"War" in the field of contemporary adoption: addressing the reality of special needs children[1]

Claudia Fonseca

It's a great pleasure to be here with you today, able to listen to and learn from scholars who have experience in situations quite different from mine in Brazil. Your accumulated knowledge on the way youngsters rally and react to war-torn situations in India, Africa, and Glasgow, will no doubt bring new insights to a number of problems I`m working on. And certainly, considering present-day political turmoil and the thousands of refugees fleeing violence in Libya and Egypt, "children and war" is more than ever an important theme of debate. However, as you probably know, the violence that young people in Brazil have experienced over the past century has very little to do with outright war, and much to do with the everyday consequences of structural violence. Thus, as you will see, my talk on child circulation in situations of violence stems from priority concerns that we in Brazil have for the welfare of children and young people at home…

War has been relatively rare in Brazilian history. On the other hand, tales of child circulation – in which children of all ages are raised by adults who did not bear them -- abound in every corner of the nation. Indeed, anthropologists have consistently shown, throughout the globe, that child circulation is by no means an exceptional phenomenon, there being ample evidence of such practice (in its varied forms) from the Inuit in Northern Canada to the kanak of French Oceania, from the life-cycle servants in Tudorian England to the "post-modern" family involving frequent divorce and step-parenthood. In fact, anthropologists hold that child circulation only becomes exceptional when viewed through the lens of a Euro-American observer who has grown used to an historically particular form of nucleated family, wherein children are supposed to grow from birth to early adulthood under the care of a single pair of adults – preferably their genitors.

As we know, the naturalization of this model, especially among the middle classes, has been tremendous, silencing the presence, even in Euro-American populations, of

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systematic child-circulation. Other-mothering in North American black populations would be one example. I myself have described the multiple mothers of Brazilian slum children, who transit between the various households of their extended kin, employers and other sorts of foster parents they or their mothers have arranged for. To take but one recent example, the first years of the AIDS epidemic in Brazil, linked to drug abuse particularly among young adults, implied high mortality rates, causing a good number of children to be literally orphaned. A systematic study of "AIDS orphans" suggests that the overwhelming majority of these children were absorbed by the extended family or other community-based caretakers (Doring 2005). The fact that only 5% ended up in institutions (or legally adopted) is an indication of the continued relevance of traditional child circulation networks. (Statistical studies suggest that, even in the late 1990s, a good number of Brazilian children were living with adults other than their biological parents. (Serra 2003).

Legal, plenary adoption, with all its modern-day trappings, follows, of course, a dynamic of its own coinage – one of the child`s exclusive belonging in its new adoptive household, together with total rupture with its original birth family. My contention here is that modern plenary adoption has been successful in stigmatizing and repressing local practices of child circulation. And, it has done so thanks to a packet of globalized technologies that have circulated since the end of WWII – one that includes not only international conferences and written legislation, but also child-saving stories that present adoption as the act of generous people taking in the orphans of war.

War and child circulation: fostering refugees, adopting orphans

Certainly, as no one would deny, and as the research of colleagues on this panel thoroughly demonstrates, war is all too real. It has caused tremendous social disruption, and calls for inventive tactics for the physical and emotional survival of people of all ages. Wars have been historically associated with the massive displacement of populations, refugees of violence. The systematic evacuation of children from war zones is a more recent phenomenon, dating from the first half of the twentieth century – a time in which thousands of Spanish children, fleeing from Spain`s civil war, were taken into European homes; Jewish youth were exported from Hitler`s growing empire; and English children were shipped off to North America or anywhere else in the colonies where they might escape the bombings of WWII (see Marre and Briggs 2009). Yet, as these scholars point out, at the time, actions of solidarity did not carry the connotations that adoption does today. Volunteer foster families would express their solidarity by caring for youngsters as long as necessary. However, no one expected the child to take on the identity of its new family, nor that it adopt the religion, nationality, and culture of its new home. All concerned were supposed to consider it

normal that, sometimes after years of living with their “rescue family”, children could be abruptly “repatriated”, returned to their original homes.

As we see, the transnational circulation of children, as a result of war, was already a reality well before the 1950s. However, in adoption circles, the beginning of international adoption as we know it today is normally attributed to the Korean War. The Korean rejection of half-blood children engendered by the American GIs served as a sort of kick-off to a more general process. The convergence of a number factors led, particularly in the United States, to child-saving campaigns, often of religious inspiration, that were embraced by all elements of the political spectrum.

