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“The Globalization of Love”

Transnational Adoption and Engagement with the Globalized World

I am walking and my two-year old daughter is toddling through a small “Third World” arts and crafts store located in a Western North Carolina community. The store is filled nearly to capacity with visitors from the local Christian retreat center and tourists who are passing through as they view the fall foliage. We are all searching for gifts to give for holidays, weddings, housewarmings, and birthdays. During our twenty minutes in the cramped shop, four women asked me about my child. This is not an uncommon experience. Though we have some common features—black hair, dark eyes—our skin tones do not match. I am a white woman born in Kentucky, and my daughter is a brown-skinned child born in Guatemala. “Is she adopted?” “Where is she from?” “Where did you get her?” “Was it hard to adopt?” “How long have you had her?” After their questions are answered, the conversation continues. Several women seem to want to connect with me; they tell me of their nieces, cousins, and friends who have adopted children born outside of the U.S. They fuss over my child, smiling, cooing, and speaking to her in Spanish.

Boston Globe columnist Ellen Goodman wrote of her newly adopted granddaughter for her July 4th column:

Together, we have all learned about the globalization of love. America is continually made and remade by newcomers. But this daughter from China has reminded us how small our world is and how vast: a village you can traverse in a day and a place of stunning disconnects and differences, have and have-nots. Ours was already a global family, brought together with luck of the draw and pluck of the ancestors who came from places as far away as Italy and England, Russia and Germany. On this Fourth of July, we add another continent to our

heritage and another child to our list of supreme good fortune.
Welcome, Cloe, to America. (2003: A13)

The above anecdotes reflect the attention and interest directed toward the practice of transnational adoption. In these stories (just a few of the many I could tell), shoppers, strangers, and journalists have tales to tell or comments to make about the role adoption has played in their own lives. And these stories tell us that transnational adoption, the families it creates, and the implications it holds for families in far-away countries are of concern and interest to the public. The above commentators are participating in discourse about transnational adoption that highlights anxieties about the formation of families, race, ethnicity, culture, distance and travel, as well as inequalities of wealth and power. Adoptive parents similarly negotiate these problems and questions through adoption-related media, community discussion, and their narratives of the adoption experience.

My own position in the so-called “adoption triad”—birth parent, adoptive parent, and child—is unusual, ill-defined, and reflective of changing configurations of family in contemporary America. I began dating my now-partner while she was in the process of adopting a baby girl from Guatemala. Seven months into our relationship, she traveled to Guatemala to take custody of a six-month-old baby, Maria. Both academics, my partner and I live in different cities about 200 miles apart. I commute weekly, spending four days with my family in small-town North Carolina and three days in my rented room in suburban Atlanta. My parental role defies simple definition. I’m partial to “long-distance co-parent,” while Maria (now a two-year-old) has inexplicably christened me “Giggy.” My relationship to the transnational adoption process is similarly unsettled, as I am not the legal adoptive parent and have not had some of the same experiences as most adoptive parents. Although I became a parent in a much different way than do most adoptive parents, my decision to be part of an adoptive family was just as deliberate, and I have been emotionally and physically invested in this family since before Maria’s arrival.

I must be clear that I am attempting to neither romanticize nor demonize transnational adoption. My partner and I struggle with the contradiction between the joy our daughter has brought us and the knowledge that the system through which she came to us has the capacity to exploit impoverished and oppressed people for the benefit of relatively wealthy ones. Writing about the adoption of Native American children by white families, Pauline Turner Strong states, “[a]doption across political and cultural borders may simultaneously be an act of violence and an act of love, an excruciating rupture and a generous incorporation, an appropriation of valued resources and a constitution of personal ties” (2001: 471). Like Strong, I hope that my work will highlight the complications and contradiction of transnational adoption. By illustrating the ways in which adoption-related discourse both reproduces and

challenges racist and neo-colonial relations, I hope to challenge such narratives and encourage adoptive parents to reconsider how they approach the process.

