

Briggs
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**Locating Adoption in Relation to State Processes:
War, Economies, Trauma, Politics**

I've gotten interested in a story that runs throughout the historical, legal, and psychological literature on transnational adoption. It tells us that adoption to the United States from elsewhere saw a significant uptick in the 1990s because of the effects of birth control, abortion, rising rates of infertility, and the growing acceptability of single mothers keeping their children. As a result, the story goes, people in the United States turned increasingly to overseas adoption because of the simple demographic fact that there were fewer children available for adoption domestically. This story interests me because I don't think it's true, which leaves me wondering what kind of ideological work it does, and what we can say it masks. What I mean when I say it's untrue is not that there haven't been changes in childbirth and child-rearing practices, but that it presumes a BEFORE moment when adoptive children were plentiful in the United States. And the more I look for that before-moment, the more persuaded I become that it never existed. And this leads me to ask, then, why would we produce this story, over and over again—what does it naturalize, what does it obscure? And I think the answer to this is, it obscures how children become available for adoption, not as a simple matter of "there are all these children just waiting for adoptive homes," but rather that they come not to live with or be raised by their birth families for reasons that are heterogeneous, to be sure, but also in the main, catastrophic—that is, something awful happened, and not necessarily strictly to an individual family, but more likely, to a whole community, nation, class, group, or region. And this awareness, that adoption is not the outcome of demographics but of tragedy—or at least of tremendous constraints on their parents, usually their mothers—makes us uncomfortable, especially in the United States, where liberal notions of overseas intervention always position us in the role of saviors, rescuers, helpers—especially of women and children. So my goal in this paper is to persuade you to never again read in the same way that obligatory paragraph in writing about international adoption that makes it the outcome of demographic shifts within the United States, and to think instead about what happened that a community began sending its children away.

This story of infant-shortage is not actually new. At times in the United States when adoption practice has undergone significant shifts, we have told the story that "demographics made us do it" before. In the 1920s, as Julie Berebitsky tells us in her wonderful history of adoption, *Like Our Very Own*, adoptable children were said to be so scarce that 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.' At that time, social workers were fighting to consolidate their control of adoption, to shift it from an often-informal affair to one requiring social workers to do a home study, and a judge to approve the whole arrangement. They were encountering tremendous resistance, because everybody knows you don't need to have a homestudy to give birth, and the whole idea that these intrusive women were going to certify "proper"

homes and distribute the appropriate, matching babies—while consigning those who failed the quality test to a lifetime of institutional care—irritated a lot of people, especially those waiting to be certified as a good enough family who were walking past apparently homeless street children in the city every day. So we find the *Record* picturing 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."' ¹ And again, in the 1950s, when the American Child Welfare League opened up a really different practice of adoption, one of putting children of color in white families that didn't "match" racially, or placing children with disabilities, the organization justified both the Indian Adoption Project and "special needs" adoptions because of, again, the imagination of shortages in available infants. While I understand the impulse to try to map the relationship of supply and demand in adoption and its relationship to changing practices, I don't think this is a plausible enterprise, simply because *both* supply and demand for adoption are such contingent things, dependent on—to start a list—pro-natalism, reproductive technology, labor, leisure, and childrearing practices; the availability of nannies, for example, or childcare at work, the rise and fall of the importance of biogenetic relatedness, the perceived costs and benefits of having children, the status of social security, the cost of housing, health care, and schools, the question of who is "good enough" to be a parent, foster care and child welfare policies, the status of the perception that adopted children don't turn out well, the historical trajectory of sentimental childhood, the meaning of the "date," the prevalence of penis-in-vagina heterosexuality as a form of sexual expression, the meaning and status of female desire, the social meaning of children produced through rape or child sexual abuse, the value of education, the relation of racialization to citizenship—you get my point. The list that includes the pill, abortion, single motherhood, and later-in-lifecycle reproduction, while interesting, is not nearly a long enough to account for something as notoriously mutable as the "supply" of children, even within the United States, never mind the demand.

So, as I said, I think maybe what this demographic story naturalizes and obscures is the centrality of trauma to transnational adoption. I'm indebted to Swedish scholar Tobias Hubinette, himself a Korean adoptee, for making this notion of trauma central to my thinking about adoption. Of course, transnational adoption was born in war and trauma. The first significant numbers of children adopted across national borders were those fleeing bombings and concentration camps during World War II. Subsequent waves were adopted from Korea and Vietnam following the U.S.-led wars there. Most of these children—like the handful that also came from China and Japan—were the mixed race children of U.S. servicemen fighting the Cold War in Asia. And this reminds us that the problem of imperialism's mixed race children is not new, to recall that a few years earlier Europeans were dealing with the same issue. As Ann Stoler in particular notes, Europeans were not particularly comfortable with thinking of these children as Asian, and set up orphanages and schools in the colonies where the French and Dutch educated these children to be Europeans, with or sometimes without the consent of their, say, Vietnamese or Javanese mothers. So what seems to be different about the post-WW II period is that these children were repatriated, this time to the U.S., not that they were born, or imagined as orphans by virtue of being "misplaced" or mixed-race whites.

Another phenomenon that might or might not properly be called the early history of transnational adoption also has a history rooted in imperialism. The four large English white settler colonies in the Americas and the Pacific—Canada, the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand—all developed aggressive programs to separate indigenous children from their birth families, first to boarding schools and then to white adoptive families.

