

Introduction

“An Iron Chain around Your Soul”

Evangelical couple seeking to adopt a girl between the age of 12 and 18 to live with us and take care of our one year old baby. She can live with us and go to school. The father and mother are business owners. The girl must be introduced to us by a parent or guardian.

In May 2014, a couple posted the above advertisement in the *Diário de Pará*, a newspaper based in Belém, Pará, Brazil, to find a *babá* (nanny) for their baby. The publication of an ad of this nature in a mainstream newspaper reflects the pervasive practice of “adopting” young girls into families for the purpose of exploiting them as unpaid domestic workers (Beltrão 2016).¹ The listing sparked an uproar among prominent social activist groups in Brazil that marshaled social media platforms to denounce what was viewed as the couple’s poorly veiled effort to exploit child labor under the guise of adoption.² The ad itself includes multiple legal violations: it advertises to “adopt a girl” (adoptions via the local newspaper are illegal) for the purposes of putting her to work (adoption for labor is illegal) by caring for their baby (child labor exploitation is illegal), and for no salary (not paying a domestic worker is illegal).

¹ Beltrão (2016) reveals the harrowing yet commonplace occurrence for indigenous and Black children from peripheral areas in the state of Pará to be transferred to other individuals and abused both for their manual and/or domestic labor and sexually exploited. The Black children who are taken often belong to quilombo communities, which are areas that were established by enslaved Africans who escaped slavery.

² Adding insult to injury, the couple’s attempt to use their religious identity, as “an evangelical couple,” to justify their actions and, further, the inclusion of their status as business owners only made it more offensive that they were looking to exploit a child rather than pay an adult to provide this service.

Moreover, Brazilians of diverse backgrounds converged toward consensus that the actions of this couple were an anachronistic reminder of Brazil's shameful history of slavery. Indeed, the couple's newspaper posting mirrors the ads published back in nineteenth-century Brazil (only a few years after the abolition of racial chattel slavery in Brazil), except the language of older ads was more explicitly racist. An 1896 newspaper ad in São Paulo, Brazil, read: "We are looking for a dark-skinned Black nanny to cook and clean; Looking for a little Blackie to clean the house and handle the children."³ In 2014, race was not explicitly mentioned and perhaps needed not be since the majority of domestic workers in Brazil are Black women.⁴

As intensely as Brazilians berated the couple online for the exploitative ad, it is precisely because of the normalization of informal or clandestine adoption, what is known as *criação*, that the couple did not anticipate the barrage of critique that they received nor did they fear prosecution (Fonseca 1986, 2002a, 2003). Though critiques of the couple's ad were widespread, the outcry tended to overlook and, in worse cases, vilify informal care, including kinship-based fostering, which is practiced widely. Indeed, instead of being institutionalized, the 163 million children around the world who do not live with a biological parent are placed in informal familial arrangements (Leinaweaver 2008).⁵ Anthropologist Claudia Fonseca's meticulous research (1986, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2003, 2013) on the cultural and legal ramifications of informal adoption in Brazil has pivotally outlined the positive meanings that families attribute to child-lending practices.⁶ Fonseca, in particular, has for decades highlighted the benefits of the "circulation of children" among poor and working-class families in Brazil (Fonseca 1986, 2002a, 2003, 2005). She offers the nuanced conclusion that the care informally adoptive families

³ "Precisa-se de uma criada de cor preta que cozinha e lava; precisa-se duma negrinha para arranjos de casa e lidar com crianças." Author's translation. Biblioteca Nacional, Setor de Microfilmes, *Jornal do Commercio*, 1 de janeiro de 1888; 8 de janeiro de 1890; e 14 abril de 1901 as cited from Dantas (2020).

⁴ Marcondes et al. (2013).

⁵ In addition to those cited by Leinaweaver (2008), there are numerous examples of informal adoption or fosterage that emerge from mutually beneficial arrangements between status equals in global contexts. See Baran & Pannor (1989); Goody (1992); Weber (2001).

