

The Culture of Poverty, Crack Babies, and Welfare Cheats

THE MAKING OF THE "HEALTHY WHITE BABY CRISIS"

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In 2002, a researcher looking for endocrine markers of early childhood stress and trauma compared two groups: postinstitutionalized children adopted from Romania by U.S. families, and post-foster care children adopted by U.S. families. By virtually any measure—age at adoption, aggressiveness toward peers and family, trouble getting along with other children, school problems, delinquency—these two groups of children offered the same (considerable) behavioral and emotional challenges to their adoptive families. (In an unexpected note of grace, despite their serious struggles, a very high percentage of adoptive parents—84 percent—reported that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with their relationship with their adoptive children.)¹ Finding these children so similar in so many dimensions raises a question: why did Americans rush to Romania in 1991 (2,594 State Department visas were issued for Romanian “orphans” that year, and only 100 each in 1990 and 1992)² to adopt deeply troubled kids at considerable expense to themselves and with very little formal support for raising them, when they could have adopted substantially similar children in the United States, with institutionalized support and government subsidy? While the motives of adoptive parents are as heterogeneous as the children they adopt, this pattern suggests that something, culturally, was at work that steered people away from U.S. kids in foster care. In this light, legal scholar Richard Posner’s paradigm of low price increasing demand for difficult-to-place U.S. children is clearly inadequate; something far more complex than money was at stake.³ (Patricia Williams cynically called Posner’s the “old children, cheap” model.)⁴ In 1991, at the height of the Romanian adoption boom, many suggested that the answer was crudely race, as these were presumptively white children being adopted from Romania.⁵ Yet the considerable numbers of white children in U.S. foster care (nearly 40 percent) gives the lie to this as a motive in any straightforward way.⁶ Either a lot of would-be adoptive parents were behaving in an extremely irrational way—spending upward of \$10,000, \$20,000, even \$30,000, traveling halfway across the world, and negotiating difficult visa problems in a language few of them knew to adopt children who were as old, as traumatized, of the same race, and as sick as children that they could adopt in the United States with more information about their past, free access to health care and mental health

care for their children, and non-need-based subsidies of upward of \$600 a month—or adoption decisions respond to different pressures than are usually articulated.

We read this apparently inexplicable difference in approach to Romanian children and children in the domestic foster care system as what anthropologist Sally Falk Moore terms a “diagnostic event.” By this she means those moments of powerful contradiction that lay bare cultural logics, identify the diverse stakeholders in social conflicts, and reveal the genealogies of ideas linking institutions.⁷ Not all adoption is like the Romanian context; it is a very different set of practices in diverse places. This particular time and place draw some of the contradictions most starkly, however, leading us to ask whether they inform us about important logics of childhood. We are not interested so much in the motives of individual adoptive parents—good, bad, or indifferent—but in looking at the kinds of knowledges, beliefs, and institutional and state practices that made their decisions seem natural and inevitable, that structured what potential adopters were likely to know, believe, and not know, and that may have led individuals to think that adopting U.S. children in the foster care system was far more difficult than it, in fact, is. The conundrum of Romanian adoption in 1991 lays bare a genealogy of the racialization and biologization of poverty through a series of academic discourses and social policy decisions that resonated with popular cultural expectations concerning the plasticity of children exposed to turbulent environments in their earliest years.

In order to explore how these tropes of resilient (overseas) and toxic (U.S.) childhoods were produced, to show their interrelationship, and to make the argument that they together did powerful cultural work (often in the service of the state), we need to explore them across multiple decades and political moments. To this end, we need to look not at a particular moment, but across four decades of arguments about childhood, race, and poverty. In this article, we explore three historical moments: the elaboration of the “culture of poverty” by Oscar Lewis and other social scientists in the 1950s and 1960s; the “crack baby” crisis of the late 1980s; and the Adoption Promotion Act of 1996, which, alongside welfare reform, was supposed to transform the poor into productive citizens by taking away their children. We argue that through these discourses, a biologically suspect and racialized U.S. “underclass” was produced through a description of kinds of reproduction and childhood in a way that rendered its members—and particularly its children—intrinsically pathological and completely irredeemable. At the same time, far more optimistic liberal discourses of development suggested that children outside the United States, although equally the keystone to understanding the poverty of those overseas, were highly responsive to intervention.

We suggest that discourses of damaged children interfaced with other powerful racial and national ideologies, leading to the creation of moral panics over the scarcity of white children for adoption or the medical fragility of crack babies. We critically trace the creation of a quasi-biology of failed childhood in the social sciences that both drew upon and fueled policy debates, leading some children to be constructed as damaged beyond repair. There is tremendous irony here in the extent to which culture on the one hand and biology on the other did remarkably similar kinds of work with respect to constructing citizen-subjects, races, classes, and childhoods.

Discourses of poverty and childhood marked significant realignments in the form of public policy and the meanings of race. These tropes located poverty as an outcome of a certain kind of childhood and parenting, and hence were able to discount economic, political, and institutional structures as causal. Thus, these discourses work to mask the ways that the state failed to invest in working-class families and obscured the operations of racism. These narratives appeared at highly specific moments, providing a cover story for moments of disinvestment. The culture of poverty and the Moynihan Report worked to signal the end of the era of governmental support for black civil rights, while the crack babies epidemic marked the apogee of the Reagan-Bush era's criminalization of poverty through the War on Drugs. The Adoption Promotion Act of 1996 was initially part of the welfare reform bill and represented Congressman Newt Gingrich's and the *Contract with America's* commitment to put the children of welfare mothers in orphanages, and thence into white adoptive homes.

