

Review Essay: The Museum of the Battle of Ideas, Cardenas, Cuba¹

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The Museum of the Battle of Ideas (el Museo a la Batalla de Ideas) (Figure 1), located in the town of Cardenas in the Cuban province of Matanzas, is a state museum that documents Cuba's campaign (1999-2000) for the repatriation of Elián González. González, who was with his mother when she attempted an illegal migration to the United States (U.S.), washed ashore in Florida three days after their boat capsized. He was five years old at the time. The museum relates the ensuing international custody battle to several historical events that are significant for Cuban nationalism. In an anthropological context, one could view the museum as an expression of Cuban national sovereignty in the post-Cold War era. Furthermore, the institution illustrates an important trend of Cuban socialist heritage production—the use of contemporary social life as the inspiration for national heritage. The museum succeeds in its goal to depict the mass mobilization and revitalization of national unity that the Elián González case inspired among Cuban citizens. Likewise, the museum successfully portrays parallels between this moment and important historical events in the consolidation of Cuban nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹

How Social Life Becomes Heritage

The Museum of the Battle of Ideas documents the campaign for the repatriation of Elián González (1999-2000). On November 22, 1999, Elizabeth Brotóns, her son, Elián, and her husband (Elián's stepfather) left Cuba on a small boat. They were part of a group of 14 people attempting an illegal migration from Cuba to the United States.² Three days later, the boat capsized at sea. There were only three survivors—Elián and two adults. After receiving medical attention, the U.S. authorities released the child to the custody of his paternal great uncle, Lázaro González, who resided in Miami. According to some accounts, when Lázaro took steps to file for custody of Elián, Juan Miguel González, the boy's father, still had no knowledge of his departure.³ The González relatives in Miami claimed custody of the boy, saying that by law he was entitled to asylum in the U.S. because he had reached the U.S. mainland.⁴

In 2000 the U.S. and Cuban governments engaged in a fierce battle of words. The Cuban exile community in Miami called into question the quality of life in Cuba and accused Fidel Castro's government of ongoing human rights abuses. The Cuban government responded to criticisms by framing the conflict as part of an ideological "Batalla de Ideas," which relates to the defense of national sovereignty against forms of neo-imperialism.⁵ For seven months, Cuban society erupted in outrage, as people demonstrated across the island but particularly in Havana in front of the U.S. Interest Section.⁶ On June 29, 2000, Elián returned to Cuba with his father and stepmother.⁷ A few months later, crews began restoring a 19th century firehouse in the

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municipality of Cardenas, the hometown of the González family.⁸ The following account draws upon the museum tour and formal interview that I conducted with Ernesto Álvarez Blanco, the museum's director, on February 20, 2002.

The museum restoration project commenced under the direction of Cuban architect Augusto Bueno on September 1, 2000. The plan was to restore the building to its original 19th century style. This meant looking for new architectural elements that resembled the old ones as much as possible. They imported the floor and special cement from Italy and reconstructed the original stairwell. Castro assigned the Union of Young Communists (Union de Jovenes Comunistas), the Communist Party's youth organization, responsibility for financing the initial phases of the project. According to the director, the government would finance the museum's budget until the museum became self-supporting through revenues from admissions (5 Cuban pesos and 5 USD for foreigners), the museum store, and restaurant.⁹

On July 14, 2001, in the presence of Elián González, his family, and Elián's classmates from Marcelo Salado Primary School, Castro inaugurated the museum and addressed a crowd of some 2,000 onlookers in the Parque José Antonio Echevarría in Cardenas. Castro's personal involvement with the project reflected its political importance. His presence at the inauguration, approval of the resources to finance the project, and the name that he chose for the museum, assured media coverage. Castro considered several names for el Museo a la Batalla de Ideas, such as the National Anti-Imperialism Museum and the Cuban People's Museum of Ideological Struggle.¹⁰ More than six months after opening, visitor attendance had reached 33,000. The day that I visited in February 2002, approximately 500 people also visited.¹¹

Exhibiting the Battle of Ideas

The museum succeeds in its goal to depict the mass mobilization and revitalization of national unity that the Elián González case inspired. It began with only 200 objects and after six months had acquired more than 2,000. The collection grew exponentially as Cubans, and people around the world, donated objects. The public created a memorial for Elián at the González home in Cardenas. In 1999 and 2000, local residents left gifts for Elián, but according to newspaper accounts they also left at the memorial different objects related to acts of aggression targeting Cuba and objects that illustrated revolutionary accomplishments (García Fernández and Álvarez Blanco 2001).

