

---

# Mother, Child, Race, Nation: The Visual Iconography of Rescue and the Politics of Transnational and Transracial Adoption

*Laura Briggs*

---

The notion of 'Third World' poverty, hunger, or need conjures up certain conventionalised images – a rail-thin waif, maybe with an empty rice-bowl, or a mother holding a skeletal child, a secularised, traumatised Madonna and Child – her head maybe covered, gazing at the child or perhaps the camera, eyes sunken. Something much like the image of Ethiopian famine victims in Figure 1. It is an image of 'need' popularised by television advertisements with Sally Struthers, television news, Save the Children advertisements, CARE and UNICEF; it is haunting, pleads for help, and is regularly raised around family dinner tables in the United States when children do not eat their peas. To get a sense of how standardised representations of 'need' have become, it is interesting to notice some of the images that seem difficult to imagine as a US newspaper image of 'Third World' poverty or hunger, although they are equally possible: international aid agencies with buildings, trucks and personnel; development projects that might redirect water supplies; military check-points that disrupt (or redirect) the distribution of basic foodstuffs; currency devaluation being debated in a parliament or congress; starving people who live in houses, towns or even shanty towns (as opposed to the outdoor spaces and tents of refugee camps); children playing games; people sleeping; elderly people; white people; men; people wearing warm clothing against the cold; those ill with typhus or other opportunistic infections; people laughing. It is not an accident that our collective imaginary has become so narrow with



**Figure 1:** Ethiopian woman, AP Photo – Ethiopia, April 2000.

respect to hunger and poverty; television and photojournalism have come to rely reductively on two images to stand for the abstraction ‘need’, the mother-with-child, and the imploring waif.

This article asks, what is the genealogy of this image, and what ideological work does it do? As my list of alternative representations implies, I suspect it directs attention away from structural explanations for poverty, famine and other disasters, including international, political, military and economic causes. It mobilises ideologies of ‘rescue’, while pointing away from addressing causes. Beginning in the 1950s, I argue, this image became a finely honed trope, not merely one possible convention of visual culture. Furthermore, it has played a powerful role in shaping popular support in the USA for a variety of public policy and foreign policy initiatives, from IMF loans to the globalisation of an international labour force to US debates about family.

This visual trope had a counterpart in practices of transnational and transracial adoption in the United States, which became the subject of debate in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. What was at stake in these debates had as much to do with understandings of Black-white relations or the role of the United States in the wider world, as with the fate of particular children. These visual and familial practices worked together to produce

an ideology of rescue by white people of non-white people, inside and outside the United States. While there might be a temptation to think of the image as a rhetoric and adoption as real, it is more fruitful to think of each as a simultaneously symbolic and material practice, with substantial effects on individual lives and a discursive significance that extended in multiple directions and ultimately took in a whole culture. Intervention was the cultural system in which these images and adoption policy were inserted.

Photographs, Nancy Armstrong argues, do epistemological work by helping people identify 'types'.

Through the photograph's uncanny ability to make its subject matter seem both unique and utterly predictable, the consumer of this visual information would nevertheless have recognized a given category of subject matter simply by recognizing the pose, a few background details, and a constellation of physical features. What first caught the viewer's eye was not the unique object of each photograph. Instead, each example conjured up for the consumer a type or category, one of a system of such categories.<sup>1</sup>

Photographs – and adoption debates, for that matter – made of the waif and Madonna such a category. Christina Klein, in her groundbreaking work on the role of stories about international 'adoption' – including the 'send \$5 a month' variety sponsored by various international aid agencies – points to the role of ideologies of children and quotidian domestic practices in building Cold War liberal support for US foreign policy. To 'adopt' a child was to participate in foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Here, I want to expand her argument to look at the evolution of particular kinds of photographic 'types' alongside other institutional discourses that forged a coherent cultural logic that invested the foreign in the domestic and the domestic in the foreign.

In the 1950s, the 'mother-child/waif' image of international aid agencies and US journalists worked together with ways of imagining 'non-white' children in the United States to organise liberal – and even leftist – projects by mobilising pity and ideologies of rescue to position some people as legitimately within a circle of care and deserving of resources. Taken together, they wrote US foreign and domestic poverty policy as driven by a debate over whether to save women and children, rather than seeing the larger problems of individuals and nations as having anything to do with goals involving economics or the consolidation of US political, military or economic power.

What might seem at first to be a relatively trivial (if ubiquitous) set of photographs – the sentimentalised UNICEF children and development Madonnas-with-children – and a basically unimportant (if interesting) set of debates about transracial and transnational adoption, finally organised

cultural knowledge of the Third World and its needs, and US poverty and race. These photos and policies also cemented understandings of the political and cultural location and meaning of the United States at a time when it was consolidating itself as one of two world powers, and taking over responsibility from England for steering international policy with respect to the lands once part of the British Empire (and a few other empires), newly classified as the (ostensibly autonomous) Third World. In reciprocal fashion, it reinforced an ideology of the white heterosexual family as fundamentally caring and committed to the well-being of local non-white and working-class children, as well as infants, youth, and families around the globe. This secular salvation theology authorised not only child-feeding programmes, however, but military interventionism everywhere.

We can understand the explicit political work of Madonna-and-child and waif images to secure support for US Cold War interventionism and development policy in the 1950s by exploring what happened in the decades before they were deployed to stand for Third World 'poverty' and its imagined solutions. These tropes track the locations and emphases of liberal interventionism. In the United States during the isolationist inter-war period, for example, these images were used to figure US poverty, and to build consensus for federal intervention to ameliorate the national situation. In England, however, consistent with the support for the empire and a vigorous foreign policy, such photos were more likely to represent the needs of those overseas. With the outbreak of World War II in Europe, and the growing pressure for US involvement – pressure applied in part by US newspaper editors and photographers – we find 'foreign' orphans and Madonnas gracing the pages of US newspapers, figures that were the direct precursors of UNICEF and development photos of the Cold War period.

