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Adoption & Culture, Volume 6, Issue 1, 2018, pp. 50-73 (Article)

Published by The Ohio State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ado.2018.0006>

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Adoption: Cultures of Ambivalence Past, Present—and Future?

CAROL J. SINGLEY

ABSTRACT: Adoption is a familiar and well-publicized topic today. However, despite attention in the media, courts, and schools, and regardless of the success of advocacy rights efforts, adoption remains culturally speaking second choice and second best, very much shaped by views of the biogenetic family as the norm, such that the predominant attitude toward adoption, as evidenced in American literature and culture, is ambivalence. But this essay envisions a more tolerant future for adoption as family norms become more flexible.

KEYWORDS: adoption, ambivalence, literature, American

I

Adoption is a familiar and well-publicized topic today. Almost a household word, it is no longer shrouded in a veil of secrecy and shame as it was during much of the twentieth century, when closed records and policies of “matching” children and adoptive parents hid adoption from view. With the open adoption movement that began in the 1970s, campaigns for adoptee and birth mother rights, burgeoning scholarship on adoption and kinship,¹ and popular representations of adoption in

film, news, and other media—including high-profile legal cases such as the Baby M case and celebrity adoptions by Madonna and Angelina Jolie—one might say that adoption has finally come into its own. Yet despite the attention to adoption in the media, courts, and schools, and regardless of the success of advocacy rights efforts, adoption remains, culturally speaking, second choice and second best, very much shaped by views of the biogenetic family as the norm.

Although, according to the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, “Americans have a favorable opinion of adoption” and agree that it serves a useful purpose in our society (*National 2*), adherence to biogenetic identity is ingrained, and adoption is likely to elicit as much sympathy or suspicion as it does appreciation, such that the predominant attitude in the US toward adoption might be described as ambivalence. This essay contemplates that ambivalence by surveying representations of adoption in American literature from colonial times to the present. Through this analysis, it aims to create greater awareness of the disparate and sometimes conflicting attitudes toward adoption and to move toward an embrace of adoption as a less stigmatized and more accepted way to form a family. Literature, an art form that both reflects reality and imaginatively reshapes it, offers a unique lens through which to view the dynamics of adoption. With its capacity to portray internal states of mind or feeling—through point of view and character development—and to depict external practices or events—through setting and plot—literature engages personal aspects of adoption while simultaneously positioning the personal within larger cultural and historical contexts. A literary genealogy of American adoption, then, charts continuities in the representations of adoption as well as feelings of ambivalence that underlie them.

This is not to say that views toward adoption are fixed. The history of adoption demonstrates that it—like the child, family, and nation with which it is linked—is a social construction, always in flux, its precise aims and efficacies open to interpretation. Codified originally by the Romans as a way to transmit power and bestow rights and responsibilities in the absence of a biological heir, adoption was designed to protect patriarchal lineage and cement alliances between families, with the security of home afforded to the child ancillary to adult needs. The notion that adoption serves the best interests of the child developed relatively recently in the United States, in the mid-nineteenth century. It coincided with romantic conceptions of childhood, a reform-minded middle class, and an expanding nation. The United States led western nations with passage, in Massachusetts in 1851, of the first adoption law designed to protect the interests of the child. With its stronger focus on bloodlines and inheritance, England did not pass a similar law until 1926 (Presser 465, 443). Adoption in the twenty-first century is an acknowledged alternative way to construct a family although the legal terrain of adoption is uneven and sometimes contested; the social interpretations regarding benefits to the birth family, adoptive family, and child are subject to change; and the psychological impact of adoption is highly debated (Carp, *Family* 1–3).²

In American literature, beginning in the seventeenth century with the Puritan arrival in New England, adoption is an open rather than secret matter (3), sanctioned by the Bible and religious practices that emphasized parallels between the adoption of a child and the adoption by God (Singley, *Adopting* 20). Open adoption remained the norm until the early twentieth century, when developments in genetics, psychology, and social work converged to create new sensitivity about the role of blood kinship in the formation of identity, with a resulting emphasis on the emotional risks of being severed from one's roots and a corresponding concern about adoptees who might be carrying inferior genes or tainted blood (Carp, *Family* 18). Increasingly among the white middle class, prospective adoptive parents looked for guidance from and placed responsibility in social workers, who endeavored to match children and adoptive parents—for example, according to appearance, ethnicity, or religion—thus diminishing adoption's visibility in an effort to ensure its success and demonstrating, as historian Barbara Melosh writes, "the cultural ambivalence that has surrounded this difference [of adoption]" (*Strangers* 51–53). Further stigmatized by its association with illegitimacy and, frequently, with promiscuity or degeneracy, adoption, now secret, also became shameful (Melosh, "Adoption" 228). Social pressures in the 1950s and the following decades led some birth mothers to hide out-of-wedlock pregnancies and relinquish children they never knew and were encouraged to forget (Solinger 3–6, 26).

Only in the 1970s did activists agitate for open records. Their efforts, focused on adoptees' right to know their origins, took place within a larger context of sexual liberalization and civil rights advocacy (Melosh, "Adoption" 239). The search movement, having the effect of uniting adoptees and birth mothers, helped to reconfigure the adoption triad in a way that shifted voice and power, even if minimally, from adoptive parents to birth parents, but it also generated resistance from some birth mothers who wished to remain anonymous (Carp, *Family* 145). An accelerating rate of transnational adoptions in the early 1990s focused attention on the flow of children from one nation to another (Volkman 2)—and helped to expose a little-discussed fact that is nonetheless apparent in the proliferation of American literature about adoption dating from the nineteenth century: that adoption typically involves the flow of economic and social capital in a direction that favors adoptive parents (Singley, "Building" 54–55). That is, children are generally adopted by people who are more affluent, educated, and socially well positioned than those who gave birth to the child. Transnational and transracial adoption underlines this typical, if not fundamental, inequality in adoption, that "sending" countries are generally poorer than "receiving" countries (Volkman 2). An economics of adoption persists despite a cultural mystique that maintains that the key attribute of adoption is selfless service in the best interest of the child.

Adoption thus circulates in a mixed atmosphere of charitable benevolence and socioeconomic realities.

