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Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice

Adoption, Immigration, and Privatization: Transnational Transformations in Family

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Article notes[1]

In this article, I explore neoliberal globalization and its paradoxical effects on the "private" space of the family through a story about three imagined but common sorts of people. The first is a Guatemalan infant, adopted by a U.S. family. The second is a Guatemalan woman who is, let's say, the child's mother—and someone who left behind other children and family members to migrate to the U.S., where she works as an undocumented nanny. Consider how these two people are valued—and how borders produce that value. The cost of the infant's adoption, for her U.S. parents, was about \$30,000. The child's mother, on the other hand, is valued at very little, if we think about the wages she can probably earn, or what her life was worth, crossing Mexico and then the Arizona desert, where she was twice as likely as a man to die. While we dwell on how unfair that is, we could recross the border and notice that their relative "value" is the opposite in Guatemala. The child is most likely Mayan, one of more than a dozen distinct indigenous groups. One could say that her existence is the result of the failure of the genocidal campaigns of the state in the 1980s and '90s.[2] If, for some reason, this child's family couldn't raise her, she might be lucky enough to go to school or even to find an NGO-based orphanage, or she might live on the streets in communities with children as young as two or three. She might well be working for wages or panhandling by the time she was six or seven.

Adoption to the U.S. is serving as a privatized welfare system for the ferociously neoliberal Guatemalan state. This is bitterly fitting, given the U.S. role in defeating other visions of the state in Guatemala.[3] The child's mother, we might say, has a higher "value," as measured by her wages or the likelihood of dying of treatable disease or malnutrition.

In figuring out how borders reverse the relative value of these lives, we need to consider them in relation to another problem of domestic labor and value—that of a middle or upper-class woman in the U.S., usually but not always white, who might adopt this Guatemalan baby and employ the mother. Like the women whose story Arlene Hochschild told in her 1989 book *The Second Shift*, this woman, well-educated and potentially well paid, probably entered the labor force in her twenties, unlike many women in previous generations, to offset the historic decline in real wages that affected households beginning in the 1970s, creating a crisis at home. Women were still doing most of the housework—and fighting with their husbands about it, as Hochschild tells it. At the time, with women's wages becoming critical to more and more household budgets, it seemed like men would eventually have to do more childcare and housework. It turned out, though, that there was another way of negotiating this problem for middle-class families:

delaying childbearing until a later time, when a mother might be further along in her career (and receiving higher wages),^[4] and then hiring a nanny from outside of the U.S. for relatively low wages.^[5] But delayed childbearing is a risky reproductive strategy, as both partners' fertility declines as they age, conspicuously with women beyond the age of 35, which is more or less the moment when she might be established professionally. Rising ages of reproduction for women have led to increased rates of impaired fertility,^[6] and this has been met, in part, through transnational adoption. This narrative is also relevant for queer families, who might not have a specifically gendered labor crisis at home but are nevertheless caught up in the same problem of managing domestic and waged labor in the context of child-rearing and a structural "infertility."

This article explores a genealogy of how these bodies, families, and their labor came to be valued differently, looking at some of the many factors that might account for it. First, I examine how transnational adoption from Latin America emerged in the 1970s and '80s in conjunction with civil and dirty wars. Second, I explore how moral panics around race and parenting rendered some children less desirable than others. Finally, I look at how related (and sometimes similar) hysterics around parenting turned middle-class parents into guardians of these children and rendered "security" a keyword of the family as much as the state. Taken together, these three developments account for the peculiar and contradictory story of the relative values of these three figures.

In the last two decades, growing numbers of middle-class households in the U.S. have included domestic workers, mostly of Latin American origin or ancestry.^[7] This has contributed to a downward economic shift in Hothschild's crisis of reproductive labor, bringing the "who's watching the kids?" question to a greater number working-class households in the U.S. and across national boundaries, as mothers leave young children in their home countries to support them by doing domestic work elsewhere. This is a "cost of reproductive labor" issue. If an increasing number of middle-class households in the U.S. are relying on labor from elsewhere (i.e., from Latin American women hired for lower wages to work in their homes), then it is also true that migrant women who leave their children in home countries are relying on the lower cost of reproductive labor outside of the U.S.^[8] It is a form of "offshore reproduction" that has been, at once, crucial to other forms of globalization, including the superheating of the U.S. economy before the crash of 2008, and, to a significant extent, ignored in discussions of neoliberal globalization.