The gritty photographic realism of the 1920s and 1930s in the United States was characterised by a politics that railed against 'business as usual'. Reform photographers positioned themselves as the champions of the weak. For example, Lewis Hine took pictures of children as part of the Child Labour Bureau's campaign to halt child labour practices, as well as Ellis Island photos designed to combat anti-immigrant sentiment. He used both the Madonna-and-child and waif figures prominently; the Ellis Island collection is full of Madonna images, while the child-labour photos feature images of tough, prematurely adult boys and girls dwarfed by the machines on which they worked.<sup>3</sup> A few years later, Dorothea Lange produced one of the best-known representations of the Depression, a picture that has come to be called 'migrant mother'. It is of two weary children clinging to their thin, care-worn mother, who holds them as well as an infant on her lap; she gazes away from the camera, in a look conveying a grim toughness and utter, confounded puzzlement over what, possibly,



**Figure 2:** Migrant Mother. Credit: Dorothea Lange, Farm Security Administration Collection, February, 1936 (retouched version). Library of Congress, American Memory Collection. Reproduction number: LC-USF34-9058-C (film negative). Location: FSA/OWI - J339168.

could be left to do (Figure 2). This is a moving photo that works as an icon of the era because it echoes the New Deal administration's characterisation of those in need of 'relief' as hard-working but down-on-their luck. It was taken in 1936 while Lange worked for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), released for public relations purposes, and featured in articles with titles like, 'Ragged, Hungry, Broke, Harvest Workers Live in Squalor', and 'What Does the "New Deal" Mean to This Mother and Her Children'?<sup>4</sup> The photo made the case more or less explicitly for the moral and political necessity of the New Deal. Although 'migrant mother' was by far the most famous of such photographs, Lange and the other FSA photographers like Russell Lee, Ben Shahn and Jack Delano often chose women, children or Madonna-and-child figures for their subjects,<sup>5</sup> invoking ideologies of rescue, care, and compassion – figuring the federal government as succour to these desperate mothers and children. These images were, and were intended to be, politically inflected documents: they were produced as propaganda for the New Deal relief and food-aid efforts at a time when Republican opponents were calling them 'communism', and Roosevelt himself, 'that man', and insisting that he was ruining the country.

Nevertheless, as Wendy Kozol points out, there were real limits to the kind of political change being advocated by documentary photographs that relied on the Madonna-and-child image. She contends that there was a real conservatism at back of this kind of nationalist 'family values' photography,

one that intrinsically foreclosed questions of, say, restructuring the economy, the family or women's roles:

The madonna is an effective and privileged image [in the FSA archive] because it draws so strongly upon cultural values associated with familial and social stability. Fundamental among those values is that maternal care is necessary for a family to survive. The call for welfare underlying these images is, therefore, a call to assist individual mothers in preserving their families. The images ask to alleviate the madonna's immediate need rather than demand political or economic change.<sup>6</sup>

These were reformist, not radical or revolutionary documents, whose agenda was grounded in reclaiming an imaginary lost past of social stability, rather than imagining a different future.

At the same time, adoption debates point up how the 'waif' constructed its counterpart, the would-be rescuer. As historian Julie Berebitsky has shown in her remarkable history of adoption, *Like Our Very Own*, at almost no point in the past century and a half have there been enough orphans to satisfy the demand for them. In 1929, the *Philadelphia Record* contained a front-page banner headline about the 'Chronicle of a Search for a Homeless Waif in Philadelphia – Where There Aren't Any' that decried the situation. An accompanying illustration showed a frowning infant's face with a half dozen couples reaching after it, while the text commented on how 'social service workers here reveal the amazing reversal in a situation that once was a great problem; question of "where shall we find homes for our homeless babies?" now has shifted to "where shall we find babies for our childless homes?"'.<sup>7</sup> The nostalgia for that lost moment when there were enough 'homeless babies', then as now, relied on the fiction that there was such a time. More profoundly, it pointed out how deeply satisfying, and even necessary that role of rescuer was. The three decades before 1950 saw a struggle over whether single women could adopt, or whether they were, definitively, incapable of modulating their need, and would emotionally smother a child without the stabilising influence of a husband. The exigency of restraining women from rescuing too much, its manifest misogyny aside, suggests a lingering suspicion about the intrinsic violence of sentimentality and ideologies of rescue.

Meanwhile, the photographic image was fighting foreign policy battles in Europe. In the immediate post-World War I period, Allied powers continued to blockade Austria and Germany in order to compel them to accept the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. A group in England founded the Fight the Famine Council – an organisation that would become Save the Children – in response to news reports of hungry children in Germany and Austria subsisting on cabbage, and six-year-olds the size of two-year-olds. One of its founding members, Eglantyne Jebb, was arrested for handing out a leaflet showing a starving Austrian baby with the heading 'Our Blockade Has Caused This'. The organisation that subsequently

emerged sent relief funds from England to a host of unpopular places and peoples in the interwar years: Germany and Austria (as well as France and Belgium), refugees from the Armenian genocide and Soviet Russia. Save the Children's public relations material argues that its singular success – then as now – in fundraising for national 'enemies', or at least those ill-liked, rested in part on their deployment of photography, and their willingness to send photographers to capture 'hunger', (in the form of children and Madonnas-and-children, I would add) on film.<sup>8</sup>

During the Second World War, newspaper readers in the United States became accustomed to seeing pictures of children suffering in war-torn Europe and Asia. The Associated Press photo archive records some of these haunting images: a bloodied, wailing infant in a Chinese railroad station destroyed by Japanese bombing in 1937 (Figure 3); refugee children from Holland; nursery school children in an English air-raid shelter.<sup>9</sup> Collectively and individually, these kinds of images called on the reading public to demand US entrance into the war. The Chinese infant, in particular, demonstrates how these images work through a logic of incompleteness. An infant alone is a disturbing picture. We long to solve the narrative problem it presents us, to pick the child up and comfort it if its parents cannot be found or have been killed. Similarly, the Dutch refugee children, although they were smiling and well-dressed, remind us that children should not be travelling alone from Holland to England; pictured with dolls and balls, we are invited to think about what the world has done to them to turn them into little adults, and when they will be able to return to childish games. The narrative problem of these two photos



