

THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2023

Rethinking Children's Rights Amidst the Adoption Industrial Complex

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Challenging Legacies

The framework of how we view childraising, children, and children's rights is built off of the legacy of the generations before us. This is true as we reflect on how our society views vulnerable children. Every year, thousands of children are sold abroad to different families, where they are raised severed from their homeland, culture, and language. Their families back home will be erased from their minds and their new "parents" will either tell them their parents died, abandoned them, or no longer wanted them. However, the opposite is true; these original families are chronically under-resourced, resulting in family instability and ultimately children being separated. This scenario is not a sensationalized story, but for many adoptees, especially intercountry adoptees, a reality.

Our generation is left with a legacy of the supposedly inherent good and glorification of adoption. 80% of all children in orphanages have living family they can be united with (Lumos, n.d.). However, the adoption industrial complex argues that these children will have a better life if adopted by another family. The adoption industrial complex is the large-scale system of adoption agencies and partnerships intertwined with multiple sectors of family planning and policing services. It is a profit-driven industry built upon socioeconomic policies and business practices that rely on the commodification of children and the exploitation of poverty. It operates and is maintained through both political and social institutions of race, colonialism, class, and other socioeconomic imbalances of power. Although South Korean adoptee McKee,

has been one of the first to write a definition of transnational industrial complex, this definition aims to expand beyond prior literature. Through a brief analysis, readers will have a deeper understanding of the history, practice, and harm of the adoption industry and what society can do instead to replace the current system.

Origins:

In this essay, I present both the origins of the adoption industrial complex and how it actively influences the way families are policed and separated under the guise of a better life and child protection. The first documented case of transracial adoption was in Australia between 1910-1970. It is estimated that the government stole between 10%-30% of children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in an effort to commit genocide. Through physical and cultural separations, these children were forced to assimilate and marry into Caucasian families, creating mixed-race offspring. These policies were intended so that through several generations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders would become obsolete. Assimilation ensured that these children would not only be geographically removed from their families, but also lose the ability to speak their native language, practice their cultural traditions, and use their original names. Oftentimes, these children were told that their parents were dead or had given them up, reaffirming a narrative that adoptees have no family (O'Loughlin 2022). Although these policies officially ended by 1970 and this period of history known as The Stolen Generation, these practices continue to this day. White-centric values and racism are still used to justify the erasure of adoptees' origins and identity.

Imperialism plays a critical role in family destabilization which leads to a boom in adoption rates, the Korean War solidified this intersection. South Korea contributes significantly to the pool of adoptees, shipping away over 200,000 of its children to the West since 1953 (Brief Korean Adoption History, n.d). It is not coincidental that those years were a time of great turmoil and instability for Korea as it dealt with war and external military involvement. United States involvement during the war saw a massive interest in adoptions by U.S. soldiers and influenced the increase of intercountry adoptions. The children that resulted from this mass exportation of South Korean during the 1950s were labeled war orphans. These war orphans demonstrated how imperialism is a primary ignition of family separation. Both the structural violence of war and neoliberal economic policies create an institution where displaced children become the spoils of war. It also solidifies that the legacy is simply a myth of the inherent goodness of adoption. As well as countries need Western imperialism to "save" them, while being the victims of Western imperialism and foreign policy (Kim, 2021). South Korea is not a unique case, and the role of Western involvement in adoption cannot be ignored. Many Korean adoptee scholars have spoken up and highlighted the connection between their adoption and neo-colonialism as U.S. military interests superseded the rights of South Korean children (Pate, 2014). It is imperative to recognize the correlation between instability and how that enables the growth and outsourcing of children through adoption.

As in all industries, success and relevance are based on the financial gains of an organization. Adoption is a highly lucrative business as it is an economic transaction where a child is

exchanged for money. In 2020, the adoption industry generated \$15.3 billion (Miller, 2020). On average domestic adoptions cost between \$30,000-\$50,000, and intercountry adoption costs between \$32,000-\$66,000 (Adoption Network, 2022). The demands of this industry continue to put thousands of families at risk of losing their children. Families in the global south are disproportionately at risk, whereas those who are adopting children and running adoption companies are wealthy, white people. Thus, perpetuating existing power hierarchies. Many developing countries are particularly at risk for predatorial practices of international adoption and have found that coercion, recruitment, and inducement of families to relinquish their child into adoption is rising. The highly lucrative nature of the adoption industry encourages irregularities and false pretenses that prey on vulnerable families (Cheney, 2017).

Although there are safeguards to protect against human trafficking, it is very difficult to spot coercive tactics from afar and even the best efforts to stop human trafficking in adoption are nearly impossible to see once a child is labeled as an “orphan” or “adoptee”. This is due to both weak infrastructure and the substantial profit, this outweighs any fines or restrictions (Smolin, 2006). Our generation is facing a systemic and institutional failure in the way we view vulnerable children. We must acknowledge the way capitalism shapes child protection policies and the way we justify the buying and selling of children.

