

A Long Way Home: A Glimpse at Transnational Adoption

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“We on the periphery, learning and watching
From the outside, have a particular power
With revolutionary roots.” Kim Diehl (1)

As a transnational/transracial adoptee, I have come to realize that no amount of scholarly expertise can possibly assuage or help elucidate the convoluted politics of transnational adoption. The research process for this paper has been an arduous journey of self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-preservation. When we consider transnational adoption, we must, inescapably, confront issues that are far more poignant than international politics, far more heart-rending than legal processes; we encounter the profound, emotional and often overwhelmingly painful conditions that circumscribe the lives of real people. Transnational adoption irrevocably transforms the lived experience of biological parents, adoptive families, and adopted children-- in many ways that are not overtly apparent.

While the materials I have collected for my research are simply theoretical tools, they

simultaneously provide a springboard for exploring evolving questions, emerging insights, and acquired knowledge. When I began my study of transnational adoption, I understood the endeavour to be both a personal and academic journey of transformation. Ultimately, effective and fulfilling research lies not only in the final product, but also in the experience of reconsidering, redefining, and re-examining the process. For me, this has entailed a three-month long study of transnational adoption and its myriad implications in which my focus and perspective have continually shifted.

Would I prohibit transnational adoption? Do I condemn the practice entirely? Does transnational adoption dismantle the nuclear family model? I don't know. What I do know, however, is that feminist scholars who assume a rigid position on either side of the transnational adoption debate, pro or con, are regressing rather than progressing. At stake here is a multivocal narrative that encompasses the biological mother, the adoptive family, and the transnational adoptee. While it is fruitful to consider opposing elements, it is a very different matter to espouse one narrative over another, which implies the privileging of one voice over another. This approach is counterproductive and does not allow us to consider the broad range of perspectives inherent in this issue. Moreover, ethical issues cannot truly be deconstructed if the methods employed by scholars to analyze them are finite. In other words, if the very objective of confronting a multifaceted debate is to unearth definitive, one-sided solutions, the effort becomes futile, paradoxical, even. Scholars must approach this controversy with wisdom and flexibility as they collaborate with those of us who live, every day, the reality about which they theorize. They must look to the transnational adoptees whose bodies have become locales for

emerging and dominant discourses. We, too, are the experts. It is our time to speak.

At six and a half months, I was adopted from an orphanage in Calcutta by a single mother from the United States. Raised in a white, middle-class family, I recognized the advantages of my circumstances-- the privilege that accords children who cross the borders of the so-called developing Third World, and take up residence in a more prosperous location. Assimilation enabled me to experience Western culture, but only at the expense of my origins. In the anthology *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, contributor John Raible exclaims in his essay "Lifelong Impact, Enduring Need" that the "paradox that is the inheritance of all adoptees, who arguably have been given a fresh start in life, is rooted in the opposite experience of profound loss" (186). It is from this location that I scrutinize the politics of transnational adoption. Situated at a juncture where the personal sphere may collide with the academic, I offer a feminist critique (placing the interests of women and transnational adoptees at the centre of my study) from the perspective of an "outsider within." To construct this essay from a primarily academic nucleus would do a great disservice to those of us who sit, as Kim Diehl refers, "on the periphery."

I write this essay as much for myself as for an audience. It is an intimate attempt to navigate my way across a highly contested terrain, which has grown manifest from the very landscape of my own racially demarcated body as active witness and participant. Consequently, my body, as a site for the implementation of this controversy, has become a semiotic device upon which the nature of transnational adoption may be

conceptualized. My status as a transnational adoptee gives this paper an urgency that would not exist if I were approaching the topic from a second-hand perspective. While I rely on the work of feminist scholars to augment my discussion, the crux of my paper lies within the realm of embodied knowledge.