**Figure 3:** Sino-Japanese War. AP Photo/H. S. Wong – Shanghai, August 28, 1937.

suggests a way of reading nursery-school children and staff in an air-raid shelter, as a different kind of incompleteness: women and children, frightened and alone, unprotected by the men who are away fighting the war. Here, as in the other photos, US intervention in the war was figured as the resolution to a familial problem, the needed appearance of the mother/parent/husband who will save them from this dreadful aloneness, incompleteness. At a time when a strong isolationist movement was shoring up resistance to US participation, these kinds of photos recast international politics as family drama.

Thus, we can see that in the period leading up to the 1950s, these Madonna/waif images had an explicitly politicised career. While anxieties over adoption might have sounded a cautionary note to reformers and governments over the extent of the intervention that the waif or Madonna authorised, adoption debates seem only to have reinforced the utility of child and family rhetorics. Though we might be tempted to wonder whether these kinds of photographs were merely convenient conventions for picturing abstractions like 'hunger' or 'suffering' or 'the horrors of war', we can see from their location in debates over relief policies, the blockade of Germany or US entrance into WWII that these kinds of images were deployed in political ways. Even organisations like Save the Children that attempted to cast their mission as privatised (to avoid the appearance of opposing governmental hostility to Bolsheviks in Russia or non-intervention in the Armenian genocide), can be seen to be engaging in a double move. What began as an explicit opposition to the government through the use of a picture of a starving Austrian child (because who, after all, can support the deliberate starving of children; the lone, hungry baby is cast as every child, which is to say, just like 'our' child) becomes re-privatised, but only apparently: Save the Children is not interested in 'politics', just feeding ('our') children, albeit children that government policies might be said to be making hungry. The flexibility and ambivalence of this image, public or private depending on the needs of the moment, or, better, privatising yet political, very much informed its usefulness for US foreign policy in the 1950s.

After World War II, the Madonna and child and waif images, already common, became ubiquitous – tropes of journalistic writing as well as visual culture. In 1947, shortly after the end of the war, Truman sent telegrams to army commanders in Germany and Japan asking them to take photographs 'showing famine conditions, particularly emphasizing children, women and aged, bread lines, emaciated conditions, etc'.<sup>10</sup> Meaning to answer critics who complained about providing food aid to former enemies at a time when the United States was still experiencing shortages (and the Congressional representatives who were insisting that there were no starving people in Europe), the federal government sought a simple,

already popularised way of representing 'hunger'. Although sending members of the army out to take sentimentalised photos to document the devastation to women and children that they themselves had caused sounds almost like a bad joke, it was a taste of things to come. In the years that followed, Americans became ever more schooled in how to believe that only US intervention could solve the problems that US intervention had wrought.

The *Saturday Review*, that bastion of American middle-brow liberalism, published an article by Norman Cousins in 1949 on the atomic devastation of Hiroshima, the still-mounting casualties and questions of American moral responsibility for orphans, four years after the dropping of the atomic bomb. While not exactly an anti-bombing piece, it did suggest that something horrible had happened there for which Americans were, sadly, responsible. While Cousins took pains to say that the Japanese residents of Hiroshima endorsed the American view of the bombing – that it was necessary to prevent further casualties in the war in the Pacific, and to bring down Hirohito's military government – he also reported the high end of the (very contested) figure for the number killed by the bomb, fixing it at as high as 250,000, and pointed out that none of the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission's millions-of-dollars budget was being spent on treating the people still dying from the effects of radiation, but rather on observing them. A similar gentle dissent infused his account of what he terms 'moral adoption' of Hiroshima children. He mentions that before he went to Japan:

several people had told me they would like to adopt Japanese children orphaned by bombing. Under the Oriental Exclusion Act, however, these adoptions are not possible. I should like to suggest the next best thing – moral adoptions. By moral adoption I am thinking of Hiroshima children who would be adopted by American families and who would carry the names of the people adopting them. The children would continue to live in Japan – perhaps in some place like Mrs. Yamashita's [orphanage] – but the American families would be responsible for their care and upbringing. Then, later, if Congress passes a law permitting Japanese children to come to America, these morally adopted children could become legally adopted as well.

He said that the cost of taking care of a child at Mrs. Yamashita's orphanage was \$2.32 a month, and offered the *Saturday Review* to serve as middleman to transfer donations to Hiroshima.<sup>11</sup> While Cousins clearly found the Asian Exclusion Act unjust and inhumane, he also powerfully believed in the fundamental decency of Americans, their capacity to resist the official xenophobia, and their ability to do right with respect to the victimised Japanese.

The response to Cousin's modest proposal was overwhelming, and, interestingly, politically diverse. Some of those who wrote letters in response denounced the bombing. One letter writer wrote that she was

enclosing a check as ‘a tragically small tax payment for my own share in the guilt of belonging to a race which dropped first atom bomb ...’.<sup>12</sup> A former pilot, Lawrence Malis wrote in a similar vein that:

Having flown twenty-six B-29 missions over Japan, I have carried a guilty conscience for several years. First, because of the indiscriminate fashion with which we used to burn out slum areas with fire bombs; second, because of the atom bomb itself, and what I feel was its unwarranted and needless use. Your article ... was interesting enough as far as it went, but it also presented an easy way to soothe an elusive feeling of collective guilt. I know I can’t buy back my teen-age ideals for a small sum ... [but] I am enclosing my check.<sup>13</sup>

For some, ‘moral adoption’ embodied a contradiction: the sense of collective guilt being too-easily assuaged, yet at the same time, the necessity of doing *something*, and the difficulty of articulating what that might be.

