H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Laura Briggs. *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. 384 pp. $94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5147-4; $25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5161-0.

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Published on H-Ethnic (March, 2013)
Commissioned by Amy J. Johnson

New forms of adoption, enabled in part by changing racial ideologies and new technologies for global mobility, have captured an increasing popular and scholarly audience since the 1970s. Debates about the interracial families created by the adoption of children of color into white middle-class families center on the implications of white parents raising nonwhite children. In her book *Somebody's Children*, Laura Briggs aims to refocus that debate onto the women and families who lose or give up their children, arguing that the broader structural dynamics of domestic social policy, globalization, and war serve to divest people of their children, making the adoptability of a group's children a crucial indicator of that group's relative vulnerability. Rather than evaluating the merits of white adoptive parents, Briggs points to how those very assessments have obscured the unequal relations that facilitate the movement of impoverished children of color, both within the United States and from abroad, into wealthy white U.S. families. Through a close examination of the historical and current processes that condition the possibility of transracial and transnational adoption, she reveals the centrality of these forms of adoption to the rise of neoliberal globalization.

Somebody's Children contains three parts. Part 1, made up of three chapters, explores the politics of transracial adoption within the United States. Chapter 1 examines the National Association of Black Social Workers' (NABSW) 1972 response to the removal of black children from the homes of mothers on welfare. She argues that, contrary to common interpretation, the NABSW was objecting less to the notion that white parents were capable of raising black children and more to the systematic removal of black children from their birth mothers that resulted from racist discourses of black familial pathology and invasive welfare policy measures. The NABSW statement, she suggests, was an attempt to garner respect for black mothers and prevent the continuation of a long history, from slavery onward, of black women losing their children.

Further illuminating the role of welfare policy in separating impoverished children of color from their birth parents, in chapter 2, Briggs focuses on white adoption of Native American children resulting from the processes of tribal termination and the extension of Aid to Dependent Children onto reservations. She examines the decade-long efforts to enact the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), arguing that scholars have largely misunderstood this movement. Rather than following a racial logic similar to that of the NABSW, those advocating against the placement of Indian children in white families were appealing to political rights. She shows how the ICWA drew on legal precedents in tribal relations with the federal government and was aimed at ensuring tribal sovereignty in questions of foster care and adoption. The removal of children from their birth families and into boarding schools, foster care, and adoption, she argues, has been a critical part of the colonial project of tribal termination.

Concluding her discussion of domestic transracial adoption (until it reemerges in part 3), Briggs turns to the moral panics over "crack babies" and fetal alcohol syndrome in the 1980s. She shows how the combined political power of neoconservativism, neoliberalism, and the Christian Right ushered in a two-pronged welfare reform that both ended the already feeble safety net for impoverished families (with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996) and eased the process by which the children of single mothers could be removed and adopted into the white middle class (with the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 and the Interethnic Provisions of 1996). Through the demonization of impoverished single mothers, parental rights were redefined as obstacles to adoption. The resulting transfer of these children into wealthier families, she argues, was crucial to the privatization of welfare. With these three chapters, Briggs uses the lens of adoption to elucidate the continued structurally enforced vulnerability of impoverished families of color as part of the ultimate

consolidation of neoliberal domestic policy.

Shifting focus in part 2 to the politics of transnational adoption, Briggs examines the social upheaval of wars, genocide and structural adjustment in Latin America and Guatemala in particular, and the role of adoption in both enacting and managing that upheaval. In chapter 4, she traces the cultural and political processes by which white middle-class people in the United States came to view themselves as rescuers of foreign children. Looking at the photographic tradition of capturing desperate-looking impoverished children, as well as the Cold War projects of purportedly saving children from the evils of Communism, Briggs shows how transnational adoption became symbolically crucial to U.S. national identity and foreign policy.