This was a time when mass communication was intensifying the mood of long-distance humanitarianism. Karen Dubinsky, describes the “visual iconography of rescue” that began to circulate in weekly magazines during the fifties -- photos of dark-skinned emaciated children, sometimes in exotic garb – published by charitable organizations seeking financial contributions. Dubinsky does not deny the eventual benefits certain children derived from such campaigns. However, interested as she is in the ”historic symbolism of children”, she concentrates her efforts on showing how images of children, “bearers, but never makers, of social meaning” (p.3), are used to vehicle nationalist ideologies. A prime example would be Operation Peter Pan in the early days of Castro’s Cuba, a sort of air-born conveyer belt to get children out of Havana. North American evangelicals, together with the Voice of America and other forms of U.S. government initiatives, were able to persuade Cuban families to save their children from communism by sending them to foster homes in America. Between 1961 and 1962, over 14.000 children under 16, and unaccompanied by their parents, parted from Cuba in this fashion.

Also during the 60s, North America and Western Europe witnessed a number of social innovations that would spell change for the field of adoption: the feminists moved to diminish stigma against women’s sexuality; more and more women entered the job market, gaining increased autonomy; the dissemination of effective means of birth control dramatically reduced the number of unwanted pregnancies. In other words, traditional sources of adoptable babies were drying up, exactly at a time when couples were, more than ever before, seeking children to “complete their families”. In Australia, Canada and the U.S., a first move to compensate the dearth of babies involved the moralization of aboriginal peoples. Native children, removed from their unfit parents, would be sent to live with white, middle-class families. Historians refer to this period as the “Sixties (baby) scoop” in Canada, and the “Lost Generation” of aboriginal children in the U.S. and Australia. However, social movements defending the rights of minority populations soon caught up with the situation, and as legislation tightened against abusive practices at home, adopters were increasingly forced to go overseas to find an adoptable child.

Yet, something had changed. People were less and less willing to simply foster these children. Adoption itself was being adjusted to the proprietary logic of the Western nuclear family. During the 60s, plenary adoption–stipulating complete rupture with a child`s birth family -- was written into national legislations throughout the Western world, marginalizing or even outlawing previous versions of simple child circulation. It was also around this time that the expression “war orphans” was extended to cover not only those children whose parents had been killed, but also those whose parents had ”consented” to release them to adoption. (Skeptics may well ask about the validity of “consent” given by people in situations of extreme duress, and who may well be unfamiliar with the tenets of Western plenary adoption.)

Oft-cited examples of abuse and their consequences

Certainly, there have always been criticisms directed at the abduction of children, whether perpetrated by state agencies or individuals. From the forced evacuation of children during the Spanish and Greek Civil Wars to the regimenting of children behind the so-called iron curtain, historians have documented the arbitrary use of state power to remove children from their “rightful” homes. Of more recent memory, the children sequestered by the Argentine dictatorship of the 70s and 80s, brought into worldwide view by the courageous efforts of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, underlined the danger of totalitarian regimes in the mediation of adoption procedures.

Today the fear of totalitarian regimes appears to have given way to the fear of individual agents, abducting children from poverty-stricken mothers in order to “sell” babies” for personal financial profit. This fear of the traffic in children has justified the writing of certain principles into international and national legislation on adoption: 1) that no child should be removed from its original home merely because of poverty, e 2) that there should be no contact between birth and adoptive parents. Granted, well-publicized episodes such as the recent Zoe’s Ark incident in the Sudan (or the pop-star, Madonna’s adoption of an Ethiopian child) –attest to the very real dangers of transnational child circulation in a world of radical inequalities. Yet, anthropologists suggest that the concentration on such sensational cases yields a sort of smoke screen around the daily abuses perpetrated by contemporary democratic regimes against economically discriminated minority populations.

Carla Villalta, specialist on the abduction of children during the Argentine military dictatorship, makes just such a point. Her contention is that, in many cases, the military were able to mask the kidnapping of children under the legality of existing adoption law exactly because previous democratic governments had allowed ample leeway for the unilateral termination of parental rights, particularly among poverty-stricken families. Public outcry occurred, however, only when this sort of abduction was coupled with the terrible violence of the military regime. In the Brazilian case, I myself have insisted that

the phantasm of traffic in children has more to do with tropes of national honor and the media's appetite for scandal than with the mundane operations of child circulation.

Yet, the legacy of rhetoric on "war orphans" together with the fear of trafficking in babies renders birth parents relevant only as vulnerable victims, to be seen (if at all) through clouds of pity, and not heard. In traditional child circulation, birth mothers take an active role in their child's placement; in modern, plenary adoption, once they have signed the consent form, they are excluded from all further proceedings, irrevocably cut off from all information concerning their children. It is striking that when birth mothers finally find a voice, such as in certain social movements in North America and Europe, they call to mind analogies between their situation and that of war victims. Forced by prevailing legislation to "surrender" their offspring, they and their children have become MIAs (instead of Missing in Action, read Missing in Adoption) (Modell 2002: 42).

