Do Symbols of Children as Innocent, Orphaned, and Vulnerable Serve Children’s Best Interests?

A review of

Babies Without Borders: Adoption and Migration Across the Americas
by Karen Dubinsky

Reviewed by
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The central thesis of Babies Without Borders: Adoption and Migration Across the Americas is that the symbol of the child as innocent, vulnerable, and an object of sentiment is often used for political and social ends. Moreover, not just symbolic babies, but real children sometimes suffer negative consequences of those images. Karen Dubinsky, the author of Babies Without Borders, explores these themes through four adoption venues: (a) Operation Peter Pan, in which 14,000 children were airlifted from Cuba to the United States during 1961 and 1962, (b) transracial adoption of Black children by White parents in Canada, (c) transracial adoption of Aboriginal children by White parents in Canada, and (d) intercountry adoption of children from Guatemala.
Segments of Dubinsky’s arguments have appeared in earlier journal articles (Dubinsky, 2007, 2008), but in this book the entire argument, with a range of examples, is laid out. (In the interest of full disclosure, I wish to note I am an editor for a forthcoming book on intercountry adoption being published by Ashgate.)

The Peter Pan (or Pedro Pan) airlift provides a vivid portrait of how the depiction of helpless children can lead to actions that don’t necessarily benefit them. As a result of anti-Castro propaganda suggesting that parental custody rights would be rescinded under a communist government and children would come under state care, many middle-class and wealthy Cuban parents sent their children to live with families in the United States. In one version of the rumor, children would be made into (dog) food to be resold in Cuba. Alarmed parents bade tearful farewells to their children at the Havana airport. Half a century later, discussions of the airlift still echo discrepant positions; within Cuba, the party line is that the Peter Pan children have become drug addicts and gang members, while some Peter Pan alumni in the Cuban American community attribute their education and successful careers to the airlift.

The innocent child in transracial adoptions within Canada was “symbolic of racial harmony and integration” (p. 68) or occasionally of exotic racial stereotypes. In Canada, the author examined not only documents such as newspapers but also hundreds of case files from Montreal’s Children’s Service Centre.

Dubinsky argues that adoptions of Black and biracial children in Canada were on the forefront of adoption reform, and Canadian adoption professionals prided themselves on having more progressive policies and less racial divisiveness than did their neighbor to the south. In fact, a prominent group of advocates for interracial adoption in Canada, the Open Door Society, maintained close and positive ties with Black communities. To this day, there are a number of intercountry adoptions of mostly Black and biracial babies from the United States to Canada, presumably propelled by birth mothers’ perceptions of Canada as less racist than the United States (Naughton, 2010).

Adoptions of Aboriginal children by White Canadians followed a different course, involving more acrimony and a less positive public image. The public discourse revolved around horror stories of adoptions gone wrong, as well as accusations of cultural genocide. Once more, the author examined hundreds of actual case files, in this case from an agency in Winnipeg. The case files revealed the usual reasons for relinquishment by birth mothers—abandonment by boyfriends, rape, poverty, and/or a wish to complete their own education. Moreover, in contrast to most of the Black children who were adopted as infants, the majority of Aboriginal children were older and suffered multiple placements in foster and adoptive homes. Their older ages and larger number of life disruptions could have contributed to the view that their adoptions were more difficult.

With respect to Guatemala, the image of the innocent child created a rescue narrative that was later largely surpassed by a kidnap narrative. Emblematic of the rescue narrative, a Google search for images of Guatemalan orphan today yields photos of angelic toddlers
with faces stained with tears or dirt. (The message is clear: Take me home and give me a good life.) The kidnap narrative arose from reports of child theft for intercountry adoption, including one case that was substantiated by DNA proof (Bebé Robado, 2008).

Since the completion of the literature review for Babies Without Borders, intercountry adoption in Guatemala has undergone profound changes. Beginning in April 2008, new intercountry adoptions have ceased. Moreover, a poll of Guatemalans’ views on adoption revealed that most adults believed that Guatemalan children would be better off adopted by a Guatemalan family than by a foreign family (Seijo, 2008). The central authority for adoption in Guatemala is now promoting domestic adoption there.

Babies Without Borders is meticulously researched. The prose is intelligent and dense. For example, an extensive list of the many scandals in intercountry adoption occupies only two pages (pp. 101–103). In many instances, Dubinsky poses, rather than attempts to answer, the crucial questions, such as “Isn’t there some space between ‘rescue’ and ‘kidnapping’?”

One question that came up for me, however, was how the nature of the sources of information might have affected the descriptions of the four situations. In the case of Cuba, Dubinsky lived for extended periods in Cuba and relied not only on printed accounts but also on interviews with Cubans and Cuban immigrants to the United States. For the transracial adoptions within Canada, she had access to adoption files, and although those files were written through the lens of adoption professionals, they provide an on-the-ground account of the adoptions. For the Guatemala section, the author relied primarily on newspaper accounts, combined with shorter in-country visits.

The focus on the public discussion in Guatemala might have caused the author to overlook some other themes. For example, on page 18, the Guatemalan perspective on the relinquishment of up to one percent of babies born there was reported to be one of national shame. However, in a recent study, almost half of respondents said that the popularity of Guatemalan babies in intercountry adoption was related to positive qualities of those babies: “La sangre de Guatemala es mejor” [the blood of Guatemala is better] (Gibbons, Wilson, & Schnell, 2009). In that study, national pride, not shame, was evidenced; respondents claimed that Guatemalans are intelligent, hardworking, kind, and strong.

Although I found convincing Dubinsky’s conclusion that casting children as vulnerable led to difficult circumstances for many of the Peter Pan children, the arguments for the other three venues were less clear to me.

Nonetheless, it is evident that emphasis on children’s helplessness and vulnerability may not always serve their best interests. A number of ethnographers have pointed out the resilience and agency of street children in getting their needs met (sometimes more effectively than do humanitarian aid organizations; Aptekar, 1988; Malindi & Theron, 2010).

Research by Cheney (2011) has revealed some paradoxes of the portrayal of African children as orphaned or vulnerable as a result of the AIDS epidemic. Programs aimed at
supporting traditions of child care by kin or nonkin in the absence of parents have provided payments to adults for taking in orphans or vulnerable children. Such “benevolent humanitarianism” has led to exploitation when adult caretakers can realize financial gain by taking orphans into their homes.

In sum, Babies Without Borders is a probing analysis of the how the depiction of children as innocent and vulnerable can backfire in terms of children’s well-being. If the author has not answered all the questions she raised, it is because the answers are complex and highly context dependent.

References