The cultural backdrop to the discursive contradictions of contemporary social reproduction is marked by this persistent dual narrative of the imperative to aid coupled with the certainty of failure. As a special period of vulnerability, like old age or infirmity, childhood is culturally constructed as a time in which the state and its institutions—and even ordinary citizens—should feel a special responsibility to intervene to prevent abuse and neglect. At the same time, popular scientific and lay discourses about children who have been traumatized portray them as unlikely to adopt the character traits of desired citizens as they grow to adulthood: they will always be “damaged goods.”

Ironically, children “at risk” who live overseas are seen as both in need of rescue and characterologically untainted. These children are seen as victimized by a poverty that can be remedied through transformation of the state, modernization, education, technology, and science. Unlike the poor of the First World or those in urbanized sectors of developing countries, whose families are constructed as perverse rejecters of social norms,

the rural Third World poor are romanticized as malleable innocents who can take advantage of the opportunities passed up by the dysfunctional domestic underclass. This makes their children the innocent of the innocent—a bare canvas upon which American-ness can be reproduced, an image not just of (adoptive) parents, but of the supremely modern. In the case of children from the former socialist bloc, the narrative of rescue adds an appealing layer of heroism: not only are these children innocent of the political choices of the former leaders of their nations, but their successful upbringing also confirms the U.S. victory in the Cold War.

The Culture of Poverty

Children in foster care are working-class children, and the contemporary account of the most disenfranchised members of the working class—the poor—begins with the notion of the culture of poverty. The culture of poverty began its career as a social science paradigm elaborated by anthropologists, sociologists, and journalists who associated themselves with the Left; yet by the 1980s, it was firmly the property of neoconservatives. Whether it ever really was a progressive concept is not so clear. In the hands of its originator, Oscar Lewis, it was an account of poverty that, like the subsequent Moynihan Report, focused on behaviors and beliefs learned in childhood as a cause of multigenerational poverty. These included a looseness about sexuality that meant multiple partners and the conception of children outside of nuclear families, and a carelessness about their upbringing that extended to neglect at one end of the spectrum and violent harshness at the other. In more recent years neoconservatives like Charles Murray have particularly seized on the fact of children being raised in fatherless families as crucial to their account of the causes and consequences of poverty, and key to their argument that welfare and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) themselves cause poverty.

In 1961, Lewis summarized his understanding of the culture of poverty as follows:

In anthropological usage, the term implies, essentially, a design for living which is passed down from generation to generation. In applying this concept of culture to the understanding of poverty, I want to draw attention to the fact that poverty in modern nations is not only a state of economic deprivation, of disorganization, or the absence of something. It is also something positive in the sense that it has a structure, a rationale, and defense mechanisms without which the poor could hardly carry on. In short, it is a way of life, remarkably stable and persistent, passed down from generation to generation along family lines.⁸

This is a striking definition; in three sentences, Lewis mentions that this culture is “passed down from generation to generation” twice; this way of understanding poverty is fundamentally about children and childhood. Later, in his 1966 book, *La Vida*, Lewis put an age to it: by the time children were six or seven, he argued, they were so damaged by the effect of the culture of poverty that they were essentially doomed to repeat the impoverished lives of their parents. The implications of this view for dealing with what was already in the mid-sixties a considerable number of institutionalized children seems clear; one may wish them well, but families who might adopt or foster them would be raising them only for a life of criminality, joblessness, and poverty. In the hands of those like political scientist Edward Banfield in 1970, the “culture of poverty” served to make a very familiar distinction in U.S. culture: what poverty historian Michael Katz calls the Anglo-American tradition of distinguishing between the “worthy” poor and the “unworthy” poor.⁹ It also solidified the notion of a quasi-biological underclass that reproduced itself during discrete temporal “windows” of childhood development. By affirming that most social interventions of necessity missed the open windows of childhood plasticity, scholars reified the hard wiring and irreversibility of the culture of poverty. The children of the U.S. and urbanized poor came to share a dilemma with the chronically ill and the disabled: labeled as sick, they were culturally denied any route to meaningful recovery and reintegration into the social body. Although Lewis never meant his theory to have this disconcerting effect, it presented a profoundly hopeless prognosis for the inhabitants of this cultural category.

Paradoxically, the equally impoverished children of families in the nonurbanized Third World were spared such a somber assessment of their ability to respond positively to later-life interventions and thrive. Oscar Lewis was careful in his original articulation of the culture of poverty thesis to assert that “modern” poverty was different in its psychological effects than “traditional” poverty. “Traditional” poverty was consistent with high degrees of social cohesion, strong family units, and the cross-generational replication of healthy sexuality and gender norms. Children coming from such contexts, then, might have suffered from a lack of biomedicine or sufficient food, perhaps might have some cognitive deficits, but would not have been almost perversely psychologically crippled by their own families.¹⁰ One notes a consistent representational thread here of children in the developing world that was to characterize popular discourses of their suitability for adoption: these are highly resilient, hardy human products sown in unpromising infrastructural soil. A contemporary cultural variant of this representation stretches to include the citizens of the former Soviet bloc as honorary primitives, the victims of an ideologically

perpetuated intellectual and social famine. The children of these populations in need can have their full potential realized in one of two ways: injecting massive resources into their home countries or airlifting them to a more promising homeland. Although—as noted in the Romanian case—this representation is not borne out in the lived realities of institutionalized children in sending countries, it is a reassuringly heroic narrative of intervention.

