wanted to come here to “ask God to help Elián like He helped her” in the past.⁹⁴ Many attendees were moved to tears.

The religious iconography found at the house was extensive, ranging from paintings of the Virgin Mary holding a Christ child resembling Elián, to altars outside the home depicting San Lazaro surrounded by flowers and other religious paraphernalia. One man even tied himself to a makeshift cross in front of the house, resembling the crucified Christ. *El Nuevo Herald's* Barbara Gutierrez visited the house where Elián was staying. She commented on how it resembled a place of pilgrimage, where individuals would flock to catch a glimpse of this miracle-child:

It was an unsettling sort of event for me because I was always conscious that he was a little boy.... It was religious and it was surreal. It was almost like these people felt that if Elián touched them they were blessed.⁹⁵

She mentioned that there was a feeling among the congregants of the need to protect the boy with their dedication and prayers, noting also that individuals would bring the family religious artifacts and talismans in hopes that these would bring the family luck and protection. One individual brought Lazaro Gonzalez a statuette of la Virgen de la Regla, who is syncretized as Yemaya in Santeria, goddess of the sea. On the fence, visitors placed a statue of Santa Barbara and another of San Lazaro. There was a poster of La Virgen de

⁹² Meg Laughlin, “Prayer Vigil Lifts Elián Fervor to New High,” *Miami Herald*, March 31, 2000.

⁹³ Amy Driscoll and Sandra Marquez Garcia, “Thousands Join Glowing Prayer Vigil,” *Miami Herald*, March 30, 2000.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

la Caridad on the fence as well: “It was like a pilgrimage, and each person brought something, and the gate was full of objects. They left stuff on the fence. It’s like when someone goes to a sanctuary and leaves an offering. Like when people go visit San Lazaro and leave tiny crutches behind to signify he has cured them of their illness.”⁹⁶ Reverend Menendez likewise explained how visitors to the Gonzalez home brought a variety of religious paraphernalia, such as images of Jesus and various manifestations of the Virgin Mary:

Everyone wanted to give them something that would protect them, that would look after them. That’s what people were looking for. People were praying, listening, asking God not to take him. They were creating a sort of spiritual mural around the boy. It all turn[ed] into a symbolic battle.⁹⁷

The religious fervor surrounding the boy was widespread, and one event shown on the news depicted a huge crowd holding candles and forming a cross, as they blocked an intersection in Little Havana during a massive protest. Candlelight vigils became common during this time, creating a gathering place for people to share their experiences and combine their efforts in lending support to the family. Espinoza explained how the Miami home became a shrine to many people who visited it and how people brought parts of their religious life from all different backgrounds.⁹⁸ Their hunger for meaning caused them to gather here and make sense of the situation. They came here to experience unity, he

⁹⁵ Personal Interview with Barbara Gutierrez, Miami, January 25, 2001.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Personal Interview with Reverend Jose Luis Menendez, Miami, January 25, 2001.

⁹⁸ Personal Interview with Juan Carlos Espinosa, Miami, January 23, 2001.

explained, and the home offered a place for solace and solidarity for the majority of the individuals. These reoccurring events were in effect the ritual performance of an ideological stance, tying ideology and religion in the plight for Elián.

Elián's power as a religio-ideological symbol was also reflected in devotional practices exhibited by individuals as well as in ritual practices surrounding the boy and his Cuban-American family. In phenomenological terms, he became a hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred in the worldly realm.⁹⁹ On the back cover of *Ideal* magazine, which is circulated among the Cuban Catholic community in Miami and distributed at such places as La Ermita, Elián was termed the Cuban Moses (*"Elián: Un Moises Cubano"*).¹⁰⁰ Others have also referred him to as "The Moses of the Year 2000."¹⁰¹ His story was of a child found in the waters, like Moses, and delivered to safety by his mother (although his mother did not survive to see him get to America). Elián was likened to Moses in that his mother placed him in the water so that he would be swept away to safety, eventually to return to Cuba and lead his people, much like Moses. In the Moses story, the notion of crossing water to make the transition from slavery to freedom is evident, and parallels have been made to this in reference to Elián.

In effect, Elián became an object of fervent devotion among Cuban Catholics and within the Santeria community as well. Individuals gathered around his Little Havana home and prayed during the nightly vigils that took place in his honor. Catholic and Protestant services were conducted in and around the home, allowing the community to

⁹⁹ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11. A hierophany is described by Eliade as "the act of manifestation of the sacred" or when "something sacred reveals itself to us."

¹⁰⁰ *Ideal* 28, no.293 (1999), back cover.

¹⁰¹ Paul Brinkley-Rogers, "Protesters from Abroad Flock to Home," *Miami Herald*, April 23, 2000.

focus on those things they held in common instead of the various barriers that divided them. During this time, the Gonzalez household was thus transformed into a virtual shrine, making it the spatial focus of religious life for many people of various faiths during this time.

