

Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity & Kinship

Alliance Members to meet at MLA 2004 in Philadelphia

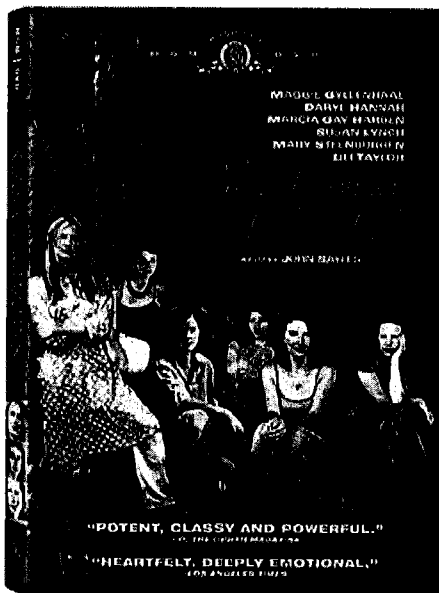
Members of the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity and Kinship plan to meet informally at the cash bar of the Division on Autobiography, Biography, and Life Writing at the 2004 MLA.

The Division's cash bar will be held at 5:15-6:30 p.m. in Commonwealth Hall A2 in the Loews Hotel on Wednesday, December 29.

Commentary: Casa de los Babys

By Julia Rosenberg and Warren Rosenberg
Wabash College

Review: *Casa de los Babys* (IFC Films, MGM, 2003)



From his first independent feature, *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980), John Sayles, the writer and director of *Casa de los Babys*, has created believable, diverse and multifaceted female characters. In films like *Lianna* (1983), a sympathetic representation of lesbianism, and *Passion Fish* (1992), one of the most sensitive renderings of female friendship put on film, conversation constitutes action as characters (and viewers) discover who they are in tightly written dialogue. *Casa de los Babys* offers Sayles's most challenging opportunity to represent women as it follows six North Americans waiting to adopt babies in an unnamed South American country. The women talk about economics, sexuality, their relationships, eating, but mostly about children, motherhood, and the difficult adoption process they are all experiencing. They clearly begin to worry about each other, especially about who is fit or unfit to become a mother, and as the viewer comes to know them better

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Addition: The 2004 NEMLA roundtable on teaching adoption literature, abstracts from which were included in the Alliance newsletter's 2004 supplement, was designed and proposed by Marianne Novy.

The Responsibility of Representation

A Response to the Rosenbergs' Review of Sayles's Casa de los Babys

By Molly Shanley
Vassar College

The review by Julia and Warren Rosenberg beautifully captures the themes and sensibility of John Sayles's *Casa de los Babys*, including communities of women, economic disparities both within and between countries, and the randomness of good and bad luck. The evenhandedness and refusal to take sides in various debates surrounding international adoption that the Rosenbergs find to be one of the film's strengths, however, left me somewhat disconcerted and disappointed.

As the Rosenbergs note, the image of the lottery is crucial to the film's meaning. The lottery of life makes us citizens of one country or another, members of one social class or another, fertile or infertile. Such factors shape individuals' lives in ways that have nothing to do with their own merit or effort. The wheel spins and some are blessed with resources while others are born into lives of material deprivation, emotional abuse, illness, infertility or other condition beyond their control.

The most moving scene in the movie (well worth the price of admission or of the DVD), in which Eileen (Susan Lynch) and Asunción (Vanessa Martinez) tell their stories, juxtaposes the pain and longing of a woman who cannot bear children with that of a woman who had to relinquish her child for adoption because of poverty. On the one hand, the scene is infused with a deeply humane vision of mutual compassion across barriers of language, nationality, and class. On the other hand, it suggests that the lottery of nature that makes some women infertile is closely akin to the lottery of economic resources and

opportunities. Yet poverty is not a force of nature but is the result of the arrangement of institutions and economic relations created by humans and remediable by them. This is why putting the critique of those social arrangements into the mouths of ne'er do well, drunken "café revolutionaries" undercuts Sayles' own portrayal of the moral complexity of intercountry adoption.

Let me be clear that like the Rosenbergs I find *Casa de los Babys* a fine and "must see" film in general, and in particular for anyone interested in issues surrounding adoption. As the mother of children born in Colombia, I wish that Sayles had found a way to represent the tension between fate and human agency with greater nuance than he does here. Nonetheless, John Sayles is one of the most talented filmmakers working today, and in *Casa de los Babys* he tells a story that inspires reflection and discussion.

