

Indians In The Family: Adoption And The Politics Of Antebellum Expansion

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Review

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Peterson, Dawn *Indians in the Family: Adoption and the Politics of Antebellum Expansion*. Harvard University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 674737555

The Hazards of Benevolence and the Politics of Adoption in the Early Republic

In 1813, Andrew Jackson wrote home to his wife informing her that in the midst of a bloody military campaign against the Creeks he had been moved to pity by the plight of a young Creek orphan whom he was sending on to join their household. While Jackson's pivot from brutal commander to sympathetic patriarch might at first glance seem surprising, Dawn Peterson reveals the interdependence of these roles by locating Jackson's actions within a larger history of Indian adoption in the early national era. Peterson argues that white adoption of Indian youths was a critical tool in the process of U.S. territorial expansion and the cultivation of racial slavery in the region that would become the Deep South. Yet, as Peterson demonstrates, these adoptions were contingent upon Native support. She mines a rich archive to investigate the motivations and visions of indigenous parents and leaders, arguing that they looked to adoption as a "strategy of infiltration" that helped some nations challenge American incursions, at least for a time.

Indians in the Family is both a nuanced history of the lives of Choctaw, Creek, and Chickasaw youths adopted into white households between the 1790s and the 1830s and an incisive investigation of Native politics and American expansion. While later in the nineteenth century the removal of Indian children from their families and the removal of indigenous peoples from their lands served as paired strategies of dispossession, Peterson argues that the volatile politics of the early national era made adoption a valuable strategy both for American expansionists and Native resisters. By putting adoption at the center of this history of U.S. antebellum expansion, Peterson succeeds in integrating the intimate politics of household organization into the history of nation building

and empire. Peterson defines adoption expansively, as “an array of practices focused on the assimilation of Indian youths . . .” (p. 3) This approach enables her to contextualize her careful reconstruction of the paths individual Indian youths followed in and out of white households within a larger examination of struggles over the place of Native peoples within the American body politic.

Across nine chapters, Peterson examines the shifting politics of Indian adoption beginning with Thomas Jefferson’s national vision and concluding with Indian removal. For Jefferson, adoption fit into a larger vision of “reproductive philanthropy” that promoted the integration of Indians into the modern economy as a means of saving them from demographic collapse while simultaneously opening Native lands to American settlers. For Native peoples, the patriot victory in the American Revolution curtailed possibilities for transnational alliances and, consequently, made adoption a more valuable strategy in efforts to protect territory and sovereignty in the face of American aggression. In this context, experiments in sending Indian children into white households and schools outside Native territories proliferated. Some adoptees became important representatives of Native interests in negotiations with American political and economic powerbrokers. For example, Mary Doxtater, who left the Oneida territories to live with Quakers in Chester County, Pennsylvania, went on to open schools and serve as an attorney for the Stockbridge Nation in its negotiations with the state of New York.

Peterson’s attention to adoption’s multiple political registers reveals its importance in the struggles between sovereign nations but also within individual lives. For example, deep contextualization enables Peterson to reconstruct the decision of Molly McDonald, a Choctaw woman, to place her son with Silas Dinsmoor, an Indian agent. In so doing, Peterson makes a compelling argument for women’s importance in shaping how Native communities confronted encroaching American settlers and the system of racialized slavery they brought with them. Just as McDonald looked to placing her son in Dinsmoor’s household as a strategy that would help her navigate the volatile politics of the Choctaw nation in the early nineteenth century, Dinsmoor pursued adoption in hopes of improving his own career. Similarly, Peterson argues Andrew Jackson adopted Lyncoya, the young Creek orphan, to shore up his place within his household and his son’s affections at the same time his action lent a benevolent cast to a violent war. Peterson demonstrates that the personal was political for all parties in these experiments in assimilation.

Jackson's embrace of adoption was short-lived, however. By the 1830s he argued that the very cultural knowledge and social connections that were the objective of adoption had made former adoptees illegitimate representatives of Indian nations in treaty negotiations. The career of James McDonald, Molly McDonald's son, who grew up as the ward of American elites and returned home to serve as a Choctaw diplomat, reveals the costs and limitations of the adoption strategy. His cultural and legal knowledge helped him secure his family's claims to land and enslaved property, but did not prevent Choctaw dispossession. He, and his nation, suffered as a thoroughly racialized understanding of identity and citizenship eclipsed the negotiated vision of assimilation.

Indians in the Family is an analytically ambitious book that begins from the premise that gender, indigenous agency, and racialization are essential to understanding the politics of American early national expansion and the entrenchment of racial slavery. The book balances its analytical rigor with attention to human subjectivity and how it shaped historical action. While Peterson's broad definition of adoption enables the book to connect disparate stories, it also leaves questions about the politics attending varied modes of child circulation for other scholars to explore. Peterson acknowledges that these elite experiments in adoption were relatively rare, but other kinds of child circulation moved many children across national and racial boundaries in this period. Examining those stories and their relationships to the rich history Peterson has presented here would afford further insight into the political value of cultural knowledge and children's prominence in creating it during the early decades of the nation's history.

Catherine Jones is an associate professor of history at University of California, Santa Cruz. She is the author of Intimate Reconstructions: Children in Postemancipation Virginia (Charlottesville, 2015). She is currently working on a book about the incarceration of children in the post-Civil War South.