At the same time, others proclaimed themselves to embody ideals of American (nationalist) domesticity, with a husband, wife, dog, cat and children. This fairly conservative, Cold War ideal of the nuclear family is what historian Elaine Tyler May calls ‘domestic containment’, in which the ideals of national security and family security are conflated. Psychologist Joseph Adelson powerfully characterised the domesticity of the 1950s as both *zeitgeist* and a willed denial of some of the forces that shaped it. He wrote:

We had as a nation emerged from a great war, itself following upon a long and protracted Depression. We thought, all of us, men and women alike, to replenish ourselves in goods in spirit, to undo, by exercise of the collective will, the psychic disruptions of the immediate past. We would achieve the serenity that had eluded the lives of our parents, the men would be secure in stable careers, the women in comfortable homes, and together they would raise perfect children.<sup>14</sup>

The contradictions in this account – as in the structure of feeling to which it refers – are interesting; *willed serenity*, and psychic *disruptions* which lead to *stability*, *comfort* and *perfection*. While ‘lying’ might not be a fair or just description of a ‘willed serenity’ that came out of such collective upheaval and pain, Adelson’s description does reveal something of why 1960s youth – their ‘perfect children’ – attached the moniker of ‘hypocrisy’ to so many of the beliefs and political policies endorsed by their 1950s parents.

Having a job, marriage, children, house and a dog constituted the reassuringly normal, painfully conformist, consumer-oriented way of life that defined the ‘man in the gray flannel suit’ and his stay-at-home, suburban wife who attached themselves to these clearly defined roles and expectations, proving that they were, if not happy, then American. (As William J. Levitt, developer of Levittown wrote, ‘No man who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do’).<sup>15</sup> One respondent

to Cousin's proposal of 'moral adoption' took up precisely these kinds of terms, insisting:

It seems like a wonderful plan to us and we hope you have a big response ... Any American family of the most moderate means could manage to squeeze out that small sum each month. We pledge ourselves to be financially responsible for some small orphan ... I can think of no better way to teach our own four-year old daughter a sense of responsibility for others in the world ... My husband is a ceramic engineer. He has been employed for ten years, with four years out for Army service. We own our home and are not in debt. We support our daughter, one dog, and two cats, so feel quite sure we can undertake another child.<sup>16</sup>

Thrift, good child-rearing, engineering, home ownership, volunteerism (though not dissent) ... the letter-writer, who signs herself Mrs John Snoddy (read 'wife'), produced a virtual catalogue of the earnest values of Cold War domesticity, and conflated it with a foreign policy. Or, with a different emphasis but contending with much the same ideology, two 'spinsters' (who may or may not have been lovers), Etta Gibson and Myrtle Moore, wrote of their desire to support a child, and their concern that this would not be acceptable, saying 'since we are spinsters I don't suppose we would be allowed to have a child over here, but if we could have him, or her, we would accept the responsibility and do our best to rear him happily'.<sup>17</sup> Two other, more famous 'spinsters', Helen Keller and Polly Thompson, also sponsored a child, 'preferably a girl [because] women are the precious fruit trees of the future Japanese civilization [who need a] fair chance of healthy growth'.<sup>18</sup> Presaging virtually every theme in contemporary debates in adoption and fostering, from political conformity to protest to feminism and questions about the shape and components of 'legitimate' families, the response to the *Saturday Review* piece also rehearsed Cold War questions about 'our' responsibility for 'them'.

The *Saturday Review* Hiroshima orphans were ultimately also incorporated into the regimes of visual culture. One of the principle distinctions between 'them' – foreign, impoverished, war refugees, orphans, migrant labourers – and 'us' – white Americans – is made visually with reference to the home. Where the letter-writer cited above mentioned dog, cat, home-ownership, and ceramics engineering as a series of equivalences, each reinforcing a claim to non-Communist American normality, photographs treated the interior of the home as a synecdoche for the whole. Displaced and 'foreign' children were outdoors; American families and children were represented inside home-like spaces.<sup>19</sup> Nine months after the original Cousins article, *Saturday Review* told a story about the resolution of the problem it had presented readers: all the orphans in Yamashita's institution had been 'adopted' by American families, as had eighty others from orphanages elsewhere in Hiroshima. An accompanying photo-essay demonstrated the resolution of this

narrative problem in a different way – pictures of the orphans, outside, near buildings or flowering bushes, were presented alongside photographs of their American ‘families’, parents and children or children alone, inside houses. Japanese children had been moved, symbolically, into American homes.<sup>20</sup>

Also in 1949, Pearl S. Buck – well-known author of *The Good Earth* and outspoken advocate of a mid-century liberalism that combined concern for women’s rights and improving race relations with a fierce anti-communism – started another transnational adoption project. Buck founded what would become Welcome House, a programme that placed Amerasian children in US families. Outraged that mixed-race children were considered ‘unadoptable’, she began by placing Chinese-American children in US families. Within a few years, with the US war in Korea and US troops still stationed in Japan, she, and Welcome House, were locating and placing Amerasian children from these nations; ultimately, Vietnam, Taiwan and The Philippines would be added to the list as well. She also started the Pearl S. Buck Foundation, which supported Amerasian children in their country of birth, their mothers’ nations. Buck herself adopted several Asian-American children.<sup>21</sup> Buck drew simultaneously on themes of rescue, anti-Communism, and American paternalist responsibility to overcome Asian ‘barbarism’ to argue for increasing US involvement in the lives of Asian-American children. ‘These children are isolated and alone, stateless and lost’, wrote Buck:

I cannot see them grow up lost and angry without trying to do something about it. I know from history and experience that lost and angry children, especially if they have brains and beauty, grow up into dangerous people. Moreover ... I cannot bear to see Americans, or even half-Americans, growing up ignorant and at the lowest level of Asian society, which is very low indeed ... Do we, their fathers’ people, not owe them something?<sup>22</sup>

With this sentimental, child-nurturant language, Buck argues not just for care of families or individual children, but also an anti-Communism located in caring families that can assimilate these children as Americans, not ‘low’ Asians.