Although adoption—profoundly personal and engaging basic issues of identity and belonging—can be viewed as a narrow experience affecting a small percentage of the population, it should be seen as an important entry point for study of critical issues in the humanities, among them the role of blood as the measure of family bonds, the benefits of openness and secrecy, the line between public and private, and the link between resources and child-raising. The vicissitudes of the history of adoption invite inquiry into the cultural significations of various kinds of family formation and the nature of personal and group identity. Simply put, adoption invites us to rethink normative definitions of self, family, and nation. However, despite adoption's explicit challenge to genealogy and its unsettling of accepted genealogical norms, it is the case that adoption, to date, has failed to realize its full potential to radically reconfigure personal, familial, or national identity. Adoption remains an accepted anomaly, benignly tolerated, even embraced, whether or not it is exploitative, that falls short of fundamentally changing the hegemony of genealogy as the primary and significant marker of identity. Unsurprisingly, the dominant emotion associated with adoption is ambivalence.

An assimilationist rather than a radical view of adoption, even in American society, which is known for its individualism, is evident at various levels of discourse across periods. Those in well-meaning conversation about adoption often condescend toward members of the adoption triad while eliding the economic and social inequalities that contribute to the need for adoption. In contemporary culture, in jokes, commercials, film, and TV, it is acceptable for siblings to taunt one other for appearing or acting differently from other family members with affectionate barbs such as, "You must be adopted."³ Adoption carries an overall sense of disadvantage or insufficiency. The general public may expect less from adopted children than from children raised with their biological parents, and be surprised, even if they do not say so, if an adopted child achieves at the same high level in school or a career as his genetically raised counterparts. They may expect the child to be grateful for having been adopted. Adoptive parents are praised for doing the charitable deed of adoption ("It's so good of you to adopt"), but birth mothers face quizzical if not negative responses such as, "How could you give up your child?" Adoptive parents in an open adoption might be asked whether they fear that the birth mother might want or steal the child back and be expected to share in this alarm. Despite the US being known as a nation of self-starters that rewards merit, not lineage, this adherence to norms of genealogically defined identity is further reflected in the fascination with learning roots through websites such as *Ancestry.com* and the fact that, after gardening, genealogical research is the second leading pastime in the nation (Seabrook).

II

The ambivalence toward adoption dates from the earliest days of American literature. Even the fundamental virtue associated with adoption then and today—that of saving a child—is complicated. No legal system of adoption existed in seventeenth-century Puritan New England. Massachusetts Governor William Phips first used the term “adoption” in a will he signed in 1693; colonial legislatures commonly passed individual bills to recognize the adoption of a child (Babb 36). However, colonial parents routinely practiced temporary adoption through “placing out” children with other families, a system that offered practical benefits such as providing the child with education and training, and that helped to modulate parental tendencies to form overly emotional connections with the child—worldly attachments of any kind being suspect and subordinate to the most important relationship, the believer’s attachment to God. E. Wayne Carp writes that “colonial Americans showed little preference for the primacy of biological kinship, practiced adoption on a limited scale, and frequently placed children in what we would call foster care” (*Family* 5).

Biographies of eminent colonists such as jurist Samuel Sewall and preacher Cotton Mather demonstrate that taking in others’ children was commonplace. For example, Sewall had fourteen children, of whom six survived infancy. He took interest in children outside his immediate family and expended time, effort, and resources on their behalf. He housed, tutored, and mentored several young men preparing for Harvard College, including two sons of rural ministers and a young Native American boy. He sheltered three orphaned grandchildren and was named guardian of a young man whom he apprenticed to an associate. Nieces and nephews frequently visited Sewall’s home, and other young men and women joined his household as servants. A distant cousin’s son lived with him and served him in old age, and a niece lived with his family from the time of her youth to adulthood (Graham 3, 50, 252n1). The affection that each of these children received and bestowed varied according to circumstances, including the children’s educational and emotional needs and Sewall’s domestic situation at the time they entered his home; but taken as a whole, Sewall’s busy domicile, peopled by blood and non-blood-related kin, attests to the normative nature of nonbiological kinship in early colonial America. Sewall’s care of others’ children also reveals a socioeconomic imbalance common to adoption: he was able to take in so many children because as a prominent Boston judge and merchant he had the means to do so. Most of the children who stayed with him came from situations of equal or less affluence and privilege. From Sewall’s time through today, adoption often involves the movement of children from less to more advantaged settings, adding an element of class to the myth that love and care, rather than material need or abundance, are at the heart of adoption.

Cotton Mather's biography reveals a similarly fluid rather than fixed sense of family, with adoptive arrangements that were flexible and informal, like those in some African American and Native American communities today. For example, when Mather's son Sewall was accepted to Harvard in 1719, Mather wrote John Leverett, the college president, to ask him to serve not only as Sammy's president but also as his tutor and surrogate father. Mather wrote that he unequivocally entrusted his son to Leverett's "wise, and kind, and paternal tuition" (Silverman 294). Mather's religious writings also promote adoption. Exemplifying a commitment to adoption is his sermon "Orphanatrophium," a sixty-seven-page tract in which he exhorts his congregation to adopt the newly orphaned children of deceased church members. In his sermon, Mather establishes a notion of adoption as salvation that would power a national mythology and literature about adoption. Mather mandates the community's responsibility to care for orphaned children and asks the congregation to provide a material and temporal "Legacy for Orphans" (1). He outlines adoptive parents' roles as caretakers and comforts orphans by helping them understand that they are "*Not Forsaken*" because "*the Lord will make a better Provision for me, than ever my Parents could.*" He even goes so far as to say that orphans enjoy "*Happy Troubles*" because their parentless state allows them to set their sights on the only true comfort—adoption by God (1–2, 5, 9). The idea not only that adoption rescues a needy child but also that adopting parents do God's work as they replicate the Father's adoption of his chosen people continues through American literature of the nineteenth century.