Molly Shanley is Professor of Political Science at Vassar College and the author of Making Babies, Making Families: What Matters Most in an Age of Reproductive Technologies, Surrogacy, Adoption, and Same Sex and Unwed Parents (Beacon, 2002).

Casa de los Babys (cont.)

we are drawn into asking the question as well. One of the major points of the film, however, is that no one can predict or fully control the outcome of raising a child.

While he has assembled an impressive cast of American actors, including Mary Steenburgen, Daryl Hannah, Maggie Gyllenhall, Lili Taylor, Rita Moreno, and Marcia Gay Harden, Sayles refuses, as usual, to make a typical Hollywood film. Rather, he uses the situation not only to explore the issues of adoption and motherhood, but to interrogate the political, economic, and cultural contexts that make one region a supplier and another the buyer of children. The result is a complex, layered film that often manages to be both thoughtful and moving.

In films like *Lone Star* (1996) and *Men With Guns* (1997), as well as in his 1991 novel *Los Gusanos*, about Cuban exiles, Sayles has shown a great interest in and knowledge of Latin America. Almost a third of his novel is written in Spanish, and almost half of this film is sub-titled. *Casa de los Babys* begins in the local South American community as it follows the workers who come down each day from the hills to make their living in the seaside resort town. One of these workers, Asunción, a maid in the hotel (known locally as 'casa de los babys') where the American women are staying, becomes a focus for the "supply side," for as we later learn in the film's most effective scene, she has had to give her child up for adoption. The grinding poverty and ceaseless labor of the majority of the local people (several are shown as quite well off) is jarringly contrasted with the luxurious and idle lives of the Americans who wait, sometimes for months, for their adoptions to be approved.

While we come to sympathize with the powerful need to adopt of all of the North American

women—even with the pushy "ugly American" Nan (Marcia Gay Harden), who seemingly will stop at nothing to get her baby—Sayles keeps us equally focused on the Latin American women. In addition to Asunción, we meet pregnant 15-year-old Celia, whose well-to-do mother will not let her keep the baby and for whom abortion is not an option in Catholic Latin America. We also meet Señora Muñoz (Rita Moreno), the tough owner of the hotel, showing the kind of entrepreneurial skills needed to succeed. Yet Moreno, in a strong performance, reveals the vulnerability and pain of a wife and mother whose husband has left her for a younger woman and whose thirty-plus year old son is still financially dependent on her.

It is a large and dynamic canvas, at the center of which are the babies themselves. Sayles spends a lot of screen time shooting them in close up as they lie in the clean, well-appointed nursery waiting to be adopted, or as they are carried about and hugged by a particularly loving nurse who tells them about the privileged lives awaiting them in North America. The babies, reduced to commodities, from the perspective of Señora Muñoz's politically radical son, are the objects of the fantasies of completion shared by the women. While the film seems to marginalize his cultural imperialist critique, presenting him as a feckless drunk, the son is the only voice in the film to offer a broader analysis of the apparently individualized and random process of adoption. Capitalist consumer culture is revealed as a key element, both from the perspective of the North Americans, who have the money to satisfy their desires, and from the South Americans, who use the system to survive economically.

While we are frequently



Maggie Gyllenhall as Jennifer in John Sayles's *Casa de los Babys*

Casa de los Babys (cont.)

reminded of what the children will gain from being adopted—better lives in the North—the film focuses on the various needs and desires of their potential mothers. This may tend to obscure the larger socio-political analysis, but it leads to a far more engaging film that ultimately demonstrates how the political and the personal are intertwined. In the film's many deftly written and acted scenes, the women reveal the reasons why they wish to adopt. Leslie (Lili Taylor), a wisecracking young New Yorker without a husband or partner, fears the running down of her biological clock. Her nemesis, Nan, apparently wants a child to control and form to her own will, as she was controlled. A reference to her having been physically (and perhaps sexually) abused, coupled with her attitudes and behaviors—Leslie's view that she is a "sociopath" seems valid as she lies and steals—make the thought of her successfully adopting a child frightening. Jennifer (Maggie Gyllenhall) wants a child to hold together her failing marriage, the wisdom of which is debated by the women. Skipper (Daryl Hannah), a golden-girl from Colorado who obsessively works out, is the only one able to conceive. However, we find out why she too is at the hotel in a powerful scene with Jennifer. It is never explicitly revealed why Gayle (Mary Steenburgen), the seemingly most well adjusted "mother" figure in the group, wants to adopt. Perhaps as a recovering alcoholic she only now feels responsible enough to have a child. Nevertheless, the viewer is certainly rooting for her.