Crack Babies

In the 1980s, pessimism about the culture of poor children turned into a concern about their biology. In 1989, crack babies were the news story of the year. Major newspapers ran huge, multipage features,¹¹ and network news shows bombarded their audiences with regular images of women using crack cocaine during their pregnancies, characterizing their offspring as likely to be born early, to experience exceptionally high rates of perinatal mortality, to be born addicted and quivering, to experience a host of neurological, digestive, respiratory, and cardiac problems, and to be headed toward a childhood of learning difficulties, hyperactivity, and ultimately, delinquency and jail.¹² The bitter irony is none of it was true. Crack has very little, if any, effect on pregnancies or fetuses. For decades, the legal and child welfare systems worked very hard to make women who used crack during pregnancy suffer. Between 1985 and 2000, more than two hundred women faced criminal prosecution for using cocaine and other drugs during pregnancy, and tens of thousands lost their children to foster care.¹³ In March 2001, medical researchers Deborah Frank and colleagues published a meta-analysis of research on the effects of prenatal cocaine exposure in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (*JAMA*). Their conclusions are literally incredible to most people: they found virtually no evidence that cocaine use during pregnancy had any negative effects on offspring. They wrote:

After controlling for cofounders, there was no consistent negative association between prenatal cocaine exposure and physical growth, developmental test scores, or receptive or expressive language. Less optimal motor scores have been found up to age seven months but not thereafter, and may reflect heavy tobacco exposure. No independent cocaine effects have been shown on standardized parent and teacher reports of child behavior scored by accepted criteria.¹⁴

While there is debatable evidence for attention problems, that is it. In a commentary on Frank et al. in the same issue of *JAMA*, Wendy Chavkin

suggested that all the “hullabaloo” about crack babies had much more to do with politics than it ever was about medical effects on fetuses.¹⁵

While this may ultimately prove to be quite true, it fails to account for the extent to which everyone—medical researchers included—jumped on the crack babies bandwagon. This was a moral panic of the first order, taking in right, left, and center. Even cocaine-using pregnant women were persuaded that jail was the best place for them.¹⁶ At the height of hysteria in 1989, one researcher noted that the likelihood that a study of cocaine effects on pregnancy outcomes would be accepted for the annual meeting of the Society of Pediatric Research was significantly affected by whether or not it found adverse effects. Studies that showed no effect on a pregnancy had an 11 percent acceptance rate, while those that found undesirable effects on fetuses had a 57 percent acceptance rate, despite the fact that negative studies tended to be better designed, more likely to have a control group, and more likely to compare polydrug exposure with and without cocaine.¹⁷

Neoconservative commentators were certainly among the most vociferous. Douglas Besharov of the American Enterprise Institute referred to the birth of a “bio-underclass” whom Head Start could not help, and syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer, in high eugenicist mode, referred to a “generation of physically damaged cocaine babies whose biological inferiority is stamped at birth,” who represented between 5 and 15 percent of all black children.¹⁸ Yet even liberal African American commentators like Derrick Z. Jackson of the *Boston Globe* and William Raspberry of the *Washington Post* joined in, arguing that high rates of black infant mortality were caused by crack, and that efforts to decriminalize drugs should be opposed because of the effects of cocaine on babies.¹⁹

There is a haunting question about how the most vulnerable, most impoverished people in the United States—pregnant women, often prostitutes, sometimes using multiple drugs (prominently alcohol and tobacco), often homeless, more often than not facing violence during their pregnancies, frequently dealing with long-term ill health and often mental illness as well—became a symbol of everything that was wrong with the country. For all these reasons, the case often seemed plausible that the children of “crack mothers” were not doing well (they weren’t, but crack was a correlate, not a cause). The entire edifice of the moral panic about crack babies rested on two statistics, both of which ultimately proved to be wrong. The evidence for a growing “epidemic” of cocaine use, rooted in the newly available, cheap form of the drug, crack, was a slight increase in a daily and weekly usage statistic provided by the U.S. General Accounting Office. These statistics were notoriously unreliable because they relied on very small samples, and this one proved wrong: the percentage of the

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U.S. population using crack remained absolutely stable between 1988 and 1994.²⁰ A second statistic showed a sharp rise in the mortality rate of African American infants in Washington, D.C., in the first half of 1989; officials later realized that a large number of these deaths had really occurred in 1988, and infant mortality rates had, in fact, stayed relatively stable.²¹ It is striking how few people acknowledged that the case for the crack “epidemic” wreaking havoc in inner cities and blighting a generation of babies was extraordinarily shaky, despite the availability of countermanding evidence in the 1980s. Instead, crack babies were poster children for the War on Drugs and an allegory for debates about abortion, exhibit A for the mostly conservative policy makers and prosecutors who wanted to show why small-time drug users were a danger to the society as a whole and deserving of jail time (since what were being called boarder babies were putting an incredible strain on hospital finances, and the children were entitled to expensive special education classes at public expense), and why fetuses needed to be protected from dangerous mothers who, to paraphrase the columnist Krauthammer,²² would kill them if they were lucky.