While there was never a golden age in the U.S. when domestic labor was understood to be a common, social concern supported by the state and a wider community, there were still moments that offered a promise of something different. In the 1960s and '70s, feminism and the welfare rights movement advocated wages for motherhood, housework, and daycare centers. Jimmy Carter's administration even acknowledged some obligation to help families with young children since, for the first time, a majority of mothers of children under six were working for wages.^[9] Reagan changed all of that. Beginning with the 1980 campaign focus on "welfare cheats," it was high on the agenda of Reagan's people to shut this space down. How they did this was a textbook case for neoliberalism: they began by demonizing working-class black, Latina, and Native women and children as irresponsible, immoral, and unworthy of help. Then, they moved on to white middle-class families, which they claimed were potentially *just like* these awful working-class families of color—or that they would become like them if government gave them support. In place of this, neoliberals offered personal responsibility and security. I am thinking, here, of how "crack babies," fetal alcohol syndrome, and child car seats and bike helmets became major public policy issues.

I have written about the invention of the crack baby in the 1980s and how it was part and parcel of the civic disenfranchisement and sanctioned impoverishment of black and Latino people in

the U.S.[10] Here, I want to talk about fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) because it caused double damage: it first demonized Native American mothers and then turned on (usually white) middle-class mothers. Together, "crack babies" and FAS provided a cover story for neoliberal decimation of the social contract between the state and its most vulnerable citizens, essentially claiming that personal irresponsibility was illegitimately making outrageous claims on the public fisc.

In 1989, Michael Dorris published *The Broken Cord*, an influential account of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.[11] While fetal alcohol syndrome had been identified in the research literature as early as 1973 and had received passing mention in the media and in court cases, Dorris's book put it on the map as a public health emergency. The first half of *Broken Cord* is a tremendously compelling, novelistic account of the adoption of his son, a toddler with developmental delays, and the crashing to earth of Dorris's hopes that environment was everything, as his son continued to exhibit growing health problems and learning disabilities. By the end of the book, Dorris insists that as many as one in three Native children may have been irredeemably harmed by maternal drinking during pregnancy. What followed was hysteria about pregnant women drinking, culminating in warning labels on alcoholic beverages and in bars. Media stories decried child abuse and even "genocide" by Native American women who drank. Women, mostly Native, went to jail to "protect" their fetuses, despite appalling pregnancy outcomes for women in prison, and some lost children to foster care. Native children with developmental disabilities were automatically assumed to have FAS, although a 1994 genetic study on reservations in Arizona found that more than half the children diagnosed with FAS didn't have it, suffering instead from Down's syndrome or something similar.[12]

The entire debate also terrified middle-class women who didn't drink much. Fetal alcohol syndrome went from being a problem of the children of alcoholic women to a warning to all pregnant women not to drink at all. Uncertainty about how *much* alcohol caused fetal defects emboldened public health officials and the media to claim that any alcohol use at all during pregnancy constituted fetal child abuse.[13] Dorris's partner, Louise Erdrich, summed it up when she said that "one-glass-of-wine-a-day permissiveness of first-time yuppie mothers is still sufficient to cause brain damage in the fetus." [14] No one has the slightest idea if that is true.

Yuppie mothers in the '80s were never demonized the way that black or Native mothers were. Still, for them, the '80s was a period of intensifying anxiety about their vulnerable children. Child advice books turned mean.[15] In contrast to the reassuring Dr. Spock, who told mothers that if they listened to their children and their own common sense, all would be fine, mothers in the '80s got Richard Ferber and T. Berry Brazelton. The new advice books warned of the dangers of bad parenting, urged disciplined approaches to bedtime and potty-training, and insisted that parents attend to developmental guideposts. The 1980s also marked the emergence of a host of new anxieties about child death and disability (ironically as rates of both declined). There were countless news stories about threats to children, including SIDS,[16] unverifiable reports of poisoned Halloween candy, drunk driving, stranger kidnapping, and sexual abuse. States passed new laws requiring bicycle helmets for children,[17] seat belts, and expensive child safety seats.[18] At exactly the moment when middle-class U.S. American mothers most needed them, sturdy, self-reliant children disappeared.[19] At a time when there might have been a widespread demand for publicly-funded daycare, daycare became seen as a dangerous place where children were routinely sexually abused. The 1980s expansion of *the private* was at once an attack on feminism and the incursion of neoliberalism, replacing belief in public services with private, familial labor.