An ambivalence toward adoption is evident from the fact that, even as they embrace and promote the benefits of adoption, early American writings such as Mather's reveal the limits of such acts. They simultaneously affirm the importance of blood and the bonds of community based on lineage. Despite the fluidity of Puritan households and the integral role that adoption played in charting the spiritual progress of the believer, Puritan society was highly patriarchal and intensely genealogical. To be included in the covenant, a child had to be born to church members; even then, the child was not necessarily saved. This genealogical belief system led to restrictive understandings of kinship. Puritan John Winthrop, for twelve years the governor of the Massachusetts Colony and author of the famous assertion that "A family is a little commonwealth, and a commonwealth is a great family," expresses this ambivalence when he writes that "a family is not bound to entertain all comers" (166). As critic Edmund Morgan explains, "The church" became "an exclusive society for the saints and their children" such that in "this obsession with family and genealogy," "theology became the handmaiden of genealogy" (174, 186, 44). Members of the church community were thus highly suspicious of outsiders and as driven to exclude strangers as to admit them. The resulting distrust of nonbiological kinship made special cases of children not related to adults by blood and could make it difficult to view these children as equally worthy of salvation. This sentiment is reflected in the writings of Increase

Mather, Cotton Mather's father, who based redemption on heredity with a statement that became a cliché of Puritan preaching: "God hath seen good to cast the line of Election so, as that it doth . . . for the most part, run through the loins of godly Parents" (12). By adhering to a doctrine of limited election and genealogically determined redemption, Puritans implied that children who are in need of adoption are less redeemable than others.

Simply by needing adoption, then, the orphaned child becomes associated with sin and unworthiness. The paradox is that the Puritan mission in the New World—a search for religious and civic freedom that led to a break with the mother country England—reinscribed the importance of genealogy. Believing that they were divinely chosen people, the Puritans severed ties to a birth nation in order to realize God's promise in a new land. They theorized the rupture of old ties and reconstruction of new ones, creating a positive context for adoption. However, despite the emphasis on fresh starts that this venture entailed, Puritans adhered to a doctrine of descent that regarded biological rather than adopted children as the rightful heirs of the covenant. The legacy of this belief is evident in the countless stories and novels published about white, middle-class adoption in the nineteenth century, in which the orphan's plot is driven by a need for adoption, which is represented as a form of salvation (Singley, "Building" 53–54; *Adopting* 92–98). However, patriarchal family structures and a hierarchy of social forms stigmatized adoption by reinforcing genealogy, revealing ambivalence and ongoing tensions between inherited and constructed forms of identity.

In the imaginative literature of the nineteenth century that developed out of this Calvinist tradition, adoption became increasingly secularized but retained its spiritual base in a discourse of salvation, often figured in domestic terms. Ambivalence toward adoption became codified in a fictional formula in which the orphaned child's adoption into a loving middle-class family paralleled the larger narrative of an expanding nation. As I demonstrate in *Adopting America*, the story of adoption also became a national story.

Adoption resonates with a nation that was formed by immigrants who left their birth country to adopt a new land, that promotes the idea of fresh starts and opportunity as part of the American dream, and that subscribes to the notion, outlined by Jay Fliegelman, Jerry Griswold, and others, that the literature of the nation develops as a child does, from a state of dependence, to rebellion, to independence. The popularity of adoption as a topic in literature also linked to a critical discourse that likewise developed from Alexis de Tocqueville's observation, in *Democracy in America*, of an ongoing tension in American literature between notions of inherited and acquired identity, between a self shaped by the past and one open to the future (5). As historian Ellen Herman writes, "adoption illustrates the authenticity crises that plague many forms of voluntary belonging, including democratic citizenship itself" (8). The American proclivity toward adoption was underlined by passage of an 1851 law promoting adoption in service of the best interests of the child.

Nineteenth-century American fiction about orphans is by no means monolithic. There are multiple other variations—for example, in tales of indentured service, foster care, and kinship adoption. There is also an alternative ending, one in which the orphaned or homeless child reunites with the birth parents. In this case, the restoration of the child to its original family resonates with the fairy tale, or the foundling tale, which has its roots in Europe rather than in the US. In a variation of this narrative in which the child searches for roots, the tale resembles a detective story, common to both European and American fiction. The young adult novel *Doppelganger* by Pete Hautman and Mary Logue, in the Bloodwater Mysteries series, falls into this category.

Adoption stories are optimistic, with a spirit of adventure, but they also reveal ambivalence, giving voice to the simultaneous and sometimes contradictory calls to origins and fresh beginnings, to feelings of worthiness and unworthiness, to practices of inclusion and exclusion. The nineteenth-century “American response to change was ambivalent,” as Anne Scott MacLeod writes. The adoption plot gives form to this ambivalence. Janus-faced, it looks backward as well as forward, revealing problems as it purports to solve them, telling of an aspiring Anglo-American middle class *and* of the underclass it leaves behind (8–9). Amy Schrager Lang notes that reformist fiction of the antebellum era holds to the notion that class can be transcended through individual virtue (8, 28). Orphans of various kinds—from genteel homeless girls who have lost their footing to destitute, immigrant “street arabs,” as homeless boys were called—could be taken in and held accountable to middle-class standards of morality and behavior. Adoption thus reflects and addresses anxieties about immigration, urbanization, and other social changes while simultaneously supporting the ideals of the middle class and, by extension, of the nation.

Adoption allowed the family, and implicitly the nation, to expand and seal its borders at the same time; to acknowledge the citizen as separate from family or nation but also as contained and embraced by it. The argument of whether parents loved their adopted children less than their biological children—a question that continues to circulate today—was subsumed by the Christian mandate to love all children as God loved them. But adoption also reflected national economic expansion and an increasingly consumer-driven society, with some narratives portraying adoptive parents selecting children from orphanages as if shopping at a store. As bestselling novels such as Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* and Susanna Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* demonstrate, adoptive parents express their generosity made possible by material and spiritual success and in turn exact compliant behavior from the adoptee. Adoptees receive the benefits of a home and family, but they also bear a heavier burden than children securely positioned with birth families to prove themselves worthy of their adoption. These saved children are expected to show that they are grateful, obey their adoptive parents, serve others, and sometimes even save adults who stray from the Christian path. In the