This was also an intensely racializing moral panic. Although the typical user of both cocaine and crack was a young white male, by 1985, television and print media were portraying crack as a drug used by African Americans and, to a lesser extent, Latinos. From 1988 to 1990, the nightly news was engaged in a war against crack mothers—who were all but definitionally black. In that period, 55 percent of the women portrayed in network TV news stories about crack use were black; in later years, from 1991 to 1994, it was 84 percent.²³ The newspapers were, if anything, worse.²⁴

At the precise moment when the Reagan and (first) Bush administrations had all but succeeded in disallowing race as a legitimate term of political grievance through their attacks on policies like affirmative action, and following on decades of deindustrialization and the flight of jobs from cities that disproportionately affected communities of color, race emerged sharply as a term in which to characterize pathology—indeed, a specifically biologized pathology. The terms of this discourse explained away a multitude of things caused by Reagan-era economic policies, such as homelessness and increasing infant mortality rates, especially among African Americans. The crack baby crisis invited people not to think about the economic causes that led communities of color, and urban youth of whatever race, to be disproportionately involved in the drug trade, or the ways that cuts to social services and government transfer payments left working-class families scrambling. It also discounted another story one could have told about impoverished children in this era: the effects on youth of the steadily expanding workdays that working-class

parents had to put in to make ends meet. In its place, the crack baby epidemic offered bad parenting, moral failure, and a criminal recklessness about fetuses.

The other thing the crack baby epidemic did was to produce the contemporary foster care and child welfare system. Between 1985 and 1988, the number of children in out-of-home placement—foster care, psychiatric institutions, and the juvenile justice system—increased by 25 percent.²⁵ In the five years after that, it reached its 2002 figure: 500,000. At the urging of federal drug czar William Bennett, many hospitals—especially those serving mostly black patients—introduced routine screening for cocaine into delivery rooms, and mothers who tested positive lost their newborns on the spot; some even went to jail, still bleeding from labor.²⁶ In the post-Reagan social service landscape, these policies initially taxed foster care systems to the breaking point, but crack babies quickly became a rallying point for agencies to lobby for—and get—massive new funding. Congressional reports, hearings, and funding appropriations reflected the new urgency about caring for the “littlest victims” of crack and built a much larger institutional capacity (at the same time that a massive prison system was also being built, in no small measure for these same children’s parents). Foster parents of these so-called crack babies were canonized by the popular press; they were caring for “babies in pain,” who disrupted families and would never be normal.²⁷ Although the Supreme Court ultimately found that hospital policies of testing women in labor were unconstitutional—a warrantless search—and, many also argued, racially discriminatory, since very few white women were tested and in some hospitals all black women were, there was also profound popular opposition to “crack mothers” getting their children back.

The most fully developed and dramatic account of why crack mothers could not parent their children came from Hollywood, in the popular film *Losing Isaiah*, critically described and unpacked by Sandra Patton in her important text *Birth Marks* as a key cultural artifact in the professional and policy debates concerning transracial adoption.²⁸ In *Losing Isaiah*, the child’s black birth mother (Halle Berry) is living in a crack house and abandons him in a pile of garbage so she can go get high. A heroic white social worker (Jessica Lange) takes in the quivering infant after he suffers a brain hemorrhage, and she raises him despite his incessant crying, hypersensitivity to stimuli, and hyperactivity. The child bonds with the new family, but the birth mother reappears, having gotten clean. A race-conscious family court voids the adoption and awards custody to the birth mother. Isaiah fails to bond with his birth mother (at the Black Power day care), and the white social worker has to step in to save the day again.²⁹

Once again, we have a redefinition of poverty at a critical policy junc-

ture that rests on an account of children and childhood. Where the concept of the culture of poverty intervened in the War on Poverty to produce an anomalously pessimistic view of the childhood of the working class, the narrative of crack babies produced a biologized account of the growing impoverishment of urban communities of color. These were intensely homogenizing discourses, for all that they appear to make distinctions between the worthy and unworthy poor, or good-versus-drug abusing African Americans. This effect can be seen most clearly in the wildly disproportionate application of drug testing to black pregnant women, who went to jail for cocaine use out of any proportion to their representation among drug-using pregnant women.³⁰ The ways the criminalization of these women negatively affected their children and their families was a notably understudied social phenomenon.³¹

While fetuses and children are victims in this narrative, and hence innocent, it is an ambivalent kind of innocence. Because they cannot escape the effects of the bad morals and loathsome behavior of their parents, these children grow up to be the terrifying criminals and demonic parents that the discourse holds their parents culpable for being. The possibility is left ever so slightly open that this tedious, rote reproduction of criminality and bad parenting can be interrupted by the extraordinary intervention of heroic (and therefore good and innocent) white and middle-class people.