⁶ *Criação* is not a Brazilian idiosyncrasy, but rather is commonly practiced throughout Latin America, including Mexico and Peru, among other countries. In Spanish-speaking Latin America, the practice is known as *criadazgo* and in Peru alone, 50,000 Peruvian children live as *criadas* in exchange for food and shelter (Leinaweaver 2008).

provide reflects the mutual aid and interdependency used among vulnerable families as a survival strategy.⁷

Second-Class Daughters, however, exposes the murky fault lines demarcating where the “circulation of children” shifts from being a mutually beneficial kinship arrangement to, as one respondent described, a “child trafficking ring” and what others routinely referred to as “slavery.” In fact, this research shifts the focus of analysis away from children to emphasize what occurs when these children become adults.⁸ It reveals how exploitative forms of informal adoption can be justified using the same racialized, gendered, classed logics that undergirded chattel slavery, and can also include some of chattel slavery’s most brutal aspects including strenuous and life-threatening labor without compensation. National and transnational scholars have identified how an increasingly global system of domestic labor exploitation exploits women, and women of color, especially (Ehrenreich, Hochschild, and Kay 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001a; Parreñas 2015). However, as this work will examine, several factors differentiate exploitative forms of informal adoption in Brazil. These factors include the significance of cultural repertoires connected to slavery, the comingling of authority and cordiality, ideological tropes that shape readings of poor and often Black women’s bodies and labor, and (most notably) a culturally specific affective and moral framework that maintains the system (Arend 2005; de Santana Pinho and Silva 2010).

I never intended to write a book about informal adoptions. Beyond the compelling analysis of informal adoption or *criação* that I had read in Twine’s (1998) seminal book, I knew very little about the experiences of the Brazilian girls and women referred to as *criadas* or *filhas de criação* (informally adopted daughters).⁹ Everything changed when I saw Nadia, a middle-aged Black woman, sleeping on the floor in the home where

⁷ Specifically addressing the innovative familial strategies that Black families developed during and after slavery in the Americas, Spillers (1987) asserts that “the inviolable Black family” remains one of the supreme social achievements, for which flexible notions of kinship and family have been the touchstone (74).

⁸ Other studies have also focused on the exploitative aspects of *criação* (Portuguese) or *criadazgo* (Spanish) in order to clarify the conditions under which these practices may not be mutually beneficial especially when they involve emotional, sexual, and labor exploitation. See Arend (2005); Beltrão (2016); Dalla Vecchia (2001); De Azevedo (2017).

⁹ My first introduction to the existence of *criadas* is Twine’s (1998) book, *Race in a Racial Democracy*. In it, she includes a troubling picture of a young Afro-Brazilian girl holding the white baby for whom she provides care. She further describes the way that white families invoke the notion of family to mask the exploitative nature of these relationships.

I rented a room from a Brazilian family.¹⁰ The family's home was in an expensive high-rise along the shore of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Nadia had been omnipresent in this family's home. I saw Nadia cleaning, cooking, folding clothes, and performing other household tasks around the house, so I reasonably assumed she was a paid domestic worker. Once, while wading through an early morning haze on route to the kitchen for a drink of water, I noticed the family's teenaged son's bedroom door ajar.

A casual glance into his room revealed Nadia's brown body curled up on the floor at the young man's bedside. The sight of a thin, worn sheet draped over Nadia's body, which barely covered her feet, unnerved me. I returned to my room with tight knots in my stomach. Why was Nadia sleeping on the floor and in his room? Did she live in the house? Did my presence in the house mean that I had taken the room and bed where she usually slept? When I casually asked her about her experiences living with the family, Nadia smiled and replied, "Me tratam como se fosse filha da família" (They treat me as though I were a daughter of the family). Nadia's narrative reflected the "myth of being like a daughter," which suggests that unpaid domestic labor is comparable to the just, inclusive, and "natural" age-based division of labor typical of families (Young 1987: 365). However, Nadia's emotional and physical abuse alongside the nonpayment for her labor exposed the underside of her "family" status. These contradictions persuaded me to pry open the figurative door left ajar, to expose the inner workings of this peculiar entanglement of race, gender, family, and work in Brazil.

