July 4, 2004. With the presidential campaign in full swing, the Bush administration has upped the voltage of its rhetoric against the dastardly regime in Iran: “undeclared nuclear weapons”…“support of global terrorism”…“oppressed peoples yearning to be free.” Eager to energize an ambivalent electorate focused on deflationary domestic economics, the diplomatic brinksmanship seems little more than a calculated diversion, election-year bravado in a nation grown leery of the math of imperial attrition. This of all mornings, a reconnaissance flight from the USS Kitty Hawk brings report of a remarkable sighting, soon corroborated when a child is fished from the Persian Gulf by the crew of a nearby destroyer. Alone on a makeshift raft, cloaked in a tattered American flag, and clutching, in one hand, a hatchet, and in the other the severed trunk of a cherry tree, the boy—let’s call him George Washington Khomeini—recounts a dramatic and remarkable tale of escape from Iran: his father a minion of Islamic militants, his freedom-loving mother (perhaps an American?) killed in the act of achieving his liberation, the strong Judeo-Christian faith that sustained him in his ordeal, reports of—yes—a bald eagle swooping low across the waters to fend off deadly peril… The story is an immediate and immoderate media sensation, its veracity above suspicion (“Little George” cannot tell a lie), its main character a uniquely embodied agent of complex symbolic value (and a complexly embodied symbol of unique cultural agency). He is also a pawn in the dramatic “clash of civilizations” in which he stands enmeshed. As such, and rather predictably, the mullahs call for his release from the Great Satan, while Secretary Rumsfeld denounces the perfidious forces of oppression, and how about those weapons of mass destruction anyway? Stateside, the six-year
old refugee is an American hero, counting among his strongest supporters the president, the
attorney general, and the talking heads of Fox News, who, collectively sounding their martial
bugles, unveil the deep seriousness of their militaristic intent, urging loyal Americans to rise as
one, in the name of Little George and his sainted mother, to support this new just, holy, and
wholly justified war…

Among the most fascinating aspects of the Elián Gonzalez affair is its seeming lack of
analogical utility, which is to say its irreproducibility. While it is hard enough to construct a
counterpart to Elián at the national level (see above), it seems nearly impossible to concoct an
equivalent among any other ethnic-American subset—a Korean Elián is possible but
problematic; an Israeli or Palestinian Elián would seem a redundant image of suffering; a Haitian
Elián, the most apt and pragmatically viable alternative, would be deported before ever making
landfall. Whether or not one believes “Little George” would have the symbolic weight to serve
as a causus bellus, whether his story would generate the kind of popular support in the American
public at large that Elián galvanized in the Cuban-American community (and, too, whether one
imagines the presence or absence of such support as relevant to the administration’s decision to
launch the cruise missiles), depends upon one’s relative degree of cynicism, but the point of the
contrivance is merely to underscore the uniqueness of the actual event. To put the matter in
terms more appropriate to Marshall Sahlins’s oeuvre: if Captain Cook comes ashore in Miami,
and Elián in Kealakekua Bay, no problem; reverse the two, and the engine of history trembles
into motion.

Hypothetical gamesplaying hardly constitutes an evidentiary proceeding, of course, but
an ironic cultural imagination is an essential asset for any reader of “The Iconization of Elián
Gonzalez,” Marshall Sahlins’s canny and convincing consideration of the Elián case. Sahlins
delights in the “chiasmic relationships and dialectical oppositions” occasioned by Elián, the most entertaining of which saw liberal Democrats arguing for Elián’s repatriation in the name of “family values” while Republicans sought to keep him on U.S. soil through a spontaneously-evolved doctrine of market-inspired “libertarian individualism.” Sahlins even offers some counterfactual fancy of his own, postulating, in light of “the decisive effects of the Elián affair on the U.S. presidential election of 2000,” the potential equation: “no Elián, no war in Iraq.” By the same token, of course, no Ralph Nader, no war in Iraq (and had Ralph Nader washed ashore, they might still be counting votes in Broward County), but Sahlins knows well the frivolity of such speculative regression. In fact, he argues aggressively that the structural and systemic orders at work throughout the Elián affair demonstrate the fallacy of historiography based on cultural “disconnections” and “incoherencies.” The elaborate factual reality of Elián is so dense, and the political and cultural equation in which he became a central integer so complexly derived, as to seem almost a proof, if one were needed, for the notions of historical and structural “conjunctures” so central to Sahlins’s world-view. Change a single factor and Elián’s story remains one of personal tragedy rather than the “historical melodrama” it became; not any old narrative will suffice to engage the gears of sociocultural machinery, as Sahlins notes, “it has to be a good old story, structurally speaking.” Short of wearing a pair of Mickey Mouse ears en route, it’s not clear what Elián might have been done to render his symbolic value any more dynamic.

