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Karen Balcom

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Constructing Families, Creating Mothers: Gender, Family, State and Nation in the History of Child Adoption

Julie Berebitsky. *Like Our Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood, 1851–1950*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000. viii + 248 pp.; ill. ISBN 0-7006-1051-0 (cl).

E. Wayne Carp. *Adoption Politics: Bastard Nation and Ballot Initiative 58*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. xiii + 238 pp.; ill. ISBN 0-7006-1305-6 (cl).

Barbara Melosh. *Strangers and Kin: The American Way of Adoption*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002. x + 326 pp.; ISBN 0-674-00912-6 (cl).

Rickie Solinger. *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2001. xi + 290 pp.; ISBN 0-8090-9702-8 (cl).

Karen Balcom

In the introduction to *Strangers and Kin: The American Way of Adoption*, historian and literary scholar Barbara Melosh describes her new book as “a cultural history of the family as it is refracted through the kinship of strangers.” “The law and practice of adoption,” she argues, “reveal the larger historical changes that shape all families; the intersecting histories of child welfare, sexuality, upward mobility and assimilation” (11).¹ Melosh not only follows this ambitious agenda but also presents the history of adoption as a cultural narrative of borders crossed and boundaries reaffirmed in the formation of adoptive families. All families are, of course, social institutions shaped by culture and public policy but in the intentionality and public surveillance of adoption there is an opportunity for scholars to see the possibilities and the limits in our ideas about family, motherhood, identity, and belonging. All four books in this review explore these large themes through the history of child adoption in the United States. Neither that history nor the questions it raises, however, can be contained within the borders of the United States, not least because the United States remains the greatest receiving country in international adoption.

The practice of turning “strangers” into “kin,” of raising the child born into another family “as one’s own,” can be traced to the colonial period

of Euro-American history and much further back in the history of Native America. However, the legal practice of adoption as it exists today was not a part of the colonies' English common law inheritance. The first "modern" law of adoption in the United States (severing previous family ties, incorporating the child legally into the adopting family, and including a provision that the courts must adjudge the adoption to be "in the best interest of the child") was passed in Massachusetts in 1851. In *Like Our Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood, 1851–1950*, historian Julie Berebitsky picks up the history of adoption in the late nineteenth century when, she argues, adoptive parents, child welfare workers, and legal experts were still working out the precise meaning and status of adoption in American law and society. Berebitsky reads the history of adoption in the first half of the twentieth century from the perspective of adopting parents, emphasizing the often fraught relationship between adopting parents looking for children and social workers seeking to extend their professional and legal authority over the adoption transaction.

Berebitsky argues that "adoption . . . has served as a public site on which the culture at large has thrashed out meanings of *family* and *parenthood*," but the part of parenthood she is most interested in is motherhood. Her chapters read as a series of vignettes in the intellectual history of motherhood in the twentieth century. (Indeed, this book is best seen as a series of stand-alone essays, rather than a single narrative.) Both Berebitsky and Melosh cite the work of anthropologist Judith Modell, who argues that the dominant cultural model for the adoptive family in the (contemporary) United States has been the "as-if-begotten" family, that is, the adoptive family which mirrors the "blood" family as closely as possible in its social composition and even in its biological characteristics.² But, in this model, the adoptive family will always be "as-if" and never fully "begotten." Thus, the adoptive family will always be marked as different, as approaching but never reaching the cultural ideal; the claims of adoptive mothers, then, become a way of reading the society's core beliefs about motherhood. In the case of adoptive mothers, Berebitsky argues, "because they had never given birth, adoptive mothers found themselves on the edges of the culture's ideal . . . adoptive mothers (and their advocates) argued for a definition of motherhood that would legitimate their identity as 'real' mothers" (76). Berebitsky's adoptive mothers (and their supporters) appropriate and adapt available cultural scripts of motherhood to support a motherhood marked as difference. In an essay on self-representations of adoptive mothers in the period 1900–1950, for example, Berebitsky argues that the rise of scientific motherhood shaped by experts allowed adoptive mothers to make a stronger claim to a status as "real" mothers. Their chosen and "conscious" motherhood could be represented as a positive difference from "natural"

motherhood. Nonetheless, Berebitsky makes clear that adoptive mothers are always in the position of needing to prove their worthiness to strangers, most notably to those strangers who control access to the children they wish to adopt. This was the case as early as the 1910s when, Berebitsky argues, there was already a “shortage” of the kind of children families most wanted to adopt: specifically, young white children who could be fully and finally separated from the family of origin.