In some ways, it is not surprising that, during this period of anxiety, there was an explosion of interest from the U.S. in transnational adoption. Middle-class domestic space had grown increasingly important, but more women were starting families late and struggling with fertility.

Moral panics about "crack babies" and FAS left many who, in an earlier generation, might have adopted children from U.S. foster care leery of potential disabilities. A vision of unregulated markets was gaining real traction, and, at least ideologically, the state was in decline. Manufacturing plants began to move easily and repeatedly to wherever poverty was the greatest, assuring the lowest wages; Third World workers began to be seen as interchangeable, and babies entered this world as similarly mobile.

Adoption, like jobs, followed gradients of poverty and civil disruption. Wars in Korea and Vietnam produced the first big waves of transnational adoption, and then adoption followed in the wake of advancing neoliberalism and civil war. In the late '70s and the '80s, the most significant sending countries, besides South Korea, were Colombia, Peru, Guatemala, Chile, and Paraguay.[20] This is a striking list, as each was run by a right-wing government with close ties to the U.S., and each was engaged in a dirty war against leftist insurgents that included massive human rights violations against civilian populations and used "disappearances"—clandestine arrests, kidnapping, and murder—as a tactic of terror.[21]

Activism by human rights groups like the Asociación Pro Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos in El Salvador and Todos por el Reencuentro in Guatemala made it increasingly clear that child kidnapping, followed by adoption within the country or by a U.S. or European family, was also a tactic of political terror.[22] Court cases from Argentina to El Salvador used the disappearance and adoption of children as the major—sometimes the only—civil war crime that can be prosecuted.[23] As a result, organizations of parents of disappeared children and the grown children themselves have emerged as some of the most important groups in Latin America's pro-democracy movements that demand legal accountability for war crimes.

In one place—Guatemala—rates of transnational adoption doubled in the year after the Peace Accords were signed and increased almost a hundred-fold within a decade.[24] Guatemala has been called the country where neoliberalism has advanced the farthest, at least in part because anti-Communism was most successful there.[25] For thirty years, the state tried to kill every trade unionist, member of an agrarian cooperative, intellectual, or member of a progressive political party, only to then turn to genocide of indigenous people, whom they suspected of someday possibly having progressive sympathies. When the killing was done, the leaders were pardoned and stayed in power. Those who kidnapped children and sold them through adoptions during the war continued to oppose the implementation of international human rights frameworks for adoption. Despite repeated reforms, each a tacit admission that perhaps all was not well before, many still regard the Guatemalan adoption system, in the words of one human rights lawyer, as "a nest of corruption." [26]

To return, then, to the story with which I began, the conditions under which middle-class U.S. households decide to hire Latin American women to do household labor or adopt Guatemalan babies, or that Guatemalan women decide to migrate or relinquish their children for adoption, have changed dramatically since 1970. I have tried to describe the historical, material contexts in which individuals do or do not make these choices and to characterize some of the things that have made them more likely in this post-Cold War moment in vigorously neoliberal states like the U.S. and Guatemala. Privatization has meant the expansion of "the private" for some and its virtual evisceration for others. We have understood neoliberalism to be about states and economies, but it is at least as true to say that it is a story about families.