In a slightly less affluent home, I realized within two months of meeting Tânia, another middle-aged Black woman, that she, too, was a *filha de criação*. Typically, the term *filha de criação* was used in reference to young girls who were "given" away and informally adopted into families without a formal legal process. I, like many other researchers, assumed that informally adopted children eventually married or ran away to start families of their own.¹¹ Yet, like Nadia, Tânia was an adult *filha de criação* who continued living with the well-to-do family long after she

¹⁰ All names are pseudonyms, ages have been slightly altered (no more than five years), and inconsequential details (such as gender of certain family members) may be altered in order to protect their identities.

¹¹ Research on fosterage and informal adoption often has as an implicit assumption that individuals enter as children and leave as adults. However, not only do some "adopted daughters" enter as adults; some who do enter as children never leave. They may be treated well or occupy a slave-like position for their entire lives (Dalla Vecchia 2001; de Azevedo 2017).

was “adopted” at age seven. She had lived in their home over forty years, and even when employed outside the home, she performed domestic labor without monetary compensation. Unlike Nadia, she adamantly rejected any suggestion that she was part of the family, and instead, with time, she progressively shared examples of abuse and labor exploitation. To be certain that I understood the extent of her exploitation, Tânia shared in her characteristically matter-of-fact voice, “You feel the distance in the way that you are treated, the way you are insulted and humiliated . . . You realize that you are really property. I can beat my property, I can ask it to do anything, I can do anything to it.”¹² These haunting words lingered as another reminder that towering condominiums boast all of the accoutrements of middle-class living, but also serve as the site of one of Brazil’s oldest traditions: slavery.¹³

But how widespread were exploitative forms of *criação*, and, particularly, how many adult women were living in these conditions outside Bahia? In the state of Amazonas and Paraíba, I found numerous cases of *filhas de criação*, who shared a surprisingly similar trajectory to the women I had met in Bahia. Marina, a mixed-race woman (African and indigenous roots) in the Amazon, was only twenty-two years old when we met, and she felt trapped and exploited in her current work/family arrangement where she was referred to as a *filha de criação* and treated as an unpaid domestic worker. In the northeast state of Paraíba, Maisa, a Black woman in her fifties, had been informally adopted at such a young age that she did not even remember her biological family or know her true birthday. She doted on her adoptive family even as she reflected on her taxing unpaid work schedule. Maisa still lives with this family and predicts that she will die in their care. And most unexpectedly, there was Kátia (also in Paraíba), a white, college-educated women, who defied what I thought I knew to be true of *filhas de criação*. She shared with me a harrowing account of her life as a *filha de criação* who moved through three exploitative foster families until she ultimately escaped and created a family and life of her own. She described her experience in *criação* by referring to it as a “child trafficking ring” wherein poor girls are sold a dream, but end up defrauded and exploited.

¹² Hordge-Freeman (2015b) provides an extended analysis of Tânia’s full quote and additional aspects of this interaction in *The Color of Love* (106).

¹³ See also Roth-Gordon (2016) and Corossacz (2015; 2017) for a review of the practices and behaviors common to what is referred to as Brazil’s A-B class.

Over the course of ten years, I met and maintained contact with more than a dozen women, *filhas de criação*, who shared that they had been (or continue to be) exploited in a slave-like or semi-servitude fashion. As I shared these encounters with my Brazilian colleagues, I was met with knowing nods and, in some cases, indifference. So common is the prevalence of informal adoption in Brazil that the phrase *adoção á brasileira* (Brazilian-style adoption) is used to describe how impoverished families transfer the care and guardianship of their children to individuals and families with more resources (Fonseca 1986, 2002a, 2002b). Despite the risks, informal adoptions are sometimes preferred by families because they allow them to sidestep bureaucratic processes, select adoptive families on their own terms, retain their parental rights, and maintain relationships with their children.¹⁴ This practice is imbued with complex meanings by families and is pursued with various ends in mind including the amplification of the kinship group in ways that might be later beneficial to disadvantaged families (Fonseca 2003; Leinaweaver 2008). Nevertheless, serious problems arise when the practice occurs among social unequals because it is under these conditions that “adopted” children are more likely to be required to care for others rather than receive care.¹⁵ In cases where *criação* is exploitative, the rhetoric of being “like family” is reinforced by a framework of hierarchical familial relations that has the potential to naturalize exploitation that begins in childhood and extends until death (Collins 1998).