A second strand of Berebitsky’s argument traces the growing (and in her estimation often baneful) influence of social workers in the adoption transaction. Early in the twentieth century, social workers and child welfare reformers—influenced by eugenic concerns and committed to keeping children born out of wedlock with their birth mothers—were cool toward child adoption as a wide-spread option for the care of dependent children. In the 1930s and 1940s, however, social workers became more positively inclined toward adoption as social theories stressing the impact of “environment” over “heredity” in child development became more influential and as potential adoptive families pushed for help locating children. But help from social workers came at a high cost for these families and, Berebitsky argues, for society at large. As they embraced adoption, social workers called for increasingly elaborate evaluations of birth parents, children, and adoptive parents designed to “match” specific children to individual families according to a range of criteria including race, religion, physical appearance, and the more vaguely defined “developmental potential” of the child. Across the United States, social workers invoked a language of “risk”; an adoption contracted without the guidance of adoption professionals was portrayed as “risky” for parents and children. Their claim to act in the best interests of children thus worked to expand their professional and, in some jurisdictions, legal authority. Social workers scrutinized the motivations and psychological health of adoptive parents and assessed how well parents performed expected gender roles. Potential adoptive families were subject to the kind of intense surveillance of their private lives that poor families in crisis had long been forced to endure, but that was a new and significant expansion of professional authority in the lives of the middle class. As a result, through the middle decades of the twentieth century, the history of adoption is also the history of social work and a history of the expanding authority of the welfare state to oversee and intervene in the lives of citizens.

Berebitsky argues that as social workers exerted more control over adoption, they enacted an increasingly narrow definition of the approved or acceptable family. As a result, “adoption came to mirror the nuclear biological family, a process that served to uphold that particular family as the ideal” (3). Thus, a social transaction which had the radical potential to remake family—to recast a dominant social institution—became instead a

conservative force. This argument is most clearly laid out in an essay on single women as adoptive parents, perhaps the most important chapter in this book. Single female adopters were never common, Berebitsky argues, but before 1920 their qualifications for adoptive motherhood were not challenged. The ranks of single female adopters included some of the most prominent women in the early-twentieth-century reform community, who raised children on their own or in partnership with other women. After 1920, however, single adoptive mothers were regarded with suspicion, in large part because the wider culture came to view motherhood as part and parcel of "the experience of the sexually satisfied emotionally fulfilled wife" (103). Single adoptive mothers did not follow this script and both their mothering and their sexuality came to be regarded with suspicion. "Critiques of single adoptive mothers," Berebitsky argues, "are as much about cultural fears surrounding lesbianism, the maintenance of distinct male-female gender roles, and the stability of the traditional family as they are about the best interests of children" (116). Ironically, female child welfare professionals—who had much in common with the single professional women who adopted—were amongst the most vocal critics of single women as adopters; "The growing authority of social workers in adoption, whose primary professional interest was to maintain the stability of the traditional family, effectively closed off their [single women's] access to children" (121).

This is an important book which uses the history of adoption to trace complicated changes in the history of the family. Yet, there are places where the argument could be more nuanced and the larger claims of the book clarified. The "social workers" in this book appear too singular, too unified in their goal of reinforcing an idealized vision of the nuclear family. And while Berebitsky's critique of social welfare professionals is clear, it is less clear whether she sees them as a leading cultural force remaking—narrowing—definitions of family, or whether she sees the social workers and adoptive parents as largely reacting to broader cultural trends. Do the social workers remake the family through adoption or is the way they approach adoption reflective of change occurring on a much wider scale? Similarly, is adoption (shaped by the professionals) a place where cultural meaning is created, or where meaning created elsewhere is reflected? Both claims are important, and in all likelihood adoption as a cultural site both leads and reflects, but Berebitsky could be more precise about her stance across the book and in the specific essays. One wishes, as well, for more connections between the separate essays in this book. Berebitsky refers to single adopters in her chapter on representations of adoptive motherhood, but the evidence in the representations chapter and the single adopters chapter (particularly as it pertains to sexuality and lesbianism) could be more tightly interwoven.

