Elian Gonzalez
And "The Purpose Of America:"
Nation, Family, And The Child-Citizen

Presentation, Sarah Banet-Weiser
Communications Department, USC

Respondent, George Sanchez
History Department, USC

Meeting Notes, Judith Peres
The Norman Lear Center, USC

Celebrity Politics & Public Life

A presentation to the Celebrity, Politics & Public Life faculty seminar

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The Norman Lear Center

Founded in January 2000, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world; the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field.

Celebrity, Politics & Public Life

Since Fall 2000, the Norman Lear Center has sponsored a popular faculty seminar series on Celebrity, Politics & Public Life. Faculty and deans from over 20 departments convene three times each semester to develop an interdisciplinary analysis of political life in this country as it is shaped by popular culture. The project is co-directed by USC History Department Chair Steven J. Ross and Leo Braudy, Leo S. Bing Professor of English. Our topics have ranged from Elian Gonzales and Timothy McVeigh to Angela Davis, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Edward G. Robinson. The group includes professors and deans from anthropology, art history, cinema-television, theatre, ethnic studies, American studies, German, sociology, business, political science, economics, education, policy and planning, philosophy, gender studies, art history, psychology, communication, journalism, English, and history.

Participants

Sarah Banet-Weiser, Communication
Tom Hollihan, Annenberg School
Martin Kaplan, Norman Lear Center
Abigail Kaun, Linguistics
Doe Mayer, Cinema-TV
Dana Polan, Cinema-TV
Kira Poplowski, Norman Lear Center
Elizabeth Ramsey, Cinema-TV
Patti Riley, Communication
George Sanchez, History
Marita Sturken, Communication
Peter Vorderer, Communication
Rene Weber, guest

The Executive Committee for 2002/2003

Leo Braudy, English
Selma Holo, University Galleries
Marty Kaplan, The Norman Lear Center
Nancy Lutkehaus, Anthropology
Dana Polan, Cinema/Television
Steven Ross, History
Marita Sturken, Communication
Elian Gonzalez and "The Purpose of America:"
Nation, Family and the Child-Citizen

Background and Summary

Communications Professor Sarah Banet-Weiser’s paper continues her studies of childhood and citizenship, and examines how the media addresses children as citizens. Here, she discusses the figure of young Cuban refugee Elian Gonzalez, and how his individuality was permutated to represent and further political and social agendas. In her work, Banet-Weiser discusses how the manipulation of the image of “The Child,” as illustrated by Gonzalez, has become normative to citizens, as constructing narratives based on their manipulation, or interpreting “The Child”’s situation has become normative to the media. In the U.S., child-like innocence has become the symbol for political progress, and the national symbol of hope.

Banet-Weiser went on to say that “The Child” has been transformed through media storytelling into a different kind of political celebrity, the success of which depends on factors such as whether the child’s ethnicity, age, status in the social hierarchy, and physical attractiveness will be palatable to the general American public, and be seen as “worthy” of adult protection. In Elian’s case, he was the right kind of child for the time, and his story brought to the fore issues of waffling U.S. immigration and Cuba-sanction policies, as well as themes pertaining to the cultural identity crisis of second generation Cuban-Americans.

Respondent, Professor George Sanchez

Professor of History George Sanchez replied to Professor Banet-Weiser’s paper by suggesting that overall, the lasting impact from Elian’s Passion play is its confirmation of the power of media saturation, as well as the predictable tendency of the media to move on to the next sensationalized narrative. Elian’s predicament brought to light perpetual issues in the history of U.S. immigration, namely, that immigration policy in the States has never lined up neatly alongside the human rights spectrum – many shades of gray persist. The media create a narrative that oversimplifies immigration issues into elements of good and evil, and black and white, because the issue of immigration policy is too complex for real discussion and simple resolution.
As a result, and especially since September 11th, the immigrant is viewed as unfit, or as a threat, regardless of the U.S.’s identity and legacy as a refuge and beacon to the downtrodden or unwanted. The Reagan era redefined acceptable refugees, distinguishing between immigrants and exiles. While exiles were treated as victims, especially if they fled communist countries, immigrants were not. Immigration control called for secure borders to staunch immigration flows, yet the U.S. did not want to militarize its borders. Immigration raids became media events for the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) to appeal for more funding.