Situations of structural violence

There is something abhorrent about trying to rank different situations of violence. The violence of war situations brings its own disturbing dynamics, as does the violence of chronic poverty. I have no interest in trying to declare Brazil's the most scandalous of miseries as though we were journalists pandering to sensationalist appetites or NGOs competing for limited funds… However, it is undeniable that chronic poverty, with its accompanying lack of sanitation, slow starvation, and viral epidemics has radical effects for the way young people grow up. In such situations, child circulation serves as an effective survival strategy – as I have repeatedly shown in my own ethnographic field work.

During recent years, in Brazil, advances in the distribution of life-saving medicines as well as a more efficient welfare system, have somewhat altered this picture, decreasing mortality and supplementing incomes. Nonetheless, another killer – gang wars perpetrated through organized crime -- does not seem to have diminished. Brazil's present homicide rate puts it on a par with the world's war zones. As one journalist observed, "Some 55,000 Brazilians died of homicide in 2005 - a few thousand more civilians than in three years of war in Iraq". 150 people are murdered every day, most of them young, negro males. (A 1997 study shows a shocking difference of ten years in the life expectancy between white women and black men.)

To what extent does this "local context" work into the government's official child placement policies? In Brazil's 1990 Children's Code there is not a trace of traditional child circulation practices. Since then, the monopoly of legal plenary adoption, together with a blanket refusal of programs that might encourage or give support to foster families, has left little choice to people who are unable to care for their offspring. Either their children are institutionalized or they go up for adoption. Nonetheless, it would be

misleading to give the impression that professionals in Brazil's highly complex field of child welfare are not aware of potential abuse against the poor. It's true that, in certain instances, one finds simplistic appeals that present adoption as the salvationist cure for poverty and other social ills. Brazil's New Adoption Law, ratified in 2009, looked, in its original draft form, much like the U.S. adoption law – a measure designed to empty the government-run youth shelters, quickly delivering "at-risk" youngsters into the arms of adoptive parents. However, five years of protest organized by activists who feared the mass abduction of children from families whose major crime was indigence, reigned in the law's more gung-ho tendencies, establishing family reunification over adoption as priority destination for institutionalized youth.

This is not the first time professionals in the field of adoption have dug in to implement progressive policies. After the initial 1980s scandals involving the international adoption of Brazilian children, government officials took measures to insure that international adoption would be used only as a last resort – to find adoptive families for children that no Brazilians wished to receive in their home. Since, in Brazil, there is no dearth of candidates wishing to adopt healthy, white infants (the last estimate was five candidates for each available child), this meant that children sent to overseas adoptive families were increasingly older, darker, often with health problems. Peter Selman`s meticulous survey of transnational adoption shows that children adopted from Brazil are far older than those of any other nationality.

I repeat: in Brazil, today, authorities in most areas of Brazil are scrupulously following the tenets of progressive international legislation -- favoring family reintegration first, national adoptions second, and reserving international adoption only for those children who have not found a home within the nation's borders. Hence, the vast majority of children who go up for adoption come from highly problematic backgrounds; they are frequently beyond toddler age, and carry with them memories. Although there are still people willing to meet the challenge of a "special needs adoption", such children can hardly compete with the infants produced in more chaotic and repressive contexts. The exotic toddlers that slipped through the cracks of government surveillance during the Guatemala war, easily gained preference in the adoption market over "special needs" children. Better still, in China, the baby girls whose abandonment was produced by highly repressive measures of population control, could be imagined to be "unproblematic", attracting the bulk of consumers on the "adoption market". When there is no war, and government machinery seems to be operating normally, the children going up for adoption are – or should be – in another league.

The war at home…

I address, as my final point, the reception of those "special needs" children in adoptive homes. Before proceeding, I should point out that the "problems" of special needs

adoptees is a delicate issue. I have encountered, in certain Brazilian milieus, extremely worrisome attempts to pick up some kind of organic difference – located normally in the brain -- in children who have lived through harrowing situations. One researcher from the genetics department in my university suggests that, because they live in constant fear, the brains of most slum children have been irreversibly damaged. Such perspectives not only fail to take into account cultural factors in the lived experiences of "danger", in my mind, they also provide fodder to a new strain of eugenics in which lower-income populations are seen as emotionally and cognitively deficient. On the other side of the Atlantic, we find European nations establishing a sort of ranking of children adopted from abroad, according to nationality. In Barcelona, for example, adoptive families are cautioned: Asian and African children fare better at school. East European and, alas, Latin American children often appear to be slow learners. With no critical evaluation of the specific circumstances and government policies which produced the different profiles of adoptable children, these discussions may lead naïve observers to imagine some sort of racial hierarchy of intelligence. Seen in this perspective, doctors and their pharmacopeia seem to be the major hope for compensating the cerebral shortcomings nature or social violence has wrought.