As a segue into the core of my research, it seems appropriate to share the details of my experience growing up as the daughter of a white, single mother, and the reaction our visible differences elicited over the duration of my childhood. “Is that your real mom?” my peers would query. “She’s not dark like you.” At a relatively young age, I began to internalize prevailing Western assumptions that were rooted in racist logics. Instead of recognizing these attitudes as a reflection of white supremacist values, I misconstrued the dominant ideologies as a set of criteria that I was unable to satisfy; I understood marginalization as a fault of my own, and not as the product of hegemonic reign.

Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin, editors of *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, state in their Introduction: “...although it appears to be an innocent question, ‘Where do you come from?’ carries the implicit rejection ‘you are not like us,’ and underlines the assertion ‘you do not belong here’”(8). Indeed, as Harvard Law Professor Elizabeth Bartholet maintains in her essay “International Adoption,” from *Children and Youth in Adoption, Orphanages, and Foster Care*: “In [transnational] adoption, adoptive parents and children meet across lines of difference involving not just biology, but also socio-economic class, race, ethnic and cultural heritage, and nationality” (107). Under these circumstances, the transnational

adoptee is inevitably positioned as “Other” against a homogenous backdrop that is perpetually reinforced. In Rachel Qui Collier's essay “Performing Childhood,” she asserts: “An adopted child can be appropriated, assimilated, made into the image and likeness of her parents and society. She is given a (new) name, language, religion, cosmology, worldview; she is, in a sense, colonized” (212). Transnational adoption is a problematic affair that must be upended in order to comprehend the gravity of its consequences on the private lives of the biological mother, adoptive family, and transnational adoptee.

Transnational adoption-- typically the movement of children across national borders-- is a troubling phenomenon of the last half-century. Anthony Shiu, in his essay “Flexible Production: International Adoption, Race, Whiteness,” observes that laws enacted in the United States since the early 1990s-- designed to accommodate the needs and desires of privileged and affluent white adoptive parents, rather than to improve the circumstances of biological mothers or adopted children-- have resulted in a marked rise in transnational and transracial adoption (5). It is a distressing fact that even the titles of many of these laws emphasize economic, rather than social or humanitarian, objectives. For instance, who would imagine that the “Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996” has anything to do with the creation of families by transnational adoption? One would expect that a law with that name might have more to do with the acquisition of property-- and in fact, that is very close to the truth. As Shiu explains it, the “SBJPA” law attends to issues of supposed “reverse discrimination,” ensuring that whites are able to adopt non-white children, irrespective of their best interests. Shiu states: “Children become the strategic

discursive wedge-- indeed the very 'good[s]' desired-- that enables the law to work toward fulfilling white middle-class parental desire." He goes on to quote Cheryl Harris, who claims: "White privilege, as legally articulated, is always concerned with property and access to it" (6).

Shiu cites numerous examples which describe, in painful detail, the self-absorbed, solipsistic, and self-indulgent attitudes of privileged white Western adoptive parents. None of the parents depicted in this article possess even the slightest modicum of sensitivity regarding issues of race, class, identity and culture. I do not doubt the veracity of these anecdotes, and acknowledge that this mindset is, unfortunately, no doubt the norm. However, it does not seem-- based on my personal observation-- that this extreme degree of insensitivity is universal among all adoptive parents of transnational adoptees, as Shiu seems to suggest. Perhaps there are grey areas that might appropriately be explored or acknowledged.

According to Kim Park Nelson, in her essay "Shopping For Children in the International Marketplace:" "When adopted infants became less available Domestically...the swelling baby boom population...created high demand for adoptable children" (91). In the context of "high demand," transnational adoption is often framed in one or another of two mutually exclusive and contradictory positions: adoption as rescue (middle-class whites as saviours-- the rescuers of vulnerable, racialized children), or adoption as kidnap (affluent Western whites displacing children of colour from their birth families and countries). Karen Dubinsky, in her essay "The Fantasy of the Global

Cabbage Patch: Making Sense of Transnational Adoption,” notes that neither of these tropes is “particularly illuminating” (2).