There were pilgrimages to the Little Havana home even a year after Elián was returned to his father in Cuba. In November 2000, Lazaro Gonzalez's brother, Delfin Gonzalez, bought the house where Elián stayed in Miami with plans of eventually turning it into a shrine.¹⁰² Lazaro and his immediate family have since moved out of the Little Havana home and the family has begun the process of turning it into a memorial. "About twenty-five people still congregate nightly at the house, keeping an endless vigil to remember the raid."¹⁰³

Besides regular vigils at the home, on November 26, 2000 a seaside vigil was held in La Ermita de la Caridad in honor of the boy and his late mother.¹⁰⁴ Lazaro Gonzalez, Donato Dalrymple, and Al Diaz (the Associate Press photographer who took the famous picture of the federal agent pointing his gun at Elián and Dalrymple on April 22) were among the many attendees at the vigil. In addition to the mass at La Ermita, which included a bayside demonstration behind the chapel, Thanksgiving Day acts of remembrance also included a mass in front of the Gonzalez home. A year after Elián was found at sea, he was still making headlines.

¹⁰² Luisa Yanez, "The Miami House that Welcomed Elián Has Become a Quiet, Decorated Shrine," *Miami Herald*, November 25, 2000, 3B.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

Religious and Mythological Implications

As we've seen, religious and mythological beliefs concerning Elián were abundant, fueling the passions and fervor building around the custody battle for the boy. Stories concerning Elián's symbolic rescue, his life, and the lives of those around him, were widespread, all containing some type of religious or mythological embellishment. Many Miami Cuban-Americans have been enchanted by the boy's bright smile and charisma, and he is often compared to an angel (*un angelito*). He was born on December 6, which is Saint Nicholas' Day. Saint Nicholas was a fourth century ecclesiastic Christian and was referred to as the patron of children. This is where the legend of Santa Claus originated.¹⁰⁵ Elián's rescue on Thanksgiving further adds to the symbolic importance of the event. As mentioned in an editorial in *El Nuevo Herald*, Elián represents the salvation of a people, particularly those in exile, and his importance lies in the reasons given for how and why he came to this community.¹⁰⁶ He is described as a gift from heaven for those in exile as well for those who reside in the island of Cuba, and as a boy whose mission is clear.

Espinosa commented on the way Cuba's "islandness" has marked the Cuban people:

It is interesting to look at Cuba as an island and see where the relationship with water comes in. Water is viewed as a danger and also a place we need to cross. Water is a transformation. It carries our fears and hopes... Water has a certain dichotomy of

¹⁰⁴ Sara Olkon, "Anniversary Vigil Pays Tribute to Elián, Mom," *The Miami Herald*, November 26, 2000, 2B.

¹⁰⁵ Belkis Cuza Male, "¿Es Elián un Angel?" *El Nuevo Herald*, February 2000.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

danger and mystery, but it is also something to be embarked upon.

We must cross the straits in order to reach freedom.¹⁰⁷

Gutierrez also made reference to how the religious connotations involving water contributed to this story. “Everything that has to do with Cubans has to do with the sea. We’re surrounded by the sea, and an island is born of the sea, and then our patron saint is of the sea...I think the religious myth around him was evident from the very beginning.”¹⁰⁸ Espinosa emphasized how the Cuban archetype of water, which he termed the “brilliant blue graveyard,” held a meaning of both danger and salvation. This strong symbolism and dichotomy may have also contributed to the richness of the interpretations made throughout the Elián story.

Water also signifies rebirth and regeneration, a powerful archetype in myth. The notion of the “baptismal waters” is important when trying to understand these concepts of rebirth and regeneration, especially in myths of Catholic and Yoruba origins. Some rituals of Afro-Cuban origins involve pouring water over one’s head as a reference to baptism and rebirth. Water reminds one of the darkness of the watery womb, and some say we are “born from the waters.”¹⁰⁹ The ritual of baptism is commonly associated with Jesus Christ, with whom Elián is often compared: “His arrival just weeks before Christmas and the year 2000 made him a symbol of hope, like Jesus.”¹¹⁰

One Elián supporter in Miami waved the Israeli flag around next to Elián’s house. When asked why he was waving this flag around instead of a Cuban or American flag, he

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Espinosa, January 23, 2001.

¹⁰⁸ Gutierrez, January 25, 2001.

¹⁰⁹ Espinosa, January 23, 2001.

replied, “This is a sacred child... so the flag of the Holy Land is appropriate here, because this street is holy land.”¹¹⁰ The various “miracles” attributed to the events surrounding the Elián saga have thus paved the way for some interesting religious comparisons.