nineteenth-century nature-versus-nurture debate, the pendulum swings toward nurture as the adopted child embodies a belief in individual improvement and national progress not only possible but also divinely ordered. The conclusion of the adoption tale signifies material and psychological gain for the once homeless child. This social and economic rescue works in turn to reassure aspiring middle-class readers of their own upward mobility.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, American fiction about adoption reveals an underlying anxiety about an overly enthusiastic embrace of nurture, reflecting an incipient Darwinism that led, by century's end, to the eugenics movement and a fear of adoptees' bad blood. This literature thus presages the growing role of science and psychology in shaping attitudes toward adoption that continued through the twentieth century. Despite the power of adoption to advance religious and social reform agendas, Louisa May Alcott shows in her novel *Jo's Boys* that at Plumfield, the school that Mrs. Jo founds with her husband, Professor Bhaer, not all boys who receive training and guidance are capable of benefiting from nurture and education. The boy most resistant to a reformist agenda is Dan Keane, a street orphan who first appears in *Little Men* when he is taken in on a trial basis and expelled for organizing a party with cards, beer, and cigars. "A wanderer still" at the beginning of *Jo's Boys* (3), Dan returns to Plumfield having made a small fortune in mining. The most troubled and romantic of Jo's boys, he has difficulty settling on a career path like the others do because he is fundamentally different, that is, different by nature, and no amount of adoptive care can bridge the gap between his natural, wild state and the evolved, cultivated young man that Mrs. Jo and Professor Bhaer wish him to become. Critically limited by his biology, Dan grows more animal-like, not less. A "wild buffalo" with a "shaggy black head" and beard (54), he is also a "colt [that] was not thoroughly broken yet" (66) and a cat with "nine lives" (290). His wild nature connotes a sexuality at odds with Jo's genteel standards, and he is deemed an unworthy match for any of the Plumfield girls. "I'm glad he's going away," Jo says about his rugged good looks. "He's too picturesque to have here" (84). Stressing blood lineage, Jo fears Dan will become what "she suspected his father had been—a handsome, unprincipled, and dangerous man" (310).

Dan's nonconforming ways and ethnically marked appearance make him a poor candidate for adoption, in a similar way that special-needs children and children of color are viewed today as more difficult to place with white middle-class adoptive families than are white children.⁴ With his origins unknown, Jo suspects "that Dan had Indian blood in him" (54); the "black sheep" of the Plumfield family (322), Dan himself identifies with outsiders like the Montana and the Sioux. Alcott's novel also makes clear what is largely unremarked in this fiction: that adoption is a gendered enterprise. Many nineteenth-century fictions depict girls who end up safely inscribed in their adoptive families. However, books about boys' adoptions often follow the plot line of *Jo's Boys*: with the help of mentors,

teachers, or parent figures—and sometimes without them—boys set off to make their fortunes, often in the West (Singley, “Building” 67–70). Mark Twain, notoriously dismissive of Alcott’s domestic writing, portrays just such a boy in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In Twain’s critique of the sentimental family, Huck flees the widow’s attempt to civilize him, demonstrating the gendered nature of nineteenth-century childhood and adoption.

Nineteenth-century fiction also reveals racial biases, with African American children enjoying few of the privileges afforded to white, middle-class adoptees. Harriet Wilson’s autobiographical novel, *Our Nig*, tells the story of a mixed-race girl abandoned by her mother and taken in by a white family who abuse and exploit her. There is no happy ending for Frado Smith, either through adoption or through reunification with her birth family, as there is for countless white children in domestic novels such as *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter*. *Our Nig* relies on narrative conventions of the tale of seduction, the slave narrative, and the conversion narrative, as critics have noted, but there is no heroic escape from bondage as found in African American slave narrative and no redemption or rejuvenation as is typical in the seduction or conversion novel. Wilson depicts the plight of African American children subject to racism, double sexual standards, and class bias. In this earliest example of an African American novel by a woman, she explores child placement not as a saving act but as a self-serving one, on a continuum with slavery at one end and loving adoption at the other. Adoption is not available to all. On the contrary, the act of sheltering a racially marked child robs it of roots, dignity, and a future.

The romanticized view of adoption also takes a turn in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with more realistic accounts of adoptive family life. The literature reflects the growing influence of genetics; nascent, often inadequate, laws protecting adoptees; and awareness of the vulnerability of female children in particular. A mid-nineteenth-century bestseller such as Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* unproblematically applauds the heroine’s marriage to her mentor and guardian, an arrangement facilitated in reality by ill-defined laws governing incest (Grossberg 145). However, the exploitative nature of such quasi-incestuous unions concerns realistic writer Edith Wharton in her novel *Summer*. Wharton explores an issue that would later garner popular attention in, for example, the 1990s scandal involving film director and actor Woody Allen’s reputed seduction of his adopted daughter.

Wharton signals a new age of adoption fiction in which the adopted child falls victim to uncaring or self-serving adoptive parents, a theme Edward Albee dramatizes in his autobiographical play *The American Dream*. Wharton not only targets sentimental portrayals of female adoption but also shows the biogenetic direction that adoption narratives would begin to take. In the novel, a young girl is rescued from an uncivilized New England mountain community and taken in but not legally adopted by the town’s lawyer and his wife. When the wife dies, Charity Royall comes of age in her adoptive father’s house. She gestures toward

autonomy with a summer fling with an outsider who visits the town, but when she becomes pregnant, her short-lived independence is cut short and she marries her adoptive father. Charity's father-turned-husband, aptly named Lawyer Royall, legitimizes the baby; Charity, also aptly named for the imputed benevolence of her adoption, returns to live in his house, never to have a home or life of her own. The grim ending reflects a rising interest at the turn of the twentieth century in genetics; the bright note is that the baby's genes come from Charity's young, educated, robust lover, not the enervated Royall. Wharton, well versed in Darwinian science, introduces a theme found in adoption narratives through the mid-twentieth century: the role of genes in shaping behavior and the fear of tainted blood.

An ambivalence toward adoption and representation of the adoptee as pariah, pawn, or victim continues with William Faulkner's racially inflected novel *Light in August*. Faulkner explores the confounding pull of blood and the stigma of illegitimacy and racialized difference in his portrayal of the ill-fated, mixed-race Joe Christmas, who is at first abandoned, then adopted and abused, and eventually isolated from his society. Joe's final act of murder is both revenge for the mistreatment he endures and a suicidal wish. The trope of the murderous adoptee also appears in the novel *The Bad Seed* by William March. In the novel and film adaptation based on it, concern over bad blood turns to hysteria when a devoted mother, Christine Penmark, realizes that her otherwise perfectly behaved little girl, Rhoda, is a cold-blooded murderer. The explanation for Rhoda's evil actions comes when her mother, who was adopted as a young child, discovers that her birth mother was Bessie Denker, a notorious serial killer. The daughter Rhoda is the irredeemable "bad seed" who has inherited her birth grandmother's criminality.

Twentieth-century American adoption narratives are shaped more by developments in science, psychology, and social work than by religion, as in nineteenth-century narratives, but they exhibit similar ambivalence. A dizzying number of changes in adoption practices and attitudes over the course of the century shows how ideas about adoption, along with concepts of the child and the family, are socially constructed. When in the first half of the twentieth century social services agencies were influenced by the eugenics movement, facts about a child's origins were fully disclosed so that prospective adoptive parents would know if the child were "diseased" or "feeble-minded" (Carp, "Adoption" 226). By the 1950s, however, there was a reversal of these practices. Restrictions were placed on disclosure to protect the adopted child and birth mother from the stigma of illegitimacy and, informed by psychoanalytic theory, to address the belief that adoptive parents neurotically envied those who could give birth to children. Adoption agencies sheltered adoptive families from public knowledge that they were infertile and matched children with adoptive parents to simulate blood-related kinship. This is also the era in which unwed pregnant women were sent away, pressured to relinquish their children, and told to forget their experience.

A sense of inadequacy surrounds the adoptee at midcentury as it did at the beginning of the century, but psychology is enlisted not to vilify or criminalize but to pathologize and sympathize. Despite the fact that most adoptees succeed in school and career, create fulfilling relationships, and live fulfilling adult lives, David Brodzinsky et al. report that “when adoption rises as a salient issue in a person’s inner life, the most pervasive feeling is an overwhelming sense of loss. The loss inherent in adoption is unlike other losses we have come to expect in a lifetime, such as death and divorce. Adoption loss is more pervasive, less socially recognized, and more profound” (9). Nancy Verrier refers to this pain as a “primal wound” and affirms the right and need of adoptees to know their birth origins.

A vast body of literature—much of it in the first person by adoptees and birth mothers—recounts a narrative of displacement, heartbreak, or incompleteness, problematizing traditional views of adoption as child saving. Adoptee Betty Jean Lifton writes that being adopted is like being “twice born” (*Twice*). It minimizes—and may eliminate—the role of the birth parents, who are, as Lifton notes, as if dead (*Lost* 14). Lifton also suggests that the Freudian family romance, in which children engage in the fantasy that they are adopted as part of their normal development, is no romance for the adoptee, who must cope with the fact that there really are two sets of parents out there, the actual birth parents and the imagined ones. Moreover, adoptees not only entertain positive fantasies of royal blood but are also burdened by negative fantasies of birth parents who might be whores, rapists, murderers (*Lost* 13–14). Birth mother Lorraine Dusky, writing extensively about loss, describes the relinquishment of a child as a “hole in the heart.”

III

The 1970s ushered in a new era of open adoption, influenced in part by the Civil Rights movement and facilitated by internet access to information that allowed adoptees to search for and reconnect with their birth families. This general atmosphere of disclosure continues to shape the norm today. The effect of the open-record movement has been to focus attention on the adoptee, whose personal story had been subsumed by that of the adoptive family in an ongoing mythology that adoptive families are no different than biologically constructed ones. Judith Modell’s anthropological study notes this historically fictive nature of adoption: an “as if” construction that embraces adoption while simultaneously requiring replication of the biogenetic norm. Thus the legal practice of replacing a child’s original birth certificate bearing the birth parents’ names with one bearing the adoptive parents’ names and the early twentieth-century practice of matching. As adoptees, historically the silent member of the adoption triad, assumed center stage with their unprecedented numbers of adoption memoirs and activism to unseal their birth records, they gained an important voice. By underlining the es-

sentialist nature of identity, however, they also reinforced the sense of deprivation that adoptees suffer by the fact of being adopted. They mourned the loss of biogenetic connection rather than celebrated the difference of adoption. The search for roots paradoxically showcases the importance of blood among a population that had no choice but to be separated from blood relations. It is not clear, as a result, whether the stigma attached to adoption has lifted or whether adoption represents a significant challenge to the preeminence of genealogy.

The question of whom adoption serves occupies those most affected by adoption: the members of the adoption triad. Even within organizations created to promote dialogue among parties involved with or affected by adoption, such as the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture (ASAC), founded in 1998, divergent views can flourish about whom adoption privileges.⁵ As adoptees and birth mothers work to assert themselves in a historically oppressive cultural atmosphere of dismissal or denigration, they may appear to take a stand against adoptive parents, who are presumed to wield and enjoy superior financial and cultural capital. Adoptive parents who foster relationships with birth parents in an open adoption may do so to provide a secure network of relationships for the adoptee, but they may be construed as inauthentic or even exploitative, given the comparatively fragile status of birth parents. Even under the best conditions—for example, in open adoptions in which adoptees know the facts of their adoption and have ongoing contact with their birth parents—members of the adoption triad may misunderstand or distrust one another.

A significant twentieth-century development, transnational and transracial adoption (too large a subject for treatment in this essay) also focuses attention on the perennial question, whom does adoption benefit? As promoted in the early years of international adoption, such as the Holt International Korean Adoption program in the 1950s, and continuing through the more recent histories of adoption from China, Russia, or Honduras, adoption is an engagement in baby saving and international peacemaking. Elizabeth Bartholet defends intercountry adoption on the grounds that it creates peaceful connections between cultures and helps children in ways that their communities cannot (*Family Bonds* 142; “Permanency”). However, recently scholars have debated, with vigor, the question of whether transnational and transracial adoption is an act of appropriation and colonization, with its sense of entitlement and ethnocentricity (Briggs “Imperialism,” 25–26), arguing that immersion in birth-country language amounts to little more than “cultural tourism” (Quiroz). Transnational and transracial adoption recapitulates on a grander scale the imbalances of power, prestige, and wealth found in domestic adoptions and in literature about them.

