Adoption as Political History

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Laura Briggs. *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. xi + 360 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. $25.95.

A number of academic books published in the last decade have told the history of the politics of transnational and transracial adoption, but few have told political history *through* adoption. These are, of course, two sides of the same coin, and Laura Briggs accomplishes both. *Somebody's Children* recounts the fraught and sometimes violent political economies of significant periods in U.S. domestic and transnational adoption over the last century. What weaves these various moments together is suggested in the title of the book: the contexts and experiences of the particular somebodies whose children are rendered "adoptable." For example, two different instances conventionally framed as a battle over who should adopt what babies—the response of the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) to the adoption of black children in the 1970s and the battle to keep Guatemala "open" for adoption several decades later—become linked via detailed accounts of a battle for justice for the (poor, female, non-white, single) parents whose children are taken away. These and other accounts address, head on, how children come to be undone from their birth families and birth countries, establishing Briggs as a whistleblower of historic proportion.

By viewing political history through the lens of adoption, *Somebody's Children* turns conventional methodologies of adoption inside out. Briggs first disassembles the misguided ideological distinction between "good adopters and bad adopters, child rescuers and child stealers" (p. 3), exemplified by the popular discourses surrounding adoptions by Angelina Jolie and Madonna, respectively. Out of the rubble she reassembles the symbolic and material importance of adoption to the ideological work of anticommunism, evangelical and liberation theologies, and neoliberal globalization. The book thus makes a significant contribution to a growing body of scholarship that recognizes that the story of struggles over kinship is also the story of institutional and international configurations of power and of raced, classed, and gendered

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productions of subjectivity. It does so by setting its sights squarely on "the *politics* of how these mothers come to lose their children" (p. 6).

The chapters of *Somebody's Children* are a comprehensive reimagining of Briggs' notable contributions to adoption research over the last decade, organized here both historically and geographically. The book's first section is on transracial domestic adoption in the United States; its second section moves to transnational adoption from Latin America; and the final chapter and epilogue return to the United States and what Briggs terms "emerging fights" over the politics of gay and lesbian adoption and over the precarious position of undocumented immigrants relative to their children. I read the epilogue first, curious where Briggs was headed, and I was riveted. The potential for U.S. citizens to claim immigrants' children for adoption sharply brings home the book's argument that "the production of adoptable children is an index of vulnerability, particularly of single mothers" (p. 282). This loaded statement rings profoundly true by the time one has read the book in its entirety.

The experiences of undocumented immigrants are frighteningly close to the kind of adoption future Briggs warns of in her introduction, where she sets up the book's main themes: the policing of vulnerable mothers, the centrality of adoption politics to the rise of neoliberal globalization, the variable fates of marginalized groups across time and context, and the pathways by which assumptions about single motherhood and needy children make their way into political practice. The introduction is also where Briggs establishes public adoption commentator Elizabeth Bartholet as her foil. While not heavy-handed about it, Briggs takes Bartholet to task for the terms on which she advocates for transracial adoption. In constructing children as "languishing" or in need of "rescue," argues Briggs, Bartholet radically reduces or even erases the histories and experiences of their mothers. Indeed, *Somebody's Children* is a direct reappropriation of the title of Bartholet's influential book *Nobody's Children*.

The first two chapters address the racial politics of African American and Native American children with the explicit goal of distinguishing these two intertwined histories from each other. Briggs argues that too many observers, Bartholet included, have mistakenly treated the institutional and policy debates over the adoption of African American children and the adoption of Native American children as two instances of the same contestation over where children "belong" racially and culturally. Briggs' painstaking retelling of these two mid-twentieth century struggles convincingly demonstrates that they must be understood as having distinct political trajectories. Yes, both struggles were collective responses to the racist and systematic dispossession of children. But where the NABSW statements were part of a historic struggle over legal ownership of land and labor and thus bound up with battles over reproduction in the Civil Rights Movement, the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was about claiming postcolonial rights to citizenship and sovereignty. These histories set

up chapter three, where Briggs offers a pointed critique of the backlash that ensued in the 1980s and 1990s against "race-based" adoption policies, culminating in the Multiethnic Placement Act and the Interethnic Provisions. She is eloquent on how these were enabled by overblown mythologies of crack babies and welfare mothers, shored up by neoliberal ideologies of privatized "colorblind" care, and premised on a mistaken reading of the NABSW and ICWA histories as anti-white rather than as attempts at *keeping* children.

The next section also analyzes changes from the 1930s to the early twenty-first century, but this time with a focus on intercountry fostering and adoption. The storyline here also moves toward the ascendancy of neoliberal, private solutions, but shows how they emerged from the anticommunist drivers of overseas adoption. Various forms of conservative, evangelical, and progressive Christianity play a supporting role in what Briggs sees as two competing but often coexisting approaches to transnational adoption in the United States: forms of rescue and conversion blind to the violence that makes children into refugees and orphans, and movements of solidarity with the marginalized women and families who lose their children. Chapter four sets up this section with a revised version of Briggs' excellent scholarship on the anticommunist fervor that constructed "madonna" mothers and "waif" children out of war refugees across the globe—in Spain, Korea, Cuba. Especially poignant is her reconstruction of exceptional policies that formally made particular children into orphans available for transnational adoption.