The museum not only provides a convincing account of a Cuban society actively engaged in the González case, but it also successfully portrays parallels between the Elián González event and important historical events in the consolidation of Cuban nationalism. The museum display compares political and moral battles for national liberation with Elián's custody case between the Cuban and U.S. governments. At one moment the museum text quotes General Antonio Maceo, the "Bronze Titan," who was second in command of the Independence Army in the Independence War (1895-1898). One display celebrates national liberation hero, José Martí, martyrs of the Cuban Revolution, including Conrado Benítez (the young volunteer teacher murdered during the 1961 Literacy Campaign), and Juan Miguel González, Elián's father. Another display describes the "moment of the revolutionary triumph" in 1959 when Castro and

rebel forces took power. According to the museum's narrative these important points of reference within Cuban historiography are comparable to the triumph of Elián González's repatriation.

In the first of six rooms (Figure 2), the museum tells the story of the nation's battle for "Eliancito," as he was called in Cuba during the summer of 2000. In the entrance stands a sculpture of José Martí holding a boy protectively while pointing accusatively in the distance (Figure 3). During the demonstrations in 2000, this object was part of the "tribunal" stage that the government built in front of the U.S. Interest Section in Havana. Another sculpture in the first exhibition hall shows a little boy preparing to throw a Superman doll far into the distance in a gesture of rejection or disapproval (Figure 4).

The main exhibition is a chronological and thematic display of objects related to the massive weekly demonstrations and daily television discussion programs that began to inform the public and solicit their active participation in the repatriation campaign. T-shirts with slogans, posters, and photos of the demonstrations serve as evidence of the public's participation and support. Another display includes international correspondence to the Cuban government—supportive emails, faxes, and letters from around the world. Another set of objects relates to the boy and his life in the U.S., while waiting to return to Cuba. One object is a notebook (Figure 5) that Elián used in Miami when his Cuban teacher and classmates traveled there to hold classes with him. The notebook lies open, which allows visitors to see Elián's handwriting, observe the schoolwork, and imagine how Elián spent his time while waiting to return to Cuba. An interesting pair of items is the medal and certificate that the Cuban Counsel of State awarded Juan Miguel González on July 5, 2000 (Figure 6).

The director called my attention to the large photo boards (Figure 7), an extraordinary feature compared to most exhibitions that I have visited in modest public museums in Cuba. The photographic display captures the highlights of the national effort to free Elián, whom the Cuban media described as "sequestered" in the U.S. One photograph shows Elián, beaming with joy, reuniting with his father, stepmother, and infant brother in Miami. A different photograph shows groups of primary school children and massive crowds protesting in front of the U.S. Interest Section during the summer of 2000.

An open courtyard (Figure 8), which adjoins the two main galleries, contains busts of several Cuban martyrs of anti-imperialism, including Ernesto "Ché" Guevara and José Martí. When viewed from the second-floor balcony, the patio floor tiles recreate the pattern of the Anti-Imperialist Tribunal in front of the U.S. Interest Section, which was the site of the weekly demonstrations in Havana in 1999 and 2000. Furthermore, the patio serves as a physical and conceptual bridge between the Cuban past, present, and future, represented respectively as the struggle for sovereignty, the international custody battle, and the brighter future for Cuban youth, which the content of the third exhibition hall addresses.

The third room presents materials related to the education and cultural programs that the government announced in 1999 and 2000 during the height of the international custody battle (Tisdell Flikke 2005).¹² The programs and the objects portray the intellectual commitment of the Battle of Ideas—providing quality education and raising the cultural level of the nation, goals

that invoke the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961. The display includes a model of the solar panel that the government installed in 1,944 schools in the fall of 2001. The solar panels were installed to power the new televisions, which the government installed to provide each classroom with access to a new educational channel.