The pessimism in Berebitsky's interpretation of the history of adoption before 1950—adoption as the lost or sabotaged chance to remake family—becomes the more evident when her book is read beside Melosh's *Strangers and Kin*. Melosh argues that "adoption has been accepted more readily and practiced more widely in the United States than in any other comparable industrialized nation" and she reads this embrace of adoption as evidence of the peculiarly American commitment to optimism, self-invention, malleability, and faith in social engineering (2). The history of adoption, for Melosh, is a "case study in the shifting boundaries of American pluralism." She sees adoptive families and social workers (often pushed by adoptive families) as testing the borders and boundaries of family, as trying out new answers to the questions "What makes a family? Who belongs together? How wide is the circle of the we?" (5) The answers to these questions could and sometimes did reaffirm existing hierarchies of race and class, but at other junctures the formation of adoptive families was, for Melosh, a place where new meanings and new possibilities for family were created.

In part, the contrast between Berebitsky and Melosh is linked to the different timelines of the two studies. Melosh traces the history of adoption across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Berebitsky's study ends in 1950, just as rates of adoption in the United States were surging upward. In 1937, the United States Children's Bureau estimated that there were 17,000 adoptions contracted in the United States. In 1945, the number was 50,000, in 1955 it was 91,000, and by 1970, 195,000 (Melosh, 105). The post-World War II upsurge was related to increasing rates of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and to broad public and professional support for separating white children born out of wedlock from their mothers and placing them for adoption. As historians Regina Kunzel and Rickie Solinger have previously argued, by the late 1940s increasing numbers of social welfare professionals understood white unwed pregnancy (as distinct from unwed pregnancy in a woman of color) to be the result of a deep-seated neurosis in the pregnant woman, a psychological state which, by definition, made her an unfit mother.³ The neurotic unwed pregnant woman could, however, be cured of her neurosis (and her transgression against conventional morality) by relinquishing her child for adoption. White unwed mothers who turned to social agencies for help were under often intense pressure to relinquish their children and thereby give themselves a chance to reenter the standard narrative of postwar (married, heterosexual) domesticity. "The 'second chance' of adoption," Melosh argues, "allowed [white] unwed mothers and their children a new opportunity to participate in the social mobility of the booming postwar economy and gave infertile people a way to enter into its celebration of domesticity and family" (106).

The postwar period was also matched by an increasing faith, Melosh

argues, in the power of "nurture" over "nature." Armed with a new faith in environmentalism, and under pressure from potential adoptive families who greatly outnumbered children available for adoption, social workers gradually expanded the definition of the "adoptable" child. Earlier in the century, children who were in any way disabled or whose biological heritage was unknown or contained some pathology were considered a poor risk for adoption, and most placements were delayed until extensive testing of the child's physical and intellectual development could be undertaken. By the 1950s, much of this testing was abandoned, children were placed much earlier, and there were increasing numbers of trans-racial placements. The postwar period also saw the rise of international adoptions by U.S. citizens, adoptions which were also often trans-racial. After the Second World War, Melosh argues, there was a widespread cultural acceptance of the family forged in adoption, and adoption led to expanded definitions of family, mirroring the optimism, pluralism, and "expansionist character of contemporary political cultural and social life" (106). But, Melosh argues, the postwar "adoption consensus" had a limited life. She views the period since 1970 as one where adoption as a social institution and adoptive families have been challenged by nationalist critiques of trans-racial adoption, anti-imperialist critiques of international adoption, and by the adoption rights movement. Each of these forces, in different ways, has reasserted the enduring significance of biology in the construction of family and personal identity. "In both popular and scientific discourse," she argues, "environmentalism gradually yielded to a pervasive biological determinism that renewed old fears of the risks of adoption" (239).