It is Eileen (Susan Lynch), though, an Irish woman now living in Boston, whom Sayles clearly presents as having the least "psychological baggage" as a potential parent. She is much poorer than the others, constantly counting her money, and is one of the least fluent in Spanish, yet she makes an effort to connect to the maid Asunción, and in the most effective scene in the film, describes in loving detail a day she imagines with her adoptive daughter. It is a snow day,

something Asunción cannot imagine, when there would be no school, no work, just the opportunity for mother and child to be together. While Asunción does not understand the specifics of what she is hearing, a bond is created between the women that allows Asunción to say to the non-comprehending Eileen that she often dreams that the North American mother of her own four-year-old daughter is exactly like Eileen. In the last scene of the film we see that Asunción has affected Eileen just as strongly.

While we feel great sadness for Asunción, Sayles also shows us throughout the film the lives of several homeless boys, following one in particular, Tito, as he almost steals Eileen's wallet but instead receives a book from her that he cannot read. In scenes reminiscent of Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* and the recent disturbing Brazilian film *City of God*, Sayles shows us the utter despair of children who sleep anywhere they can find, scrounge for money and food, and sniff inhalants from paper bags. This is apparently what happens to the unwanted and the unadopted in Latin America. To drive his point home even further, Sayles gives us the appealing Chico, an educated but jobless young man who has learned English from watching films and who dreams of going to Philadelphia, the "cradle of liberty." He cannot support his three children, and we watch with anxiety as he plays the country's national lottery in hopes of solving all his problems in one lucky moment.

The image of the lottery dominates the conclusion of the film and becomes a symbol for the adoption process and for life in general; everything seems either magically predetermined or totally random. How the system works remains a mystery. Would payoffs help or hurt one's chances of getting a child? Does speaking Spanish, being Catholic, praying, or working out help? Sayles makes the process and the

Casa de los Babys (cont.)



result of adoption intentionally ambiguous. He offers no solutions to the global problems that create the market for international adoption nor does he explicitly champion certain characters as winners of the adoption lottery. Why are the two women who are eventually given babies selected?

The viewer must think back over the film to try to understand. As the film also demonstrates, things are no more certain in parenting. Whether we are biological or adoptive parents, we engage in a complex dance of replicating or rejecting our own upbringing. In adoption as in life, we can try but can never fully control our own destinies or those of our children. Sayles has been criticized before for the open-ended conclusions to his films, but if *Casa de los Babys* is to represent the complex realities of international adoption, and of parenting itself, can there be any more honest way to end?

Julia Rosenberg is Director of Academic Support and Warren Rosenberg is Professor of English at Wabash College.

2005 Adoption and Culture Conference Call for Papers

The 2005 Adoption and Culture Conference will be held in Tampa, Florida, November 18-20, 2005.

Delivering the keynote address will be Ellen Herman, the University of Oregon historian who created *The Adoption History Project* website (see "Member News"). Herman is currently working on a book entitled *Kinship by Design*, which discusses 20th-century American adoption in relation to the histories not only of childhood and family life but also of the welfare state, scientific authority, and therapeutic culture.

We are seeking proposals for 20-minute papers on adoption in relation to literature, history, philosophy, art history, anthropology, legal studies, political science, religious studies, cultural studies, etc.

We are also seeking short samples of creative writing.

Inquiries should be sent to Emily Hipchen, ehipchen@ut.edu, and Marianne Novy, mnovy@pitt.edu.

ASAIK Member News

E. Wayne Carp's book *Adoption Politics: Bastard Nation and Ballot Initiative 58* was published in 2004 by the University Press of Kansas.

Ellen Herman created the website *The Adoption History Project*, which introduces the history of child adoption in the United States and includes coverage of key individuals and organizations, topics in adoption history, adoption studies, adoption science, and archived historical documents related to adoption. Supported by the National Science Foundation and the Center for History and New Media, the site is available at <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption>.

Tobias Hübinette, Stockholm University, presented his Ph.D. project, "International Adoption from Korea, the Korean Adoption Issue and Representations of Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture."