These nested rhetorics, embracing at once the foreign and ‘domestic’ – in both senses of the word – give lie to any simple division of private and public. Or rather, they rely on simultaneously separating and confounding them, turning private, familial nurturance into a political, world-straddling, liberal-internationalist act. Like starving Austrian children subsisting on cabbage and child war refugees before them, Hiroshima and Amerasian orphans were deployed as part of an argument for an interventionist foreign policy. As Christina Klein has pointed out, at a time when most in the US were fundamentally uncertain about whether the US ought to

embrace a role as a world power or return to an earlier isolationism, Klein points out, organisations like CARE or the Christian Children's Fund, alongside Cousin's and the *Saturday Review's* call for 'moral adoption', urged Americans to 'adopt' Asian infants from afar, exchange letters and photos, and send aid.<sup>23</sup> At the same time that they were being persuaded to take responsibility for seemingly helpless and hurt children, Americans were being convinced that Asia was 'our' responsibility. This was a useful conclusion on the eve of the US commitment to a civil war in Korea, and not too many years in advance of a war in Indochina. As subsequently became very clear in the response to the war in Vietnam, popular support for US foreign policy mattered a great deal to the federal government's ability to make war.

Other Cold War uses of women and children were frankly ideological. Two Associate Press photos published on sequential days, May 8 and 9, 1958, point to how the discursive distance between 'the free world' and 'Communism' could be figured visually. The first showed almost-naked children sleeping on a piece of cardboard in the streets of Hong Kong, refugees from 'Communism' in China. Communism caused this – nakedness, homelessness, children alone – the picture and caption declare (never mind that it could equally function as a placard for 'capitalist' hard-heartedness, where children are not guaranteed a place to live, even years after they arrived in Hong Kong as refugees.) The second photograph is a study in contrasts – neatly dressed, well-scrubbed Ecuadorian children waved American flags at Vice President Nixon, with the name of their school on a banner and a new building rising in the background. Latin America and development thrive because of 'capitalism' and alliance with the United States. Another photograph, this one from *Ladies Home Journal*, pictures a group of maybe ten women with head scarves, each holding an infant in her arms in a Madonna with child pose, with their men behind them. They were apparently battling for Christianity somehow, because the article below, entitled 'Women versus the Kremlin', said that Russian women must teach their babies about Christianity because 'the state will teach them atheism – if it can'.<sup>24</sup>

One of the greatest purveyors of Cold War images of waifs and Madonnas was UNICEF, which used them to raise money and build support for their mother-and-child health and child-feeding programmes. Organised in 1946 to provide blankets and milk to child war refugees in Europe, the Middle East and China, UNICEF quickly became, at the urging of representatives from the Third World, a permanent organisation dedicated to combating disease and malnutrition. UNICEF had a tremendously high profile in US magazines, newspapers, towns, and cities, in part because of its startling early success in combating yaws, tuberculosis, and leprosy with new wonders – vaccines and penicillin – but

more broadly because it embodied the post-War dreams of eradicating poverty through technological, scientific means.<sup>25</sup> UNICEF worked hard at maintaining its high profile in the United States, raising money in visible, public places, urging volunteers to sell its Christmas cards, and soliciting children's donations at Halloween. The story of the organisation of the 'trick or treat for UNICEF' campaign suggests how omnipresent UNICEF was as an organisation in suburban life in the 1950s. According to UNICEF-USA's account:

The idea that Halloween could be turned into 'something good' first occurred to the Reverend Clyde and Mary Emma Allison in 1950 in a Philadelphia suburb. Clyde Allison was then a young editor looking for ideas for a national Presbyterian publication aimed at junior high school groups. One day, Mrs. Allison happened to be downtown when Elsie, the Borden Company cow, was parading along the main street. Mrs. Allison followed the cow to Wanamaker's department store, where a booth was set up to collect money for UNICEF's milk-feeding programs. Why not, she thought, have children collect money for hungry children through UNICEF?<sup>26</sup>

The frightening image of a cow in Wanamaker's notwithstanding, the indication that one could follow Elsie down Main Street in suburban Philadelphia and find UNICEF suggests how ubiquitous the organisation was, and not only because it so perfectly embodied the ideals of post-war liberalism. The organisation also put massive energies into public relations campaigns in the United States – appointing celebrities like Dannie Kaye, Audrey Hepburn and Harry Belafonte as its 'goodwill ambassadors', for example.<sup>27</sup> The US was its principal funder, and, after enabling legislation was passed by Congress in 1954, the source of great quantities of free milk from agricultural surplus. The popular press, like *Parents Magazine*, marked and extended UNICEF's popular appeal through puff pieces about 'Trick-or-Treating for UNICEF' that noted perkily: 'This Halloween perhaps your youngster will join millions of boys and girls who will ring doorbells to collect pennies and dimes for the United Nations Children's Fund. This new style Halloween gives our own children an opportunity to aid sick and starving children in other lands'. *Parents Magazine* recommended hosting an internationally themed party afterward, complete with a discussion of games from many lands, borrowed, apparently, from UNICEF's 'Youth Recreation Kit'.<sup>28</sup> UNICEF's publicity machine was massively successful in insinuating the organisation into everyday, domestic life.