What Hubinette wants us to understand about trauma and adoption is that sentimentality and nationalisms—and, I would add, the romances of heterosexuality and childhood in the nuclear family—get in our way of producing a sustainable, liveable narrative of transnational adoption. If we tell a child, a family, a nation that children were "rescued" from a place or people who could not raise them, but do not narrate the wrenching loss or what caused it, or do it one-dimensionally, we lie. And if we want to understand why places like South Korea are experiences such agony about how to understand the children lost to places like Sweden and the United States, why that grown generation of Korean adoptees are authors of so many angry briefs against international adoption, when, U.S. missionaries say, South Korea so clearly was just watching orphans die in the aftermath of the war, often powerless to do much—when there was no infrastructure to deal with rebuilding the country, never mind care for parentless children. And South Korea's economic miracle continues to depend, to a significant extent, on atomized women workers without dependents, on aggressively delivering a labor force without a welfare system. So why do they hate us, if both the children and the state need U.S. adopters to make the system work? And the answer, perhaps, is that we sentimentalize this tragedy, imagine only happy smiling families made through adoption rather than acknowledge that something awful happened to get to that adoptive family. Mine is not a plea for a particular kind of policy, but rather for a struggle with meaning—let us think, fully, about what this act means as a prerequisite to questions of policy. Karin Evans models this kind of engagement with nuance and pain in her *Lost Daughters of China*, in which she as an adoptive mother refuses the sentimental and self-righteous stories of "red threads" and the one-child policy, and looks at the struggles of women workers in sweatshops, the Cold War, Mao. It's a useful encounter, a moving story in which adoption does not emerge as the best of all possible worlds, a narrative one imagines may be difficult but ultimately liveable for her daughter.

And to turn now away from Asia, which is not my area of research and which I probably should not really try to talk about, except that it's what we have a secondary literature on, let me speak briefly about Latin America. I think it is easy to know that all is not well with Latin American adoption, that we are in worlds of pain when we think about the shantytown legends that surround it—the stories of *saca-ojos* in Peru, of the gringos who steal children's eyes and sell them on the world market, of the *trafico de órganos*, the children imagined as "adopted" only to be hollowed out, killed for their kidneys, hearts, lungs, a narrative documented throughout Latin America, to the point where the U.S. State Department felt obligated to issue a statement saying it wasn't true, if only to try to protect citizens like June Weinstock, the leftish American who went to Chiapas and then Guatemala, beaten by a mob and left for dead in 1994 because somebody accused her of trying to kidnap children. What is going on in Latin America that this is what people are saying about us? And it's not just a shantytown legend, either, as I have dubbed it, the work of people who are poor and illiterate; in 2002, for example, Juan Díaz González, a commissioner of the Mexico City Legislative Assembly, proposed

a reform of police procedures to address child disappearances, saying “This is a very serious problem because beyond the [child] theft, we are also dealing with issues related to the child pornography network, the trafficking of organs and the sale of children into illegal adoptions.”² Court cases and international human rights investigations render the problem differently, as one of illegal adoption rings. A 1999 UNICEF report claimed 1000-1500 children and babies were “trafficked” every year from Guatemala; the same year, the INS arrested several people and convicted them of running an illegal adoption ring between Mexico and the United States. By 2003, the U.S. embassy in Guatemala was putting the number of minors smuggled from and through Guatemala at 15,000, although this number wasn’t exclusively in reference to adoptions, but encompassed allegations of sex trafficking as well.³ In Brazil, Nancy Schepper-Hughes tells us of paramilitary groups, wealthy individuals, and orphanages that participate in an illegal adoption industry. In Argentina, *las abuelas de la plaza de mayo* continue to demand prosecution of those who disappeared leftists during the Dirty War, now in the name of their grandchildren, born while their children were already in jail, and adopted out to families and friends of the military and ruling *junta*. Truth commissions across Latin America remind us that during the civil wars of the 1970s, children were kidnapped or simply picked up after massacres and “adopted” by soldiers and others. A litany of tragedy and violence that, as adoption grows as a market sector increasingly crucial to many places, investigative journalists in Latin America and even the United States try to keep abreast of. There’s no “official story” here, to recall the name of the Argentine film that tried to tell this story in 1985, few enough authenticated facts. *Casa Alianza* in Guatemala argues that thousands of children are illegally adopted from Guatemala every year, but they have won court cases to return children only six times. But the *testimonios* persist; every year, one or two lawyers or adoption facilitators in the United States is arrested and charged with participating in illegal adoptions. At irregular intervals, countries declare the practice corrupt and close their borders to international adoption. I think all is not well with adoption in Latin America; how could it be, with people paying \$30,000 for an infant; how many individual cases of illegal adoption must be authenticated before we are collectively troubled about it?

Because I think we’re not. Most of the time, when I tell people in the U.S. I’m working on a history of international adoption, they light up, they tell me a story about a friend or a cousin, about loved and wonderful children. It’s not my intention to dismiss these stories, or say they don’t matter, because of course they do, very much, especially to those of us who are adoptive parents. But I think one of the things that matters, very much, about these loved and wonderful children, is that they are not here because of some demographic transition. They are here because of tragedy, politics, war, economies, sexual violence, trauma. And we need those stories too.

¹Julie Berebitsky, *Like Our Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood, 1851-1950*

(Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000)., p. 132.

² Alejandro Bordon, “Advierten Robo De 6 Niños Al Día,” *La Reforma*, 24 April 2002.

³ "Pilar de redes de trata de personas," *Prensa Libre*, 14 November 2003.