Endnotes

1. A long version of this article is forthcoming as "Foreign and Domestic" in Eileen Boris and Rhacel Parreñas, *Intimate Labors: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Care, Domestic, and Sex Work* (Rutgers, 2010). [[Return to text](#)]

2. The Guatemalan Truth Commission report called it genocide; see Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico. *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*. 12 vols. Guatemala: Oficina de Servicios para Proyectos las Naciones Unidas, 1991. [[Return to text](#)]
3. I first came to understand external adoption as a kind of alternative to a welfare system after reading Tobias Hübinette's dissertation. See Tobias Hübinette, "Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture" (Stockholm University, 2005). The ideology battle in Guatemala was particularly stark, and I am not thinking exclusively of the kinds of positions espoused by the guerilleras, although that would be clear enough, but also all the labor unions, agrarian cooperatives, and other grassroots democratic institutions suppressed through murder by the Guatemalan state. See e.g., Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2000). [[Return to text](#)]
4. Women's age at first child has been climbing steadily since 1970, actually increasing almost every year, from 20.1 in 1970 to more than 25 in 2002. It has increased more and faster for white women than for black women, with women "of Hispanic origin" in the middle. This would be consistent with it being a strategy for maintaining middle-class status, as more white women than black or "Hispanic" women are middle-class, rather than working class. In 2002, the average age of first birth for all white women was almost 27—getting surprisingly close to ages at which fertility is difficult. A. Chandra et al., "Fertility, Family Planning, and Reproductive Health of U.S. Women: Data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth," in *Vital Health Statistics* (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2005). [[Return to text](#)]
5. In fact, with respect to the nanny part of the equation, Hochschild, among others, has pointed this out. See her essay "Love and Gold," Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2003). Although I am troubled in this essay by her assignation of the term "pre-modern" to anyone's late 20th century childhood—the whole notion seems preposterous at best, a hallmark of the anthropology of premodern "savages" at worst—I do appreciate the effort to think through care-work in a transnational context. Another work that makes this point eloquently is Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2001). [[Return to text](#)]
6. Although not, we should note, the "epidemic" of infertility widely and hysterically reported in the press, that Susan Faludi comments on in *Backlash*. Rates of actual infertility are declining. Impaired fertility is part of normal aging. A. Chandra et al., p. 2. [[Return to text](#)]
7. A number of people have made this point; see e.g. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila, "I'm Here, but I'm There: The Meanings of Latina Transnational Motherhood," *Gender and Society* 11, no. 5 (1997); Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*. The Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2006 counted 37.2% Latino or Hispanic "maids or housekeeping workers," and 19.9% African-American. It recorded no nannies, but "childcare workers" were 17.3% Latina and 17% Black. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employed Persons by Detailed Occupation, Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin," (Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). (It also found this to be the segment of the employed population most likely to be poor). Bureau of Labor Statistics, "A Profile of the Working Poor," (Washington, D.C.: Department of Labor, 2000). [[Return to text](#)]
8. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Children of Global Migration: Transnational Families and Gendered Woes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). [[Return to text](#)]
9. My favorite invocation of these politics is Barbara Ehrenreich's outraged questions about what happened to them as she encountered resistance from feminists to her discussion in her *New*

Yorker article about the humiliating sexual politics of "maid" work. See Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001). There is a fabulous new literature on welfare rights; see Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Felicia Ann Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2003); Patricia Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing About Motherhood," in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994); Bonnie Thornton Dill, "Our Mothers' Grief: Racial-Ethnic Women and the Maintenance of Families," *Journal of Family History* 13 (1988); Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Social Constructions of Mothering: A Thematic Overview," in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994). [\[Return to text\]](#)

10. Laura Briggs, "Orphaning the Children of Welfare: 'Crack Babies,' Race, and Adoption Reform," in *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, ed. Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2006), 2. [\[Return to text\]](#)

11. Michael Dorris, *The Broken Cord*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1989). [\[Return to text\]](#)

12. Jane Erikson, "Doctors Mislabeled Defects: Fetal Alcohol Misdiagnosed," *Arizona Daily Star*, November 27, 1995; HE Hoyme, L Hauck, and DJ Meyer, "Accuracy of Diagnosis of Alcohol Related Birth Defects by Non-Medical Professionals in a Native American Population" (paper presented at the David W. Smith Morphogenesis and Malformations Workshop, Mont Tremblant, Québec, CANADA, 1994). In a personal communication, Hoyme sent me the paper but told me he never published the research. [\[Return to text\]](#)