UNICEF's most prominent public relations campaigns in the US, however, were not Christmas cards or trick-or-treating, but its extensive use of photographic images to demonstrate and generate support for its work. Perhaps more than any other single thing, the massive, repetitive use of Madonna and waif images by UNICEF in the 1950s accounts for

the normalisation of these images as the grammar of 'hunger' or 'need' in contemporary US culture. UNICEF hired commercial photographers and sent them around the world to capture on film the things not there – the *absence* of yaws, the *absence* of tuberculosis, or hunger or widespread infant mortality. Compounding the difficulty of this task was the work of capturing 'strange lands' in ways that marked them as different but not other, to tell the story of foreign places in ways that did not reinforce the US's historic tendency toward isolationism, but rather excited pity toward and interest in these children. UNICEF photographers accomplished these tasks in part by repetition of the two images – the Madonna with child and waif. They essentially reproduced the same photograph over and over in different places (Figures 4 and 5). The things that changed – complexion and clothing of the subjects – was rendered picturesque, while the essential interchangeability of children and mothers was stressed. These photos stand as testament to themes of liberal universalism and the family of man: we are all the same, with a few minor changes. Of course, they are *not* us; the lack which must be remedied through our intervention could be figured as a few facial lesions, in the case of yaws, or painfully thin infants. As often, though, the children, infants and mothers appear curiously plump and healthy, if we consider that the point of these photographs is in part to talk about malnutrition and unmet health needs. Their lack, though, is still there – figured by the absence of interior spaces – they are not 'at home', they are (always) outdoors or at the clinic. Again, where magazines like *Ladies Home Journal*, *Parents*, or *Good Housekeeping* consistently pictured US children inside home-spaces, UNICEF's children are never indoors. The other striking contrast between 'our' and 'their' children can be seen with reference to activity and autonomy – in women's magazines, even the youngest US infants are sitting, sleeping, or playing at some distance from adults, if there are any adults in the picture at all – while UNICEF's infants are in the arms of, connected to, or at least within touching distance of a mother figure.

Other United Nations agencies, even those that did not run mother-and-child programmes, also came to rely on Madonna-and-child images. After 1953, for example, the United Nations Korea Reconstruction Agency worked on typical development projects: vaccinating cattle, importing fertilizer, planting seedlings and supplying bicycles for forest guards; providing textbooks and supplies for universities and books for a literacy campaign; supplying spindles for the rehabilitation of the textile industry; building houses; providing laboratory facilities for mining; making nets available to fisher-folk; dredging a harbour; and providing flood control for farm land.<sup>29</sup> When the agency hired photographer Josef Breitenbach from New York and sent him to Korea for two years to take pictures and develop a photo lab that would send home pictures for publicity purposes,



**Figure 4:** Yaws. Unicef/ICEF 251B – Indonesia, 1953.



**Figure 5:** Not Enough Milk for Two. *Ladies Home Journal*, July 1960.

these were the projects they told him about. The agency's public relations arm described the problem that his photographs were meant to solve thus:

Since 1953 coverage of Korea is essentially restricted to short political new[s] items. There must, however, be a number of people who want to hear what happened to the Reconstruction projects of which so much was spoken during the war and on which close to 100 million dollars [of] American money and about about 50 million from other U.N. countries was spent.<sup>30</sup>

Yet like so many others, Breitenbach sent photographs back to New York that were dominated by Madonnas and children and kids in the street. So much so, in fact, that when he published under his own name a book of the photographs he took in Korea and elsewhere, he called it *Women of Asia*.<sup>31</sup> The visual idiom of 'development' was women and children, even if the actual site of it was flood-control engineering.

Domestic and foreign policy were linked not only through ideologies of domesticity and gender, but also through ways of conceptualising race. As Nikhil Pal Singh in particular has argued, projects of racial justice at home and a universalising nationalism abroad were intrinsically interconnected for a variety of liberal commentators. This US nationalism encompassed the belief that 'America', democracy and freedom were identical concepts, not only through World War II, but even afterward, as the United States engaged in continued expansionist projects.<sup>32</sup> For example, Carey McWilliams wrote in 1943:

It is pre-eminently our assignment to demonstrate to the world that peoples of diverse racial and national origins, of different backgrounds, and many cultures, can live and work together in a modern democracy. As a nation of nations, we alone are in a position to exercise real political leadership.<sup>33</sup>

This notion was also taken up reciprocally by US racial justice movements that linked the struggle for rights at home with US foreign policy abroad. This is visible, for example, in the ways US Middle-East policy got incorporated in African-American cultural politics, including the Black Muslim movement, or the ways Chicano Nationalists politics were rendered part of a Third World struggle.<sup>34</sup>

The mutual imbrication of domestic projects of race and US foreign policy are also evident in the ways that domestic idioms of dissent – from leftist racial justice and anti-intervention movements to liberal politics of transnational adoption – echoed the UNICEF archive of mothers-and-children and children alone. On the one hand, similar images did work in the defence by the Left of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, members of the Communist Party charged in the early 1950s with selling atomic secrets to the Soviet Union, whom many believed were innocent targets of anti-communist hysteria, scapegoated because they were Jewish. Similar photos also fuelled criticism of the US participation in the Korean War

and supported African-American civil rights. Children, in this usage, could stand for the values of protection and care that state policy failed to uphold. Transracial adoption, on the other hand, took in a whole political spectrum, from liberal to conservative. As in the 'Hiroshima orphans' letters in *Saturday Review*, there were all kinds of slippages in rhetoric and meaning between liberal and conservative projects of adoption, so that they did not resolve clearly into one or the other. These ranged from imagining the possibility of multiracial families in a multiracial nation, to what would become the neo-conservative fantasy of the assimilation of African-Americans as just another ethnic group in melting-pot America, the project of 'colour-blindness' that willed centuries of slavery, segregation and racial violence into invisibility by pretending they did not exist.<sup>35</sup>

A number of such newspaper images are striking for their commentary on these issues. In 1950, at the outset of US participation in the Korean War, US troops killed groups of Koreans coming from the North into the South. Ostensibly, the concern was that these groups contained Communist infiltrators; however, local people reported that most of those killed were women and children, refugees from the war in the North. Supporters and opponents of US military action debated in the US press, and at the centre of the controversy was a picture of a Korean mother holding her infant; family members reported that both had been massacred by the US Army. This photo provided a focus for dissent, and fifty years later the military would admit that critics were right. An Associated Press photograph, of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg's two sons leaning slightly out of a black car window after visiting their parents on death row, was probably intended to – and certainly did – recall war-time pictures of other Jewish children leaning out of trains on their way to death camps. Another newspaper photograph found plaintive African-American school children, on their own, sitting at a white diner in Oklahoma, hoping to be served food, locating civil rights activism within the tradition of 'development' liberalism, reminding viewers of other pictures of hungry children.<sup>36</sup>