There have been various references in myth to the image of the golden child who suffers a tragic separation from the mother and later goes on to become an important figure or hero. It is particularly interesting to note that the mother had a difficult time conceiving Elián, reportedly after seven miscarriages. Difficulty in childbirth and conception are also topics revisited when discussing the life of a hero or of the “golden child.”¹¹² Mythic archetypes that stand out in the Elián saga include the rich symbolism of the water,¹¹³ supernatural assistance to the child or assistance from animals while endangered in the water, and the role prophesy plays in the fate of the child.¹¹⁴ These are popular topics in the Elián myth and are part of the archetypal consciousness reflected in many mythological tales.

The survival of the child in the treacherous waters was perhaps the most powerful image in this story, an image that included dolphins surrounding Elián, protecting him

¹¹⁰ Meg Laughlin, “Prayer Vigil Lifts Elián Fervor to New High,” *Miami Herald*, March 31, 2000.

¹¹¹ Paul Brinkley-Rogers, “Protesters From Abroad Flock Home,” *Miami Herald*, April 23, 2000.

¹¹² Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949. “The child of destiny has to face a long period of obscurity. This is a time of extreme danger, impediment, or disgrace. He is thrown inward to his own depths or outward to the unknown; either way, what he touches is a darkness unexplored. And this is a zone of unexpected presences: benign as well as malignant: an angel appears, a helpful animal, a fisherman, a hunter, crone, or peasant (326).” Obstacles to conception and childbirth and/or supernatural aid to conception are also common in mythopoeic consciousness, as seen in the Bible (Jesus, Nimrod) and in Greek Mythology (Zeus, Perseus, Oedipus).

¹¹³ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 130. According to Eliade, emersion from water is seen in several myths to convey a form of rebirth and regeneration, while immersion in water is equated with “a dissolution of forms (130),” which is why the water symbolism is important in issues of death and rebirth.

¹¹⁴ Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 71. Supernatural aid to the child is another common element in hero myths. According to Campbell, “the helpful crone and fairy godmother is a familiar feature of European fairy lore; in Christian saints’ legends the role is commonly played by the Virgin. The

from circling sharks and nudging him back up to the surface every time he felt himself slipping under the water. Lazaro Gonzalez has mentioned to the press how much Elián talked about the dolphins, starting from his first day in America after the rescue, while he was in the hospital. When asked by reporters how many dolphins were with him, he replied simply that there were “many.”¹¹⁵ This also coincides with the mythic idea of a pack of animals protecting or raising an infant, acting as the child’s guardians in times of need.¹¹⁶ Alexis Blanco, an artist in Little Havana, made a sketch of the boy at sea surrounded by dolphins and titled it “*El Niño de los Delfines*” (“The Boy of the Dolphins”) in honor of Elián.¹¹⁷

Myths of dolphins coming to the aid of stranded individuals at sea date back to ancient history. Aristotle wrote about children riding dolphins and dolphins rescuing wayward souls at sea. The poet Arion once wrote a poem about a dolphin carrying him and saving him after his enemies had thrown him overboard and he found himself drowning. Dolphin frescoes and other artwork concerning dolphins could be found inside ancient houses and temples; some depicted the animals saving people from the water, helping fishermen find food, and helping sailors navigate to safety. Aside from the Elián case, there have been other reports of the phenomenon of dolphins coming to aid those in peril in modern times. Since dolphins are naturally playful, intelligent, and protective, some

Virgin by her intercession can win the mercy of the Father.... The hero who has come under the protection of the Cosmic Mother cannot be harmed (71).”

¹¹⁵ Ana Acle, “Dolphins Tale the Stuff of Legend,” *Miami Herald*, January 23, 2000.

¹¹⁶ Remus and Romulus in Greek Mythology were raised by a she-wolf after they were abandoned to die on the banks of a river. It is not unusual in Myth to have an infant child be raised or suckled by animals, only to return so society as a hero.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* This account has not been verified, however. Some reports show that the animals surrounding the boy were not dolphins, but dolphin fish. Donato claimed he only saw fish surrounding the boy, but Elián’s relatives claimed that Elián was able to differentiate between the two.

say these accounts should not be shocking.¹¹⁸ “Cubans saw the dolphins as traditional figures in marine myths from ancient times to the present: the animals who saved shipwrecked sailors, now saving Elián, child of a shipwrecked nation that is taking to the oceans in desperation.”¹¹⁹

A powerful image responsible for Elián’s elevation to religio-mythological status was his condition when rescued, suggesting supernatural intervention that protected him while at sea. Whether he was protected by dolphins or by something greater, he had no real injuries and did not seem particularly sunburned or dehydrated when rescued by the Coast Guard. Devout Catholics in the Cuban exile community had faith that a supernatural force such as an angel or, more importantly, La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, was responsible for his protection. El Angel de la Guardia is an important figure in Cuban Catholicism. This is a guardian angel that is supposed to protect children, and it is customary for prayers to this angel to be recited before bedtime.¹²⁰ It was mentioned in various Hispanic news stations at the time that Elián prayed to this angel while at sea. There were other individuals reporting that an angel appeared to the boy at sea and he stretched out his arms to it, but La Caridad was the entity most Cuban American Catholic believers thought was at work, since she had rescued the three Juans in the Bay of Nipe. The child’s plight was thus compared to the story of the three Juans, and his survival an act of God. The fact that Elián was found by chance by two fishermen, as was the case

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Damian Fernandez, “Elián or the Metaphor of Cuban Political Culture,” Paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association Meeting, March 17, 2000.