Marianne Novy arranged a roundtable on teaching adoption in literature at the 2004 NEMLA conference, held in Pittsburgh. Participants were Jill Deans, Cynthia Callahan, Lynne Dickson Bruckner, and Carol Singley. She also arranged a session at the National Women's Studies Conference in Milwaukee, on the topic "Rethinking Adoption: Family Intersections, Family Borders, and Identities in the Middle," in which Laura Woliver, Political Science, South Carolina, spoke on "Patriarchal Paradigms in Adoptions," Emily Hipchen, English, University of Tampa, gave a paper on "Cropping the Family: A Partial Look at Photographs in Adoption Autobiographies," and Marianne gave one on "Opening and Closing Family Borders in *Emma's Child*, *The Baby Dance*, *The Bean Trees*, and *Pigs in Heaven*." Her book *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama* is forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press in summer or fall 2005.

Annabelle M. Rea published the article "L'Adoption: George Sand contre le règne de la famille bourgeoise" in *George Sand et l'empire des lettres*, ed. Anne McCall (New Orleans: Presses Universitaires du Nouveau Monde, 2004).

Constitution: Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity & Kinship

I. Name of Organization

The name of this organization shall be the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity, and Kinship.

II. Purpose

The purpose of the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity, and Kinship is to promote the study of literary and cultural representations of adoption and related issues such as identity, displacement, and family construction. This organization will

promote discussion of literary representations of adoptees, adoptive parents, birth parents, and of related ideologies, practices, and institutions, including how writers' involvement with adoption might relate to how they write about other matters; it will also deal with such related topics as literary representations of infertility, illegitimacy, orphanhood, single parenthood, stepparenthood, foster

ASAIK Constitution (cont.)

parenthood, wet-nursing, families created by new reproductive technologies, and other kinds of reconfigured families. It might also include representations in film, television, and other media.

In discussing the varying ways writers and cultures imagine adoption and other kinds of reconfigured and substitute families, the group might explore—without being limited to—such topics as adoption narratives and plot structures, the metaphors of adoption, literary treatments of identity and family construction in diverse family structures, and analyses of how literary works representing adoption and related issues show connections between the apparently private sphere and the public one. This organization will facilitate seeing both the changes and the continuities in the cultural imagination of adoption over time.

Through its annual meetings, sessions, special conferences, and newsletter, this organization provides communication among scholars interested in adoption and encourages the study of its literary and cultural representations.

III. Membership

- A. Membership is open to anyone interested in the study of adoption and related issues in literature and culture. Individuals become members upon payment of dues.
- B. Initial membership dues will be \$5.00 per year. Later membership dues shall be set by the Executive Committee.

IV. Meetings

An annual membership meeting shall be held for reporting to the membership and conducting business. This meeting shall take place concurrently with the annual

meeting of the Modern Language Association of America.

V. Officers and Their Responsibilities

- A. The officers of the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity and Kinship shall be a chair or two or three co-chairs and enough other members to make an executive committee of five. Ordinarily, each elected officer (this first time determined at the 1998 Convention meeting) will serve two years. One or two of the first set of officers will serve a one-year term to allow for the election of one or two new members to the committee the following year. Nominations and elections may take place either at the annual meeting or by mail ballot.
- B. The chair or co-chairs will preside at the annual meeting, and organize or appoint someone to organize the special session proposal for the MLA convention and/or MLA special events, such as poetry readings. The chair or co-chairs will work with the rest of the Executive Committee in circulating a newsletter. One member of the committee will keep track of dues and of using them to fund the newsletter and special events.

VI. Amendments

This constitution may be amended by a majority vote of the members in attendance at the annual business meeting at the yearly MLA convention.

Originally published in Volume I, Issue I of the ASAIK Newsletter, the Constitution is reprinted here for new members and readers.

Membership 2005

Please contribute to the Alliance by keeping your membership active.

Send \$5 to

Joy Castro, Membership Chair
Department of English
Wabash College
Crawfordsville, IN 47933-0352

(Please make checks payable to Joy Castro, and write "ASAIK" on the note line.)

Please update any of the following information by sending this form with your check.

Name:

Institutional Affiliation:

Preferred Address:

Email Address:

Would you like to write a book review, film review, or short article?

Would you like to recommend any titles for review?

News or suggestions for the next newsletter: