

**There's No Place Like Home:
Elián González and the Ideology of Family Values**

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“...One of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, ‘I am ideological.’”

Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)”

It is a portrait of absolute American domestic bliss. Standing before their newly purchased, two-million dollar home in Chappaqua, New York, a section of “affluent Westchester county” (Kiely 12A), President Clinton’s left arm wraps lovingly around Hillary’s shoulders. The First Lady, clad in a white turtleneck, a white parka, and white mittens, smiles approvingly. Her gaze is fixed lovingly upon her black-leather jacketed husband. Off to the side of the overjoyed national couple a large microphone penetrates the frame. The Clintons are offering a press conference the morning after moving into their new home. Joking about an “evening spent deciding where to hang paintings or move furniture,” the first family take a moment to reminisce about their first home, a “two-story frame house in Little Rock they bought for \$112,000” (Kiely 12A). The black and white photograph of the Clintons, dressed equally monochromatically, acts as a powerful document of what Lauren Berlant calls the “utopian symbolic nation” (3). According to Berlant, “the marketing of nostalgic images of a normal, familial America defines the utopian context for citizen aspiration” (3). The picture of the Clintons, snapped during a moment of domestically charged nostalgic reverie, underscores Berlant’s philosophy that false images of the familial, transmitted nationally, truly define the pinnacle of American citizenship status.

Brutally heteronormative and class conscious, the national family snapshot becomes that image that one ideally aspires to. In this public display of political success, economic excess, and marital bliss, problematic histories are deftly erased. The Clintons’ marital narrative, an uninterrupted tale focused around a table they bought shortly after marriage in 1975 that can finally be put to good use, is primarily constructed here through a historical sleight-of-hand. The remote past, marked by accounts of first homes and newlywed possessions, and the near

future, Hillary's potential election to the New York Senate, obliterates the well-documented turbulent history of the couple's marriage. Eliminating the recent past, replete with internationally-dissected incidents of marital infidelity, the photograph takes on an iconic register. This is a snapshot of possibilities. A black and white photograph of the black and white definition of family. Financially, professionally, domestically, and heterosexually successful, the Clintons become magically transformed into a powerful symbol of the completed American dream—the white family foregrounding the white home snapped in a moment of consciously wiping away the black marks on their marital and familial record.

This particular instance of historical cleansing is significant not only because it underscores the primacy of publicly affirmed family connectedness so seemingly vital to the discourse of the nation, but also because it appears a brief eleven pages after the comprehensive coverage of Miami Cubans demonstrating over the INS decision to send Elián Gonzalez back to Cuba to live with his father. The young boy, found clinging to a raft on Thanksgiving Day of 1999, has become a powerful symbol of the political tensions between Cuba and the United States. There is almost monumental discord emanating from his uncertain status and potential relocation. The struggle over whether he should stay in Miami or be reunited with his father in Cuba stems from the relatively contradictory discourses embedded within the near-mythologic abstractions central to the American narrative: liberty and family. These two potent ideologies, so very prominent in the Clinton photograph, fail to register in the images of elderly exiles blocking the entry into the port of Miami or clashing with riot police throughout the city. In this particular case, the pursuit of liberty and the pursuit of family cannot seamlessly coincide. One negates the other.

According to Ernesto Betancourt, founding director of Radio Martí, “there is a perceptual chasm between the Cuban-American community and the rest of society because we see the child's return as a continuation of the repression by the Castro regime and the world only sees that Elián will still have his father” (Roth 4A, my trans.). These competing perceptions are ultimately incapable of synthesis. The political filter of Betancourt's vision of the Cuban American community and the familial filter of the “rest of society” actively distort the paramount decision in this case: What should be the boy's ideal home? Hazarding an answer, however, is not the primary goal of this discussion. Instead, I choose to focus on the incoherencies emanating from these two aforementioned modes of argumentation. The schism between family politics and exile politics serves to disrupt any possibility of effective action in the case of Elián Gonzalez. In order to fully ascertain the distinction between the familial and political discourses present in this case, one needs to locate the source of this national focus on family and family values as essential agendas disseminated by the American government.

