Guatemala inflamed
The Village Voice; May 31, 1994; 39, 22; Research Library
pg. 25

GUATEMALA INFLAMED

Accused of Stealing or Murdering Babies, American Women are Attacked by Hysterical Mobs

BY ELIZABETH KADETSKY

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The 52-year-old June Weinstock, an environmentalist from Alaska, was accused of killing a child to steal his organs.

"Hey,pretty. You think I'm sexy?" This is what the standup comic is yelling to me through the crowd at dusk one evening in Guatemala City, and he won't let up. "Francesa? Italiana?" I wonder: Should I pretend I do understand, or that I don't? Should I ignore him, or shoot back in Spanish? Should I leave? I leave. Look back. Men from the crowd are tailing me. By the time I've lost them it's dark, and the boys from the Policia Nacional are posted by the fortress around the corner from my hotel. I watch the officers frolic, like cats playing: their rifles rise, fall, spar. Then I suck in my breath and walk past, listening for the familiar sound of banter shutting down, hissing noises announcing the arrival of a woman alone, at night, just trying to get to the other side. The night before, a few men hissed, and I thought I overheard one laugh to the other, "Did you see the way that gringa looked at that baby?"

Maybe June Weinstock came across such a scene on March 29, just before a mob of some 75 highland villagers beat her into what looks like permanent semiconsciousness for allegedly stealing a Guatemalan child. An environmentalist from Alaska, the 52-year-old Weinstock was hardly the sort of person one could imagine committing so luridly imperialist an act as kidnapping a Guatemalan child, hiding him in her skirts, and pirating him off to the United States to be harvested for body parts for a wealthy American kidney patient. Yet if this sounds like an implausible act for (almost) any U.S. citizen, it does not appear so to the thousands of Guatemalans who have been swept up this spring in a national hysteria that paints North-South relations as something like those between a privileged scavenger and his spare-parts car.

June Weinstock was staying in a $3-a-night hotel in the little town of San Cristóbal Verapaz when she fell into the ordeal that began with the accusation of child stealing. Ironically, she had purposely come to San Cristóbal, a rain-soaked place few outsiders who are not members of the Peace Corps bother to visit. Weinstock was not a traveler to tolerate the foreigner-thronged Semana Santa celebration, at its height on March 29 in Guatemala's more luscious precincts. In San Cristóbal she found something less polluted by the commercializing influence of tourism. "She was very intelligent and conscious of cultural differences," notes one of her coworkers at the Northern Alaska Environmental Center in Fairbanks. "She knew how to travel as an un-ugly American, she was learning Spanish. That's why it's so bizarre that this happened to her."

The hotelier Olivia Gomez de Ruiz, Doña Oly to friends and guests, was equally impressed by the integrity of San Cristóbal's recent martyr. I am the first reporter to partake of the hotelier's minute account of the 15 hours Weinstock spent at Hotel Oly before her ordeal, but Doña Oly's precision suggests I am not her first listener. "I offered her coffee—she had papaya and two cups of coffee—and I noticed she was left-handed," Doña Oly tells me. "I told her in my country to be left-handed is to have good luck and intelligence. Can you imagine? Then I asked her what she did and she said, 'Look at my hands, I work hard,' because she did some kind of agricultural resettlement. She did, she had working hands. These were not the hands of a secretary."

Then Doña Oly shows me June's room—the entrepreneur is intent on illustrating that San Cristóbal is in fact hospitable, though I have my doubts. "When I heard what happened," Doña Oly is saying as I scan the room, "I thought *¡Que terrible!* But you know we've never had a problem, never an incident. People here were always very friendly. And now look at this reputation we have."

It is not just in San Cristóbal that locals have demonstrated feelings of unwelcome toward their wealthier neighbors to the north. Two weeks earlier in the sleepy coastal city of Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa, several hundred residents misinterpreted the arrest of Melissa Larson, from Taos, New Mexico. A veteran visitor to the Guatemalan resorts, Larson had been picked up on suspicion of carrying a joint. Police took her to a distant prison, unbeknownst to the mob that surrounded the local jail. The mob believed she'd been arrested for running a child-snatching ring. When they realized she was gone, they burned the jail down. In a similarly motivated attack on March 25, a Swiss scientist suffered minor injuries.

