

Interrogating non-innocent kinship

KATHRYN A MARINER. 2019. *Contingent Kinship: The Flows and Futures of Adoption in the United States*. University of California Press, 256 pp. ISBN: 9780520299566

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Kathryn Mariner's *Contingent Kinship* opens up the backstage work in adoption which she encounters through her collaboration with an adoption agency located between Chicago's affluent suburb and the city's low-income neighbourhoods. Mariner's focus is pre-birth adoption, where a contract is drawn between expectant mothers (predominantly African American and ethnic minority women) and prospective parents. As is known in the case of surrogacy, intended parents lay claim on the womb of the surrogate; in the case of adoption, prospective parents lay claim on their ability to give the unborn child a better future. Mariner acknowledges the loop this can create – an imagined future for an imagined child.

Mariner approaches adoption as an artefact and unpacks the way this artefact is constructed and given value. Her theoretical framework draws from Viviana Zelizer's construction of kinship not only as a field of cultural production, but also structured by and in turn structuring several economic and political factors. Kinship through adoption does not reside only in the innocent space of intimacy, but rather mirrors speculation one finds in the market. This vocabulary of the market is maintained throughout the monograph with debates and discussions pegged around investments and futures. It is this 'intimate speculation,' which may or may not result in 'futures' of parenting that Mariner calls 'contingent kinship.' Contingency is conceptualized as a characteristic barrier between investments in kinship and desired futures. Mariner demonstrates how contingency,

conceived as a disruptive experience for adoptive parents and the adoption agency masks, and is privileged over the systematic and structural contingencies that mark the everyday lives of expectant mothers, who are primarily women of colour, migrant workers and the disenfranchised in America. This book is about a specific moment in the history of adoption in America, after the recession, and how state and market tactics of disciplining and governing citizen bodies through social welfare, employment, housing, and inflation come to determine politics of reproduction, of which adoption is an important element.

The first chapter looks at the way in which the figure and body of the expectant mother are both constructed and subject to surveillance. The body of the expectant mother, Mariner says is turned inside out by science and social workers' enquires into her pregnancy to authenticate her status as an expectant mother. The expectant mother is always viewed with suspicion with regards to her intention to place her child for adoption. Over the chapters Mariner evokes the figure of the 'welfare queen' to discuss the cultural justifications that social workers encounter while reflecting upon a 'fall through' (technical term in case the expectant mother decides to eventually parent the child) as both an emotional as well as financial loss.

The second chapter creates a diorama of the Home Study Inspection (HSI), a crucial operation within the official adoption process. Here Mariner exposes the power relations that manifest during a HSI between social workers and adoptive parents. Aspects of privacy as a valued commodity within middle-class American society are breached by the presence of the state (in the form of the social worker) in the houses of adoptive parents. The HSI then is a highly performative moment when adoptive parents have to stage (with a certain degree of disdain) their selves, their everyday lives and the physical spaces within which these unravel. The third chapter unpacks the critical role of social workers by highlighting their work as 'brokers, therapists, fortune-tellers, and risk managers' (97). The adoption process is rife with contingency and uncertainty for both the social workers and adoptive parents – ranging from the disappearance of the expectant mother, to the appearance of the birth father, to the health of the child. This period is marked by the affective labour of social workers who devise various informal and organized strategies to both manage and mitigate the risks and contingencies that surround adoption. The fourth chapter draws upon discussions around 'the value of children' (Zelizer 1985) to address the moral discomfort that is

anticipated when adoption of children is viewed through a commercial lens, namely as a monetary transaction between concerned parties. Here Mariner focuses on the many ways both social workers and adoptive parents articulate or rather de-articulate the role of money involved in fulfilling one's desire for a child by adoption. Last, Mariner provides a micro perspective to understand a more global phenomenon, through the closure of the agency with she collaborated throughout her ethnography. Her specific enquiry in this chapter is about the manner in which 'the quiet death of a small adoption agency' (161) can reveal how kinship as intimate speculation is contingent upon politics of endowments, donations, and public financial support in the United States after Recession.

Borrowing Marcus' classic markers of a multi-sited ethnography, the author follows people, things and metaphors (Marcus 1995). She follows and works with social workers who, like all brokers, occupy a liminal space that allows them access to the houses of middle- and upper-class White Americans, and low-income neighbourhoods where expectant mothers usually reside. The book maps the localized world of the adoption agency and neighbourhoods in Chicago. The spaces that we traverse indicate the way capital, affective networks and geography intermingle. The author follows things. There are a number of ways in which we may understand 'things' in this ethnography. Money as a thing, legitimized through 'allowable legal expenses to expectant mothers,' yet recalling anxieties and discomforts about the entanglement of intimacy and economics. The adoption agency as a thing, which has its own agentic function of weaving futures (through successful adoptive kinships) as well as severing them (separating birth mothers from their children). The author follows the metaphor of the child. Mariner theorizes the way race and capital in America determines who counts as a child, based on who has the possibility for a future. This conceptualization excludes children who are parented in low-income single women-led African American and ethnic minority households. On the other hand, a child desired through adoption by white heterosexual couples is no longer an African American or ethnic child, but is constructed as a gift, 'a positive investment in everyone's future, in a national future.' (17)

The descriptions in this book are thick while being generative of data. The author explores multiple subject positions, while not meandering from her political commitment to systematically marginalized expectant mothers, to small not-for-profit agencies, and to scholarship that exposes

the way cultural determinants of who deserves to be a parent ensures the production of surplus capital. We meet people. We visit neighbourhoods. We visit homes. We encounter hope. We encounter hopelessness. We encounter limbo. The book is also a brilliant example of collaborative ethnography, where the author and the social workers within the agency share and inform each other's' works. One usually finds the author in the backseat of a social worker usually driving an expectant mother for a clinical appointment or running errands to buy daily groceries for expectant mothers or trying to strategize in anticipation of a fall-through. Authorship is therefore an emergent effect that reveals its own construction through dialogue, shared performance and intimate exchanges. This book will be of use to those interested in and can be taught as part of graduate courses on kinship and race in the United States, gender and reproduction, and objects, gifts and commodities.

References

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