Transnational adoption began in the years following World War II and the Korean War. Since the early 1990s, however, the practice has become "unprecedented in magnitude and visibility" (Volkman, 2003: 1). Transnational adoption has become an increasingly common practice worldwide, with an estimated 30,000 children migrating between over one hundred countries a year (Selman, 2002: 206). The United States adopts more children from outside its borders than do citizens of all other countries combined (Scrivo, 2000), with the number of such adoptions increasing rapidly over the past few years, from 11,316 in 1996 (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1997) to 21,100 in fiscal year 2002 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2003). It is estimated that each day, twenty American couples adopt a child from a foreign country (Zeppa, 1998). The majority of transnationally adopted children come from four nations: China, with 6,062 adoptions in FY 2002; Russia with 4,904; Guatemala with 2,361; and South Korea with 1,713 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2003).

The overwhelming majority of children adopted by U.S. citizens come from non-Western and "Third World" countries of the global south. Not surprisingly, transnational adoption has frequently been criticized as a neo-colonial, imperialist practice (Altstein and Simon, 1991: 2; Hoelgaard, 1998: 203; Masson, 2001: 148; Pilotti, 1985: 32; Tizzard, 1991: 746) or described as a "manifestation of exploitation of poorer nations by more affluent ones" (Freundlich, 1999: 88). Or as Barbara Katz Rothman (1989) said of the class dynamics of adoption, both domestic and transnational: "Thirty-two-year-old attorneys living in wealthy suburbs do not give up their children to nineteen-year-old factory workers living in small towns" (130).

With an average cost of \$20,000 per adoption, U.S. citizens spend over \$300 million annually on transnational adoption (Varnis, 2001: 39). Thus it is frequently described and criticized as an industry (Graff, 2000), a system of trade (Triseliotis, 2000: 48), and as a market (D'Amato, 1999: 669; Triseliotis, 2000: 49) that can "fluctuate on demand" (Elton, 2000). The process of transnational adoption is also characterized as a system of "supply and demand" (Hoelgaard, 1998: 207; Jacot, 1999: 37), with "Third World" countries as "suppliers" with a "surplus of healthy children" (Altstein and Simon, 1991: 2). Transnational adoption of children born in Guatemala has been described critically as "one of the most successfully nontraditional exports...It brings in more money than snow peas and broccoli" (Riley, 2003).

In addition to issues of neo-colonial exploitation, it is also crucial to keep in mind the particular ways the process of international adoption is gendered. Most children adopted by U.S. citizens are girls. Girls account for sixty-five percent of internationally adopted children in FY 2002 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2003). This figure is largely attributed to adoptions of

Chinese children, nearly all of which are girls.

Given the acceleration in the number of transnational adoptions in the United States, as well as the paucity of research in disciplines other than social work and psychology (Volkman, 2003: 4), the practice of transnational adoption needs to be analyzed for the ways it is embedded in the globalization of capital, people, cultures, and ideologies. In their introduction to an edited volume on reproduction in a globalized world, Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (1995) argue, “[p]eople everywhere actively use their local cultural logics and social relations to incorporate, revise, or resist the influence of seemingly distant political and economic forces” (1). How do adoptive parents from the United States “incorporate, revise, or resist” discourses of globalization through the process of forming families through transnational adoption, and how do these discourses depend upon various narratives about race and gender?

Texts produced by American adoptive parents and international adoption agencies such as web pages, print publications, and adoption story testimonials reveal the ways international adoption can be examined as a practice that is embedded in global capitalist flows of capital, ideas, and cultures. Using Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) idea of ethnoscaples, I will analyze discourse about international adoption that negotiates differences in American, white, and First World cultures and ethnicities of the adoptive parents and the non-Western, non-white, and Third World cultures and ethnicities of the adopted children. These negotiations occur within a context of immense economic disparity between the First and Third Worlds, as well as a history of colonialism, racism, and exploitation. Adoption texts expose these negotiations of ethnicity and culture between the First and Third World actors involved in the international adoption process. Also, as the majority of adoptees are girls, this negotiation occurs using images (both print and visual) of female children. Discourses of cultural and ethnic difference and similarity in international adoption commonly occur with girl children as the object of negotiation.

