

Book Review/Reseña

Kristen A. Kolenz
Centre College
kristen.kolenz@centre.edu

***Until I Find You: Disappeared Children and Coercive Adoptions in Guatemala.* By Rachel Nolan. Harvard University Press, 2024. 320 pages, 13 photos, 5 maps. Hardcover, \$35; paperback, \$25; Kindle, \$20.**

In *Until I Find You: Disappeared Children and Coercive Adoptions in Guatemala*, Rachel Nolan presents a history of international adoptions from Guatemala, the only country in the world to have legalized a fully private adoption system. By immersing readers in the historical specificities that preconditioned and perpetuated Guatemala's highly irregular, south-to-north transfer of children from 1977 until 2008, Nolan makes visible the devastating consequences of intranational and global racism, classism, and sexism in a world shaped by colonial violence. Positioning Guatemala as a "sender" country in the international adoption market, Nolan's study illuminates the intersecting dangers of anti-Indigeneity, paternalism, and harsh condemnation of poor populations on a global scale. *Until I Find You* historicizes and analyzes Guatemala's history of disappearance, coercive adoption, and outright kidnapping for profit to consider how white supremacist, patriarchal power sanctions who can be a good mother, who is allowed to parent, and which children are desirable.

Among the most comprehensive histories of Guatemala's notorious adoption industry, *Until I Find You* spans from 1968, the year that marked the first formal state adoption, through thirty years and (after 1977) 30,000 international adoptions, and ends in 2008 with the state's total termination of all international adoptions. Synthesizing histories from the briefly opened state archives; police, military, and court records; interviews with lawyers, advocates, and adoptees; and contemporaneous media, Nolan debunks the belief that stealing children and coercing adoptions amount to "random, chaotic crime" (14). Rather, her research reveals systemic, enduring political violence that relies on an elitist, white supremacist body of lawmakers willing and able to exploit poor, Indigenous peoples and women to maximize their monetary gain. Beginning with the intensification of war violence and extending more than a decade after the peace agreement in 1996, Nolan

demonstrates the centrality of adoption in the maintenance of colonial power and the reactivation of genocide.

Tracing evidence of rhetorical strategies that generate the perception of an “orphan crisis” through the Cold War and the earlier years of civil violence, through the aftermath of the 1976 earthquake, and through the most intense years of the civil war, *Until I Find You* uncovers a profoundly hierarchical network of lawyers, baby brokers, social workers, and international adoption agencies. At their worst, Nolan finds, these interconnected actors target, kidnap, and traffic lighter-skinned babies. However, in other less common instances, the same networks leveraged the unregulated system and broad-ranging impunity to help women deal with unwanted pregnancies in a country that criminalizes abortion. Weaving together emblematic stories of the extreme, outlying, and mundane realities of adoption in Guatemala, *Until I Find You* presents a complex history of violence and resistance before national and international systems of inequality.

The book opens with an introduction that broadly sketches Guatemala’s multilingual, multiethnic, and unequal landscape in relation to its vastly disproportionate participation in the global adoption market. The nine chapters that follow progress in a loosely chronological sequence. Chapters 1 and 2 take on the era before adoption privatization through the lens of state-employed social workers who dealt with a disconnected country, under-resourced systems, and the beginnings of civil war. Nolan juxtaposes generally well-meaning social workers, an overburdened agency, and underexamined racial ideologies with the recency of formal adoption procedures to show a flawed but far less criminal organization than what would follow.

The core of the book, chapters 3–8, trace the privatization era. In chapters 3 and 4, Nolan highlights Guatemala’s 1976 earthquake as a key factor in the perception of a national “orphan crisis” that ultimately paves the way for lobbying for and passing privatization legislation and the subsequent criminal rings. Chapters 5–8 focus on adoptions through the intensification of civil war violence, particularly the national military’s aggression against rural Indigenous peoples. First, in chapters 5–6, Nolan presents the evolution of rhetorical and physical state violence under military (chapter 5) and civilian (chapter 6) rule. Then in chapters 7 and 8, Nolan tracks the processes of state (chapter 7) and private (chapter 8) adoptions through the height of the war.