These seemingly flukish events garnered brief mention in the U.S. media, but the tension has remained constant. Just two weeks ago in the more cosmopolitan capital, a crowd tailed a Philadelphia resident through darkness to her friends' house, demanding that she turn over the newly adopted Guatemalan baby she'd been carrying. Foreign women living in Guatemala City now find themselves the objects of suspicion, and unpublicized misunderstandings are common. Christena Colclough, an Irish-born AP correspondent with a blond, blue-eyed newborn daughter, says, "Guatemalans ask me, 'Is that your baby?' Sometimes I give them a filthy look. I feel anger. People will say, '*Qué linda. Qué chula*.' I say, 'Look, you motherfuckers, it was your people who bashed that woman into a vegetable. How can you look at this baby and see a foreigner as a beautiful entity and then on the other side of the scale see this woman who's old enough to be her granny and beat her into a pulp?' "

San Cristóbal Verapaz is not a modern city, but it does have videographers, and at least three of them taped the attack on Weinstock. Reuters sent out a three-minute excerpt of the videos for international media consumption, though in Guatemala viewers could watch five hours of the San Cristóbal violence, most but not all of it directed at Weinstock, on the sensationalist TV channel NotiSiete.

At the government public information office in the capital, I watch the video of what happened after Weinstock got off a bus at the town's central plaza and inauspiciously befriended some children. A local, Jesús Valdez, tried to reason with the gathering crowd, which snowballed as it followed Valdez and Weinstock the three blocks to San Cristóbal's one-room lakeside courthouse, where a judge could presumably sort out the allegations against her. When after two hours, the rowdy multitude proved unconvinced, Valdez, Weinstock, Mike Lewis—an evangelical missionary living on the lake—and a half-dozen municipal authorities took refuge inside the courthouse. They phoned a military base six miles down the road for rescue. Meanwhile, 13 policemen on hand toyed with their rifles and wondered what to do.

In the following three hours, the crowd stormed the courthouse, dragged a petrified Weinstock outside, and attacked both her

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The crowd torched the courthouse where June Weinstock took refuge.

and Lewis—abandoning Lewis when someone pointed out that he was a neighbor. Lewis and the municipal authorities fell back into the crowd, convinced, as one official told me, "it was going to be a massacre." A crew of disgruntled striking roadworkers soon materialized and offered up a truckload of poles and machetes as weapons. The crowd, all indigenous men, torched the courthouse. The lake was steaming with the policemen's extinguished tear-gas canisters by the time an impassive military rolled into town three hours late. (Military spokesmen would later disingenuously claim they had no authority to intervene in a civil disturbance; with circumstantial but persuasive evidence, human rights activists accused the military of engineering the attack and hiring the roadworkers to carry it out.)

The video image, its perspective foreshortened, catches Weinstock from her Nikes up lying on the pavement. The lens angle accentuates her naked hips and crotch, her matronly skirt pulled up over. Her head is bashed in and covered in blood. (Two months later her head remains visibly deformed; she cannot speak or reliably recognize her friends.) On screen, young men beat her, and rape her, with sticks. In the background, Guatemala is in full bloom, the purple of jacaranda, orange blossoms, flowers everywhere. In the office, where I have been wedged in front of a TV monitor between two desks, young male officeworkers carry on obliviously, their eyes occasionally gliding past the television. On screen, a boy tosses a two-by-four over his shoulder, looks defiantly into the camera, and is led away by police. There is the arrogance of the boys who attacked the Central Park jogger, the chaos of social unrest we witnessed on the videotaped mutilation of Reginald Denny, and the vengeance of both.

The men assert paternal responsibility. "What are we if we do not protect our children?" one man screams into the camera.