Reductionism will never serve us well in an attempt to understand the complexities of transnational adoption; binary simplifications (good/bad, rescue/kidnap, right/wrong) only minimize and distort a circumstance for which there are perhaps as many elaborately interconnected sets of facts as there are people involved. For example, Dubinsky, the mother of a transnationally adopted child from Guatemala, reveals her rationale in choosing to adopt a baby overseas:

I came to adoption when I decided to get off the speeding locomotive that is infertility treatment. I was thus more ready to be convinced by [feminist and legal scholar Elizabeth] Bartholet’s arguments-- clearly consistent with feminist critiques of the normative nuclear family-- that adoptive families were not only ‘real,’ they were transformative, and that the fetishism over blood ties and essentialist understandings of family has unfairly and unfortunately privileged ‘child production’ through reproductive technology over adoption (2).

Bartholet’s transformative view of transnational adoption seems to re-frame the previously conservative notion of family, as it characterizes an excessive attachment to,

or preference for, familial “blood ties” as a form of unhealthy fetishism. More often, though, the arguments swirling around transnational adoption are far less esoteric, and far more personal; it is generally the mother-- biological or adoptive-- who bears the brunt of critical scrutiny.

In an increasingly polarized society, women's bodies are the targets of glaring socio-cultural, political, and economic disparity. It is upon this precarious foundation that their lives are interminably measured, controlled, and regulated. As Oparah, Shin, and Trenka acknowledge in their Introduction: “The real alternative is found in welfare policies that support poor mothers of colour rather than penalizing them, criminal justice policies that strengthen and heal communities rather than destroying them, and international politics that prioritize human security over profits” (7). Furthermore, “a real transnational feminist solidarity [must] be created, one that leads women to fight for each others’ most basic human rights to parent their own children and that rejects transactions that pit (birth) mother against (adoptive) mother” (13).

In her article “Complicating the Ideology of Motherhood: Child Welfare Law and First Nation Women,” from *Open Boundaries: A Canadian Women’s Studies Reader*, Marlee Kline describes the nexus out of which, I would argue, the power and prestige of transnational adoption also arises. Although her essay is specifically directed at First Nation women, the arguments she posits can be extrapolated to corroborate my own research. Kline maintains: “By the dominant ideology of motherhood, I mean the constellation of ideas and images in western capitalist societies that constitute the

dominant ideals of motherhood against which women's lives are judged” (190). By the same token, “the ideology of motherhood speaks not only to gender roles and behaviour, but it also constructs some locations within social relations of race, class, sexuality, ability, and so on as more appropriate for motherhood than others” (191). However, most salient in Kline's essay is the assertion that “motherblaming” obscures the wider context of “racism, poverty, ill-health, and violence” (192). The controversy surrounding transnational adoption cannot easily be solved or neutralized, and it is perilous to place blame upon the individual mother. Doing so diverts our attention away from systemic injustices.

While there are indisputable colonial implications in the very lure of transnational adoption, it is unproductive to posit the adoptive mother (and by extension, the adoptive family) as enemy. While she does exercise a considerable amount of ethnic, political, social, cultural, and economic privilege over that of the birth mother, this very scaffolding of elements, as with all hierarchical structures, is multi-tiered. It is important to realize that the adoptive mother is, herself, a product of societal control; larger institutions of discourse regulate her behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions. She is not an autonomous agent in the process of transnational adoption, or in the subsequent selection of her child. She has been conditioned to adhere to the culturally enforced role as “mother” and “nurturer.” According to Oparah, Shin, and Trenka, we must endeavour to “connect [transnational] adoption to broader struggles for decolonization and social justice,” (14) rather than support the individualization of blame. Anthony Shiu, even while criticizing the commodification of the soon-to-be adopted child through

photographs of the “product” (the child) which are sent by the adoption agency to the soon-to-be adoptive parents, concedes: “I want to recognize the importance of parents for these children and not attribute pure domination to them, for it is impossible to condemn adoptive parents for imbuing hope onto photographs” (12). Again, the complex circumstances involved in transnational adoption cannot be reduced to simplistic dualisms.