The final chapter, titled “The Reckoning,” reads national rumors and violence that emerge after 1988 as a manifestation of public backlash against years of state-sanctioned disappearances, family separations, and kidnapping. Nolan ends her study with an epilogue that foregrounds the adult adoptees who search, often unsuccessfully, for their birth families. Adoptees confront two states—the United States and Guatemala—that have yet to reckon with their respective roles in tens of thousands of coercive adoptions.

Alongside the thorough history of an understudied and widely misunderstood component of the Guatemalan state's assault on its most vulnerable citizens, *Until I Find You* offers a complex analysis of archival silences and omissions. Most notably, Nolan activates this critical methodology in chapter 9 with her reinterpretation of Guatemala's "moral panic." Common readings of organ-trafficking rumors, accusations of kidnapping, and false reporting on adoptions viewed them as evidence of the Guatemalan public's inability to obstruct the will of the governing elite. Nolan, in contrast, situates the public response as resistance. She connects kidnapping rumors in the 1980s and 1990s to constant suspicions about Indigenous children's safety and family integrity since colonial invasion and asks readers to critically analyze the truths within beliefs about organ-trafficking (or, trading the lives of the Global South's poor for the enrichment of the Global North). Rather than emphasizing the inaccuracies of rumors and false accusations, Nolan argues that this supposed "moral panic" preconditions the political possibility of the end of private adoptions. Further, Nolan suggests that readers interpret this backlash as a way for the public to act in their own defense when the state was both indifferent to and complicit in violence.

Until I Find You is a critical contribution to Guatemalan studies, a field largely dominated by assessments and analyses of the civil war, especially counting the dead, quantifying harm, and describing in graphic detail the massacring of Indigenous peoples. Following Diane Nelson (*Who Counts? The Mathematics of Death and Life after Genocide*, 2015), who suggested that tallying and fixating on round numbers of dead bodies obscures the depth and breadth of state terror, Nolan studies the time of Guatemala's civil war through the parallel violence of adoption. With her focus on international adoptions and the conditions that made privatization possible, Nolan provides a refreshed perspective on the state's unrelenting, anti-Indigenous aggression and the operations of genocide during this era. As she makes explicit, Nolan wants this field and those who study disappearance and genocide anywhere in the world to "ask about children, too" (14). A "known variant of political violence," stealing children is emblematic of mass terror's purpose; forcibly separating children from their families accomplishes the ends of genocide and exposes the interconnected systems and broad network of actors that enforce and perpetuate state violence. Nolan's work urges scholars to account for the diversity of a violent state's strategies, the breadth of its criminal networks, and the roots of its logics. These insights stand to generate unasked questions and bring to light understudied modes of violence in scholarship on intranational conflict far beyond the Guatemala context.

A finalist for the 2025 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction, *Until I Find You* will appeal to a broad audience, from undergraduates to scholars in Latin American studies, international adoption studies, civil conflict studies, de/postcolonial studies, and migration studies. Nonacademic readers, like the immigration justice and anti-US

imperialism activist communities and those intimately connected to international adoptions, will also find Nolan's parallel history accessible and illuminating. Writing that *Until I Find You* is for the adoptees still searching for the truth of their origins, Nolan authored the book with this wide readership in mind. Because she has expertly balanced a highly relevant intervention in narrow area studies fields with a sharp critique on global systems of structural inequality, *Until I Find You* stands to impact a diverse audience and compel urgent questions about race, family, and power.

Kristen A. Kolenz is an assistant professor of international studies and affiliated faculty in the Latin American studies program at Centre College in Kentucky. She earned her PhD in women's, gender, and sexuality studies at The Ohio State University. Her current research focuses on contemporary feminist contestations of state violence and activist performances of political transformation in urban Guatemala. She is the coordinator of the Guatemala Scholars Network and an immigration justice scholar-advocate. Kolenz recently coedited the volume, *Unbordering Migration Studies in the Caribbean and Latin America* (Rutgers University Press, 2026) and is the curator of *Holding: Art from the Shadows of Mass Deportation*.