Lauren Berlant sees the focus on the family as the primary pulse that gauges the overall health of the nation as a concentrated backlash against the political agitation of the sixties. After the vocal struggle for civil rights, women's rights, and public outcries against Vietnam, American society could no longer be defined in ready-made symbolic terms. The "damaged and abandoned . . . core of U. S. society" (Berlant 3), marked by national criticism and a celebration of difference, engendered a conservative reaction that would ably reinstitute the primacy of the symbolic nation. Seeking to "shrink the state" (Berlant 3), Reagan Republicanism ushered in a new era of family consciousness that radically shifted the focus from the national to the familial. This concentration served not only to glorify the nuclear family as the essential blocks for nation building, but also helped to divert attention away from a number of governmental deficiencies. The imminent collapse of social security and welfare reforms, the silence about AIDS and sky-rocketing health care costs, and the ascending crime rates in major cities throughout the United States could be neatly disposed within the vacuum of domestic rhetoric. The case is not so much that the government is not working, but that your family is not working hard enough to find a resolution to these problems. In the decade following the end of the Reagan administration, growing concerns over the government's impotence to resolve a number of social problems—teen violence, adolescent drug abuse, gun violence, gangsta rap, and internet porn—has caused a number of politicians to reify the family as the primary locus for finding an expedient solution. In essence, these conservative politicians assume that negligent, over-worked, non-surveilling parents are the initial cause of these ills and only through their own diligence will these ills disappear.

A concentrated effort at reinstituting familial privilege, beyond all evidence of social and/or economic turmoil, is eerily echoed throughout the rhetoric of proponents of Elián's return. Representatives of the American government, namely President Clinton, U. S. Attorney General Janet Reno and INS Commissioner Doris Meissner, stand firm on the belief that the boy needs to be returned to his father regardless of the present political conditions on the island. The importance of family, superceding all other possible social institutions, becomes so tantamount in the decision of Elián's repatriation that these representatives assume familial unification can assuage the boy's reabsorption into a Communist regime. The Attorney General, specifically, has attempted to establish the myth of familial connectedness as a potent antidote to all of Cuba's social and political difficulties. According to Reno, "what [INS] took into consideration is who, under the law, can speak for the 6-year-old boy who can't really speak for himself. He has a father. And there is a bond between father and son that the law recognizes and tries to honor" ("Basis" 17A). Further into the press conference, that recognizable bond between father and son becomes

even less cogent when Reno explains that “there is something about a 6-year-old boy and his father” (“Basis” 17A). The absolute lack of concrete evidence set forth as the reason for repatriation is subsumed in ambiguous language that privileges fatherhood as that special something—a literal *je ne sais quoi*—that can never be contested. That evening, Hillary Clinton reintroduced the neglected sacrifice of the mother (who died at sea) on the David Letterman show by pointing out that her wishes must also be taken into consideration. However, the brief maternal interjection failed to sway the First Lady’s belief that “the most humane approach is for the son to be near his father because he is only six years old” (Isla 2A).

The common thread in these two narratives of parental privilege is the ethical and moral correctness of returning Elián despite the conditions on the island. The family, as the ultimate symbol of unity, takes center stage as a sacred entity that the law must strive to maintain intact. In essence, a child’s place is in the home regardless of where that home happens to be located. The importance of the family unit is so essential to the discourse about Elián that its mere mention obliterates all other potential viewpoints or possibilities. It is nearly impossible to argue against an abstraction, a something that nothing can counter. To disagree with the decision is to verge on the possibility of contradicting the United States’s fetishization of family values. This is not only a dangerous prospect, but one that wholly destabilizes the American concept of the sacrosanct domestic sphere.

The eminent position for the family within the U. S. psyche is so intrinsic that few are immune to its rhetorical or ideological power. To be part of a family is to be able to locate oneself within a network of roots that promise the preservation as well as the reproduction of cultural traditions and offers some semblance of heritage and history. When one introduces adjectives such as immigrant and/or exile, the family acts as a powerful counter-institution that aids in the safeguarding of customs and language against what some may see as the inevitable double bind of assimilation and acculturation. I would argue that no one ever is immune to the desire of familial participation. According to Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler, the creators of *The Cuban American Family Album*, “the majority of Cuban Americans have never experienced life in Cuba—they are native born citizens of the United States. Like members of other immigrant groups, they have put down roots and their claim to part of the American dream” (79). The ability to dream that dream, as the multiple narratives collected in this document suggest, stems from the ability to create a cohesive sense of family in the United States. The meshing of private families, furthermore, sustains a publicly visible entity known as the Cuban American community.