Methodologically, this is a very interesting book, or, in some ways, two books. Melosh worked from the adoption policy records of the United States Children's Bureau and from the professional and popular literature on adoption, all sources she shares with Berebitsky. But Melosh also mined the rich case records of the Children's Bureau of Delaware, a non-sectarian child-placing agency founded in 1918. She had full access to the detailed records that social workers prepared as they assessed children, adoptive parents, and birth families. She reads these records with great sensitivity, looking for the voices of prospective adopters and birth parents but recognizing that these voices in the records are always mediated (in self-interested ways) by the CBD social workers. What emerges most clearly from Melosh's reading of the CBD records is a careful and nuanced portrait of the changing professional practice and difficult choices facing the social workers. In Melosh's hands, the CBD social workers engage with their professional training, their clients, and the social and political climate of their times. She catches them in moments of remarkable self-reflection and flexibility, and shines light on places where their actions betray the racist, classist, and

sexist assumptions of their profession and society. The CBD workers, she argues, had no "critical perspective" on the "middle class code of sexual containment" pressing down on unwed mothers in the postwar period. "Indeed," she continues, "they were active agents of shame, relentlessly inculcating the harsh lessons of the cost of sexual transgression" (130). But Melosh's social workers also "recognized the acute inequalities that bore down upon women." As they ushered women through the rituals of relinquishing children and reentering an authorized script of domesticity, the social workers were effectively resisting "the most punitive policing of gender boundaries by refusing to consign gender transgressors to the margins of postwar society" (157).

This much is well executed but traditional social history. Melosh's work is also shaped, however, by her experience as a literary scholar as well as an historian and her work is also part of the emerging field of adoption studies in literature.⁴ In later chapters, notably those on trans-racial and international adoption, and on challenges to adoption in the post-1970 period, Melosh tells the story of adoption through analyses of film, fiction, media coverage, and memoir. It is not unusual for historians to use these sources, but most commonly we use them as sources of historical evidence; Melosh reads them as a literary scholar moving (for the most part seamlessly) into a new mode of argument. For example, she reads Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* (a novel in which the central character is an Indian man raised in a white adoptive family) as a text where trans-racial adoption is "both instance and metaphor of white violation and Indian deracination" (188). She argues that fictional treatments of contested trans-racial adoption present models of "creative compromise" which move beyond the sensationalism of the media and the indecision of public policy in this sensitive area.

One of the strengths of Melosh's book is her consistent attention to the racialized history of adoption. As both Melosh and Berebitsky note, throughout the twentieth century most prospective adoptive parents were white and were looking specifically for white children. Recurrent complaints about the "shortage" of children to adopt were almost always complaints about the shortage of healthy white infants. "Racial matching," Melosh notes, "was and is the most pervasive form of matching" children to parents in adoption practice. Well after other forms of "matching" were loosened or abandoned, "adopters, social workers, and others remained deeply invested in maintaining the racial boundaries between black and white" (93). Matching in general, and racial matching in particular, was a form of "boundary maintenance, and a stay against fears of transgression associated with adoption" (102). Social workers were painstaking in their efforts to "classify" children who did not fit neatly into the dominant cultural categories; in the first half of the twentieth century, visibly biracial

children were almost always placed with African American families, if they found families at all.

Large numbers of African American and other non-white children never found adoptive families. African American communities were often characterized as uninterested in adoption, but in truth African American families were poorly served by social agencies staffed (for the most part) by white social workers judging prospective adoptive families against a white middle-class vision of the appropriate adoptive home. Even in the era of the "best solution," African American women pregnant out of wedlock were actively discouraged from relinquishing their children for adoption. The 1950s and 1960s saw deliberate efforts to recruit minority homes for minority children, but also the rise of adoptions where non-white and mixed race children were placed in the homes of white adopters. These adoptions, Melosh argues, were never common, but culturally they were highly visible. When white families adopted African American children, they were "crossing the most enduring and significant racial boundary in American history" (159). The trans-racial family "pressed the limits of the postwar conception of adoption as 'substitute family' modeled on blood kinship." Melosh reads these families as evidence of the far-reaching possibilities of American tolerance and pluralism, and also as evidence of a deep faith in individualism, self-construction, and "colorblind universalism." But for members of embattled minority communities, trans-racial adoption took on the tenor of assimilation and cultural theft. There was a nationalist backlash to these adoptions, best expressed in a 1972 statement by the National Association of Black Social Workers condemning the placement of African American children in white homes and in the provisions of the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act establishing tribal sovereignty over children living on reservations and actively discouraging the adoption of Indian children by non-Indians. Melosh reads the subsequent legal and cultural battles over trans-racial placement with sensitivity, exploring but ultimately seeming to embrace the trans-racial family created by trans-racial and international adoption as a marker of "quintessentially American" diversity and multiculturalism (200).