While it is true that overarching systems of oppression afford *filhas de criação* little room to negotiate, *Second-Class Daughters* disrupts prevalent narratives of passive victims and monstrous villains. It is not an account of perfect victims, but rather of *batalhadoras* (warrior women) who navigate diverse realities, weigh limited options, and exert their individual agency wherever possible to forge what they perceive is their best possible outcome. This book theorizes the features, patterns, and discourses that characterize their exploitation with an emphasis on affective encounters and ambiguous relationships. It also offers space to consider how *filhas*, themselves, reinterpret and reconceptualize their experiences to give new meaning to their lives. A one-dimensional

¹⁴ Fonseca (1986, 2002a, 2002c) describes the “circulation of children” as often occurring among families of low socioeconomic conditions where some families may have more means than others, but the differences are often not drastic. Families anticipate maintaining contact and reclaiming their children in the future when they are able to do so.

¹⁵ Da Cunha (2008); Leinaweaver (2008).

portrayal of the women and their adoptive families is not just inappropriate; it would hinder the more theoretically valuable argument about how love and affect can be weaponized to both support *and* subvert domination. This work examines the mechanisms that ensure respondents' ensnarement in a system of ambiguous affective power relations and structural disadvantage, while also uncovering moments when *filhas de criação* make this same system bend to their will.

SLAVERY AS THE PRESUMED PAST IN THE PRESENT

The naturalization of exploitative forms of *criação* cannot be understood without discussing Brazil's extended role as the largest country in South America and longest-lasting slavocracy in the Americas (see Figure I.1 for a map of Brazil). During the transatlantic slave trade, over four million enslaved Africans were kidnapped and brought to Brazil, providing the labor that was the foundation of a soon to be burgeoning nation (Andrews 2001; Butler 1998). Brazil's proximity to the West African coast ensured a consistent flow of Africans, and while men were preferred, women and children were also enslaved and constantly subjected to sexual terrorism and exploitative labor on *fazendas* (plantations), among other places (Mattoso 1986). The commodification and exploitation of Black bodies, including those of Black children, for centuries in Brazil provides an essential historical context to understand *criação*.

One of the lasting legacies of Brazil's substantial role in the transatlantic slave trade is the sheer pervasiveness of domestic labor: Brazil is home to the greatest number of domestic workers.¹⁶ These workers are disproportionately Afro-Brazilian women who receive menial wages, poor treatment in precarious conditions, and who work exploitative hours often as part of the informal economy (Araújo and Lombardi 2013; Bernardino-Costa 2014).¹⁷ Due to the relegation of domestic workers to the informal labor market and the failure of the government to even recognize their status as workers, they have been historically some of the most vulnerable workers in the country (Bernardino-Costa 2011; de Santana Pinho and Silva 2010).

As Bernardino-Costa's (2011) work has richly documented, a second lasting aspect of Brazil's role as the largest slaveocracy is the enduring notion of the "good master," which is based on the idea that "during the

¹⁶ International Labour Office (2013).

¹⁷ Bernardino-Costa (2014).

1998). Colonial relationships that were replete with savage violence were often reframed as loving. Though this ideology remains pervasive, Black Brazilians have never passively accepted subjugation or internalized these representations without critique (Andrews 2001; Butler 1998; Hanchard 1998). From early slave ship rebellions, planned slave revolts, the development of quilombo communities for escaped Africans, and the emergence of political organizations such as the *Movimento Unificado Negro*, sustained resistance characterizes the experiences of Black people in Brazil (Conrad 1994; Nascimento 2004; Perry 2013).¹⁸ Recent contributions from Brazilian researchers and historians reveal the unconventional resistance strategies employed by both enslaved and freed Black Brazilian women in the 19th century through the present (Rocha 2009; Xavier, Farias and Gomes 2012).