¹²⁰ “*Angel de la Guardia, Dulce compañía, No me desampares, Ni de noche ni de día. Si me dejas solo, yo me perdería.*” This prayer is used to address the angel for protection. It roughly translates into:

with the statuette of La Caridad, also contributed to the list of connections between Elián and La Caridad. Santeros, however, would say it was either Oshún, La Caridad's Yoruba counterpart, or Yemaya, the maternal goddess of the ocean, who saved the boy when he was alone at sea. Not surprisingly, Santeria ceremonies in favor of Elián's asylum were conducted in Miami throughout the Elián saga.

Elián's putative connection to La Virgen de la Caridad was strengthened by the various accounts of Virgin apparitions near the Gonzalez Miami home, one of which was observed on a nearby bank. Hundreds of supporters flocked to this site in hopes of catching a glimpse of the Virgin, for them a sign of hope for the boy and the community. A bank employee first spotted the apparition on a wall. Soon thereafter, the bank had resembled a shrine, and people were rubbing their babies and themselves on the mark for a blessing.¹²¹ The image was even scrubbed to verify that it was not a mere stain. Although there were some skeptics, true believers claimed it was a sign of a miracle. One onlooker mentioned that the boy was blessed, and since he and his family lived nearby, this was an important sign for them. Elián's family was often described as being very religious.¹²²

The bank's was not the only apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary reported in connection to Elián. Another was found somewhat later on a mirror in the bedroom where Elián slept, adding still more religious meaning to this story. Associated Press photographer Alan Diaz described the image as a dark, textured figure located towards the bottom of the mirror. Family spokesperson Armando Gutierrez explained that "Elián has

Guardian angel, sweet company, do not leave me neither by night nor by day. If you leave me, I will be lost.

¹²¹ Sandra Marquez Garcia, "Mary Appears Near Elián," *Miami Herald*, March 26, 2000.

¹²² *Ibid.*

been talking about the image for months,” but that his family had only recently discovered it.¹²³ This apparition was said to resemble the Virgin of Guadalupe who appeared to a Mexican peasant four centuries ago, since she was looking downward in sadness.¹²⁴

The political controversy over Elián was thus charged with a religious fervor, powered by the rich symbolism surrounding the child. As the Pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Hialeah explained, “in Cuba some people have made Elián a symbol of the new Ché, so it’s not so unusual that some people in Miami are seeing him as the new Christ.”¹²⁵ Another individual told the media: “These religious connections to Elián are a way for people to channel their grief and anger over forty-one years of revolution. This child is a way for them to envision resurrection for Cuba.”¹²⁶ On the day that thousands of Elián supporters formed a human cross in a busy intersection of Little Havana, various priests read from the Bible and conducted a mass in honor of the boy. One member of the media reported that “after reading from scriptures about Herod wanting Jesus killed, Auxiliary Bishop Agustin Roman compared Elián to Jesus.”¹²⁷ The political and religious lines continued to grow blurry in Miami.

The boy’s miraculous story fueled these religious comparisons between him and baby Jesus. In the Santeria religion, the infant child Christ is syncretized with El Niño de Atocha, who is the Yoruba orisha Elegua, the remover of obstacles, the gate opener, and the trickster figure. Elián has been compared to El Niño de Atocha because it is said he had opened the lines of communication between Miami and Cuba. Elián’s mission would

¹²³ Alfonso Chardy, “Family Reveals Religious Image,” *Miami Herald*, March 28, 2000, 10A.

¹²⁴ Meg Laughlin, “Prayer Vigil Lifts Elián Fervor to New High,” *Miami Herald*, March 31, 2000.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

be to “shatter our divisions...[and] plant the seeds of freedom in the most arid patches of Cardenas.”¹²⁸

Another religious comparison made with Elián stressed his role as a martyr for the Cuban-American exile community. Father Jose Paz noted that Elián brought about “a positive event for all Cubans. The only one that really suffered was Eliancito. He was an innocent saint. He became a martyr. He was sacrificed in the end.... As a martyr he unified the community [and] permitted others to disregard their differences and take a look at themselves.”¹²⁹ He also mentioned other “saintly” qualities Elián possessed, such as the charisma and joyful attitude he always expressed on the news, his intense and knowing stare, and his aura of divinity. These attributes contributed to the intense emotion felt on the part of the exile community for Elián Gonzalez.