Certainly some form of commercial foreshadowing would have helped, in the months after his arrival, to contextualize those widely-publicized photos of Elián in Miami surrounded by gifts, toys and trinkets, a six-year-old boy knee deep in America’s material glut. It is these photos, Sahlins tells us, sighting a variety of journalistic sources, that proved “embarrassing” to
“an important fraction of the American middle class” in “the extravagant consumerism of it all.”
If this is indeed true, then understanding the nuances of this “embarrassment” might be the most essential sociological residue of the Elián affair. Presumably such photos were intended as political commentary on the theme of “democratic freedom versus communist dictatorship,” but what was the message, exactly? Ostensibly it was: *liberty, justice, and this stuff, too;* but in actuality it seemed to be, simply: *this stuff.* And, implicitly: *this stuff is enough.* Apparently, it was hard for many “middle class” Americans to shake the unnerving suggestion that the material abundance generally conceived of as a byproduct of “the American way of life” was in fact synonymous with it; that it was precisely this glut that defined them in the eyes of many onlookers. (Were such suspicions allayed when it was declared to be the patriotic duty of all Americans, in the days of national sorrow following 9/11, to help right the ship of state by going shopping?)

This ironic version of “the embarrassment of riches” is not an unfamiliar theme in contemporary America, but Elián gave it new spin. One aspect of this was class-based: the sensibility of the haves is so easily offended by the grasping vulgarity of the have-nots, and middle-class America was clearly perturbed by the cantankerous, ethnic, down-at-the-heels Gonzalez clan of Miami. Largely unremarked by mainstream journalists, an analogous drama of class (and acculturation) was played out within the Cuban-American community. The poor, recently arrived Gonzalezes are not unrepresentative of the wave of Cuban immigrants who arrived in Miami during the 1990s, demographically the largest Cuban immigration since the 1960s, excepting only the unique arrival of the *Marielitos.* (A Miami *New Times* journalist has written of the “coffee shop waitress” method for evaluating where the city’s latest immigrants are from: in the 60s the waitresses were Cuban, in the 70s Nicaraguan, in the 80s Colombian, and
in the 90s they were Cuban again.) While the original Cuban immigrant generation has achieved economic and political empowerment remarkable by any standard of measure, newcomers like the Gonzalezes find themselves having to contend with not merely an Anglo establishment but an entrenched hierarchy of their own countrymen as well. Elián, then, was a catalyst for family drama within the Cuban-American community, too, bridging the generation gap with a rekindled sense of shared cultural identity. Whether this rapprochement was a calculated pre-emptive assertion of political control by the “old guard,” as some assert, or a kind of charismatic folk movement is a subject of continuing speculation; whether Elián’s moment of ecstatic symbolic unity did more than paper over the structural fissures in the Cuban-American community also remains to be seen.