In terms of resistance, this research on *criação* emerges on the heels of the successful mobilization of Afro-Brazilian women-led domestic workers' unions and the growing opposition to the inequalities and indignities suffered by Black people more broadly (Bernardino-Costa 2014; Biroli 2018; Alvarez and Caldwell 2017; Harrington 2015). In March 2013, under leadership of Afro-Brazilian women union leaders, the Brazilian Congress approved one of the most sweeping domestic labor reforms in the Western Hemisphere. Given the intentional efforts previously taken by the state to exclude domestic workers from even being considered laborers, this victory takes on even greater significance. De Santana Pinho (2015) expounds upon this vital historical context:

For example, when the *Consolidação das Leis Trabalhistas* – CIT (Consolidation of labor laws) was established in 1943, domestic workers were excluded from its coverage because it was understood that maids carried out “non-economic” labor... The CIT was the first set of laws to unify workers' rights in Brazil, and it represented a major victory for the working class. By excluding domestic workers from its benefits, Brazilian legislators maintained the status quo of millions of poor (and mainly black) women, thus contributing to further naturalizing their position as “less than” laborers. (107)

In stark contrast to earlier legislation, the 2013 reforms recognized domestic work as a profession with all rights that this designation allows, including a formal stance on labor abuse, regulations about compensation, social security, right to vacation, health care, and a formal system to address grievances (Brazil Ministerio do Trabalho 2013). Indicative of the

¹⁸ As Anderson (1996) shows, the best example of this resistance is embodied by quilombo communities, of the which the largest, Palmares, withstood invasion for over 200 years.

extent to which the law would intervene to dismantle the link connecting domestic abuses and slavery, these laws have been referred to as Brazil's "second abolition of slavery."¹⁹

These legislative developments are promising; however, *filhas de criação* are part of a unique group that has historically been situated as the most marginalized and invisible workers in Brazil.²⁰ The aforementioned labor laws have not significantly impacted the lives of the *filhas de criação* in this study who were "taken in" by families under the auspices of informal adoption. None of the *filhas de criação* who are included in this study accessed these laws to receive the pay, benefits, and protections to which they would be rightfully entitled.²¹ Further revealing the gaps in legislation, the informally adopted daughters in this study remain on the fringes of the informal economy and outside the reach of these new laws because of their ambiguous positions as family members and workers. The cultural logic of *criação*, the ambiguity of their positionality, their high level of dependency, and moral ambiguities create doubts, in their own minds, about whether such legislative protections even *should* be extended to them. This ambiguity is amplified by the fact that sometimes *filhas de criação* may begin in a home as a paid worker and later transition into being a *filha de criação*, and vice versa. Some are partially paid and others receive nothing at all. For example, Indira, whose informal payments stopped years ago, lamented that her adoptive family members "have been making a slave out of me." Not only did she refuse to report them to the authorities; she lied to others about having received payments in order to protect the family's honor and her own. The moral ambiguity of these relationships similarly explains why Tânia, who felt like "property," simultaneously asserted that she should feel gratitude for her adoptive family.

¹⁹ In March 2013, Eliana Menezes from the Domestic Workers Union of São Paulo referred to the 2013 legislation as the "segunda abolição da escravidão." www.cartacapital.com.br/sociedade/pec-das-domesticas-e-segunda-abolicao-da-escravatura-diz-lideranca/.

²⁰ Offering one of the most comprehensive analyses of the precarious status of *filhos de criação* in the late twentieth century, Dalla Vecchia (2001) describes *criação* as a semi-servitude form of production where *filhos de criação* were "almost always exploited and maintained in a state of dependency and submission, politically controlled, culturally excluded, marginalized in family relations, and limited both recreationally and religiously" (ix).

²¹ Fonseca (2002a) writes about these gaps and attributes them to the fact that "Brazilian laws, often touted as being on the forefront of progressive international legislation, give so little heed to local values and social dynamics" (398).