Transracial adoption, on the other hand, was visually figured in terms closer to UNICEF's children in need than to US children. Transracial adoption in the 1950s and 1960s usually meant adoption of mixed-race (African-American/white) children by white couples. In some ways, the very definition of the question – can white people adopt 'mixed race' children – points up its absurdity. Only under very particular, US understandings of kinship were the children in question a 'different' race from the adopting couples. In another time and place, people with two 'white' parents and people with one 'white' parent might be considered to be the same race (much as US culture in the 1950s did not always distinguish between the 'races' of people with one 'black' parent and those with two 'black' parents). Yet, the murderously violent history of race in the United

States being what it is, not only were adoptions of mixed-race children by white families largely prohibited by agencies, but they were also dangerous for the families involved. Popular press reports on the large-scale institutionalisation of non-white and 'mixed' race children suggested a growing white liberal urgency about what was to be done for such children. Particularly in Los Angeles, agencies experimented with 'inter-racial' placements, largely among left-leaning and liberal whites, though they explicitly avoided anyone whom they thought was adopting for 'political' reasons of support for civil rights.<sup>37</sup>

The press reports, largely echoing the 'is-this-going-too-fast?' tone of news reporting on civil rights in the 1950s, were more interested in failures and threats of harm than the less spectacular, quiet successes. Some articles raised questions about how these children would date, or find jobs, growing up in all-white neighbourhoods with only white partners or, apparently, all-white companies to choose from. These endangered 'Black' children were shown outdoors, like Third World children, without the shelter and protection of home, and often being held, like the familiar Madonna-and-child icons. However, apparently magazines like *Newsweek* could not even countenance white-woman-with-Black-child images; they were held by fathers. These were hybrid images with respect to activity: they could be active, playing on swings and so forth, away from parental bodies.<sup>38</sup> Far more than UNICEF children, they were being made over as members of white nuclear families. Almost, but not quite.

Finally, while some children with one white parent were being defined as Black, some parents – whose own ancestors' race had been figured as white under the 1790 law that restricted immigration to 'free white persons' – were being prohibited from adopting 'white' children. Although policies differed from state to state, parents who were Italian, Eastern European, Jewish or Catholic were largely barred from adopting white children whose birth parents were Protestant.<sup>39</sup> This policy received little comment or challenge until 1966, when national television and newspapers publicised the case of Michael and Mary Liuni, a New York couple of Italian background whom the state tried to force to give up a four-year-old-girl, whom *The Nation* described as 'their Nordic featured foster child'.<sup>40</sup> While there were undoubtedly many cases like the Liunis's, both before and after 1966, that the others were neither publicised nor controversial reflects the extent to which discourses of rescue extend in only one direction. The meanings of the waif and Madonna-and-child work *only* to describe the relationship of the powerful to the powerless.

The visual images of Madonna-and-child and waif were tremendously flexible cultural resources for liberal interventionism. Their deployment tells us simultaneously about the cultural logic of the Cold War, the ways consensus for interventionist foreign policy was built, and the meanings

of adoption and family. As tropes, they worked to make the operations of power invisible by inverting a series of dualisms: purporting to speak about the private (domestic relations) while authorising a very public policy; figuring the domestic while speaking to foreign policy; picturing children and women alone and out-of-doors while invoking the necessity of putting them inside families and indoors; demonstrating the difference between active, autonomous American children and passive, dependent Third World children. This visual figure and its counterpart – adoption – worked together to tell American publics how to think about what was termed the Third World, and, to an extent that can only be gestured toward here, race within the United States. By positioning the United States and its (white) citizens as rescuers, this discourse mystified and reversed power relations. Within its terms, the United States could not even potentially be held accountable for the military, political and economic causes of hunger or poverty – its only role was to rescue the unfortunate victims of such events

One of the painful things about reading the archive of that period is how many people – in the United States and the Third World – honestly believed they were inaugurating a period of real autonomy for the lands of the geographic south. Few would suggest such a thing now, in this contemporary period of staggering debt, ‘weak’ currencies, free-trade zones, impoverished health and education institutions, and itinerant, globalised work forces skirting migration laws and often enduring harsh repression to sell their labour to the highest bidder. By exploring the visual cultural logic of liberal internationalism in the 1950s, I hope to contribute to a conversation among those of us who long for an end to the US empire and regimes of globalisation, to ask what went wrong, to explore the intrinsic contradictions and shortcomings in what was ultimately a very shaky foundation for dreams of Third World autonomy.

## Notes

1. Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 20–1.
2. Christina Klein, ‘Family Ties and Political Obligation: The Discourse of Adoption and the Cold War Commitment to Asia,’ in Christina Appy (ed.), *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945–1966* (University of Massachusetts, 2000).
3. Verna Posever Curtis, Stanley Mallach, and Milwaukee Art Museum, *Photography and Reform: Lewis Hine and the National Child Labor Committee* (Milwaukee Art Museum, 1984), Walter Rosenblum, Lewis Wickes Hine and Michael Torosian, ‘Lewis Hine, Ellis Island: Memories and Meditations of Walter Rosenblum on the Life and Work of an American Artist’, *Homage 7* (Lumière Press, 1995).
4. ‘Ragged, Hungry, Broke, Harvest Workers Live in Squaller,’ *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 10 1936, ‘What Does the “New Deal” Mean to This Mother and Her Children?’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 11 1936.
5. The digital archive of the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information photos is online at the Library of Congress’ American Memory website, <<http://memory.loc.gov/>