Elián has been described as a “bridge linking rival faiths” as well, referring to his success in causing religious rivals to set aside their differences by forging “new ties between Catholic priests and Evangelical pastors, traditional rivals in Miami for converts to their churches.”¹³⁰ Catholic priests and Protestant pastors took turns leading religious services in the Gonzalez’s Little Havana home. The two religious groups have focused on a “common ground, a common interest, and a common purpose,” attributing this to the result of the community working together for the sake of the boy.¹³¹ The kinship experienced by these religious communities, who once did not see eye to eye, has been

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Liz Balmaseda, “Elián’s Mission,” *Miami Herald*, January 10, 2000.

¹²⁹ Personal Interview with Father Jose Paz, Miami, January 23, 2001.

¹³⁰ D. Aileen Dodd, “Elián a Bridge Linking Rival Faiths,” *Miami Herald*, April 10, 2000, B1.

¹³¹ Reverend Manuel Salabarría, Presbyterian pastor and radio show host. Reported by D. Aileen Dodd, *Miami Herald*, April 10, 2000.

described as a “miracle attributed to the religious-mythological aura surrounding Elián.... Before he came to South Florida, fellowship between some Cuban Evangelical and Cuban Catholic clergy mostly consisted of hellos at meetings.”¹³²

Rumors about Fidel Castro’s motivations to return Elián Gonzalez to Cuba have also been steeped in religious myth. The word around the Miami community was that Fidel needed Elián in order to complete a Santeria ritual designed to keep his regime in power. A common method used in Santeria divination requires Santeros to toss coconut shells in order to arrive at an answer. During the time of the custody battle in Miami, the media had various reports of a prophecy linking Fidel Castro with Elián Gonzalez.

“Santeros are now predicting the future of the Castro regime as it is tied to the fate of Elián Gonzalez, who to them is the reincarnation of Elegua, a kind of Christ child in Cuba’s mix of Catholic- and Santeria-influenced culture.”¹³³

As soon as Elián had been rescued at sea, the surprising events surrounding the boy were attributed to a supernatural phenomenon, as already noted. The rumor that Santeros declared Elián a divine Elegua and the statement that if Elián were to remain in Miami that Castro would fall, resulted in the belief that Castro wanted the boy back in order to neutralize this prophesy and remain in power. “The Elegua had to be brought back to Cuba for the protection of an atheist dictator who believes all of the Santeros’ prophesies.”¹³⁴ The media reported on the coincidence that as soon as rumors about the predictions surfaced, Castro began the mandatory marches and political speeches

¹³² D. Aileen Dodd, “Elián a Bridge Linking Rival Faiths,” *Miami Herald*, April 10, 2000.

¹³³ Guillermo Cabrera Infante, “Without Elián Back, Castro Believes He Will Fail,” *Global Viewpoint*, April 12, 2000.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

demanding Elián's immediate return to Cuba. These rallies, saturated with pictures of Elián on every t-shirt and Cuban flags in every hand, were allegedly an attempt to get the boy back to Cuba so that the prophesy of Castro's fall would be thwarted.

Sister Jeanne O'Laughlin once commented to reporters about a note handed to her by Lazaro Gonzalez intended for the grandmothers. She had forgotten to give it to the grandmothers during their visit and later found it in her pocket and read it. "I was shocked by what it said.... The great uncle believed Castro would make a witchcraft sacrifice of Elián."¹³⁵ Such fears were thus widespread in the Cuban-American community. The details of the rumor included a Santeria priestess notifying Castro about a child rescued at sea by dolphins that would overthrow him if he were to escape. The only way this prophecy could be negated was for Castro to regain control of the child. "The belief that the savior-child can only be saved from the underworld if he stays in Miami continues to rage on the streets."¹³⁶

Barbara Gutierrez, who works for *El Nuevo Herald*, explained how part of her job involves taking calls from readers and reading letters mailed into the paper. She said the source of the Santeria rumors involving Fidel's plans concerning Elián originated as an anonymous letter she received in the mail. She explained in an interview that it had come from a number of Santeros who mentioned that Fidel Castro had gone to consult with members of the Santeria community for a *registro*.¹³⁷ The information gained through the