Other displays that reflect the government's investment in education are uniforms and teaching aids for the Art Educators School (Figure 9), which opened in 2001. Workbooks and study guides illustrate "Universidad Para Todos" (University for All), a television program that broadcasts courses on Cuban history and the history of art, theatre, film, dance, nutrition, geography, English, and French, three times daily. The museum also displays a dictionary, thesaurus, Cuba history book, and a copy of *El Diario del Che en Bolivia* (1968) (Figure 10), which the government features in a national library book program, another example of the government's commitment to improving the quality of Cuban education. "Because of the blockade of your country," said the director, "these books were in high demand." The shortage of affordable paper and other primary materials was a result of the combined effects of the U.S. sanctions and the demise of the communist trading bloc. With these displays about the quality of life in Cuba, the museum draws parallels between Elián's dilemma as a national struggle and the Battle of Ideas, which includes the "battle for education and culture" (García 2001:3).

Why Elián González?

The Elián González case draws our attention to political and social issues that affect the daily lives of millions of ordinary Cuban citizens. The controversy was a family tragedy that quickly became a matter of public interest and an international conflict. The issue of U.S.-Cuban migration fueled a national discourse on U.S. sanctions, the hardships of Cuban daily life, and the future of Cuban youth. Cuban citizens talked about their quality of life and economic survival frequently in 1999 and 2000, which I believe was related to the ongoing national focus on the international custody battle.

The government mobilized Cuban society for "the Battle for Elián" by holding the Tribuna Abierta, weekly demonstrations that began in Havana but eventually traveled to different municipalities around the country. Cubans were able to follow Elián's activities in the U.S. every day, thanks to the "Mesa Redonda Informativa" (The Informative Roundtable), a daily television and radio program that featured commentary by Cuban politicians, journalists, and analysts. The protests, demonstrations, and television programs inspired national unity in Cuba, but they also highlighted disagreement about what the González event symbolized for the nation.

Most individuals, however, did not air dissenting views publicly; instead they criticized life in Cuba in secure private environments. In the summer of 2000, in the privacy of their homes people debated whether the quality of life in Cuba was worth returning to, especially given the lingering effects of the economic crisis of the 1990s. "What is there for him to come back to?" asked a 58 year-old, former economist, María, when I solicited her opinion on the fate of Elián González.¹³ For, Elsa, whom I also interviewed, the Museum of the Battle of Ideas addresses the past 43 years of struggle and the question of "patriotism" that has preoccupied the nation. "The museum says that we have received hits and attacks and we cannot allow ourselves to forget,"

she said. “But, there is a breaking point,” she continued, “something that one cannot bear longer.” “Necessarily, do we need to live this way?” she asked.¹⁴

Most people that I interviewed said that they understood why Elián’s mother risked their lives to leave Cuba. The effects of the “special period” (economic crisis) persisted in 1999 when Elizabeth Brotóns left Cuba with Elián. Such details, however, are absent from the museum narrative. The museum narrative omits the contested issue of illegal migrations (and Elizabeth Brotóns) and, consistent with the state media, portrays illegal migration as a moral and political rather than economic issue.

In the summer of 2000, the Cuban media focused the debate on the rights of Elián’s father as an extension of a sovereign state and on Cuban sovereignty vis-à-vis the United States and its provocative Cuban immigration policy. Juan González became a metonym of Cuba, whereas González’s Miami relatives came to represent a nebulous anti-Castro community in Miami.

Concluding Remarks

While defining a link between the Elián González case and historical events is a reasonable goal for this national museum, which is located in the hometown of the González family, the museum narrative masks the contested nature of Elián González as a national symbol of Cuban sovereignty/identity. Furthermore the museum under-communicates wider social and political issues that shaped the events that constituted the Elián González case.¹⁵ These issues include growing economic vulnerability, social demoralization, and illegal migration.

Although the museum narrative is celebratory and uncritical of these issues (Elián González’s mother is hardly mentioned in the museum narrative), the museum has become an important *lieu de mémoire* for many Cubans. For some Cubans the museum is a symbol of national sovereignty, but for others it calls attention to museums as part of the state’s production of “silences” (cf. Trouillot 1995) as well as heritage. In an anthropological context, the Museum of the Battle of Ideas illustrates how Cuban heritage production works, rather than what Cuban heritage is.

Notes

1. In this essay, I follow the editorial style of *Museum Anthropology* in giving proper names in full on first occurrence and then using last names in later discussions, except in situations where confusion would result from the discussion of multiple individuals with the same last name. The key exception to this strategy concerns references to Elián González, who will sometimes, following world-wide usage, be referred to by his first name alone. This approach is intended to conform with established practice in discussions of the Elián González episode and will hopefully minimize confusion among readers.