- ammem/fsowhome.html>. See also Betsy Fahlman, 'Constructing an Image of the Depression: New Deal Photography in Arizona,' in *Visions in the Dust: Photographing Depression-Era Arizona* (University of Arizona, forthcoming).
6. Wendy Kozol, 'Madonnas of the Fields: Photography, Gender, and 1930s Farm Relief,' *Genders*, 2 (1988), p. 2.
  7. Julie Berebitsky, *Like Our Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood, 1851–1950* (University Press of Kansas, 2000), cited p. 132.
  8. A Short History of the Save the Children Foundation, <www.oneworld.org/scf/functions/aboutus/history2.html>.
  9. 'Child Refugees from Holland', 14 May 1940; 'Air Raid Shelter', 2 August 1940. The digital archive of the Associated Press is online at <http://ap.accuweather.com/apphoto/index.htm>.
  10. 'U.S. Asks Pictures to Dramatize Food Needs in Germany, Japan,' *New York Times*, 14 October 1947, p. 10.
  11. Norman Cousins, 'Hiroshima – Four Years Later,' *Saturday Review*, 17 September 1949, pp. 8–10, 30–1.
  12. Helen S. Arthur, 'letter', *Saturday Review*, 22 October 1949, p. 20.
  13. Lawrence Malis, 'letter', *Saturday Review*, 22 October 1949, p. 20.
  14. Joseph Adler, cited in Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books, 1988), p. 58.
  15. Cited in Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, p. 162.
  16. Mrs. John H. Snoddy, 'letter', *Saturday Review*, 8 October 1949, p. 26.
  17. Etta Gibson and Myrtle Moore, 'letter', *Saturday Review*, 29 October 1949, p. 24.
  18. Helen Keller, 'letter', *Saturday Review*, 3 June 1950, p. 24.
  19. On the importance of domestic spaces in photography for a different time and place, see also Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism*.
  20. Letters. 'Hiroshima Orphans Adopted by SRL Readers', *Saturday Review*, 3 June 1953, pp. 24–5.
  21. Klein, 'Family Ties', Pearl S. Buck, and Theodore F. Harris, *For Spacious Skies: Journey in Dialogue* (John Day Company, 1966); Pearl S. Buck, 'The Children America Forgot,' *Readers Digest*, September 1967, pp. 108–110; Mary MacMillan, 'Born Between East and West', *Saturday Review*, 23 July 1966, p. 51; Peter J. Conn, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).
  22. Buck, 'The Children America Forgot'.
  23. Klein, 'Family Ties', p. 109.
  24. Charles Parlin, 'Women Versus the Kremlin', *Ladies Home Journal* 1967, p. 46.
  25. UNICEF, The 1950s: Era of the Mass Disease Campaign (UNICEF, 1997 [cited 2002]); <www.unicef.org/sowc96/1950s.htm>; Maggie Black, *Children First: The Story of UNICEF, Past and Present* (Oxford University Press, 1996).
  26. United States Fund for UNICEF, The Cow That Started It All (UNICEF-USA, 30 November, 2001 <www.unicefusa.org/trickortreat/allisons.html>).
  27. 'Ambassador-at-Large,' *Colliers*, 9 November 1956, pp. 32–5.
  28. 'New Style Halloween', *Parents Magazine*, October 1955, pp. 88–9.
  29. United Nations. Korean Reconstruction Agency, 'Speech Delivered before the UNKRA,' (UNKRA, 1953).
  30. John Thurston, 'What about our Reconstruction of Korea', ed. Josef Breitenbach (Center for Creative Photography Archive, Josef Breitenbach Papers, Box AG90: 25, Writing and Photography Projects: 1948–1956, 1956).
  31. Josef Breitenbach, *Women of Asia* (WM Collins, Sons & Co., 1968).
  32. Nikhil Pal Singh, 'Culture/Wars: Recoding Empire in an Age of Democracy', *American Quarterly* 50(3) (1998): pp. 471–522. It was also crucial to the left projects of the Popular Front, as Michael Denning has shown in his brilliant *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Verso, 1996).
  33. Carey McWilliams, cited in Singh, 'Culture/Wars: Recoding Empire in an Age of Democracy', p. 475.

34. For a very smart account of the imbrication of Middle East and African-American politics, see Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945–2000* (University of California, 2001).
35. This analysis is indebted to Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd edition (Routledge, 1994).
36. From the online Associated Press archive. 'Bridge at No Gun Ri', [no date] March, 1950. 'Rosenberg Children', 14 February 1953. 'Seek Food and Service', 25 August 1958.
37. 'Adopting Black Babies', *Newsweek*, 3 November 1969, p. 70; B. Dolliver, 'We're the Lucky Ones! Child of Mixed Racial Background', *Good Housekeeping* 1969, pp. 90–1; 'Drip, Drip, Drip: Adopted Mulatto Infant', *Newsweek*, 4 April 1966, pp. 30–1; P. Feinstein, 'Report on Interracial Adoption', *Parent's Magazine*, December 1968, pp. 48–9; 'Mixed Adoptions', *Newsweek*, 24 April 1969, p. 58; Elisabeth Shepherd, 'Adopting Negro Children: White Families Find it Can Be Done', *New Republic* 1964, pp. 10–2.
38. 'Adopting Black Babies', 'Drip, Drip, Drip: Adopted Mulatto Infant', 'Mixed Adoptions', Shepherd, 'Adopting Negro Children: White Families Find it Can Be Done.'
39. On religion, see e.g. 'Solomon in New Jersey: Question of Religion for the Adoptee', *America*, 22 October 1966, p. 472.
40. 'Adoption Laws', *The Nation*, 28 January 1967, pp. 10–11; M. Liuni, 'They Asked Us to Give Up Our Child', *Ladies Home Journal*, April 1967, pp. 92–3; 'On Adopting a Blonde: The Liuni's Case', *America*, 26 November 1966, p. 679.