Although actors in the process of international adoption can be birth parents, children, adoptive parents, social workers, lawyers, and adoption agency staff, only the adoptive parents and adoption agents have widespread access to media production equipment, especially the Internet. While future research plans include analyses of narratives produced by people of birth countries, in this paper, I will examine how adoptive parents and adoption agents negotiate differences among First and Third World cultures and ethnicities within the context of global capitalism. Adoptive parents and adoption agents negotiate anxieties about cultural and ethnic difference in a variety of ways. I will examine how textual discourse of international adoption uses images of romanticized globalization, minimize the cultural and ethnic difference of internationally adopted children, exaggerate the American-ness of the children, and fetishize stereotypical characteristics of adopted children

in order to make cultural and ethnic difference safe and uncomplicated for First World adoptive parents.

It's a small world after all: globalization, international adoption and invisible borders

As I am conceiving transnational adoption as a process tied to globalization, a brief review of globalization theory as it is related to transnational adoption is useful here. Globalization is commonly described as the exchange of labour, capital, and ideologies in the amplifying system of capitalism. However, the complexity of the process makes it difficult to develop theories or even definitions of globalization. According to Fredric Jameson, cited in John Beynon and David Dunkerly's *Globalization: A Reader* (2000), globalization is: "the intellectual property of no particular field, yet seems to concern politics and economics in immediate ways, but just as immediately culture and sociology, not to speak of information and the media, or ecology, or consumerism and daily life" (4). In other words, globalization is not merely a system of economic exchange, and an all-encompassing definition should attempt to take non-economic factors into account. Anthony Giddens's definition of globalization includes social as well as economic forces. He describes globalization as "the intensification of world-wide social relationships which link distant places in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice-versa" (qtd. in Beynon and Dunkerly, 2000: 4).

For the purposes of this project, I am concerned with a few key ideas related to globalization. The first concerns how people perceive global spatial relationships. In his definition of globalization, Roland Robertson emphasizes "the scope and depth of consciousness of the world as a single place (qtd. in Beynon and Dunkerly, 2000: 47). Mike Featherstone (1993) describes globalization as "the emergence of the sense that the world is a single place" (171). Due to changes in configurations of power and challenges to hegemonic world histories, globalization supports ideas that "the world is one place, that the globe has been compressed into a locality, that others are neighbours with which we must necessarily interact, relate and listen" (172). Similarly, transnational adoption can be seen as an interaction that renders distance and borders between nations, ethnicities, and cultures indistinguishable, or at least surmountable.

Texts produced by adoption agencies emphasize globalization. The names of agencies show that international adoption unites all cultures as one, minimizing differences in language, culture, and ethnicity. For example, the Small World Adoption Foundation of Missouri (2004) clearly describes itself in relation to international adoption, a practice that de-emphasizes borders and differences in culture. It operates in, and creates, a "Small World." Other agencies, such as Los Niños International Adoption Center (2004), minimize national borders and cultural difference through their logos. The Los Niños logo is made up of a blue globe covered by fluffy white clouds and a bright

yellow sun. This circular arrangement is foregrounded by the agency's title and an airplane filled with small children of different colors, with one child sitting on the plane's nose. The tail of the plane shows a barely visible U.S. flag. The slogan for Los Niños is "We're Wrapping the World in Family Ties™." Also significant is the use of the Spanish language by adoption agencies. Los Niños International Adoption Center takes its name for the Spanish phrase for "children." Their logo goes so far as to translate the phrase. "Los Niños (Children's) International Adoption Center," it says. Despite differences in culture, languages, and ethnicity between adoptive parents and adopted children, international adoption (as facilitated by Los Niños) can be a unifying, conflict-free process. The Los Niños logo situates international adoption as a multiculturalist, humanitarian, and harmonious enterprise. In other words, the use of romanticized images of international travel and exchange that occurs in international adoption renders cross-cultural difference and questions of neo-colonialism unproblematic for American adoptive parents. In other words, images associated with the process of international adoption add to and appeal to Featherstone's idea that "the world is becoming one place."