Obviously, anthropologists reject these narratives in which "difference" slides into simplistic, homogenizing and opportunity-limiting stigma. On the other hand, anthropologists have repeatedly questioned the idea, often voiced by adoptive parents and some professionals, that adopted youngsters are no different from children born into the family. This sort of reverse prejudice renders a child's adoptive origins practically irrelevant, if not invisible. It explains what anthropologist Barbara Yngvesson has observed among Swedish adoptive parents who, proud of their country's racial tolerance, simply dismiss the relevance of their Ethiopian-born child`s dark skin, insisting that he or she is "100% Swedish". In like fashion, national policies greet foreign-born adoptees with open arms, while they continually up the obstacles to the arrival of immigrants from India, Guatemala, Ethiopia … the very same regions that produced the adoptees. Anthropologists have observed that the irony of this situation is not lost on foreign-born adoptees in Europe and North America who, as they grow into young adulthood, are increasingly torn between, on the one hand, their identification with immigrant colleagues at school, and, on the other hand, their need to live up to the expectation of being 100% normal – i.e., just as if they'd been born into their adoptive family and nation.

Yet, as Rachael Stryker points out, adoptable children today are increasingly not only physically different from their adoptive parents, they also hale from extremely problematic backgrounds.

> "Prior to adoption, many transnationally adopted children have been severely abused, neglected, or institutionalized for long periods of time, or they are

adopted at older ages. It is well documented that such children have difficulties transitioning to nuclear family life during post-war placement." (2010: 2).

Stryker concentrated her research on the most problematic of these cases: North American adoptive families who were undergoing radical therapy situations in a last-ditch effort to create family bonds with their adopted offspring, mostly of Eastern European origin. It is this situation of hard family conflict, and imminent disruption, that she terms "the war at home". Stryker describes how these adoptive families visualize the child's past in terms of material and emotional lacks that must be compensated. And, should the child's integration into the new family and society prove rocky, "[P]arental love is constructed as a curative agent, or a fail-safe measure that will ultimately serve as the saving grace…". -- love, materialized in the form of toys, leisure activities, a trip to Disneyland, and other consumer products. The idea of an adoptee being "born anew" in his or her new adoptive home explains why parents have a hard time coping with the child's attachment to old clothes, pictures, broken toys and certain rituals that seem to bring a comforting reminder of their pre-adoption state.

Adoptees interviewed by Stryker have their own version of this process. Some of them, even after years in America, report ambivalence about their family status. Especially in their first days in the adoptive family, they make ritual attempts to combine previous family or institutional experience with their present circumstances. They insist on sleeping or eating on the floor, they are indifferent to presents, they yearn for contact with friends and caretakers from their pre-adoption situation. Many voice the feeling that "Being in a family is hard. It's hard to know how to. [I try hard] to be in the family. But [it's] not the one I had." (p. 17).

These feelings appear relevant in the narratives even of successful adoptees. Swedish scholar, Tobias Hubinette (himself, an adoptee from Korea), suggests that families and adoption services, in their effort to reject class and racial prejudice, deny the distinctive quality of the child's biography. In so doing, they isolate the adopted person, left to work out problems on an individual basis:

"deviant problems …[when] identified are frequently pathologised and medicalised and attributed to a combination of pre-adoption and genetic factors, as if nothing imaginable can be perceived to go wrong as soon as the adoptees are benefiting from the wealth and civilization of the West"(2006:6)

Hubinette, just as Yngvesson and Stryker, appears to be pleading for *recognition* of the adoptee's past: recognition of the social and political conditions that gave rise to his adoption, recognition of the existence of pre-adoptive "significant others", recognition that there are plenty of class and racial prejudices that haunt the adoptee even in his new, well-off circumstances – summing up, recognition that the adoptee´s integration into a radically different sort of family and society may not be all that hunky-dory.

Anthropologists have long criticized the "as-if" model of the adoptive family – the effort to reproduce what is perceived as biological normality, just "as if" the adopted child had been born into the family (Modell 2002). This questioning goes even deeper in the case of special needs children. One might suggest that what these children need is *less* to feel "100% normal", and *more* to have their differences seen – differences that are located not in biological disorder, not simply in individual psychology, but in the sphere of social, cultural and political trajectories. Their message is essentially that to ignore the biographical details of a child's past is to invite problems, not solve them. Furthermore, entering into a relationship of mutual recognition provokes transformations on all sides. It is in the coming to terms with the war situations that caused the child to circulate, and through which young people continue to navigate in their present conditions, that we -- the families and societies that propose to "save" these young people -- may begin to adequately deal with our own "war at home".

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