The complexity of the issues of identity involved in transnational and transracial adoption, including the American fascination with the topic and a call for reckoning with the birth nation, appear in two recent novels, Ann Tyler’s *Digging to America* and Gish Jen’s *The Love Wife*. Tyler signals the conflation of familial

and national issues with her title, *Digging to America*, a play on the phrase adults use to describe the earnest but naive pastime of children with a pail and shovel at the beach who are “digging to China.” Tyler’s metaphor points to her excavation project in the novel: to uncover the dynamics of adoption from a country at once so distant as to be figured (erroneously) as antipode—and so intimate as to be recapitulated through weekly Chinese language classes that the adoptive parents in the novel arrange to keep the adoptees’ ties with the birth culture alive.

In this narrative, as in nineteenth-century domestic adoption fiction, families of origin disappear and the adoptive family looms large. In the opening scene, the reader meets the Donaldson family, whose name echoes the well-known research organization, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. So typically American as to be a cliché—generous, social, optimistic, physically large, and emotionally expressive—the Donaldsons contrast with, and ostensibly dominate over, another adoptive family in the novel, the Yasdans, who are first- and second-generation immigrants from Iran. The novel charts the parallel journeys of the two families, one extroverted, one introverted, as they negotiate international adoption and raise their two adopted daughters, who also differ in size and temperament and are raised as best friends. The Donaldsons are also American in exhibiting a practical adaptability and an often unexamined belief in the power of nurture over nature. With little information about their child’s history, they forge ahead to create the best experience they can for their adoptive family.

Yet even as the adoptive mother, Bitsy Donaldson, dispenses advice on everything from soy milk to playpens, she seems more vulnerable and less in control than her nineteenth-century predecessors, who relied on domesticity and what Harriet Beecher Stowe called, in her antislavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the power of “feeling right” to redress social injustice (624), provide home comforts, and reform the nation. Bitsy’s mother, Connie, calls her daughter “insecure; she [Bitsy] worried she was unworthy” (110), and Bitsy seems out of touch when she reflects with unconvincing optimism, “wasn’t adoption better than childbirth? She felt sorry for these poor women who had merely delivered.” Tyler’s tone is at times difficult to interpret, but Bitsy’s diagnosis of breast cancer may be the author’s way of destabilizing her maternal hegemony. Tyler also constructs international distinctions. The Donaldsons have adopted children from both South Korea and China. Their South Korean daughter, Jin-ho, assimilates more easily into the Donaldson family than does her Chinese sister, Xiu-Mei. That Xiu-Mei proves an indomitable force in the battle between mother and child over giving up the pacifier may be Tyler’s way of representing the challenge of China to the US as a world power. Portraying tensions surrounding international adoption, Tyler shows cracks in the veneer of American mythologies about adoption as benevolence without shattering the surface completely.

Reflecting more diverse views and experiences of transnational adoption is Gish Jen’s *Love Wife*. In the novel, an all-American white woman, Blondie, and her

Chinese American husband, Carnegie, are raising two Asian adopted daughters, Wendy and Lizzy, and their biological son, Bailey. At first adoption seems simple; it is, as Blondie says, a way of “living bigger” (64). However, Carnegie’s mother, Mama Wong, who is opposed to her son’s marriage, has arranged for a mainland Chinese woman, Lan, to come look after the children. When the two adopted girls take a liking to Lan and proclaim their desire for a “real mother” who looks like them, Blondie feels displaced by this suspected “love wife” and eventually leaves the marriage, taking their biological son, Bailey, with her. Nine-year-old Wendy and fifteen-year-old Lizzy have always known they are adopted, but the surprise comes when their adoptive father, Carnegie Wong, learns of his own adoption. He is so shocked that he has a heart attack.

In this novel, who is an outsider and who is an insider, who belongs in the family and who does not, is not so clear. Jen’s genius is that the story is told in a choral manner by each of the novel’s central characters, including the children. This Bakhtinian, polyphonic narration creates a multiplicity of voices, viewpoints, and identities that form the adoption experience. When Lizzy asks why Wendy’s birth mother gave her up, Blondie says that she “gave her up out of love, that she might have the best life possible” (107), but Blondie knows that formulaic, adoption-guide answers are not good enough. Later, Blondie asks, “Were we adopting this child [Wendy] for her good or for ours?” (121).

The Love Wife troubles rather than settles issues around transracial adoption, immigration, and Chinese–US relations with the result that the receiving nation is not depicted as irresistibly seductive or nurturing. Lan’s mate Jeb (Jiabao) wants to go back to China; as he says, “If I had not left China, I would never know how much happiness could never be mine” (342). Novels such as Jen’s provide an opportunity to explore various perspectives toward adoption through their multivocality. As Mikhail Bakhtin writes about the dialogic novel, it “is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other” (18). The effect of Jen’s narrative technique is to blur binary oppositions in a literary tradition in which adoptive voices predominate and, by engaging more in nation negotiating than nation building, to challenge myths of American exceptionalism in which the US is the savior and moral conscience of the world.

One way that ambivalence toward adoption expresses itself is in a tacit cultural understanding that behavior can be understood or even justified if it is based in genealogy and that blood kinship entails a certain loyalty or bond which is correspondingly weak, uncertain, or missing in adoptive bonds. Although adoption appeals to a collective sense of rescue and opportunity, genealogy has a strong hold on the national psyche. Seeking an explanation for the wide appeal of the TV show *Breaking Bad*, in which the villain kills at least seven people and is implicated in the deaths of hundreds more, *New Atlantis* writer James Bowman concludes that

it is the tribal instinct—the drive to preserve the clan—that accounts for viewers' willingness to overlook the vileness of Walter White's deeds.

Today, in the ongoing nature-nurture debate, the pendulum seems to swing in the direction of nature. Joseph Goldstein and his coauthors of a reference source that is frequently cited in custody cases caution against attributing to judges, lawyers, social workers, psychiatrists, and other professionals a magical power far beyond their means to decide the best interests of the child. They stress the importance of "considering what a child loses when he passes, even temporarily, from the personal authority of parents to the impersonal authority of the law" (3). "So long as a child is a member of a functioning family," they write, "his paramount interest lies in the preservation of his family" (5). Historian Nara Milanich, who calls for a more considered interrogation of childhood and migration, writes that when nations separate families, "it never ends well." Studies of twins separated at birth highlight the striking resemblances between biologically related individuals, regardless of their upbringing; genetic markers identify physical conditions and mental illnesses. Courts regularly award custody rights in adoption disputes to biological parents. In light of these biomedical and legal developments, adoption continues to be seen as risky or uncertain, second choice and second best. In a tribal, genealogically oriented society, adoption is the odd man out.