San Cristóbal is a small town tied together with rumors, the cables that wire a collective unconscious. With those rumors, my traveling partner, Cito—a blackbelt in karate whom some protective friends have asked to accompany me—and I trace the attack on Weinstock to an indigenous market woman whose eight-year-old son had run into a Semana Santa procession and disappeared. "Where's my son?" she yelled. "The gringa took him and put him in her backpack to chop him up as body parts," an ice cream vendor joked. Half an hour later, rumors that Weinstock was carrying this child's body parts were so fierce that Mike Lewis pulled every item from Weinstock's backpack to show the crowd she was clean. The day we arrive, three weeks later, a rumor circulates that she did in fact have organs, in her thermos. According to another, June Weinstock was a man in drag.

Lewis invites us to lunch when we visit him unannounced an hour after arriving in town, on our way from the mayor's office. His wife, LaTonya, rustles in the kitchen balancing muffin trays, sifters, and an oven timer. The couple and their two blond daughters live in a comfortable home whose second story provided a bird's-eye perch above the Weinstock attack; seeing her husband thus embroiled, LaTonya grabbed her two daughters and retreated to the back room, where she meditated on what she foresaw as her new life as a widow. We pray before lunch. After, Mike asks, "So how was your meeting with the mayor?"

That Mike already knew where we'd been says a lot about a town that is 85 per cent Mayan—and can explain in part the tenacity of the organs rumors. Only half the local population can speak Spanish, and of those, few are literate—50 per cent of Guatemalans can't read or write, and that rate rises among the indigenous, who make up approximately 60 per cent of the population. Boris Martinez, a linguist from Guatemala City who has spent the last 10 years living among the local Indians, the Pokonchi, adds that the indigenous language was never a written one. "People tend to hear something and they repeat it. This is an oral society," Martinez says. "This is how knowledge is passed on, and often something is added."

For Martinez and his wife, Elizabeth, this oral society can also be one that forever mistrusts outsiders, even those who go so far as to learn the language or adopt a local child, as the Martinezes have. Elizabeth, a blond from Pennsylvania with a build similar to June Weinstock's, tells me she's never encountered much hostility—these days, when she gets a dirty look she breaks into the Pokonchi language. But, she later confesses, "After living here for 10 years and really being part of the community, after taking care of the daughter of a local woman who couldn't, I really don't know what would happen if someone pointed the finger at me. Would people stand behind me? After all this time, I really don't know."

The beating in San Cristóbal should not suggest that gruesome fantasizing about the First World is restricted to rural Indians. There is a story I have heard in several parts of the country, but I encounter the most elaborate version in a middle-class house in Guatemala City: A family visiting Houston to recuperate from the tragic kidnapping of their nephew sees the nephew on the street. The boy has no eyes—they've been gouged out for corneal transplants. The storyteller then tells a version of the one about the busload of eight, or 10, or 16, child corpses, one eviscerated and stuffed with dollar bills. On top sits a note reading, in English, "This is for the boy's funeral." This took place in Santa Lucía. Or Guatemala City. Or even in Southern Mexico.

Mention of a Central American organ traffic first appeared in *Izvestia* in 1987, though folklorists link the story to legends as ancient as the infamous "blood libel," a Roman belief that Jews stole babies' blood to bake matzoh. The myths all share a tendency to reach a hysterical pitch when ma-

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The military said it had no authority to intervene in a civil disturbance.

nipulated for political gain, by the right or the left. A similar legend has been used in Syria to malign Israelis, and supposedly by the Shining Path in Peru against the government. In Guatemala, the U.S. Embassy and human rights activists charge that this spring the Guatemalan military or certain of its cronies fed the credulous local press organ-trafficking stories, thus furthering a political agenda to undermine the 10-month-old civilian government, while simultaneously dissuading foreign observers from participating in an impending peace process meant to resolve the country's 33-year-old civil war.