The second important aspect of American cultural “embarrassment” over Elián is both economic and familial. What constitutes a family, and what family is “worth,” are not abstract questions to the immigrant community, many of whom have sacrificed domestic coherence for economic opportunity. The degree to which Miami is a “city of immigrants” was made startlingly clear by the 2000 census, which found the population of Miami-Dade County to be majority foreign-born, the first time in the history of the United States census a major American city has been so constituted. Why then, from the Miami perspective, should the “sacrifice” of Elián’s mother be dismissed, and why should the nuclear family be afforded a moral sanctity that flies in the face of economic reality? To enable the wage earner to make the leap to America, spouses may part or children may be left behind. Sometimes they are even sent ahead. Still vivid in the Cuban-American memory are the “Operation Peter Pan” airlifts of 1960 and 1961, by means of which some 14,000 Cuban minors were “forwarded” to America to be raised by foster families or distant relatives, entrusted entirely to the charity of “the community.” How
different is Elián’s case, asks the voice of that generation? As the domestic sphere is increasingly subsumed into the economic the notion of a categorical incommensurability between “family ties” and economic valuation seems less and less tenable (see Religion & Culture Web Forum for June 2003, “Critical Familism, Civil Society, and the Law,” by Don Browning). Many of those “middle class” Americans “embarrassed” by the celebration of materiality surrounding Elián are presumably the same folks who devolve their own parental obligations upon third-world women—the beloved Honduran nanny, whose own children are back home with aunts and cousins in San Pedro Sula. If Elián must go back, if reconstituting the nuclear family is the ultimate moral good, why not repatriate the nannies as well? We can put a price on family, goes the argument in Miami. We do it all the time, with greater and lesser degrees of hypocrisy.

If “family” is one contested category in the Elián case, another is “immigrant,” and here moral relativism vectors in the other direction. The unique immigration status enjoyed by Cubans is a Cold War remnant which, although somewhat mitigated in recent years, still ensures that virtually any Cuban who makes it to American soil can remain in the country legally. Haitian immigrants, by contrast, who similarly risk their lives voyaging to Florida, are considered economic migrants, incarcerated in the notorious Krome Detention Center on the edge of the Everglades, and deported. Cubans are political, Haitians are economic, runs the controlling ideology of official U.S. immigration policy, so whether Elián was a political refugee or an economic migrant becomes an essential distinction. In this regard, the emphasis on little Elián’s material comfort in Miami cuts unfortunately close to the bone for the Cuban-American community, and it is possible to read the beating of the anti-Fidel drums as one way to swing attention back to the political arena. Here, as Sahlins notes, the Cuban government and the
Miami Cuban-Americans proved each other’s best propagandists, each using the other’s pronouncements to feed the frenzy of the local constituency throughout the Elián affair. Still another way to finesse Elián’s immigration status would be to obviate the question altogether by transforming him into a spiritual being.

Elián’s “transcendence” is certainly the essential mystery of the whole affair, especially from the perspective of this forum. Whenever religion and commodification conflate, the drums of the Cargo gods begin to sound, and I half-wished Marshall Sahlins had theorized that Elián might have been the “primitive” actor in an inverted Cargo cult—in this case the primitive has crossed into the realm of the omnipotent commodity gods, who find themselves beseeching his favor, as only his salvation from perceived deprivation can validate their own materialistic regime. Even Peggy Noonan might find it hard to buy such a hypothesis, but Sahlins does not put her faith to the test. Instead, he adeptly chronicles the miraculous apparitions and Christological motifs that surrounded Elián, from the “Windex Virgin” to the sacred machinations of Lotto and Santeria to the pious comparisons between Elián and Moses (the obvious effect of such a comparison being to render the Cuban exile analogous to the Biblical exile; perhaps it is easier to believe in the miraculous when such ennobling fringe benefits are attached). Sahlins sums up the nature of Elián’s religiosity this way:

Elián’s iconization as a messianic hope thus gave cosmic significance to the kindred relations and political conflicts in which his fate was being worked out. More than ideological reflexes, these religious representations were, as I say, structural relays, motivated mediations, by which the history of the national was
interpolated in the interpersonal, so that in the event what the Gonzalez folk did

became the event.

Year after year immigrants arrive in Florida on overloaded fishing boats or homemade rafts: many are lionized for the hardship they have endured, not a few are eulogized, but only Elián was deified. It was Elián Gonzalez’s peculiar fate to bear the symbolic freight that set in motion those “structural relays” by which he was objectified, politicized, historicized and canonized. In the conjuncture, then, Elián transcended all categories. And in the end he refuted the narratives imposed upon him, by going home.