¹³⁵ Meg Laughlin, "Prayer Vigil Lifts Elián Fervor to New High," *Miami Herald*, March 31, 2000.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ A *registro* is when a Santero and gives someone a reading for the year. It functions in much the same way as a yearly horoscope, only involving divination with cowry shells as common in Santeria divination. If you are a *babalawo* (Santeria priest), the shells used are your own. If, however, you are not a *babalawo*, then the shells used are those of the *babalawo* whom you are receiving the reading from. In short, the

registro came from Elegua, the trickster spirit and gatekeeper of the Santeria pantheon.¹³⁸ According to the letter, the *registro* of 1999, the year Elián was found at sea, suggested that Fidel was going to lose an Elegua.¹³⁹ According to the beliefs of Santeria, without Elegua, nothing can come about. He is the spirit one appeals to before any other, since he is the remover of obstacles and the gatekeeper. He is venerated before any other spirit and is a means of communication between the practitioner and the rest of the Santeria pantheon. The reason given for why a person cannot go anywhere without Elegua is that one's roads will be closed off without him. Without him, there is no communication with the other saints. According to Gutierrez, "Elegua not only speaks first, but when there are sacrifices, he eats first, so that the other saints will be able to eat."¹⁴⁰

To lose an Elegua, in Santeria terms, is very grave, since one would lose their sense of direction and thus their vehicle to the Saints. The letter Gutierrez received mentioned that "if Fidel did not get the child to come back, it would be the end of Fidel. The end of his power. And the interpretation here was that Elián was Elegua, and that Fidel had to, by any means possible, return him to Cuba."¹⁴¹ Gutierrez explained that the letter was anonymous and there was thus no way of verifying that it was true, so it did not get published in the newspaper. She also mentioned, however, that many members of the Cuban exile community, no matter how Catholic they were, believed this story. Gutierrez

letter mentioned that Fidel went to get a *registro* done with a panel of Santeros, and the outcome suggested that Elián was to be returned to Cuba for the good of the Castro regime.

¹³⁸ According to Gutierrez, if the person going for the *registro* is not a Santeria initiate, the information usually comes from Elegua.

¹³⁹ Elegua is syncretized as the Christ Child in the Santeria pantheon, someone Elián has been repeatedly compared to.

¹⁴⁰ In Santeria, it is customary to venerate Saints by offering them their favorite foods to eat. Since Elegua is the gatekeeper, then he eats before all the other Saints in order to open the line of communication between this world and the spiritual world.

mentioned that she had heard people speak of this matter on the street, and one woman even said to her, “You know why Elián can’t go back to Cuba, right? Because he is the Elegua.” She added, “It was understood to be true. Whether they believed it or didn’t believe it, it was part of the folklore.”¹⁴² Gutierrez regretted not publishing the letter after the fact, since members of the community had knowledge of this event.

Gutierrez also commented on how rumors that Santeria rituals were done in Miami for the purpose of helping Elián remain in the US were confirmed on several occasions. “I know that things were done here, even on the same block [as the home], regarding Santeria in order to keep the child here.” A Puerto Rican colleague of hers from CNN attended a *tambor*, or a sacred drum ceremony, designed to keep Elián in Miami. “I don’t know what happened there, because no one covered that story nor was it an overt event, but I can say that the arrival of that boy created a religious fervor. All the churches mentioned Elián in one way.”¹⁴³

Conflicting Appropriations of Elián: Miami vs. Cuba

Elián Gonzalez was a child rescued at sea by two unsuspecting fishermen, who soon became the subject of a major international custody battle. To the exile community, however, Elián became more than a mere rafter the moment he was plucked from the waters and became involved in the politics of Cuba and Miami. The Cuban-American community immediately projected all of its hopes and fears onto the boy, transforming him into a symbol of the collective exile experience. Espinosa mentioned that schoolchildren in

¹⁴¹ Personal Interview with Barbara Gutierrez, *El Nuevo Herald*, Miami, January 25, 2001.

Cuba and in Miami's Lincoln-Martí school simplified the situation: Elián was a child who had just lost his mother and was involved in a case of parental custody. The adults, however, took on a different perspective: "Adults loaded this with their baggage more and made it into a political war. . . . Elián stopped being a child the moment he was rescued. Elián became what we wanted him to become. Adults projected a lot of themselves and their experiences onto the boy."¹⁴⁴ Elián the child was transformed into Elián the embodiment of the exilic struggle, if not the savior.

An archetypal figure generally "rises up as the prophet or first-born of a new generation and appears unexpectedly in the unlikeliest places (sprung from a stone, tree, furrow, water, etc.) and in ambiguous form (Tom Thumb, dwarf, child, animal, and so on)."¹⁴⁵ According to Jung, there is no rational explanation for the archetype, except for representing the subconscious aspect of the collective psyche. "The mythological idea of the child is. . . a symbol clearly recognizable as such: it is a wonder-child, a divine child, begotten, born, and brought up in quite extraordinary circumstances."¹⁴⁶

This archetype was transferred to Elián, and the boy became a vehicle for meaning. Elián Gonzalez was not a supernatural being; he was only a boy. Those involved in Cuban-American politics transformed him into something greater. The archetypal attributes he had been delegated functioned to personify the collective experience of the exile community:

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Personal interview with Juan Carlos Espinosa, Miami, January 23, 2001.