The organs myth also serves the American left by putting a conveniently graphic and literal face on the notion of the United States sucking the blood of its Third World neocolonies. This popularity might explain the stories' enduring shelf life, as well as the legends' currency among several international organizations—despite the blind alleys that confront reporters who try to track them down. The European Parliament has decided that enough circumstantial evidence exists to justify calling organs trafficking a "serious problem"; and a Geneva-based group called World Organization Against Torture recently issued a report suggesting a thriving trade exists on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Given that it is harder to prove an untruth than a truth, I find the skepticism of those who have tracked this story convincing. AP's Colclough assisted BBC producer Judy Jackson on segments of Jackson's years-long investigation for the documentary *The Body Parts Business*. Though one Argentine doctor admitted to Jackson to having done a transplant operation, Colclough says there is otherwise no evidence of a large-scale traffic. *Time* magazine's Trish O'Kane remains open minded: "This is a place where anything can happen, where there are clandestine jails, torture chambers underground. In Guatemala, you can't rule anything out."

The organ-trafficking rumors take place in a context of real violence—and the United States is implicated. The U.S. helped fund Guatemala's singularly savage military. This peaked when the stepped-up assistance of the Reagan years coincided with a "Dirty War," in which the Guatemalan military's counterinsurgency campaign meant mistaking thousands of peasants for guerrillas and razing dozens of their highland communities. Today the Clinton administration helps finance the civilian government, which is typically cowed by the military.

The violence remains a vivid memory in San Cristóbal Verapaz, where bodies used to turn up on the sidewalks by the half dozen. In 1982 the army's wrath hit the neighboring hillside village of Las Pacayas, where at least 60 men, women, children, and old people were executed and burned. Twelve years later, military power is so fabled that even government officials fall silent at talk of the massacre.

With the congressional election of president Ramiro de León Carpio last June and the beginnings of a peace process, the national press has just begun to find the voice to describe this past. Though it has yet to mention Las Pacayas, it has been filled of late with revelations from two newly exhumed mass graves—one containing the remains of 300 bodies. The evidence at the other, in the lowlands just below San Cristóbal at Rio Negro, suggests 143 men, women, and children died by strangulation—survivors recount soldiers smashing babies' heads against rocks.

For folklorist Alan Dundes, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, macabre rumors can stand in for the unsayable. "The [organs] legend is based on a real fear," Dundes says. "It is also an outlet to talk about these butcheries, it's a form of displacement. This is a safe way to say what you can't otherwise say. You won't go to jail for talking about someone's organs getting ripped out."

Guatemala's indigenous community has also survived a vicious sequence of humiliations that constitute a history of First World–Third World/white-brown exploitation. In 1871 the Ladinos—descendants of the Spaniards—decreed all Maya lands theirs, leaving a legacy of 70 per cent poverty nationally. In San Cristóbal a day's work pays 10 quetzals, $1.50. If children are the protagonists in a myth of exploitation and slaughter, that reflects their rank as victims in general: Infant mortality among the Maya is 500 per 1000 live births; according to various human rights groups, the Dirty War against Mayans has orphaned 250,000 kids. This is in addition to 150,000 deaths, 50,000 disappearances, and a million refugees. For San Cristóbal's Ladinos, the Weinstock attack reinforces prejudices: the indigenous participants are "savages," playing out their inevitable *barbaridad*.

Elena Ixcot, a Guatemalan exile and leader living in Vermont, finds a literal link between the historic exploitation of Indians and their often justifiable fears of baby snatching. "This isn't part of some Mayan cosmovision," she tells me. "We Mayans are always talked about as pagans, satanists, savages, tons of names, an underdeveloped culture. What is true is that a system of terror arrived in this country in 1523, and this is deep in our minds. When we were growing up we wouldn't walk around alone because they said the cars would take us away. But this is because we've been violated, invaded first by the Spaniards, then by the U.S. in [the military coup of] 1954. There is a system of terror and death that has always been in people's minds."