Another consistent theme in the history of adoption is what Melosh calls the "dance of secrecy and disclosure" in adoption policy and practice (201). Adoptive parents, birth parents, adoptees, and social workers all have a part, making decisions about what information to reveal, what to ask for and what to withhold. Until the 1950s, most adoption records were open to parties of the adoption and adult adoptees could often access information about their birth families from social agencies or court records. From mid-century, the legal and social norm became the "confidential" adoption supported by the sealed adoption record opened only at the discretion

(rarely granted) of a judge; adoptees had an amended birth certificate which listed their adoptive parents as birth parents and provided no identifying information on the family of origin. Melosh argues that the secrecy of the closed records was part and parcel of the post-war "adoption consensus." If adoption was truly the "best solution," then the (new) adoptive family was the only family that mattered and "there was no adoption story once the adoptive family had formed" (239). Since 1970, however, some adult adoptees and birth mothers have insisted that there is a history in the blood and the body that cannot be denied. Leaders in the adoption rights and adoption search movement argue that adult adoptees have a citizen's right to their birth information and, in many cases, a human need to connect with their birth families.

E. Wayne Carp is the leading scholar of the history of openness and secrecy in adoption and of the adoption rights movement dedicated to opening adoption records. *Adoption Politics: Bastard Nation and Ballot Initiative 58* is Carp's third book in adoption history and his second on the "sealed records controversy."⁵ In *Adoption Politics*, Carp explores the successful effort of a very small but well-organized group of adoption activists who used the political initiative process to change state law in Oregon and secure for adult adoptees access to the identifying information in their original, unamended birth certificates. (In Oregon, and many other U.S. states, citizens can petition to place a binding direction to lawmakers on the electoral ballot.) In 1998, voters in Oregon approved an initiative instructing law makers to change the state adoption law. After the election, the state legislature drafted legislation effectively opening the adoption records, but allowing birth parents to register whether or not they wished to be contacted by their children. The new legislation was challenged in a series of court cases which turned on whether or not birth mothers (who surrendered children during the period of the "best solution") had a legally enforceable "right" to privacy which the state was bound to uphold. The legal answer to this question was no, and as of 1 June 2000, adult adoptees in Oregon had access to their birth certificates.

Carp deliberately frames this book as a study of political procedure and legal argument; his stated intention is to intervene in public policy debates and suggest a way out of protracted battles between adoption activists, birth mothers, social workers, and legislators over access to birth records. He stays close, perhaps too close, to adoption activists Helen Hill and Shea Grimm and their supporters in the internet-based adoption rights group Bastard Nation. In so doing, he may undersell the significance of this book. Carp presents a fascinating analysis of successful grass-roots political agitation. He suggests, for example, that the key victories for the adoption rights group came in the very early days of the process in pro-

cedural wrangling over the wording of the initiative and the content of a voter rights guide issued by the state. In many ways, this book is a primer for democratic political action in the internet age with a significance far beyond the issue of adoption rights. One wishes that Carp had framed the book more consistently against the larger scholarly literature on women and grass-roots social movements; there is a bigger message here. Carp may also underplay the significance of this story in the narrative of adoption in the twentieth century. As Melosh notes, the rise of the adoption rights movement represents a profound challenge to postwar adoption consensus insofar as the movement challenges the social and legal practice of confidential adoption and insists on the enduring significance of the blood tie. One consequence of this challenge is the increasing popularity of various forms of "open adoption" which sidestep the question of closed records by establishing contact between birth and adoptive families from the beginning. Carp traces these connections in his earlier book, *Family Matters: Secrecy and Disclosure in the History of Adoption*, but the reader could be reminded of this larger trajectory in *Adoption Politics*.