The ethnoscaapes of international adoption

The second theory I am concerned with has to do with the movement of people from one area of the globe to another, resulting in negotiation of cultural meanings by those confronted with traveling people. Arjun Appadurai (1996) uses the term "ethnoscape" to describe the "landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live" (33). He uses examples of "tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers" (33) to describe transnational movements of people from various nations, regions, and of different ethnicities. Those participating in transnational adoption can be seen as prime examples of players in the global movement of persons that comprise Appadurai's ethnoscaapes.

Appadurai (1996) also highlights the instability apparent in ethnoscaapes, arguing that they are "deeply disjunctive and profoundly unpredictable because each of these landscapes is subject to its own constraints and incentives...at the same time as each acts as a constraint and a parameter for movements in others" (35). The ethnoscaapes of traveling and migrating people are inherently unstable, as they occur within the context of post-colonialism and racism. Westerners involved with transnational adoption must negotiate the meanings of cultures and ethnicities of the children adopted from non-Western countries and attempt to make sense of the political and social implications inherent in such global interactions. Adoptive parents and adoption agents must also define their own identities in relation to the asymmetrical power relations that exist in transnational adoption process. These negotiations occur in a variety of ways. Parents and agents often minimize the cultural and ethnic differences between themselves and the children involved in the interaction in order to

make international adoption. This minimization can be done by emphasizing the American-ness of the children, by minimizing the degree of difference, by describing their own familiarity (or lack thereof) with the child's birth culture, and through imagery reflecting the multicultural location of the child, rendering cultural difference unimportant. Parents and agents also attempt to deal with cultural difference by marking and fetishizing adoptee children as representations of an entire culture or heritage. This type of discourse is most likely to draw on the child's gender, as well as race and ethnicity, in the negotiation of cultural difference between adopter and adoptee.

Minimizing difference

The most common type of international adoption narrative involves the de-emphasis of the child's birth culture and an emphasis on the adoptive culture, usually through verbal and visual invocations of American nationalism. Adoption agency websites frequently feature pictures of adopted children situated with an image of the American flag. Several pictures depicted the U.S. flag draped behind the child (1st Steps Adoption International, 2004) or the child wearing flag-patterned clothing (Great Wall China Adoption, 2004). Linda Donovan, a director of an adoption agency, says of internationally adopted children: "The bottom line is they are American" (qtd. in Deam, 2002). This variety of discourse prioritizes American citizenship above all else.

Other adoption texts make use of nationalist symbols, but do not explicitly privilege American-ness. Though they have since changed their website design, a previous version of the Great Wall China Adoption website played on the notion of dual nationalities or heritages in the artwork and designs within the site. The link buttons leading site visitors to other pages were comprised of the Chinese and U.S. flags. Another site, AdoptShopee (2004), sells clothing, books, jewelry, and other items to adoptive families. One popular item is the "Crossed Flags Tees and Sweatshirts." These pieces of clothing are "Personally designed for your family and children with their heritage in mind" and are embroidered with the American flag crossed with the flag of the child's birth country. Through these images, the differences between American-ness and foreign-ness are erased and are assimilated into American-ness. Of course, as in the images of adopted children with a U.S. flag, American-ness is implicitly privileged, as the United States is the country of citizenship and residency for both the adoptive parents and their newly adopted Chinese children. By locating American-ness as central to the international adoption process, these texts contribute to discourse that de-emphasizes the cultural difference of internationally adopted children.

Another common way of minimizing cultural differences between the children and Western adults involved in international adoption is accomplished when adoptive parents use their knowledge of the child's birth culture in explaining their adoption of a foreign-born child. Several adoptive mothers cited language preparation and their engagement with Spanish culture as

reasons they chose to adopt from Guatemala. Adoptive mother Tina Davis (2004): “Given my fluency in Spanish and my interest in the Latin American culture, Guatemala seemed like the perfect choice for us.” In a similar vein, Karen Scott states, “Even the interest I had in high school many years ago for the Spanish language was even then preparing me for this future.” In these cases, cultural difference is bridged through high school Spanish classes and an “interest” in Guatemalan culture. Other parents declare their lack of familiarity with a given country, but dismiss the importance of such knowledge. Sue Mertens (2004), who adopted a baby boy from Guatemala begins the telling of her adoption story: “Guatemala ... I knew it was a Spanish-speaking country, located somewhere south of Mexico, and vaguely recalled that there had been a civil war there years ago, but I have to admit that I knew very little else about the country.”