13. Janet Golden, "An Argument That Goes Back to the Womb": The Demedicalization of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, 1973-1992," *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 2 (1999). [\[Return to text\]](#)

14. Charles Trueheart, "Marriage for Better or Words: The Dorris-and-Erdrich Team, Creating Fiction Without Friction," *Washington Post*, 19 October 1988. [\[Return to text\]](#)

15. Rima D. Apple, *Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006). Argues that Spock is contradictory and that, on the one hand, he tells mothers to trust themselves, while on the other, he continues to inculcate the reign of the expert doctor, the one who really knows. Fair enough. But as she also notes, he is at a minimum a lot more friendly than the earlier advice books, precisely because he tells mothers to trust themselves. For the post-Spock period, Apple says there is a vastly expanded number of experts offering incredibly heterogeneous advice. Perhaps. But I disagree that there is no orthodoxy; in my experience, even casual conversations with people over 30 reveals a remarkable unanimity in opinion that those who became parents in the decades after 1990 are far more anxious than the generation before. [\[Return to text\]](#)

16. Stearns, *Anxious Parents*. [\[Return to text\]](#)

17. James D. Sargent, Magda G. Peck, and Michael Weitzman, "Bicycle-Mounted Child Seats and Injury Risk and Prevention," *American Journal of Disease of the Child* 142 (1986). And www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/New-fact-sheet03/BicycleHelmetUse.pdf. [\[Return to text\]](#)

18. Leavitt, *Freakonomics*. [\[Return to text\]](#)

19. Stearns, *Anxious Parents*; Steven Starker, *Oracle at the Supermarket* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989). [[Return to text](#)]
20. Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute: *International Adoption Facts* (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2003 [cited August 30 2007]); available from <http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/FactOverview/international.html>. [[Return to text](#)]
21. See e.g., Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre : Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Steve Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998, The Memory Box of Pinochet's Chile* (Durham: Duke, 2004); Winifred Tate, "Paramilitaries in Colombia," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 8, no. 1 (2001); Angela Cornell and Kenneth Roberts, "Democracy, Counter-Insurgency, and Human Rights: The Case of Peru," *Human Rights Quarterly* 12 (1990); Alma Guillermoprieto, "Letter from Lima," *New Yorker*, October 29 1990; Amnesty International, "Amnesty International Report 2003: Paraguay," (New York: Amnesty International, 2003). [[Return to text](#)]
22. Personal communication. Jon Cortina, Pro-Búsqueda, July 2005; Pedro Gregoria Santiago, *Liga Guatemalteca para Higiene Mental*, August 2007; see also *Discovering Dominga*, articles from *Proceso*, above, unsigned, "Aún En Busca De Los Niños Que La Guerra Se Llevó," *SwissInfo*, October 6, 2006. [[Return to text](#)]
23. The lawyers at la Asociacion Pro Búsqueda los Niños y Niñas Desaparecidos helped me understand why this was so critical. Laura Briggs, "Interview with Zaira Navas, Attorney for Pro Búsqueda," (San Salvador, El Salvador: 2005). The Mexican magazine *Proceso* has also been covering this unfolding story. Juan José Dalton, "Ante La Corte Interamericana," *Proceso*, 22 marzo 2005; Juan José Dalton, "Cicatrices No Cerradas De La Guerra," *Proceso*, 25 October 2003; Juan José Dalton, "El Salvador: La Deuda Con Los Niños Deaparecidos," *Proceso*, 8 March 2003; Marcelo Izquierdo, "Abuelas De La Plaza De Mayo: 25 Años De Búsqueda," *Proceso*, 25 October 2002. [[Return to text](#)]
24. See http://travel.state.gov/family/adoption/stats/stats_451.html (accessed January 19, 2006). [[Return to text](#)]
25. John T. Way, "The Mayan in the Mall: Development, Culture and Globalization in Guatemala, 1920-2003" (Yale University, 2006). [[Return to text](#)]
26. Inés Benítez, "Guatemala: Whitewash for 'Adoption Paradise'," Inter Press Service, June 5, 2007. [[Return to text](#)]

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