In his introduction, Carp notes that "the adoptee search movement has been predominantly female, as well as the leadership of Bastard Nation and Measure 58" (3). But Carp's only reason for making this distinction is to set himself apart as a male scholar studying a movement dominated by women; there is no analysis of why the movement is dominated by women or what difference this might have made (or not) in the initiative campaign. Similarly, Carp goes out of his way to identify activist Shea Grimm as a feminist, but then attaches no significance to this categorization. Surely this is important, if only because some strands of feminism have deliberately underplayed the significance of mothering as biology. And the dominance of women in the adoption search movement is both striking and frequently noted; more women than men look for birth families, and those searching are most frequently looking for birth mothers, not birth fathers. Melosh, who traces the adoption rights and birth mother movements largely through search narratives and adoption memoirs, argues that "adoption stories are almost always stories about motherhood, not about heredity; and conflicts over adoption are struggles over who can claim the name of motherhood" (245). Berebitsky insists that "a history of adoption is necessarily a history of women" (9).

In *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States*, Rickie Solinger uses examples from the history of adoption to support an impassioned argument that motherhood is becoming a "class or status privilege" in the United States (124). Solinger is very wary of the way "choice," instead of "rights," has become the concept through which we understand women's reproductive

freedom (their freedom to have or not to have children and to mother the children born to them) in the aftermath of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion in the United States. A "choice," Solinger argues, is much weaker than a "human right," and is open to challenge on several fronts. Choices can be good or bad (who decides?), and individuals or groups of women can be judged as either capable or incapable of making valid choices. Ultimately, Solinger argues, choice is a consumer privilege "to exercise discrimination in the market place among several options if one has the wherewithal to enter the marketplace to begin with." Choices might (weakly) protect women on the right side of historic divisions of race, class, and sexuality, but often at the expense of other women. "I believe it is crucial," Solinger asserts, "to consider the degree to which one woman's possession of reproductive choice may actually depend on or deepen another woman's reproductive vulnerability" (7).

This book is both controversial and provocative, perhaps no more so than when Solinger insists on looking at adoption as "the transfer of babies from women of one social classification to women of a higher social classification or group within the same country or transnationally. . . . Almost everybody believes that on some level, birthmothers *make a choice to give their babies away*. Here I argue that adoption is rarely about mothers' choices: it is, instead, about the abject choicelessness of some resourceless women" (67). In other words, privileged women are able to become adoptive mothers because other women are denied "their *biologically grounded right* to mother the children they bore" (74). In order for this system to work (for the benefit of privileged women) the mothering of the birth mother must be denied, and the child reconceptualized as a "product entirely separate from a mother" (26). The lesson Solinger reads in the past and present of domestic and international adoption in the United States is that "economic and cultural degradation can cancel a woman's ability to assert the biological claim to motherhood" (75).

Solinger uses historical evidence to support her argument, but this book is best considered as political commentary and policy intervention. Solinger is not trying to write a history of adoption in the same vein as Berebitsky, Melosh, and Carp, and she makes no claim to scholarly objectivity. Indeed, this is a deliberately subjective look at adoption (and abortion and welfare) from the perspective of choiceless women, though Solinger insists that what happens to these women is a signal warning of the reproductive vulnerability of all women. The book has problems: it is repetitive in places and can be accusatory in tone. Some readers will be uncomfortable with Solinger's characterization of adoption as resource transfer and relinquishment as coercion; this book makes it difficult to feel good about the practice of adoption in the United States. But there is a way in which these flaws

are a source of strength. This book is important because Solinger insists that we gaze at difficult and painful aspects of adoption, "focus tightly" on the perspective of birth mothers, and consider the role adoption plays in a national and international narrative of motherhood authorized and motherhood denied (22). This is not to argue that the other books in this review ignore birth mothers. Berebitsky defines her project as a history of adoption through the perspective of adoptive parents, but Carp and Melosh both listen to the voices of birth mothers as part of a larger conversation. But the singular focus of Solinger forces one to reconsider the larger body of literature and to realize that we are making important and consequential decisions when we approach adoption, first, as the creation of a new family rather than as the deconstruction (or at least attenuation) of a family that might have been.