Victimhood became a critical issue in shaping U.S. immigration policy, and created a narrative for the media: to be acceptable, an immigrant had to be both innocent and a victim. Elian fit the bill: as “The Child” in the narrative, he could be manipulated as the symbol of victimhood - he had no voice, nor choice. At the same time, the family drama of the victimized child became an important issue of its own: who is authorized to speak for “The Child,” when the speaking voice may be multi-national, as in the case of Elian’s sparring maternal and paternal relatives? In many cases, the immigrant family unit has become globalized, and unique issues face its members.

In addition, the meaning of innocence has changed: to what age is a child innocent? The period of childhood innocence is now considered so short, that sensitivity to innocence has become heightened: a pubescent or pre-pubescent child might not have fit the media’s perceptions of Elian as a defenseless innocent.

Simultaneous to Elian’s plight, the Cuban-American community in Florida was experiencing an identity crisis. As members of the earlier exile community have been passing away, the second generation has evolved, requiring new narratives – not all exiles were right-wing fanatics. This crisis of the Cuban-American community gave the Elian story further importance, in the framework of a Passion play revolving around religion, family, nation, and communism. In the context of a secularized world, the Elian story evoked nostalgia for a more religious time: the Christ-like Elian was pitted against the imperialist, evil United States. This provided the opportunity for both Americans and Cubans to be reinvigorated by a new moral story without having to act on a commitment.
Group Discussion

In spearheading the general discussion, Communications Professor Marita Sturken suggested that Elian Gonzalez’ story is a case of celebrity without consequences: she asked how Elian’s example can redefine the notion of celebrity, as our attention moves from celebrity to celebrity? The device of creating a Passion play out of the subject’s circumstances allows us to move on to the next celebrity Passion play without changing policy or requiring action: we can quickly close the chapter of one person’s story, and go to another’s. She pointed out that to the Cuban Santeria community, Elian’s plight could be perceived as a kind of play between the devilish U.S. and the Christ-like child of Cuba, alongside Cuba’s battle against the evil of the United States.

Tom Hollihan mentioned how U.S. policy toward Haitian immigrants highlights contradictions in U.S. immigration policy; he pointed out how the visibility of an immigrant population indicates how selective the media’s illustration of immigrant’s plights are. Marty Kaplan noted that the Elian case recalled classic tragedy: all sides were “right,” even though their perspectives remain irreconcilable.

In the context of the players being multi-faceted, Banet-Weiser noted that, while the custody battle of Elian Gonzalez’s families was itself a fairly simple matter, it was complicated by the multi-national identities and components of its participants. Cinema-Television Professor Dana Polan concurred that new family identities and relationships are shaped by multi-nationalism.

Banet-Weiser noted that the lasting impact of the Elian Gonzalez case seems to be that, while we develop new cultural curiosity landmarks, we do not develop new immigration or social policies. Sanchez cited the ongoing in-between legal status that continually resurfaces in Guantanamo Bay, between Florida and Cuba.

Professor Polan asked whether there were any conspiracy theories on the Elian story. Banet-Weiser pointed out that other Latino communities resented the attention given to
the Cuban community via Elian’s predicament, but that conspiracy theories had not developed.

Doe Mayer wondered whether Elian was perceived by many to be an attractive innocent because he “looked” like an American -- light-skinned -- especially after having been attired by his relatives in American, logo-emblazoned clothing, as noted by Marita Sturken.

Dana Polan mentioned the economic context of Elian’s story, and its significance to the spread of capital between the U.S. and Cuba. George Sanchez described how the second generation of Cuban-Americans has a different sense of Cuba than their parents’ generation: they view Cuba as another part of the wider Latin American market, and feel that Cuba should be open like any other South American country. Marita Sturken noted that Elian Gonzalez is still treated like a celebrity in Cuba, and that the home of his Florida relatives has been converted to a museum.

Tom Hollihan noted that polling data indicate that American people would like to change the policies currently in place against Cuba, but that these changes are politically impossible. Sarah Banet-Weiser stated that while second-generation Cuban-Americans see Cuba as a source of economic opportunity, they do not see Cuba as “home.”