2. The phases of U.S.-Cuban migration appear as six or seven different stages. José Cobas and Jorge Duany suggest that “the Balseros” stage ended in 1994. For more on Cuban-U.S. Migration see their study (1997).

3. For the Cuban government’s official account of Elián’s case, consult the Cuban website “¡Elián, Cuba te reclama! Cronología de una Infamia.” See: <http://www.elian.cu/elian0.htm>, accessed March 24, 2007.

4. Under the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966, the U.S. government has the executive authority to parole Cuban entrants who arrive in the U.S. without proper documentation. Paroling allows the immigrant to bypass the application and review process, which applies to entrants from other countries. Since 1994 the U.S. has granted asylum to Cubans who enter the U.S. via a land port. Entrants arriving by sea are paroled provided that their vessel is not intercepted at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard. This practice is known as the “wet feet, dry feet” policy. The Cuban government interprets this policy as provocative and part of a larger strategy to lure Cubans away from socialism and Cuba. Find the Cuban Adjustment Act Fact Sheet here: http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/cuba/cuba_adjustment_act.html, accessed April 13, 2007.

5. The Battle of Ideas incorporates five political objectives: (1) the liberation of the five Cuban men incarcerated in Miami for espionage; (2) the end of the Helms-Burton Law, Torricelli Act, and other forms of the U.S. blockade; (3) the end of the world economic crisis that threatens humanity and particularly the Third World; (4) world peace; and (5) education and culture (García 2001:3). When I visited Cuba (1999-2002), the phrase “Battle of Ideas” was a prominent slogan on state television, in the print media, and on billboards. The national media and political figures commonly used it in public forums to contextualize the international conflict surrounding Elián González.

6. The United States Interest Section is the government’s diplomatic entity in Cuba. According to its website:

The functions of USINT are similar to those of any U.S. government presence abroad: Consular Services, a Political and Economic Section, a Public Diplomacy Program, and Refugee Processing unique to Cuba.

The objectives of USINT in Cuba is to promote a peaceful transition to a democratic system based on respect for rule of law, individual human rights and open economic and communication systems.

Cuba and the U.S. have limited bilateral relations. For more information see:

<http://havana.usinterestsection.gov/history.html> and <http://havana.usinterestsection.gov/>, both accessed March 24, 2007.

7. Federal agents raided the Miami house where Elián resided with relatives and after a short while in federal protection, authorities released Elián to his father, who had come to Miami to retrieve him.

8. This is a summary of an audio recording of the interview.

9. According to the director, few museums in Cuba, except maybe the Museo de Bellas Artes, Museo de la Ciudad, and Museo de la Revolución, have the attendance revenues to make auto-financing a feasible option.

10. In Spanish, the names were el Museo Nacional Anti-Imperialista and el Museo de la Lucha Ideológica del Pueblo Cubano.

11. These numbers also reflect tourists traveling on the commercial tour buses between the Varadero beach resorts and the City of Havana. During my field research, rumors circulated that a government entity had directed all tourist buses to stop at the museum.

12. The government implemented numerous cultural programs during this period. I address them in more detail in a larger work (Tisdell Flikke 2005).

13. This quotation draws upon an informal interview with María, a retired economist who supported herself by working informally as a hairdresser out of her home (June 2000). In August of the same year, she went to the U.S. on a temporary visa to visit her daughter and did not return to Cuba. Several months later, María's daughter in Cuba moved into María's vacant home in a Havana suburb. Even some Cubans who took part in the organized protests and other activities grew weary of the Elián issue at times. Despite the public's participation in the government campaign for the return of Elián, many people that I interviewed, such as María, questioned the repatriation of Elián and the socio-economic conditions to which he would return.

14. "¿Necesariamente, necesitamos vivir así?"

15. A display on the Special Period at Havana's Museo de la Revolución evidences a similar treatment or "gloss-over" with respect to Cuba's social and economic problems. When I commented on the lack of personal stories in the treatment at the Museo de la Revolución, it was suggested to me that, in the museum, one will only see "causes, consequences, and percents" (causas, consecuencias, y porcentajes).

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Figures



Figure 1: Museum of the Battle of Ideas, Cardenas, Cuba. February 20, 2002. Photograph by Michelle Tisdal Flikke.



Figure 2: The first gallery at the Museum of the Battle of Ideas. February 20, 2002. Photograph by Michelle Tisdal Flikke.