¹⁴⁵ C.G. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," From Dundes's *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, 251.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 254.

That boy came to represent ourselves. The day they robbed that boy from us they violated us. They stole us. Perhaps that boy could have been you, he could have been me, he could have been the old Cubans that have died already. That boy was Cuba. . . . I believe that boy became a symbol for all of us. And what the people did was to hold on to the symbol, or what had been made into a symbol, of the Cuban nation.¹⁴⁷

In turn, the exile community internalized these experiences and derived meaning from them. The identity and character of individuals in this community are shaped by these experiences and the meanings attributed to them, and this process is important in the formulation of an identity for the individuals and the collective. Elián's place in the collective Cuban psyche has thus taken hold, much like that of Martí and Ché.

Most Cubans on the island have no civic, economic, and political rights, so there generally exists some mistrust towards the Cuban government. The central economic system is inefficient; there has been a decline in state-funded programs such as education and health care; and given the collapse of the Soviet Union, the island is going through an even greater crisis than ever before. The Cuban government organized rallies and demonstrations in honor of Elián as an opportunity to elevate a sense of nationalism that had been waning.¹⁴⁸ These demonstrations were a chance to partake in the propaganda and ideology of the regime. Elián was the primary reason these events took place, but the symbol of Elián was intermingled with other traditional Cuban icons, such as the flag and

¹⁴⁷ Personal Interview with Reverend Jose Luis Menendez, Miami, January 25, 2001.

the shield. For those still in Cuba, Elián became a symbol of the revolution, elevated to the status of Ché Guevara and other revolutionary leaders, and transformed into a charismatic hero. The rallies and demonstrations that took place in Cuba were transformed into political rituals laden with ideological meaning. Elián became the focus of these, as José Martí, Ché Guevara, and other Cuban historical figures had been in the past.

While Caridad is Cuba's national patroness and functions in ways that evoke nationalism and national identity for most Cubans on the island, the fact that she has traditionally been associated with the Catholic Church has prevented her from becoming a true national icon for the secular nation of Cuba. In Cuba, Catholicism has been the "dominant religion in name only. In practice popular religiosity was the primary form of religious expression [and] was a multilayered mixture of Christianity, ... Afro-Cuban religions, *espiritismo* (spiritism), ... and *brujeria* (witchcraft)."¹⁴⁹ Because the symbol of Caridad cannot be stripped of its religious origins, it is a symbol that cannot be as easily manipulated and thus appropriated by the communist regime.

Since Elián, however, is a real, living human being, despite all the religious connotations attributed to him, he would be able to function fully as a national symbol in Cuba over and above Caridad, and would thus quickly inherit the meaning and power as a national symbol that other revolutionary icons have been assigned. Elián was adopted as the new symbol for the revolution, the Castro regime's new and living icon.

¹⁴⁸ Personal Interview with Juan Carlos Espinosa, Miami, January 23, 2001.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have shown, following Tweed, La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre is a central figure in the formulation of national identity for the Cuban exile community in Miami. This collective has internalized certain values embodied by this national patron saint over time and has consequently created an identity for itself. La Ermita, Caridad's Miami shrine, is a gathering place where identity formulation can occur for Cubans in exile, narrating the national and transnational history of this community with its geography, iconography, and rituals. The exile community designates this sacred space as both a place of worship and a social center that transports this community back and forth from the diaspora to the homeland. The shrine makes it possible for Cubans to partake in a metaphorical return through time and space to a nostalgic Cuba left behind. Moreover, the collective experiences shared at the shrine contribute to the affirmation of *Cubanidad* through the reassessment of roots, language, and culture. Visitors to the shrine exchange common ideologies and experiences, adding to the collective memory of the Cuban-American experience.

The exile community also found a similar uniting force in the events that comprised the Elián saga, and performed ritualistic acts of identity and ideological affirmation through prayer vigils and passionate demonstrations. Elián's Little Havana home became a veritable shrine, and gathering at the home and becoming involved in this plight presented opportunities to confirm one's identity and *Cubanidad*. The younger generations, which had not suffered what the older generations had, discovered a new sense of identity with

¹⁴⁹ Damian Fernandez, *Cuba and the Politics of Passion*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000.

the exile community; they were thus introduced to the collective memory of the Cuban-American community through their involvement in the rallies and prayer vigils surrounding the boy. Moreover, in Elián, the exile community found a new cause. Elián had become their new hope for the realization of a *Cuba libre*. He had been designated as a symbol of everything that is pure, innocent, and thus anti-Castro.