One should note that there has been a narrowing of the bottleneck into a limited politics of the possible regarding childhood trauma and its emplacement in communities. An “extract-the-child” solution requires a systematic bypassing of a substantive psychological and sociological literature that locates the traumatized unit at the supraindividual or family level—but attention to the solutions implied by this literature would require the restoration of funds and power to local communities wrested from them in the Reagan and post-Reagan eras. Critical geographers who attend to the cultural construction of social race have also been attending increasingly to trauma; these scholars argue that the behaviors ascribed to crack mothers are best described as adaptive responses to the elimination of safe places in which to live in community, and the intentional disinvestments in areas disproportionately inhabited by racialized minorities, which are allowed to deteriorate into zones of “urban desertification.”³²

What is compelling about this scholarship—beyond the fact that it is consistently ignored at the policy level—is that it does take seriously the problems of childhood vulnerability and the psychological sequelae of trauma and explores interventions that break through conventional expectations of efficacy. In noting the absence of community-level solutions that take trauma to birth mothers as seriously as trauma to their children

(and the apparently natural and commonsense quality of welfare and adoption reform), we can see the cultural work accomplished by this newly biologized underclass.

Welfare Reform and Adoption Reform

It was the narrative of heroic white adoptive families that provided the opening for a neoconservative redemption story in the nineties. Following the “crack babies” epidemic, would-be adopters turned in significant numbers to overseas adoption, including the rush to Romania discussed earlier. At the same time, there were various efforts to expand the pool of potential adoptees to include, in a serious way, U.S. foster children. In part, this effort mapped onto changes in the way race was being defined, and also, as always, a shift in poverty policy. Not coincidentally, welfare reform and adoption reform were coupled; indeed, both were initially part of congressional conservatives’ *Contract with America*.

By the early nineties, neoconservatives were engaged in a full-court press to end AFDC (Assistance to Families with Dependent Children), based on their particular reading of the “culture of poverty,” and its apparent assertion that it was possible to end poverty through income supports without ending the culture of poverty. Indeed, they argued, AFDC caused fatherlessness by providing support only to single mothers, hence effectively introducing a major disincentive to marry. Fatherlessness, in turn, caused every horror and moral failing known to humans; thus welfare causes social pathology, *q.e.d.* The following passage by William Niskanen, published in the journal of the right-wing think tank the Cato Institute, is a personal favorite because he lists “abortion” among the social pathologies caused by AFDC:

Analysis of the state data for 1992 yields the following estimates of the effects of an increase in Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) benefits by 1 percent of the average personal income in the state: the number of AFDC recipients would increase by about 3 percent; the number of people in poverty would increase by about 0.8 percent; the number of births to single mothers would increase by about 2.1 percent; the number of adults who are not employed would increase by about 0.5 percent; the number of abortions would increase by about 1.2 percent; and the violent crime rate would increase by about 1.1 percent.³³

With antipoverty programs like this, poverty—moneylessness—looked like a preferable alternative.

Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West’s effort to counter the Right’s

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welfare reform efforts, *The War against Parents*, which proposed a liberal response of governmental income supports for families, illustrated how dominant the Right's account of the horrors of unmarried motherhood had become. Hewlett and West agreed that fatherlessness was a great injury to children, contributing to problems as varied as youth violence, substance abuse, lowered SAT scores, and child obesity, arguing that it is an overwhelming public policy problem that government action ought to solve.³⁴ Following, as it did, the 1995 Million Man March's mobilization in part to demonstrate support for black fatherhood, this book, a collaboration between an African American intellectual with high public visibility and a self-described feminist, suggests how few people were willing to defend working-class women's mothering in the mid-nineties. Without fathers to balance it, it had become horrifyingly toxic.

This conservative loathing of AFDC and liberal acquiescence resulted in a series of moves toward reform of antipoverty programs in the early 1990s. In 1994, one right-wing trial balloon was brought down in a firestorm: Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich's suggestion that the children of welfare mothers ought to be put in orphanages. It was probably the nineteenth-century, Dickensian quality of the word *orphanage* more than anybody's willingness to defend what were being called welfare mothers that led many liberals to pounce on the proposal (President Clinton's weekly radio address denounced it as a plan to take children out of "loving homes"). When Gingrich backpedaled a few days later and used the term *group homes*, liberal *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGrory argued that the plan was humane and well grounded in much liberal sentiment.³⁵ Sadly, she was right about the latter, if not the former.

The legislation that came ultimately to embody this goal of putting the children of welfare mothers in orphanages was the Adoption Promotion and Stability Act, and its major provision called for the "Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption." It was framed primarily in terms of race, or rather the assertion that why so many children languish in foster care was because race-matching policies supposedly discriminated against the white would-be adoptive parents. As Patton has shown, what ultimately became the Adoption Promotion Act was originally part of the same bill as the Welfare Reform Act of 1996.³⁶ This linkage made explicit what had been implicit in much of the previous debate: notwithstanding the fact of who actually received AFDC, *welfare mothers* referred to black, Latino, Native American, and, less often, Asian women and their children; the placements being sought after the children were moved to orphanages or group homes were with white families.

This neoconservative policy proposal, although following on the logic of the Moynihan Report, was a twist from previous political alignments.