Figure 3: Sculpture (by Andrés González) of José Martí holding a child. February 20, 2002. Photograph by Michelle Tisdell Flikke.



Figure 4: Sculpture of a child throwing a doll into the distance. February 20, 2002. Photograph by Michelle Tisdell Flikke.

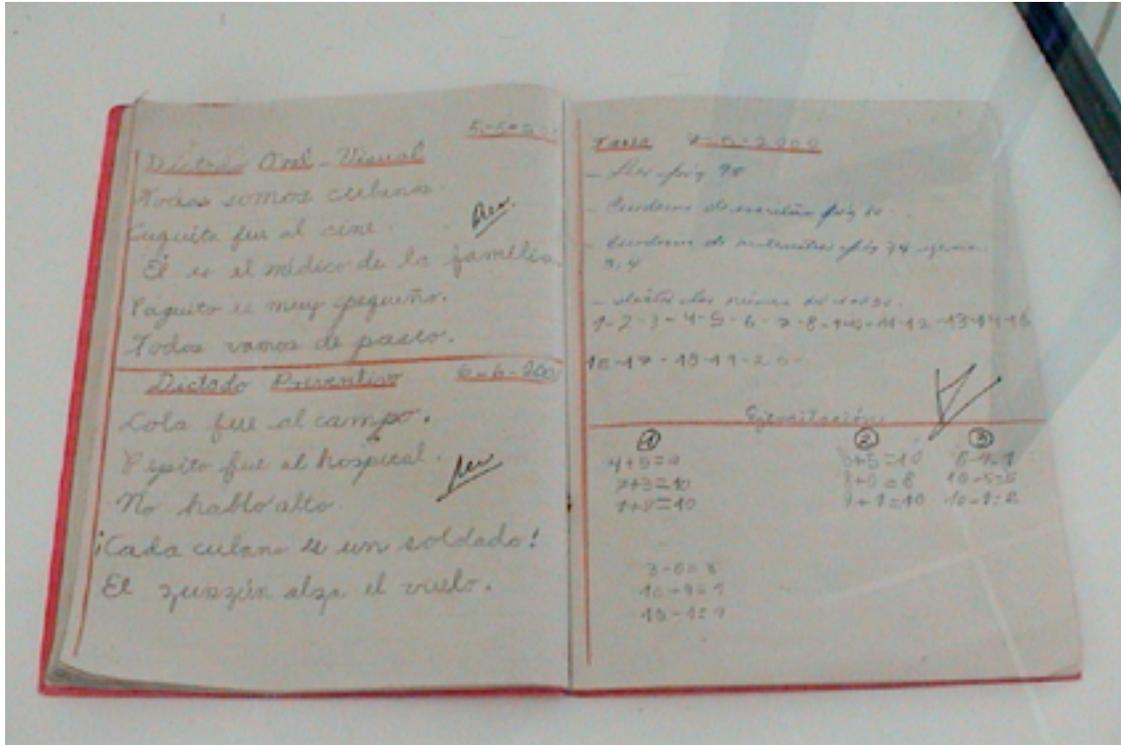


Figure 5: Elián used this notebook during his stay in Miami. The notebook is on display at the Museum of the Battle of Ideas. February 20, 2002. Photograph by Michelle Tisdell Flikke.



Figure 6: On July 5, 2000, Cuba's Counsel of State awarded this medal of honor and certificate to Juan González in recognition of his patriotism. February 20, 2002. Photograph by Michelle Tisdal Flikke.



Figure 7: A photograph display board at the museum. February 20, 2002. Photograph by Michelle Tisdal Flikke.



Figure 8: The patio and the “martyrs of imperialism.” February 20, 2002. Photograph by Michelle Tisdal Flikke.



Figure 9: These are the uniforms issued to students at Cuba's 15 Art Instructors Schools, which the government approved in 2000, in the midst of the González custody case. The purpose of the schools, which opened their doors in September 2000, was to produce 30,000 art instructors over a period of ten years and make art instruction available to children in each Cuban municipality. February 20, 2002. Photograph by Michelle Tisdell Flikke.



Figure 10: This book display illustrates the Freedom Publishing Program (Programa Editorial Libertad), which provides dictionaries, encyclopedias, and history books for use in public libraries and schools. February 20, 2002. Photograph by Michelle Tisdal Flikke.