Cultural Nationalism and Modernity: The Making of the Nation

Karen Dubinsky

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010

Reviewed by Jennifer Musial

Long before interracial and transnational adoptions became a popular culture phenomenon, my white parents fostered and later adopted my black sister. Like Dubinsky, a queer white woman with a Guatemalan child, I feel simultaneously blessed and state-sponsored adoption that led to her placement with my family.
Dubinsky shows that these feelings are not incommensurate. Despite, or possibly due to, her personal investment in the topic, Dubinsky offers a well-crafted, thoughtfully argued and researched text on interracial and transnational adoption that moves beyond the kidnap/rescue binary to look at the symbolic nature of children.

Dubinsky's objective is to make adoption more complex than kidnap or rescue discourses provide. Dubinsky says adoptive parents are neither imperial kidnappers who steal children from the Global South nor are they benevolent providers of a “better life” for children. These tropes do not reflect the reality of adoption, which involves personal agency, complicated relationships, community dynamics, militarist politics, shifts in immigration law, and nation-building strategies that allow for the circulation of children from a family of origin to an adopting family. Her unique contribution, then, is to draw out the nuances of gender, racialization, family, militarism, and nation in her look at adoption by Canadian and U.S. American parents.

To achieve this, Dubinsky uses three symbolic children as chapter tropes: the national baby, the hybrid baby, and the missing baby. In her chapter on “the national baby,” Dubinsky discusses the migration of Cuban children to the Global North in an effort to escape nationalist, pro-Castro brainwashing. Prospective U.S. American parents saw themselves as benevolent Christians and anti-communists by taking in Cuban children. Dubinsky hints towards the interconnections between racialization, ethnicity, religion, and class in these discursive renderings of adoption, but this could be developed further. For instance, Dubinsky notes that anti-Castro, U.S. created propaganda worked primarily on middle-class Spanish-Cuban families who, in part, feared relocation of their children to the countryside populated by poor African-Cuban families. Therefore, a brief look at racism, religion, socio-economic class, and region in Cuba would illuminate the patterns of migration even further.

The tensions of racialization, ethnicity, socio-economic class, and region are taken up in Dubinsky’s next chapter on “the hybrid baby.” Here, Dubinsky examines discourses of anti-racist parenting, colour-blind liberalism, and colonialism in Canadian interracial adoption. The chapter compares Montreal's Open Door Society, an organization of anti-racist white parents who adopted black children, to the removal of aboriginal children from their homes, and placement within white families. Dubinsky’s important contribution here is to point out that anti-racist parenting of black children was held up to demonstrate a progressive Canadian nation, while the adoption of aboriginal children by white families represents a national shame that has never been adequately addressed. Dubinsky could do more to draw out the nuances of adoption demography, which is buried in the final pages of the chapter, but it is a solid complement to a book that otherwise focuses on transnational adoption.

In her final chapter on “the missing baby,” Dubinsky once again returns to the movement of children across national borders. Dubinsky outlines what she calls a culture of child “missingness” as a legacy of civil war. Since children went missing through death, displacement, and disappearance, it is not surprising that Guatemalans are suspicious of transnational adoption. Dubinsky closes the chapter by arguing that the traumas of war on family structure are not yet known in Guatemala. However, the Guatemalan adoptee who sends remittances back to his/her/hir birth families and the proud Guatemalan birth mother who shows off photographs of her more-affluent child, complicate the kidnap/rescue binary as it seems neither wholly “good” nor wholly “bad,” but something a bit murkier.

Dubinsky draws on an array of research materials including film, interviews, archives, adoption case files, and public monuments. Her book represents a fascinating look at families and nationalism vis-à-vis pronatalism, racialization, militarism, and colonialism. It would be a fantastic read in family studies, women’s studies, history, sociology, children’s studies, or cultural studies courses. Beyond wanting more detail about the intersections of racialization, ethnicity, class, and religion, part of Dubinsky’s own narrative is missing. Queer parents who adopt across racial and national lines are absent. I suspect this is partially due to the timeline of the book, but it would be interesting to hear more about the migration of queer parents to the Global South for the purposes of transnational adoption. This analysis would serve to enrich an already terrific text.

Jennifer Musial completed her Ph.D. in Women’s Studies at York University. She currently teaches gender studies courses at Trent University and Queen’s University. Jennifer is working on two projects: the first looks at the construction of fetal citizenship via the “Partial Birth” Abortion Ban Act and the Unborn Victims of Violence Act in the United States, and the second examines the backlash against Nadya Suleman, the “Octomon.”

GIVING BREASTMILK: BODY ETHICS AND CONTEMPORARY BREASTFEEDING PRACTICE

Rhonda Shaw and Alison Bartlett, Eds.
Toronto: Demeter Press, 2010

REVIEWED BY CAROLINA CREWE

Shaw and Bartlett’s groundbreaking compilation adds significant depth to contemporary debates surrounding the characterization of breastfeeding and breastmilk as a gift. Shaw and Bartlett present breastfeeding as a