From the day of his arrival in Miami, Elián was appropriated by exiles towards various religious and ideological ends, resulting in a battle between those in Cuba, who wanted him returned from Miami's Cuban exile "mafia", and those in Miami, who would prefer any fate to returning him to Castro's communist state. Elián had represented everything good and pure in the struggle against evil and had inspired hope among exiles who appropriated him in the struggle against the Castro regime. The Elián seizure left the Cuban exile community with a sense of anomie and disorientation. Their messiah, who had emerged from the waters, had been taken from them during one of the holiest days of the year for Catholics, the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

According to Father Paz, Cubans have a natural tendency to look for religious interpretations of events, and the Cuban exile experience is fraught with religious connections, despite the lack of public religion in Cuba. His explanation for this is that since communism is typically an irreligious institution, religious persons under communism feel the need to turn to a religious alternative as a form of escape. "It is a form of salvation [from communism] for them. The pattern in exile is to turn to religion."¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Father Jose Paz, Miami, January 23, 2001.

The religious meaning Elián had evoked during his stay in Miami was not an accident. Cuban folklore has a tendency to view unusual events in a religious light, with a great deal of reference to things falling from the sky (“*que nos caiga del cielo*,” as if to connote a miracle) and things emerging from the water (“*que salga del agua*” like Elián, Caridad, Oshún, and Yemaya).¹⁵¹ Fernandez terms this phenomenon the “charismatic complex.” This is “the tendency to wait for a hero, to implore for a savior, to seek a providential being, a messiah that would deliver the nation from seemingly intractable situations.”¹⁵² Fernandez adds that this phenomenon usually takes place during times of crisis, when the only solution remaining involves turning to a supernatural or otherworldly authority. The notion that Cubans are not usually considered religious (at least on the island of Cuba) yet turn to religious explanations when something unexplainable is occurring, can be supported by the claim Father Paz made regarding the polarization between religion and communism, each opposing the other like the battle between Good and Evil: The Cuban who may not regularly attend a religious institution still holds a “variety of creeds, myths, [and] symbols [which] come together in a popular religiosity.”¹⁵³

This Manichean¹⁵⁴ view transformed the struggle over Elián into “a metastruggle between right and wrong, good and evil, for the revolution or against it, for or against

¹⁵¹ Damian Fernandez, “Elián or the Metaphor of Cuban Political Culture,” Paper presented at Latin American Studies Association’s Meeting, March 17, 2000.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Damian Fernandez, *Cuba and the Politics of Passion*. Manichaeism is the view that “good and evil are as easily distinguishable as night and day. No confusion is possible. The ‘we’ is good; the ‘they’ is evil (20).”

Cuba.”¹⁵⁵ Those who believed Elián ought to remain in the United States looked upon others with the same opinion as good and anti-Castro, and those of a different opinion were regarded as evil and pro-Castro. Likewise, those who felt Elián should return to Cuba to live with his father labeled others with similar opinions as good and those with a different view as evil. Both sides of this struggle were able to identify with a larger collective that would agree with their plight, further contributing to the verification of their collective identity. Those who held a common ideology, and thus a common interpretation of what Elián symbolized, formed a cohesive bond, as many visitors do at the shrine.

Paz expressed his belief that Elián functioned to raise the consciousness of others in a way theretofore unknown in the Cuban exile experience: “He served as a voice for the exile community.”¹⁵⁶ Menendez mentioned how Elián’s arrival (and seizure) was a blessing in disguise: “It gave [Cuban-Americans] the consciousness that we are all Cuban.... The older people were able to pass this on to the youth, although it seemed like a latent issue, and awaken that love for Cuba and that sense of Cuban identity.”¹⁵⁷ The plight for Elián had tapped into the collective memory of *Cubanidad*.

Both Caridad and her Miami shrine are central to this collective Cuban exilic memory, serving as a transnational, transtemporal, and translocative link to the homeland of Cuba for the exiles that visited it. Elián functioned (and continues to function) in much the same way, since in him the exiles saw the personification of their struggle. In Elián, the

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 76.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Father Jose Paz, January 23, 2001.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Reverend Jose Luis Menendez, January 25, 2001.

exile community was able to extract the collective experience of all those who had been victims of the communist regime.

Fernandez refers to Elián as a “charismatic authority” in that he evoked certain passions in individuals that transformed him into a metaphor, which resulted in a “suspension of specific time and space to reveal deeper longstanding ‘truths.’”¹⁵⁸ As such a charismatic authority for Cuban exiles, Elián is a hero and savior, who, like Caridad, provides a sense of hope and a sense of identity. To visit the shrine is to return, much like to visit Elián’s Little Havana home is also to return. The translocative and transtemporal functions of such events give way to symbolic actions that guide the Cuban-American community in its quest for answers. Pilgrimages to the home and to the shrine become introspective rituals through which individuals in this community re-examine their consciousnesses and make sense of the events surrounding them.

¹⁵⁸ Damian Fernandez, “Elián, or the Metaphor of Cuban Political Culture,” Paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association Meeting, March 17, 2000.

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