The privileging of biogenetic parentage is common in traditional literature, for example in fairy tales such as *Hansel and Gretel* and *Cinderella*, in which the wicked stepmother plots against a child and is no substitute for the loving real parents. Biogenetic superiority is evident in contemporary tales as well, such as in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, in which the protagonist journeys into a parallel but unfamiliar world, where she meets a malevolent "Other Mother" whom she must defeat in order to save her biological parents and herself.

IV

Given these cultural and literary predilections toward blood-related kinship, what would a new world of adoption without stigma look like? And how might scholars and humanists facilitate it?

A starting point might be to notice new narratives of adoption and to advocate for such stories to be told, not hidden. Abandonment, which is central to the adoption story, is a contributing feature in juvenile dystopian fiction, as Clare Bradford et al. note (136–38), but in this fiction, the relinquishing parents' perspective is seldom detailed. An exception is Louise Murphy's *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel*, in which a biological father and stepmother abandon their children out of love and mutual need for survival. Neither the parents nor the pseudoadoptive mother, who appears in the form of the witch, is vilified; rather, all work for the survival of the children (137–38).⁶ We might also become more effective readers of

the adoption narrative. In a review of Jeanette Winterson's new memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* Jan Clausen praises Winterson—the author of the acclaimed adoption novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*—but complains that her memoir falls apart in the section in which Winterson describes her feelings about adoption.⁷ Learning to read adoptively can mean being more sensitive to the gaps, silences, ellipses, and halting starts or finishes that authors may use to represent their sense of the adoptive experience.

We might also acknowledge the range of possibilities inherent in “open adoption,” a term and practice that has grown in popularity since the 1970s. Open adoption covers a continuum of interactions between birth and adoptive parents, such as at one end a yearly photo and letter to the birth mother mandated by the adoption agency and at the other end frequent, intimate social exchanges similar to those found in extended families. Increasing levels of trust and familiarity characterize my own open adoption experience. I am the adoptive mother of two sons who are full blood brothers, each adopted at birth. Sibling adoption is not rare, but neither is it common. Our first son was born and adopted after my husband and I met his birth parents through an agency that specializes in open adoption. Our second son was born and adopted nineteen months later, two months after his birth mother telephoned asking whether we would like to adopt this second child. The timing was fortuitous; a few weeks before her call we had contacted our adoption agency to begin an application for a second adoption.

We were at the hospital for the births of both boys and at doctors' appointments and in the delivery room for the birth of the younger son. Their birth mother and I are in regular touch, having developed a relationship over twenty-four years that began with phone conversations, was strengthened by attendance at family events such as the boys' baptisms and school graduations and the birth mother's family's weddings and birthday parties, and now consists of ad hoc texts and calls as well as visits. The rift between birth and adoptive mothers in many literary and cultural representations of adoption belies—or perhaps reflects, depending upon how we look at it—the fact that few bonds are as intimate as the one between birth and adoptive mothers. To mother means both to bring about and to nurture. Adoption apportions these roles, but it does not necessarily—and perhaps should not—sever them. Although culture allows for one set of legal parents, our sons see evidence of two mothers, just as they know of two sets of birth certificates, one with their birth parents' names and one with their adoptive parents' names. Their birth mother and I have built a relationship catalyzed by the adoption but extending beyond it to include other shared topics and interests. We are not co-parenting, but we are co-creating as we build a network of connections and care that serves our needs and, hopefully, offers our sons a stable base from which to forge their own ties to their adoptive and birth families in relationships that evolve over time, as all family relations do.

There are few guidebooks or ready terms for these kinds of birth mother–adoptive mother interactions, which entail willingness, commitment, and sometimes a leap of faith. Alliance? Partnership? The word “corporate” comes to mind, with its archaic meaning, “united” or “combined.” A word suitable for business today, it goes well beyond that realm to describe a shared enterprise by members of a group. It has roots in a word that means the body—corporal—and is evoked by Winthrop in his now-famous vision of America as “a city upon a hill” (91) anchored “in the bonds of brotherly affection” (83). Arguing that Christians are united in Christ as parts of the body, with no part more important than the other, he argues that settlers “must be knit together . . . as one,” “must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community . . . as members of the same body” (91). Following Winthrop, a close, dynamic relationship between a birth mother and adoptive mother may be seen as a corporate entity lovingly formed for a common purpose and a common investment of resources, with assumed risk and with the potential for rewards that help all to prosper.

Talking about adoption, providing access to birth records, and telling stories of all members of the adoption triad are but steps in a process that might interrogate larger social and economic issues. Readers might also question the conditions that make the need for relinquishment and adoption necessary while simultaneously questioning a culture in which desire for genealogical continuity figures foremost. We might resist the tendency to isolate adoption as a discrete event rather than address it in the context of greater neoliberal concerns. We might look, for example, at a political and cultural climate in which patriarchal, nuclear families are valued over other kinds of constructed families. Gender and queer studies can be instructive in this regard. Meg Wesling, in an article about epistemology, empire, and sexuality, asks us to be “more attentive to the global currency of sexuality, as well as race and gender” and to ask, “how does neoliberalism create conditions for or demand conformity to particular forms of sexual identity, arrangements of domestic life, and presentations of gender identity?” (296). She describes “the selective incorporation of difference” in liberal society (298) and suggests that “homosocial and homosexual identities might well be conceived of as social, rather than individual, subject positions” (297). Similar social spaces might be opened for adoption. We also might draw on queer theory to interrogate kinship, as David Eng suggests, to appreciate how adoptive identities are performed within and subjected to genealogical normativity. The belief that adoption entails lifelong loss might be reshaped in such a way that it is not the responsibility of the adoptee exclusively but also of the society that defines and constructs family as to make genealogy normative.