Looking to the Future Through Global Engagement:

There is a promising new horizon in the future of child welfare as countries such as Sweden, Australia, and South Korea, have taken steps to make amends for children placed into adoption or who experienced irregular adoptions. Since 2018, the Swedish government has found more than 640 cases of Chileans with irregular adoptions. Many of these irregularities consist of a pattern of forged documents or falsified birth certificates. As per Swedish Bill 557, Chilean adoptees removed from their origins through human trafficking are entitled to receive financial compensation, with additional reparations to follow (Vicky, 2023). As for Australia, measures to support those who experienced family separation through adoption include free mental health services for life. This helps to lower suicide risks which are four times more likely for adoptees than non-adoptees (Keyes et al., 2013). Australia has ensured that all adoptees, adoptive parents, and families of adoptees are equipped with adequate counseling and support services. Peer support groups are also provided to ensure adoptees can create a community with others that have similar experiences (Intercountry Adoptee Support Service, n.d.). South Korea has followed suit in taking action to rectify the wrongs of the past and created South Korea's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This commission has opened up an investigation of adoption practices brought forth by nearly 400 adoptees from across the globe. Findings of falsified documents, laundered children, and nonconsensual child separation are becoming uncovered more regularly (NPR, 2022). As the South Korean government is navigating these difficult truths, they are taking steps to acknowledge the harm adoptees have experienced and the devastation of birth families still looking for their children.

Ultimately, in efforts to right the wrongs of the past, our generation can take steps toward eliminating the sale and transportation of vulnerable children across borders. As of 2020, the Netherlands placed a temporary stop on all intercountry adoptions as instances of child abductions and trafficking were increasing. Some of the top countries Sweden received children from were Brazil, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. All these countries experienced systematic violations of children's rights under adoption. It was found that disadvantaged families were coerced into relinquishing their children without their full consent or knowledge (Moses, 2021). These steps are promising for adoptees in their fight for justice, yet it will never compensate for the pain and lifelong trauma of family separation and erasure.

Alternatives: Family Preservation and Children's Rights:

We can build upon the progress that these countries have made by rectifying the wrongs and paying reparations to those who have suffered. The first step is for our generation to break the cycle of assuming that adoption is the solution and question the systems that facilitate the selling of vulnerable children. We must educate the public about the adoption industrial complex and the risk it poses to children and their families. Moving forward, mental health services should be provided for those affected by family separation. Adoptees are twice as likely to suffer from behavioral disorders and be treated for mental health disorders. Those adopted are more likely to experience both depression and anxiety than their non-adopted counterparts (Keyes et al., 2008). Additionally, investigations should be opened into all adoption cases. If adoptees are to have fulfilling lives, they

need to know their history. The loss of one's culture and identity is embedded in the way adoption operates; consequently, investing in cultural and language classes are other ways to provide wholeness to those separated from their origins. Efforts and funding to help search for and unite separated families are necessary as well.

Furthermore, we must invest in social service programs to assist vulnerable families in remaining intact. Poverty is the leading cause of family instability. Our generation must work to close socioeconomic gaps to ensure we prioritize families. Through food programs, housing stability, job placement programs, and education funds, we can eliminate the opportunity for coercion. Lastly, community care, guardianship, and fostering to unite the child back with their family of origin are all other forms of alternative care for children who truly do not have a safe environment to grow up in. These alternative measures ensure that a child remains in touch with their origins and community and do not perpetuate white supremacist practices of cultural and racial loss.

A Call to Action: Rewriting the Wrongs

Adoption today is a profit-driven industry that cannot exist without exploiting vulnerable families either through coercive tactics or direct human trafficking. Additionally, the current practice of adoption, particularly intercountry adoption, is built upon imperialism, racism, and capitalism. These core pillars are what continues to sustain the framework and are the legacy given to us by the previous generations. What has been seen as a universal good and humanitarian act can no longer remain unquestioned. Although it is this legacy that has been passed down to us,

our generation must ensure it ends with us. With such a lucrative industry, I urge our generation to radically rethink childcare, and rather than redistribute children to wealth, redistribute the wealth to the children. Our generation must come to terms and question the way those with resources will justify spending “thousands of dollars (or tens of thousands of dollars) to arrange an intercountry adoption, when aid of less than a thousand dollars would have kept the child with their birth family” (Smolin, 2006, p. 127). By continuing this legacy of tearing apart families in the name of a “better life,” we are perpetuating white standards of family care and hurting the very people we intended to help.

Our generation can be the changemakers; together we can create a new standard of childcare and family preservation. We can replace this legacy

of generational harm by honoring a child’s inherent right to one’s origins and identity. In ensuring resources are provided to socioeconomically disadvantaged families, we diminish the need for outside intervention. Poverty is the leading cause of family separation and leaves children vulnerable to child poachers and the adoption industrial complex. By investing in families and creating environments that promote stability, we create systems and institutions that come alongside families to provide for their young. Moving forward we must believe in the inherent right of family autonomy and that poverty is not a crime punishable by the removal of children. In looking to the future, we can take active measures to build a better legacy that centers family sustainability. Children belong with their families; they are not objects to be bought and sold.

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