The essential myth of the Hoobler family album is that there is a family, in the first place, to preserve within its pages. If the Freedom Flights, the Camarioca exodus, the children of Peter Pan flights, the Mariel boatlift, the rafter crisis of ’94

and the 20,000 visa lotteries held annually have taught one single lesson, it must be that Cuban families are notoriously fractured. The Castro government has made it utterly impossible to maintain family unity throughout its four decades of power. Ironically, the Hooblers' hundred-plus pages limits this phenomenon to a mere sentence: "one of the most devastating effects of mass immigration from Castro's Cuba was the splintering of families" (79). This brief aside neglects the reality of the Cuban-American family the book hopes to document. One could argue that the Hooblers, creators of this Cuban-American social history text targeted for young people, are so invested in the familial rhetoric of the nation that they cannot escape its grasp. The editor-educators of the book have tried to contextualize the Cuban-American experience for a large audience; what is interesting about their endeavor, however, is the near-perfect Althusserian model that they employ, using the quintessential Ideological State Apparatuses of family, school, and church to signify for the American public what it means to be a Cuban immigrant. That the process necessitates an almost exclusionary process of historical and political elimination is rendered irrelevant; the Cuban-American community materializes only insofar as it molds itself around these ISAs and, in turn, to the national rhetoric of familial citizenship. For every single photo of a weeping wife awaiting word on the documentation status of her husband, there are numerous portraits of several generations of Cubans united, Clinton-like, before their homes.

The consequences of the forced imposition of a parental vocabulary upon what Cuban Americans perceive as an innately political situation is crucial to understand if one wishes to explore the reasons why demonstrators in the city of Miami took to the streets on January 6, 2000. It is quite possible to envision the events of this day as more than an act of retaliation against the INS decision. There is a much broader context that must be taken into account. Where the young boy belongs is only part of a much larger issue. These demonstrations underscore the inability of familial discourse to efface the political discourse set forth by certain members within the Cuban-American community. While governmental representatives suggest that sending Elián to his father is vital because the family should be preserved, Cuban-Americans disrupt this promise of unification by emphasizing that the boy is not returning to his father but to a government "wholly against culture, the development of identity, and the most basic human rights of the Cuban people" (Roth 4A).

Opponents of Elián's return actively privilege the political situation in Cuba in order to underscore the illegitimacy of the family unification agenda proposed by the INS. These members of the Cuban-American community in Miami assert that children in Cuba have milk rations suspended on their seventh birthday. They assert that in an island with no Disney Worlds Elián's lone enjoyment would be his mandatory introduction into the young communist

movement of the island. Furthermore, as many of the placards during the demonstrations articulated, sending Elián to Cuba is sending an “innocent child back to no future” (Oikon, de Gale, and Lynch 17A). Although these particular pronouncements originate from only a segment of the Cuban American community, and should not be understood as unified public opinion, that discord even exists in regard to this case proves the uncertainty that arises from the clash between domestic and political ideologies. If the American government wishes to hold families together, it must remember that, in regard to the Cuban-American experience, families have already been split apart. The lethal mix of emigration and separation has impeded the much-referenced cohesive family structure. In the case of Cubans dispersed throughout the globe, the almost mythic construct deemed the family is, for the most part, irrecoverable. Some agreed with the government and stayed on the island. Some took planes to destinations they believed would be better. Some died trying to reach those places. The truth of the matter is that history and politics have forced broader definitions of family; the nuclear family has had to extend its nucleus. Outside of Cuba families do not come in discreet packages. They are created from those who made it out.

Set in the months immediately following the 1980 Mariel boatlift, Christine Bell’s 1990 novel, *The Pérez Family*, narrates the story of a diverse group of characters caught in a web of governmentally sanctioned immigration policies. The novel opens with Juan Raúl Pérez’s reveries about Carmela, the wife he has not seen during his two decades in Calvario prison. The twenty years apart has motivated the “enemy of the revolution” to attempt a daily recreation of the absent wife. Aging her, just a little bit, day by day, to account for the time lost to separation, Juan Raúl’s litany becomes a concerted effort at unfreezing time. From the confines of his cell, tending to his wife’s image as one tends to a garden, Bell’s prisoner understands, quite vividly, how Cuba’s political situation manages to disrupt families to such an extent that even the memories seem insufficient substitutes.

If Juan Raúl seems locked somewhere between the evaporating past and the unreachable present, Dorita Evita Pérez’s focus is fixed directly on the future. Tired of “screw[ing] for favors and position . . . screw[ing] to be left alone . . . screw[ing] her bus fare to the Peruvian embassy when she heard rumors of the boatlift . . . [and] screw[ing] so she wouldn’t be screwed again” (18), Dorita, self-baptized as Dottie, envisions Miami as a free place where she can earn her income and own her own body. A born entrepreneur, she takes in laundry at the Orange Bowl at a quarter a load before learning to multiply her earnings by using her sexuality as a magnet for interesting motorists in the flowers she sells in the corner of Flagler and LeJeune. Dottie’s America, although plagued by fantasies of John Wayne, Elvis Presley, and endless bottles of nail polish, allows her incipient

quest for profit and self-definition to take shape in concrete ways which were unimaginable to her in her native Cuba.