With this backdrop, Briggs' next two chapters focus on Latin American adoption to the United States in relation to the families torn asunder by "uncivil wars," especially in Guatemala and El Salvador. The victories and losses of twentieth-century wars in Latin America, in which the U.S. played no small part, were marked in orphaned, kidnapped, and adopted children. Amid the complexities of political, economic, ethnic, and class conflict, discerning "whose children" becomes a task as formidable as telling any one history from the uneven pockets of evidence and the contradictory claims to what *really* happened. For example, were attacks on Americans accused of stealing children in Guatemala a national psychosis or a coordinated effort to discredit human rights activism? Briggs does not so much try to tell a definitive story as unpack the "anxieties, frustrations, violences, and political struggles over the production of adoptable babies in Latin America" (p. 201). Her chapter entitled "Latin American Family Values" resonates with her analysis in the first section of the book in its explication of the rise of neoliberalism and the battles over public versus private solutions to child and family rights in Latin America. By the 1990s, scandals over post–Cold War adoption "alternatives" in Brazil, Mexico, and Peru, and the creation of new legal frameworks such as the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, spelled the decline of transnational adoption in Latin America, which "came to stand for all the

ills of neoliberal globalization and the ugly civil wars that preceded it" (p. 230). Nonetheless, new bureaucracies and legal frameworks that emphasize in-country adoption have not necessarily done justice to informal local adoption practices and the rights of impoverished parents. Briggs wraps up this section by considering how U.S. adoptive parents and adoption agencies do and do not decry the injustices done to those parents.

Somebody's Children is, arguably, a critique of neoliberalism. It demonstrates "how the symbolics of adoption and unwed pregnancy have done ground-clearing work for those who sought freer markets and less government" (pp. 12–13)—and, as Briggs shows us, for those who sought to remake the state as broker of private kinship arrangements. The book further demonstrates how neoliberalism's particular alchemy of commercialization, security, and privatization depends on an uneven distribution of the moral regulation of families. This is the subject of Briggs' penultimate chapter on gay and lesbian adoption in the United States. She emphasizes anew the changing historical fortunes of differently situated mothers and children by tracing how the newly sanctioned ability of LGBT middle-class parents to adopt acts as a kind of "safety valve" in the management of poor and racialized mothers. The economic and moral rights to adopt other people's children are ironically juxtaposed to the economic and moral lack of rights among those other people.

While there are few critiques to be made of *Somebody's Children*, one might be that the chapter on gay and lesbian adoption is not quite like the others; it draws conclusions important to the themes of the book, but does not quite as sharply deploy adoption as a lens on history. In earlier parts of the book, some other lines may be too neatly drawn, such as evangelical Christianity as villain and liberation theology as hero. At other points, Briggs seems to assume knowledge of particular histories—the Civil Rights Movement or U.S. involvement in Guatemala—on the part of the reader, when some brief explanatory context would help connect the dots. Finally, the "somebodies" of the book's title are overwhelmingly marginalized mothers, with fathers more often present only parenthetically.

However, readers of this book are sure to appreciate Briggs' beautifully crafted prose and clear but nuanced voice. Her pithy turns of phrase, smooth transitions, and thoughtful cross-references guide the reader through the historical intricacies of fights over where and how children belong. And she effectively inserts her own experience with adoption, not so much to signify the authenticity or authority of her own voice, but rather to pull the reader onto the precarious ground between losing and keeping a child, and between private and public responsibility for children. (Given the historic role of the state in systematically removing children from "unfit" parents—parents disproportionately of class, race, and sexual minority status—Briggs is not nostalgic for a public welfare state that never was.)

In chapter six of *Somebody's Children*, Briggs reviews the 2007 publication of a pivotal account of the corruption attending Guatemalan adoptions, emphasizing its importance as a *social* rather than an individualized account of the human trafficking that affected women and children. One could say the same of this book. It is a deeply social account of the politics of adoption—of the domestic and transnational relations of power crisscrossing networks of state, market, military, and family that make adoption possible. When guerilla fighters are labeled "terrorists," their children, in turn, can be labeled "orphans" in need of families. Unsupportable headlines about the effects of crack on unborn babies render poor, black mothers unfit and their children in need of rescue.

In this way, *Somebody's Children* joins an impressive group of recently published books asking after the sociohistorical conditions and consequences of transnational and transracial adoption. These include Karen Dubinsky's *Babies without Borders* (2010), Eleana Kim's *Adopted Territory* (2010), Barbara Yngvesson's *Belonging in an Adopted World* (2010), Karen Balcom's *The Traffic in Babies* (2011), and Laura Briggs' and Diana Marre's edited volume *International Adoption* (2009). Briggs' latest book is unique among these for a couple of reasons. First is that it combines breadth of subject matter—ranging from the Indian Child Welfare Act in the U.S. to the production of neoliberal family values in Latin America—with depth of historical analysis of each case. But more importantly, these different cases constitute the most comprehensive study to date of the politics of how, where, and from whom adopted children come. Rather than working her way back from the experiences of adoptive parents or adoptees toward those of birthparents, Briggs starts and mostly stays with the political contexts in which battles to keep and take children are fought. Her work shines a light on the difficult path to creating and maintaining a stance of solidarity with the poor and disenfranchised.

While much of the book's content is available in journal articles that Briggs has published over the last decade, the way she organizes and interconnects her material will make the book an excellent and compelling course text. Scholars of race, kinship, human rights, cultural politics, and U.S. and Latin American history will find the book valuable and engrossing, and might even be tempted to do more reading or research on adoption.

Sara K. Dorow is associate professor of sociology at the University of Alberta. Her book *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (2006) was the first full-length ethnographic study of transnational Chinese adoption. In recent years she has conducted research on the experiences of adoptees, and has taken a new tack with a project examining sociocultural facets of migration, family, and community in the Alberta oil economy.