That a female face and not an army colonel's or a conquistador's has been attached to this national fixation on body parts points to the persistence of women as the child snatchers of myth. In the legend of Latin America's Llorona, for one, the indigenous lover of Cortés the conqueror so curses the betrayal of the murderous white man and colonizer that she slips off to the nearest river and drowns her new infant, the first offspring of a white and Indian union. Forever after, La Llorona, the wailing woman, slinks along late-night riverbanks as she howls her song of mourning, searching for her lost child and snatching those children unlucky enough to cross her

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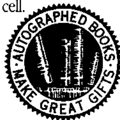

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Two months later Weinstock can't speak or reliably recognize her friends.

path. Throughout Latin America and in Guatemala, where memories of conquest remain central to Mayan culture, children shiver on windy nights in fear of La Llorona's thieving grip.

A Philadelphia woman named Janice Wogel got off a Guatemala City bus the night of May 15 carrying her newly adopted, six-month-old, brown-skinned Guatemalan baby. Perhaps, moving silently along sidewalks with no streetlights, she seemed in all those shadows like some kind of white bogeywoman absconding with the nation's future. The crowd that trailed her reportedly screamed the by now familiar abuse at Wogel, who was able to elude her accusers all the way to her friends' house. There, she summoned the Embassy, which sent emissaries to calm the crowd.

Unwittingly, Wogel, while not an organ robber, was a visual reminder of the fact that every year Americans and Europeans are adopting more than 800 mostly indigenous and mostly poverty-ravaged babies. That is the number of legitimate adoptions; the trade is so corrupt and poorly regulated that the real figure is certainly higher. Some of these infants are, in fact, stolen; others are bought. This baby traffic points to the real flashpoint igniting the recent assaults on American women. If they're in Guatemala, and particularly if they're alone, these gringas are perceived as having no purpose but to coerce the destitute into giving up their children.

In a country where the high value placed on babies seems in direct opposition to the terrifying cheapness of life, the ripping of infants from their mothers' arms can seem like a form of national dismemberment. I say ripping because babies are known to be literally snatched from their mothers as well as lifted from hospital beds, swindled from illiterate women who unknowingly sign the wrong papers, bought for sums ranging from pennies to thousands of dollars, and even commissioned from prostitutes who agree to get pregnant. Claudio Porres, a minister of public information, claims there are six child snatchings a week. Nineth Montenegro, a respected human rights advocate, tallied 60 kidnappings in the first two months of 1994.

Of the adoptive parents whom Ken Klothen, director of Children's Rights International, has encountered in his travels from Guatemala to the United States, several arranged to pick up babies on streetcorners in transactions as illicit as the handing over of ransom. No questions asked.

Even Guatemala's legitimate adoption network is haunted by allegations of cruel wrongdoing implicating everyone from those who assign (often fake) birth certificates to top government officials. Corruption is so pervasive it's almost impossible to participate in the adoption process without supporting some sleaziness. Government prosecutors have been unsuccessfully trying to nab their own Supreme Court president, the seemingly immune Juan José Rodil Peralta, for operating an adoption ring. The current ambassador to the United States, Edmund Mulet, has been arrested for illegal trafficking in children. So have the wives of several prominent military leaders and dozens of Guatemalan lawyers who practice what can loosely be termed adoption law.

Not surprisingly, these lawyers deny there is any corruption. When I ask lawyer Carlota Torres Ocampo about it, she responds, "I wouldn't know. You'd have to ask the authorities."

Lawyer Raquel Fortuny says, "The police bother us all the time. But they're illiterate, they don't know anything about adoption." Fortuny, who runs a practice out of her house in a middle class section of Guatemala City, adds defensively, "If there's a kid here the neighbors call the police and say it's a stolen child, even if it's not. The police come, they call the press, they make a scandal, they say there was a kid robbed. So the mother comes back and says, 'OK I'll keep him,' and they take the children and they end up in the street selling limes and being thieves. Or maybe they grow up and become policemen."

An official at the U.S. Embassy assures me that Americans who adopt children keep their hands clean "in 90 per cent of cases"—last year approximately two thirds of Guatemala's adopted children were destined for the United States. Even this official's facts, however, suggest far more Americans participate unknowingly in widespread corruption. The embassy keeps a list of "30 or 40" unscrupulous adoption lawyers, which accounts for a third of the entire pool of available lawyers. For suspicious cases ("If the supposed mother is giggling, or if she doesn't know anything about the kid"), the embassy began requiring a $200 genetic test last year to prove the woman giving up the child was actually the child's mother. The embassy has requested the test 16 times. Six women failed. Another six never showed up to take it.