Cultural difference is minimized in other ways as well. In an essay for *American Demographics*, New York City resident Tama Janowitz (1999) dismisses concerns that her adopted China-born daughter will attract attention and questions from strangers by describing other examples of difference in her life. Her husband, an Englishman, orders ham sandwiches with butter. Their dogs are hairless Chinese Cresteds (48). She claims she is used to comments and questions from strangers. Janowitz goes on to describe her multicultural neighborhood, made up of “an amazing mix of people.” “Is there anyone left who does fit in?” Janowitz asks (49). Using the image of a metropolitan family, Janowitz dismisses the ethnic difference of her child.

These examples show some of the ways in which adoptive parents and adoption agencies attempt to minimize the differences between the child’s birth and adoptive cultures. Each of these textual examples contributes to discourse attempting to make international adoption unproblematic, and to erase vestiges of colonialism and racism in the international adoption process.

The emphasis and fetishization of difference

Adoptive parents and agencies also negotiate the ethnoscape of international adoption through the fetishization of adopted children. Adopted children can be marked, or fetishized in several ways. The status of the child as adopted, or foreign, can be emphasized. For example, one publication in a popular finance magazine said “The Americans like their little Chinese acquisitions” (“Give me your squalling masses,” 1996). This statement fetishizes adopted children as cultural commodities. Though it is not explicit, this statement commodifies girl children as a cultural import from China, as nearly all of the children adopted from China are female. An article in *The Advocate* on the adoption of Chinese girls by lesbians blithely stated, “By now lesbians may have more Chinese daughters than Mazda Miatas” (Rich, 2000). This statement not only equates children with a consumer purchase such as a car, but also equates an ethnicity or nationality (Chinese) with consumerism. The ethnic difference of “Chinese daughters” is highlighted in order to describe the

location of American lesbians in international adoption.

Alternately, texts emphasize and fetishize the ethnicity or cultural difference of an adopted child. In these cases, adopted children are seen as representations of whole cultures, their bodies embodying stereotypical characteristics of the non-Western culture. This sort of fetishizing often occurs in relation to girl children. An adoptive parent described his newly adopted Russian daughter: "she has the coordination of a Russian gymnast or ice skater." The use of fetishizing language, whether about children as commodities or as embodiments of stereotypical characteristics again renders ethnic differences harmless. If a child is comparable to car, or the characteristics of an ethnically different child can be distilled down to stereotypes, then issues related to race and ethnicity can be rendered unimportant.

Conclusion

The exchange of capital, as well as the language of economics marks the practice of international adoption as a process intricately tied to global capitalism. The process is also part of changing public ideologies that reinforce the feeling that the globe is shrinking and people from different nations are more tightly connected. International adoption can also be seen as contributing to and creating ethnoscares, whereby the individuals involved with adoption attempt to ascribe and negotiate meanings of differences in culture and ethnicity that appear to exist between parents and their adoptive children. The disparate ways in which parents and adoption agents negotiate cultural differences using both the ethnicity and gender of their children reveals how international adoption discourse can be seen in relation to established narratives of capitalism, postcolonialism, and multiculturalism. The overarching discourse of international adoption, as created by American parents and adoption agents renders cultural and ethnic difference unimportant, invisible, and non-threatening.

Analyzing the changes in global circulations of people, goods, capital, and ideas is central to understanding how individuals and groups related to one another. Transnational adoption provides a framework through which we can see some of the ways globalized capitalism operates. Practices of globalization and related processes have a profound effect on how individuals think about and interact with peoples, places, and cultures. These interactions and ideologies make real differences in the lives of others—particularly when they reproduce racist, sexist, and neo-colonial systems. My hope is that analyzing the texts of potentially racist and sexist systems can ultimately help alter these systems in ways that truly benefit impoverished children and families.

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