Briggs turns, in chapter 5, to the role of adoption within the 1980s civil wars in Latin America, in which the United States supported right-wing governments in the suppression of leftist insurgents. Drawing on a contested archive of evidence documenting the torture, disappearances, kidnapping, and genocide that formed the strategies of these repressive regimes, she illustrates how transnational adoption was part of a privatized response to the terrorizing of indigenous families. In accordance with her move away from the common hallowing or denigrating of white adoptive parents, she presents the varying understandings that U.S. parents who have wittingly or unwittingly adopted children under these circumstances have about their own roles, some seeing themselves as unambiguous saviors and others as unfortunate accomplices to colonialism.

In the final chapter of part 2, Briggs works through the battles over transnational adoption within the framework of human rights that took place in the wake of the Latin American civil wars. She shows that even in the context of reform based on international human rights treaties, transnational adoption continues to be a site for the involuntary and unjust separation of children from their birth mothers, as formalized adoption procedures eliminate and criminalize the survival strategies of impoverished families. In Guatemala, a rhetoric of family values and an enforced silence about unethical adoption practices help maintain the legality of private adoption and the trafficking of children from impoverished mothers to wealthier families abroad, which Briggs views as a fittingly neoliberal solution to the contradictions wrought by neoliberal development.

Turning back to the United States in part 3, Briggs explores the changing social, political, and economic status of LGBT people and immigrants via the politics of adoption. In chapter 7, she shows how (primarily white) queer people have gone from waging legal and cultural battles in the 1970s and 1980s around their fitness to raise their own biological children, to claims for marriage and adoption rights structured around their unique ability to fill an important gap in the broader neoliberal project of privatizing the care of poor children. The epilogue discusses the ways that immigrants, drawn into the United States by the forces of neoliberal globalization, are increasingly threatened with the loss of their children by the evermore-repressive immigration policies of the last two decades. Together, chapter 7 and the epilogue solidify the argument that Briggs makes throughout *Somebody's Children*, that the degree to which a group is vulnerable to losing its children is indicative of its political, social, and economic position.

Aside from shifting the focus of the adoption debate to the circumstances of birth parents, Briggs's book produces a number of important insights for scholars of neoliberalism, motherhood, and race. First, her work in part 1 details crucial historical processes by which children's rights came to eclipse parental rights in debates about foster care, adoption, and welfare. While much scholarship has pointed to the idealizing of children in the 1980s and 1990s as key to the cultural politics of neoliberalism that helped penalize impoverished parents by dismantling the U.S. welfare state, Briggs reveals important antecedents to this discourse.[1] For example, in examining the rising preference for adoption over foster care for poor black and Native American children in the child welfare system in the 1970s, she shows how notions of permanence and continuity for children came to override the importance of ties to birth parents. In this way, children's rights were forwarded as directly opposed to the rights of birth parents.

Second, in juxtaposing histories and current realities of domestic interracial adoption with those of transnational adoption from Latin America, Briggs's work contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversation about motherhood as a key battleground in global struggles over power, rights, and wellbeing. The denigration of racialized welfare mothers in the United States and the political marginalization of indigenous mothers in various Latin American countries both operated to tear at the fabric of communities, disbanding families, social networks, cultural practices, and political power, while producing white middle-class U.S. women as the rightful mothers of all children. Tracing the role of the Christian Right and the politics of neoliberalism in both of these settings, Briggs points to a coordinated and transnational campaign against impoverished single mothers in this

era. Taken together, these processes reveal the continued global symbolic and physical import of battles over definitions of proper motherhood.

Third, Briggs provides a complex example of the ways that dominant ideologies of racial equality and colorblindness undergird and obscure the continuation and deepening of racial inequalities. In the particular instance of transracial adoption, questions of whether or not white parents are equipped to raise children of color provoke outcries of the inherent sameness of all people and the undeniable ability of white parents to love a child of a different race. Appearing to be precisely antiracist, as Briggs points out, these arguments deflect attention from the circumstances of systemic inequality by which these children come to be constructed as in need of love. As the interracial families that result from such adoptions stand as symbols of a new kind of racial harmony, their very existence evidences a much more complicated and dissonant reality.

Note

[1]. Most notably, Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sexuality and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

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Citation: Clare Daniel. Review of Briggs, Laura, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption.* H-Ethnic, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37021

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