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Karen Dubinsky, Babies without Borders: Adoption and Migration across the Americas. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, 204 pp.

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Book reviews

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Historian Karen Dubinsky provides an intriguing account of the symbolic power of children, a resource nations and communities can draw upon to manage social and political conflict. Focusing on Operation Peter Pan and the Elián González U.S.A.-Cuba child-contention cases, on the history of multiracial adoption in Canada and on the debate over transnational adoption in contemporary Guatemala, she identifies three distinct sets of “symbolic children” – the “national baby,” the “hybrid baby,” and the “missing baby” – configurations of meaning through which nations operate complex processes of self/enemy definition, domination and control.

The Operation Peter/Pedro Pan and the Elián González affair are both examples of the role played by children in competing state building processes. Both episodes (the first dating back to the early sixties, the second to 2000) entail a competition among Cuba and the U.S.A. over the national custody of refugee children. The U.S. government, rescuing Peter Pan children from their “bad father” Castro denounces their enemy’s illiberal “childrearing” practices (after the CIA spread rumors about Castro’s plan to confiscate children’s *patria potestad* in order to concentrate them in camps and send them to Russia – to be finally used as canned meat!) and celebrates national founding values and myths, such as freedom and equal opportunities (though the celebration of ex Peter Pan alumni/ae professional success). Cuba’s counter-narrative, which is centered on kidnap, denounces instead their enemy’s imperialist intrusions, depicting families (and their children) as innocent victims and – in the case of Elián – heroes of resistance. How these national building projects lean on competing definitions of childhood clearly emerge in the figurative celebrations given in the Cuban and American museums dedicated to Elián. While in the “battle of ideas” museum in Cardenas the child is represented (in the act of throwing away a doll) as a socialist anti-consumerist hero, the celebration of the absent boy’s memory in Miami is made instead through the display of his house and bedroom, filled up with photographs, newspaper articles, as well as religious and consumerist icons.

The history of interracial adoption in Canada focuses instead on race relationships, showing the ambivalent role played by “hybrid babies”: the black babies – innocent bearers of racial conciliation functional to the self-presentation of Canada as a multicultural society, the Aboriginal babies – shameful hostages of colonial domination. This case leads us to the book’s core theme of adoption, and to its highly ambivalent meanings: a “cultural genocide” for the colonized nations, an effort to counterfeit discrimination and to build a more inclusive society for the multicultural heralds.

The issue of adoption is then framed in the context of transnational and post-colonial relationships. The emergence of Guatemalan “adoption baby industry” is interpreted at the light of the contradictions brought by the global diffusion of a new “sacralized childhood”: innocent, safe and excluded from the cash nexus. Here issues of commodification – more than cultural genocide – contribute to polarize distinctions of “dirty”

and “clean” adoptions, along with frightening narratives of kidnap culminating in fears of organ transplants and episodes of “baby-snatchers” lynching which are deeply embedded in the country’s recent violent past.

One of the main theses of the book is that the “rescue vs. kidnap” opposition, which crosscuts the observed cases, contributes to build up a highly normative and “scandalistic” framework that obscures the “real” voices and perspectives of the leading actors – children, adoptive and birth mothers first of all, as well as the material conditions that actually produced those highly symbolized children. However, while the book offers inspiring insights on the historical processes – cold war, race relations and post-colonial struggles – at the root of such ambivalent interpretations of children’s movement across borders, thus helping us to grasp its effects on nations and communities (rather than on families and individuals, as it is mostly done in research on adoption), the voices and concrete experiences of adopted children and birth families have not been taken into account. More attention is given instead to the perspective of adoption operators and privileged observers, as the author mainly draws on newspapers, documentaries, novels, movies and adoption case files to formulate her analysis. The book is, however, fascinating in its attempt to unveil the political symbolism of children, their role of emblems – weapons or trophies – brought in struggles prompted by new and old forms of inequality.

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