The strongest historical work in Solinger's book comes in two chapters that explore the painful experiences of white unwed mothers who relinquished their children in the postwar period and then organized themselves as Concerned United Birthparents (CUB). These chapters are a follow-up to Solinger's earlier work on single pregnancy in the postwar, pre-*Roe v. Wade* period.⁶ In *Beggars and Choosers*, the women—many of whom sought out Solinger after reading her earlier book—speak about the anguish they felt and continue to feel at being forced to relinquish their children. Their pain and anger is palpable as is their sense that they were coerced by parents and social workers into surrendering their children. "The language these women used," Solinger argues, "seems to suggest that what surrenders suffered was a near-fatal blow" (74). When Melosh looks at a similar group of women, she also sees their pain and points out that the options facing these women were severely constrained. And yet, she refuses to go as far as Solinger and her informants and portray all relinquishment as coercive. For Melosh, "postwar adoption offers an excruciating demonstration of the costs and limits of women's choices; at the same time," she insists, "it also reveals women's agencies within those constraints." How can we account for these differing interpretations? One explanation is that Solinger's informants were a self-selected group who reached out to her and/or became involved in an organization, CUB, that collected self-identified critics of the "best solution." But at a more conceptual level, the difference between Melosh and Solinger is the difference between a scholar trying to read the history of adoption from a generally supportive and positive perspective, and one whose investment is, rather, in a thorough-going critique of adoption.

The same basic contrast can be seen in the way Solinger and Melosh address the complex history and present reality of the United States as the world's greatest receiving nation in international adoption. There is long history of cross-border adoptions between Canada, Mexico, and the United

States and a still longer history of adoptions crossing national borders between Euro-American and Native American nations, but the practice of international adoption as widely understood in the United States is a product of the postwar period when Americans looked for children to adopt in Europe (they found few) and in war-ravaged Korea (where they found and adopted far more). The history of intercountry adoption since this date follows the history of war and economic devastation from Korea to Vietnam to China to Central and South America and most recently to eastern Europe. Melosh notes that U.S. parents sought children outside of the United States in response to the shortage of (which kind of?) children available for adoption in the United States and out of "altruistic or political motives—the desire to help needy children; a commitment to limiting population growth; an affirmation of human solidarity across racial and national lines." She notes that transnational and (domestic) trans-racial adoption can be seen as both "utopian possibility" and a "galling instance of white privilege at home and abroad" (162). Parents who seek children abroad can be guilty of the worst kind of "American arrogance and cultural supremacy," and they can be genuine in their efforts to create a (culturally complex and difficult to negotiate) better life for the children they bring to the United States and bring into their loving homes. Melosh resists any overall judgement of intercountry adoption, although the tone of her book and of the chapter in which she discusses intercountry adoption suggests that in the pluralist and increasingly multicultural United States the complex trans-racial and transnational family can work and work well. Not surprisingly, Solinger's take on intercountry adoption is much harsher. Although she says that she does "not mean to suggest that ICA [intercountry adoption] is simply evil and the 'child rescue' should never be undertaken," her text presents nothing positive to support international adoption. Instead, Solinger minces no words connecting ICA with the history of American imperialism and colonialism, and argues that the birth mother is and must be effaced in international adoption and that "Americans' choice to celebrate cultural diversity and difference through [international] adoption depends on the immiseration of a woman from a 'different' culture and on her presumably profound loss of a child: on her choicelessness" (31).

Unfortunately, neither Solinger nor Melosh spends a great deal of time on the analysis of international adoption. This is a weakness in these books, and in larger field of the history of adoption. The history of adoption is emerging as a growing field of study in the United States, and the next step for this history is clearly a greater engagement with international adoption as it appears in the United States and as it connects with the work of historians of child welfare and adoption in other sending and receiving countries and on the complex history of globalization. This is a field of study

which opens our eyes to crucial questions of identity and family formation and which speaks—as Solinger argues—to important contemporary policy debates with great import for scholars of women and gender.

NOTES

¹All of the works under review differentiate between “stranger adoption,” the adoption of a child with no biological relation to the adopting family, and the adoption of children by stepparents or members of an extended family. The focus in these books is on stranger adoptions.

²Judith Modell, *Kinship With Strangers: Adoption and Interpretations of Kinship in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

³Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Suzy: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Regina Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890–1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁴See, for example, Marianne Novy, ed., *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); and Claudia Nelson, *Little Strangers: Portrayals of Adoption and Foster Care in America, 1850–1929*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

⁵E. Wayne Carp, *Family Matters: Secrecy and Disclosure in the History of Adoption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), and E. Wayne Carp, ed., *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

⁶Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*.