The embassy does not recommend Carlota Torres Ocampo, who was arrested in 1992 and nonetheless continues to provide babies for a New Jersey adoption agency called Amor. Torres assures me she scrutinizes the face of every birth mother of every child to make sure she is indeed the real mother. "As a woman, there's certain questions or answers where you can just tell. I ask how long was the labor. How were the pains?" Later Torres contradicts herself and admits she always works with interim foster mothers, rarely even meeting the birth mother.

Guatemala's jails occasionally offer short penance to lawyers like Torres, but they are nearly teeming with the rank-and-file laborers who perform the more explicitly illegal misdeeds of the adoption trade. The Santa Teresa women's penitentiary in Guatemala City is an immaculate and placid mountainside facility where women roam the property matter-of-factly commiserating about the legal system's lassitude in coming up with sentences and enacting them.

I have come to visit a woman who has been accused of operating a "*casa cuna clandestina*," literally a "clandestine crib house," where stolen or otherwise dubiously procured babies are tended until a corrupt lawyer can place them for adoption with a foreign, generally American, family. Since the woman I'm looking for is out at court, the prison matron obliges me by presenting a procession of women who have

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been accused of similar crimes. "We get about a half dozen of these a week," says the prison's only U.S.-born inmate (a Maya-emulating Northern Californian who has been arrested, incidentally, not for baby snatching but on drug charges).

Though some of these women have apparently been thrown in prison by ex-lovers or enemies who took advantage of the child-snatching vogue and framed them, among those who really did facilitate the adoption of a potentially stolen baby is Amalia Ramírez. Ramírez made 100 quetzals, or $17, when she signed a certificate claiming she was the midwife in the delivery of a baby she had never seen. Her employer then presented the certificate, along with another woman posing as the baby's mother, to authorities who approved the infant's adoption. "The authorities knew it was a fake," asserts Ramírez, who is illiterate and actually only provided a fingerprint. Ramírez usually makes 10 quetzales a day as a freelance laundress, seamstress, and tortilla vendor, so 100 quetzals for a fingerprint sounded like a good deal. "They've stolen my name," she tells me now.

The woman I have come to meet, Isidora Villatoro, earned 500 quetzals ($90) a month, per head, to take care of three nameless newborns. She claims to have only gotten half. Her employer, a notorious quack adoption lawyer named Jaime Castro Galindo, who landed in prison himself this February, though for only a week, apparently abandoned Isidora's *casa cuna* when baby trafficking rumors escalated. Uncertain of where things stood or even the babies' real identities, Isidora shrugged her shoulders and assumed she'd keep the kids for life—feeding and clothing them with her own money for two months easily ate up her initial payment. "When they arrested me the authorities said these were the healthiest-looking babies they'd ever seen in a *casa cuna*," Isidora brags.

Last year Guatemala ranked third among developing countries U.S. agencies tap for adoptable babies. Guatemala has been among the top eight exporters of children to the United States every year since 1988, usually falling after Korea, Peru, Colombia and India. Korea, by far the most popular source of children and generally regarded as having the cleanest and best-regulated trade, exports approximately 2000 children a year to the U.S. In 1988 Americans adopted close to 5000 babies from Korea out of 9120 total adopted foreign children.

Of these, some foreign babies came legitimately, and others did not. Rebeca de Bravatti was raising her six-year-old nephew Severino in Guatemala City when his estranged mother reappeared one day in 1989, took him to a "piñata" party and never came back. The family later discovered the mother sold Severino into adoption for $9000 through a Minnesota adoption agency, New Horizons, with the assistance of the Guatemalan adoption lawyer Edmund Mulet, now ambassador to the U.S. "Sevi" is now called "Alex" by his American family, who do not want to speak to the press and who refused to reverse the adoption when Sevi's family contacted them four months later. In the loose lexicon of Guatemalan adoption law, the adoption was not explicitly illegal.