In the sixties and seventies, it was left-leaning, civil rights types who argued that adoption could make racially heterogeneous families.³⁷ Although interracial adoption in that era was primarily a gloss for adoption of biracial babies by white families—and hence, under a different regime of racial meanings would not have been transracial at all—it was nevertheless a complicated thing for white families to do under the reigning segregationist paradigm.³⁸ As the intellectual careers of the Moynihan Report and the culture of poverty, or of individuals like Nathan Glazer suggest, the tack from white civil rights activist to neoconservative was not so anomalous. Nevertheless, it requires some work to untwist these strands, to understand how, after decades of transracial adoption being a left-wing project, in 1996 the journal of the right-wing American Enterprise Institute could run an article denouncing “Adoption and the Color Barrier” a few years after liberal Barbara Kingsolver could write a novel that sensitively and movingly portrays the Indian Child Welfare Act as a necessary bulwark to ensure Native American cultural survival.³⁹

As many have argued, the nineties saw a realignment of mainstream racial meanings that began to imagine the possibility of a multicultural ruling class.⁴⁰ New sciences of race insisted on our common genetic heritage,⁴¹ while computer software, popular magazines, and television advertisements for shaving cream invited us to imagine races morphing into each other through visual technologies that juxtaposed faces of different colors onto each other. As Donna Haraway argues, Michael Jackson, the child symbol of black pride whom medical treatment made into a “white” adult, became the perfect symbol of the way race was supposed to (not) signify.⁴² At the same time, as the Census Bureau recorded, this was purely (or precisely) a cosmetic realignment—poverty rates for Latinos, American Indians, Alaskan Natives, and African Americans remained more than three times the rate for whites, while for Asians and Pacific Islanders, it remained one and a half times higher.⁴³

The 1997 legislation prohibiting race matching in adoption was part of this structure of masking the racial bad faith of neoconservative and neoliberal colorblindness, a multiculturalism accompanied by the gutting of affirmative action in employment and education and the dismantling of the federal safety net for poor women and children embodied in AFDC. Perhaps more than at any time in the three decades of arguments about childhood that preceded it, the Adoption Promotion Act did not attempt to hide the contempt that was embedded in its pity of the poor. Even as welfare reform all but eliminated federal transfer payments to help working-class women raise their own children, the 1996 adoption reform provided a \$6,000 tax break to (implicitly white) families who adopted a “special needs” child—with *nonwhite* a subcategory of the definition of special

needs. Combined with the 1980 federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act that provided subsidies to middle- and upper-class families adopting from foster care, the Adoption Promotion Act meant that the federal government would provide upward of a \$13,000 bonus for middle-class white people to raise the same children. If the problem with foster care, as critic Elizabeth Bartholet complains, is that working-class people can do it for the money⁴⁴ (and although the specifics vary by state, it has always paid a great deal better than AFDC ever did), now adoption can be far more lucrative for middle-class people.

Finally, such reforms are consonant with the cultural erasure of race as an explicit category for the consideration of historically structured patterns in inequality and collective means for their redress at a time when race continues to signify in contexts ranging from donor-recipient matching processes in organ donation to the redrawing of electoral districts. Representational/visual cultural artifacts including depictions of Eve as universal hybrid ancestress and Tiger Woods's self-identification as "Cablinasian" work to obscure the tenacious hold of an essentialized white/nonwhite divide in our operational everyday cultural biology, which is reflected at the policy level.

Implications

Conventional explanations for the transnational adoption boom in the early 1990s are surprisingly inadequate. One suggests that with the legalization of abortion in 1973, the number of infants born to young women who did not want them fell off sharply, resulting in what was called a "healthy white baby famine";⁴⁵ this shortage is then seen as a logical cause for transnational adoption. Yet as historian Julie Berebitsky has shown, the perception of a shortage of adoptable infants has been more the rule than the exception in the United States, and in earlier periods, it did not result in adoption from outside the United States. Economistic accounts of supply and demand do less than we might hope to account for the turn to transnational adoption. We are suggesting that we also need to look at four decades of scientific, social scientific, and state projects of race, poverty, and childhood to understand one of the cultural contexts in which institutional and parental preferences for transnational, rather than (cheaper, easier) adoption from the public system in the United States, were born.

This article has been arguing that four decades of sociological and public policy discourses of pathological childhood are where we need to look if we want to understand the exceptional undesirability of U.S. foster

children as the backdrop for the current transnational adoption boom. This history represents an alternative genealogy of the “healthy white baby crisis” that conventional accounts suggest led to the turn to transnational adoption by infertile (white) couples. There have never been that many babies, and there has long been transnational adoption. What has changed is that the last several decades have seen an exceptional demonization of the poor and their reification as a biological underclass. The effects of recent efforts to provide massive monetary incentives to persuade potential adopters to reconsider domestic poor children has been accompanied by only token efforts to depathologize these children or mute the considerable infrastructural neglect and outright assault on their families and communities of origin.

At the same time, the private adoption system in this country has grown steadily larger and more expensive. A few decades ago, there was effectively only one system; now, there are decidedly two, with the public system dealing with poor and traumatized kids, and the private system being the source of (\$30,000) white infants. This private system is presumed to be the source for higher-quality, lower-risk reproductive products. A family making use of it is assumed to have more choices and more information about compatibility and a child’s long-term potential than families working through the public foster care system. In this sense, the private system is the direct inheritor of the technologies of modern child adoption and scientific child selection described by Ellen Herman, who argued that such technologies emerged in the twentieth century as an effort to naturalize some adoptions—characterized by “close” matching and the skimming of those candidate infants with the most socially desirable qualities (including phenotypical ones)—into quasi-biological kinship, while leaving others a necessary but essentially hopeless exercise in artificial parenting.⁴⁶ The latter characterized the adoptions of racially different, working-class children by white social elites, and nonscientific adoptions—that is, those out of the public system.