Despite Dottie's powerful transformation upon setting foot on American soil, her individuality and self-sufficiency become burdens to overcome when confronted with the strange vocabulary of the INS. Explanations of resettlement, documentation, naturalization, and deportation dilute and distort the simple word Dottie believed she would hear after departing Cuba: freedom. Her relationship with those governmental agencies created to police the traffic of recent arrivals from Mariel becomes a contest of competing ideologies. Dottie, the individual, becomes subsumed into a larger depersonalized political category, *Marielita*. Furthermore, this ambiguous status, aside from stripping her, within the context of immigration policy, of her ambition and determination, also makes her an unsuitable candidate for sponsorship. Acknowledging that this form of semi-adoption is reserved primarily for groups of relatives who have escaped together, and fearing relocation to some undisclosed mid-west destination, Dottie realizes that only through creating an ersatz family unit will she finally attain the liberty she obsessively pursues. The crux of Bell's plot is the formation of this Mariel family through a series of chance meetings with other characters whose lone common denominator is the shared patronym.

The marriage "in name only" (33) between Dottie and Juan Raúl allows the couple to jump a number of positions in the sponsorship charts. As the novel progresses, and the Pérez family extends to include a senile tree-climbing father and an accident-prone, drug-dealing son, the viability of sponsorship increases. Within a couple of days of encampment, Dottie moves from the low three hundreds, her original position when viewed as an individual, to number seven, her new immigration position upon becoming matriarch to her fictive family. Ironically, this manufactured unit holds the greatest promise in Bell's novel. Incapable of a satisfying reunification with his wife, Juan Raúl understands by the novel's end that he and his original wife have become "strangers" (254). He realizes, now, that Dottie is his true wife.

Despite the ironic happy ending that Bell chooses to conclude *The Pérez Family*, her novel speaks to the ominous sway governmental agencies and political institutions have over the lives of individuals. If the essential complaint of the text is that Castro's regime makes it nearly impossible to sustain a cohesive family unit, it seems even more telling that the American government demands that cohesive family unit in order to permit any legitimate access to political and/or social power. Whereas Cuban prisons destroy families, American pseudo-prisons force Cubans to deploy families. Seemingly, that impulse for familial validation is so acute that any group of individuals can imaginatively reinvent themselves into this acceptable mold. Neglecting this potent loophole is tantamount to political and social suicide because, in America, to be without

family is to be powerless, neglected, and, in the case of those who failed to acquire sponsorship, forcefully transported.

The tension of choosing between a politically compromised family and a self-selected (adopted) one, so thoroughly elaborated in Bell's text, resonates loudly in the case of Elián Gonzalez. When *TIME* magazine poses the question, "Where Does He Belong?", a plethora of voices come with a ready answer. I, however, am not interested in these answers. The reason for this stance is that opinions on paternal rights, maternal sacrifices, and potential destinations are not as significant as the original ideology that generated them. Clinton's desire to view this case as apolitical, a family crisis necessitating a family-based resolution, speaks to the failure of American governmental policy in regards to the island. Why discuss the irony of having a communist regime in one's own backyard when the potent vocabulary of the domestic—mother, father, home—holds much more symbolic authority over the American psyche? Conservative Cuban-American leaders, the opposite end of the political spectrum, wish to see solely the political conditions of Cuba, an island so bent on the dispersion of families that demonstrations urging paternal rights seem like spectacularly ludicrous gestures of revolutionary manipulation. Both sides appear quite adept at constructing the necessary scapegoats. Somewhere between the solely familial and the solely political, Elián drifts.

Perhaps Zoé Valdés, the Cuban novelist who fled to Spain six years ago, offers the ideal alternative for escaping this network of incompatible national convictions. She sees Elián's present as a succession of symbolically charged photo opportunities, portraits of a young boy covered in the American flag and urged to flash peace signs at the camera. She sees Elián's return to Cuba, his possible future, as an internationally televised instance of Castro's victory centered upon a "poor innocent's public repudiation of the memory of his dead mother" (11A, trans. mine). Ultimately seeing Elián caught up in this maelstrom of politics and uncertain families, Valdés urges that perhaps a truly apolitical alternative conceptualization must be envisioned: "Elián is more than anything else the son of the dolphins; they at least had the courage and the common sense to return him to land without manufacturing deceptions" (11A, trans. mine).

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