We might not only widen our acceptance of adoption as an alternative way of forming family but also expand our understanding and definitions of family itself.

A world of adoption without stigma might emerge from feminist theory, with its questioning of patriarchal nuclear family structures and its work to acknowledge difference without judgment or hierarchy. As Naomi Cahn writes, the stigma of adoptive families "may result from their deviation from the normal family, just as women's otherness has resulted from their differences from the male norm." She continues, "Thinking about adoption in this manner might lead to an attempt to ignore any differences between biological and adoptive families, or to value the differences between the two types of families. Alternatively . . . it could result in changing the norm. . . . This would require a respect for alternative family constructions, including adoptive and gay families, that look different from the conventional middle-class nuclear family. It might help change norms that penalize families which do not conform—because of race or class—to this traditional image." She concludes that efforts to change attitudes toward adoption should be part of a more comprehensive agenda for reconceptualizing the family (272). Charlotte Witt writes that we might "see what is wrong with genetic essentialism as a theory of personal identity. . . . The relevance of genetic origins to the identity of persons," she writes, "is always mediated by the person's self-understanding" (281). Witt proposes that a life event like adoption might be more significant than a biological inheritance of, say, flat feet. Witt continues, "For an adoptee, the process of creating a narrative of the self may well require, and be enhanced by, knowledge of genetic origins through information about and contact with the birth family (as far as they are available). But this is not because genetic endowment determines the personal identity of the adoptee. Rather, it is because knowledge of one's genetic origins, mediated by self-understanding, may be important themes in an adoptee's project of developing a narrative of the self" (282).

Postmodern definitions of society can help to redefine the family. Borrowing from Frederic Jameson, we might view the architecture of the postmodern family as one "in which none of the traditional markers . . . obtain" (51), in which the family is not a single place with individual members occupying a single place but rather a site of multiplicity, a family with fluid borders and welcome confusion over who are the "real" parents and "real" children. We can think of the family, as Jameson writes, as something that "either 'expresses' some deeper irrepressible historical impulse" or as something in which "nature is gone for good" in "a more fully human world than the older one" (ix). That is, the myth of adoption as an "as if" construction, faked and never good enough to replace the biogenetic family, might be recognized as such a fiction. A postmodern understanding of family can acknowledge that family is "internally conflicted and contradictory" and that we are "under the obligation to rehearse those inner contradictions and to stage those representational inconsistencies and dilemmas; we have to work through that every time around" (xxii).

Interrogating the adoption experience in a monolithic way is impossible, since each member of the triad approaches the subject from distinct viewpoints de-

pendent on circumstances that can change over time. However, although a subscription to blatant essentialism may seem naïve and unnecessary, the continuing stigma surrounding adoption derives in large from the hegemony of genealogy—along with a sense of American kinship, as David Schneider observes, that encompasses not only blood but religion and nationality (119). Ambivalence toward adoption persists, but if we can embrace and reach beyond local issues of adoption and interrogate broader definitions of identity, family, and nation, we might move beyond traditional understandings of kinship to something more broadly human and inclusive.

Notes

1. Recent books about literary adoption—only one part of the field—include Novy's *Imagining Adoption and Reading Adoption*, Berebitsky's *Like Our Very Own*, Nelson's *Little Strangers*, Weinstein's *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy*, Jerng's *Claiming Others*, Callahan's *Kin of Another Kind*, my *Adopting America*, and Homans's *The Imprint of Another Life*—all published in the last sixteen years.
2. Historian E. Wayne Carp, who terms modern adoption a "ubiquitous institution" that directly affects as many of one out of five Americans, observes that "any social organization that touches so many lives in such a profound way is bound to be complicated" (*Family* 1).
3. See Adler, who describes a wedding at which the best man, the groom's brother, begins his toast with a "simple and short" joke, the punch line of which is, "It's about time we told you . . . you're adopted." A similar joke appears in an episode entitled "Accepted" of the popular TV show *Modern Family*.
4. On controversies surrounding, and arguments against, contemporary adoption of African American children by white families, see Briggs, *Somebody's Children*.
5. ASAC was cofounded by Marianne Novy (University of Pittsburgh) and me. Established under the name the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity, and Kinship, it gained Allied Organization status with the Modern Language Association, with the stated purpose in its 2011 constitution "to promote the study of literary and cultural representations of adoption and related issues such as identity, displacement, and family construction. This organization promotes 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 also deals with such related topics as literary representations of infertility, illegitimacy, orphanhood, single parenthood, stepparenthood, foster parenthood, wet-nursing, families created by new reproductive technologies, and other kinds of reconfigured families. It also includes representations in film, television, and other media" (ASAIK/ASAC). The current ASAC mission statement found on its website is to promote the "understanding of the experience, institution, and cultural representation of domestic and transnational adoption and related practices such as fostering, assisted reproduction, LGBTQ+ families, and innovative kinship formations. ASAC considers adoptive kinship to include adoptees, first families, and adoptive kin. In its conferences, other gatherings, and publications ASAC provides a forum for discussion and knowledge creation about adoption and related topics through interdisci-

plinary culture-based scholarly study and creative practice that consider many ways of perceiving, interpreting, and understanding adoption" ("Welcome").

6. See also Gross's discussion of child abandonment in "*The Giver and Shade's Children*."
7. Clausen writes that "the art of the tale falters when Winterson, pole vaulting over a quarter century of adult life, dumps us in the middle of an emotional crisis and her subsequent decision to seek out the facts of her birth and adoption. While the leap makes narrative sense, the story never regains its footing amid recent memories. The first sign of trouble is clunky exposition: 'I was having a hard time. My six-year relationship with director Deborah Warner was rocky and unhappy for us both.' Not many pages later, following a breakdown, she writes, 'I had fallen in love with Susie Orbach.' Breaking the hypnotic spell of personal myth, this name dropping feels both lazy and intrusive. A truncated discussion of Winterson's suicide attempt risks turning what began as a quest for 'that order which is art' into a self-help tract—okay, maybe, on its own terms, but it's not what we signed on for: 'If you believe, as I do, that the mind wants to heal itself . . . then it isn't hard to conclude that the mind will manifest whatever is necessary to work on the job'" (12).

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