These discourses and histories of the childhood of the American poor intersected with another, whose characteristics we can only sketch here: missionary and development discourse, which understood “their” lives to be tremendously and readily responsive to social engineering. As Tina Klein argues for post–World War II ideologies of Asian adoption, our (relatively painless) ability to rescue “their” children was a staple of foreign policy and development, musicals like *The King and I*, and middle-brow magazines like the *Saturday Review*. As we argue in our discussion of the culture of poverty thesis, this plasticity of the overseas poor—particularly overseas poor children—resonates with a tenacious imperial-

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ist folk biology of the hardy, resilient, and adaptive native who waits for modernist intervention to be fully realized.

We also perhaps ought to notice that the extraordinary monetary value that Americans assign to children outside the U.S. has its own horrific implications for poor children elsewhere—not all the rumors of trafficking in children are false. The effects of the conjunction of these discourses, of “our” poor children and “their” poor children, are particularly corrupt. In essence, it is simply another product of the same atomistic cultural biology that locates irreversible damage and the promise of perfectability at a microlevel that either excludes families and communities of origin from a hermeneutics of compassion or demonizes them. In these more chilling narratives, potentially productive children—or their components—are extracted for transport to where they serve the greatest utility and cause the least resource drain, in a goal supportive of market forces and neoliberalism.

It may be argued that tales and incidents of child theft are qualitatively distinct social phenomena from the kind of well-intentioned academic and humanitarian impulses that inform the social actors involved in practices and discourses of transracial and transnational adoption, and we acknowledge this. Still, it is also evident that the powerful underlying cultural logics that structure the terms of transracial and transnational adoption—logics that rely upon and generate notions of essential and racialized biological difference—create the moral backdrop for a continuum of reproductive practices and policy interventions that have systematically failed to envision antiracist, anticlassist, anti-imperialist ways of meeting the needs of children.

Notes

1. V. Groza and S. D. Ryan, “Pre-adoption Stress and Its Association with Child Behavior in Domestic Special Needs and International Adoptions,” *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 27.1–2 (2002): 181–97. Many other researchers have confirmed this similarity; see Thais Tepper, Lois Hannon, and Dorothy Sandstrom, eds., *International Adoption: Challenges and Opportunities* (Meadowlands, Penn.: Parents Network for the Post Institutionalized Child, 1999).

2. State Department, Immigrant Visas Issued to Orphans Coming to U.S., updated 12 June 2002, travel.state.gov/orphan_numbers.html.

3. Richard Posner, *Sex and Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

4. Patricia Williams, “Spare Parts, Family Values, Old Children, Cheap,” in *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader*, ed. Adrien Katherine Wing (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 151–58.

5. See Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

6. Foster care is a state-by-state program, so nationwide statistics are always approximations. The U.S. Children's Bureau compiles an Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System Report (AFSCARS) quarterly, which includes their estimates, based on voluntary (and incomplete) reports from states. According to the AFSCARS Report for the most recent period available, April 1999–September 1999, the numbers of white children in foster care at that time was 36 percent. (Children's Bureau, www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cv/publications/afscars/ar1000.htm).

7. Sally Falk Moore, "Explaining the Present: Theoretical Dilemmas in Processual Ethnography," *American Ethnologist* 14.4 (1987): 727–36.

8. Oscar Lewis, *Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Random House, 1961).

9. Edward C. Banfield, *The Unheavenly City: The Nature and Future of our Urban Crisis* (Boston: Little Brown, 1970); Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

10. Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1966).

11. See, e.g., Lynn Duke, "Crack Abuser's Baby Is Born, Doctors Don't Yet Know Cocaine's Effect on Infant," *Washington Post*, 20 December 1989; Lynn Duke, "For Pregnant Addict, Crack Comes First; Drug Use Blamed for D.C. Infant Deaths," *Washington Post*, 18 December 1989.

12. For a detailed review of the news programming of 1989, see Drew Humphries, *Crack Mothers: Pregnancy, Drugs, and the Media* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999). Some characteristic newspaper articles include Delores Kong, "Bennett: Take Infant If Mother Is on Drugs," *Boston Globe*, 12 December 1989; "Pregnant Drug User Glad for Jail," *Chicago Tribune*, 16 December 1989; William Raspberry, "Addicts and Babies," *Washington Post*, 20 December 1989; A. M. Rosenthal, "How Much Is a Baby Worth?" *New York Times*, 15 December 1989.

13. Lynn Paltrow, D. Cohen, and C. A. Carey, *Year 2000 Overview: Governmental Responses to Pregnant Women Who Use Alcohol or Other Drugs* (Philadelphia: National Advocates for Pregnant Women of the Women's Law Project, 2000); Humphries, *Crack Mothers*.

14. D. M. Frank, M. Augustyn, W. G. Knight, et al., "Growth, Development, and Behavior in Early Childhood Following Prenatal Cocaine Exposure: A Systematic Review," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285.12 (2001): 1613–25.

15. Wendy Chavkin, "Cocaine and Pregnancy—Time to Look at the Evidence," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285.12 (2001): 1626–27. The conclusions of Frank et al. have not gone entirely unchallenged; L. T. Singer, R. Arendt, S. Minnes, et al., "Cognitive and Motor Outcomes of Cocaine-Exposed Infants," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 287.15 (2002): 1952–60, offers contrary evidence, though an attendant commentary suggests that it might have something to do with the kind of drug that was available in Cleveland, in particular, where Singer and colleagues' study took place: B. Frank, D. A. Mayes, and L. Zuckerman, "Cocaine-Exposed Infants and Developmental

- Outcomes: ‘Crack Kids’ Revisited,” letter/comment, *Journal of the American Medical Association* 287.15 (2002): 1990–91. Numerous other studies, however, have affirmed Frank, Mayes, and Zuckerman’s general conclusion about the absence of independent cocaine effects on pregnancy outcomes. See, e.g., V. H. Accornero et al., “Behavioral Outcomes of Preschoolers Exposed Prenatally to Cocaine: Role of Maternal Behavioral Health,” *Journal of Pediatric Psychology* 27.3 (2002): 259–69; Gideon Koren et al., “Estimation of Fetal Exposure to Drugs of Abuse, Environmental Tobacco Smoke, and Ethanol,” *Therapeutic Drug Monitoring* 1.1 (2002): 23–25.
16. Associated Press, “Pregnant Drug User Glad for Jail,” 17 December 1989.
 17. Gideon Koren, Karen Graham, Heather Shear, and Tom Einarson, “Bias against the Null Hypotheses: The Reproductive Hazards of Cocaine,” *Lancet* 2, no. 8677 (1989): 1440–42.
 18. Charles Krauthammer, “Crack Babies Forming Biological Underclass,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 30 July 1989.
 19. Derrick Z. Jackson, “America’s Shameful Little Secret,” *Boston Globe*, 24 December 1989; Raspberry, “Addicts and Babies.”
 20. Humphries, *Crack Mothers*.
 21. Lynn Duke, “D.C. Revises Infant Death Figures/Figures; Rate for 6 Months Remains More Than Twice National Average,” *Washington Post*, 16 December 1989.
 22. Krauthammer, “Crack Babies Forming Biological Underclass.”
 23. Humphries, *Crack Mothers*, 21, 42–47.
 24. See, e.g., Duke, “For Pregnant Addict, Crack Comes First; Drug Use Blamed for D.C. Infant Deaths”; Jackson, “America’s Shameful Little Secret.”
 25. “More U.S. Children Using Foster Care,” *Boston Globe*, 12 December 1989.
 26. Humphries, *Crack Mothers*.
 27. See, e.g., Martha Shirk, “Foster Parents Struggle with Babies in Pain,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 19 November 1989.
 28. Sandra Patton, *Birthmarks: Transracial Adoption in Contemporary America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
 29. *Losing Isaiah*, dir. Stephen Gyllenhall (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 1995).
 30. Paltrow, Cohen, and Carey, *Year 2000 Overview*.
 31. Mindy Thompson, Anne Lown, and Robert Fullilove, “Crack ’hos and Skeezers: Traumatic Experiences of Women Crack Users,” *Journal of Sex Research* 29.2 (1992): 275–87.
 32. John Bowlby, *Separating: Anxiety and Anger*, vol. 2, *Attachment and Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Kai T. Erickson, *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976); Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *The House of Joshua* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); Mindy Thompson Fullilove, “Psychiatric Implications of Displacement: Contributions from the Psychology of Place,” *Journal of American Psychiatry* 1.12 (1996): 1516–24; Roderick Wallace, “Urban Desertification, Public Health and Public Order: ‘Planned Shrinkage,’ Violent Death, Substance Abuse, and AIDS in the Bronx,” *Social Science and Medicine* 31.7 (1990): 801–13.

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35. Mary McGrory, "Orphanage Idea Has Many Parents," *Washington Post*, 13 December 1994.
36. Patton, *Birthmarks*, 138.
37. "Adopting Black Babies," *Newsweek*, 3 November 1969, 70; Dawn Day, *The Adoption of Black Children: Counteracting Institutional Discrimination* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1979); Christine Ward Gailey, "Ideologies of Motherhood and Kinship in U.S. Adoption," in *Ideologies and Technologies of Motherhood: Race, Class, Sexuality, Nationalism*, ed. Heléna Ragoné and France Winddance Twine (New York: Routledge, 2000), 11–55; Patton, *Birthmarks*; Elizabeth Shepherd, "Adopting Negro Children: White Families Find It Can Be Done," *New Republic*, 20 June 1964, 10–12.
38. One clear piece of evidence for this is the story of a white California minister who gave up on his family's effort to adopt a biracial toddler following a year of cross burnings, trash on the lawn, and hateful acts by members of his community. See "Drip, Drip, Drip: Adopted Mulatto Infant," *Newsweek*, 4 April 1966, 30–31.
39. "Adoption and the Color Barrier," *American Enterprise* (May/June 1996): 4; Barbara Kingsolver, *Pigs in Heaven* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).
40. See, e.g., Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994).
41. Evelyn Maxine Hammonds, "New Technologies of Race," in *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*, ed. Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert (New York: Routledge, 1997).
42. Donna Haraway, "Race," in *Modest Witness Second Millennium. Female-Man™ Meets OncoMouse©: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
43. Joseph Dalaker, *Poverty in the United States: 2000* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2001), 10.
44. Bartholet, *Nobody's Children*.
45. On the use of this term, see Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*.
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