"I got a threat," says de Bravatti, a florid and optimistic computer consultant who now has a daughter of her own. De Bravatti unsuccessfully challenged the case through the Guatemalan courts, but she remains one of the few public advocates for adoption reform, and discussion of her nephew still brings her quickly to the point of tears. "I stopped my car at a light and there was a motorcyclist in all black, black boots, black jacket," she says. "He lifted his visor and asked if I was going to continue fighting the case and I said, 'Yes.' Then he put a gun to my head and said, 'Are you sure?' and I said, 'Yes. Even when I'm dead.'"

The family de Bravatti believes stole her nephew may be extreme in its blindness to the adopted Alex's roots, but on the U.S. end international adoption agencies will often encourage a studied indifference. When I inquire about adoption at one California agency, the director tells me babies from India are cheaper than babies from Latin America. "You're going to pay 12, 13 thousand dollars to get a baby from Honduras right now," she says. "I can get you one from India for nine." All babies will be olive-skinned, she adds, "not brown." When I ask why international adoption is preferable to domestic, which costs about the same, she adds, "In the U.S. the birth mother can decide whether I want to keep my child, whether I want to sign or not. International adoption, the adoptions are secure. The birth mother doesn't change her mind."

The director's attitude may sound harsh, but the well protected rights of a U.S. birth mother do preoccupy even the well meaning. "This can be real traumatic," says the mother of an adopted child from Korea. She and her husband had been raising their six-month-old adopted daughter when the birth mother changed her mind and demanded the baby back. "We decided we would never go through that again, so we adopted from Korea," the mother says unapologetically.

The theme of obstreperous birth mothers also dominates discussion at a meeting of couples considering international as well as domestic adoption at a Los Angeles maternity house, Children's Home Society. Will the babies be addicted to crack? one woman wants to know. Will the U.S. birth mother demand the parents' names, visiting rights? "I know the Baby Jessica scare has everyone on edge," the facilitator placates. "You have to keep in mind that every mother has the opportunity to change her mind, because it's a hard thing to do."

In Guatemala the birth mother has no rights. Meanwhile, home studies, in which a social worker comes to the prospective adoptive parents' home to sniff out abusive or otherwise undesirable situations, are easily forged and essentially overlooked. Which are all among the litany of reasons Ken Klothen cites when recommending against international adoption. "There's obviously an element of self-deception," he says. "A lot of people don't want to know where their baby came from, a lot of people shut their eyes. There are violations in the moral sense, this is the use of economic power from the United States to have people decide to give up their children. We have this disturbing tendency in this country, it's a charitable impulse, we see children in distress we want to help them. International adoption is viewed as the solution to the problems these children face, and it's not. The solution is sustainable development so families can afford to support their children and decide how many children to have so children don't go hungry. What really should be done with poor people is to make sure they're not poor anymore."

Well intentioned First World families will likely continue to find salvation in the rescue of barefoot children selling Chiclets in the Third World. But their blithe complicity in a more insidious imbalance of power makes the tale of June Weinstock, raped and beaten nearly to death at a pastoral lakeside in the Guatemalan highlands, larger than a lurid bloodletting or even the playing out of a military conspiracy against a beleaguered and fragile civilian government. It's impossible to adopt from Guatemala—or Mexico or Colombia or Peru for that matter—without being tainted by an abusive international adoption industry and the context of Third World exploitation in which it exists. This, and the complexity of oppression it represents, is the painful fact that overtook June Weinstock when the Pokonchi Indians rose against the rarity of her white and female face.

Perhaps bitterest of all is that Weinstock seemed to be grappling with the unending depth of this very exploitation. In a touching exchange over the computer network PeaceNet this February, shortly before she left on her trip to Southern Mexico and then Guatemala, Weinstock confided to a potential traveling partner her desire to help in the fight against poverty and the abuse of human rights. "In truth, though," she adds with disarming candor, "as is usually the case in these situations, the greatest benefit from meeting indigenous people would accrue mostly to me. And I'd be pleased for that, too." ■

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