Although the dynamics regarding the adoptive mother present a complex tangle of extenuating circumstances, a far greater concern should focus on the biological mother, whose voice has been erased from the debate. For any number of reasons, she is unable to provide for a child. Under often-impoverished circumstances, within a set of deeply imbued social and cultural mores that conspire against her at every turn, what is she to do? The relinquishment of her child does not demonstrate her inability to undertake the role as an acceptable “mother,” but instead reflects the embedded framework of global inequities that position her as victim. In “Performing Childhood,” Rachel Quy Collier contends: “Adoptees are told that their birthmothers loved them so much that they gave them up for adoption. Logically, it does not make sense to believe that if you really love someone, you will stop having a relationship with them” (208). Collier's argument is insulting to the biological mother. The capacity to “love” in this context becomes secondary when the biological mother must first contend with abject hopelessness. As awful as this is to contemplate, the question of “love” is almost beside the point when the most fundamental, basic issues of survival are paramount. Karen Dubinsky asks whether birthmother “agency” is meaningful in the “winner-take-all model of transnational

adoption as it is currently organized.” She goes on to quote historian Ricki Solinger [who] suggests not. “Such transfers,” she writes, “. . .almost always depend on poor and/or culturally oppressed mothers who utterly lack choices” (2).

As a 20-year-old transnational adoptee, I ask myself what it means that I was given an American name, and that my East Indian given name, Ayla, was placed in a subordinate position as my middle name. I ask what the ramifications have been and will continue to be as the result of growing up in a predominantly white, middle-class milieu, where my ethnic polarity has resulted in exoticization, tokenism, and ostracization, but rarely full acceptance or genuine integration of perceived differences, namely across lines of race. There are no easy solutions, and certainly no shortcuts to mitigate the discomfort as I battle to embrace a hybrid identity. In his essay “From Orphan Trains to Babylifts,” academic Tobias Hubinette asserts:

Today, in the leading adopting regions of North America, Western Europe, and Oceania, [transnational] adoption has developed into the last resort for many suffering infertility, while a discourse of multiculturalism celebrates [transnational] adoptees as bridges between cultures, symbols of interethnic harmony, and embodiments of global and post-modern cosmopolitanism (139).

Extending the idea that transnational adoption may serve as a panacea for societal

shortcomings, Anthony Shiu observes that international adoption has “produced an increasing reliance on the hope of ‘family’ as the cornerstone of solutions for world peace, helping the Third World, and infertility” (1).

In a perfect world, who knows? Transnational adoptees might be worldwide emissaries of multiculturalism: the aforementioned human “bridges between cultures, symbols of interethnic harmony, and embodiments of global post-modern cosmopolitanism.” But this is not a perfect world, and that is much too tall an order. Indeed, it is presumptuous to ascribe this dubious honour to adoptees who never chose this path in the first place. The potential for a “bridge between cultures” may exist, but widespread problems with constituent elements (race, class, gender, etc.) have yet to be resolved.

Proponents of transnational adoption cannot dismiss the elusive and subversive nature of Western ideology if they wish to imagine stable bridges. Conflicting circuits of power are always present, and it is a mistake to suggest that inequality gaps can so effortlessly be repaired. Furthermore, Oprah, Shin and Trenka observe that advocates of “transracial adoption often invoke the aphorism ‘love sees no colour’” (8). This is a disconcerting assertion, upon which the ideals of white privilege are governed and reinscribed.

According to Anthony Shiu, the universal rhetoric of love obscures power imbalances, and thus perpetuates racist assumptions. He argues: “adoptive parents situate their children within a colour-blind discourse, and, in turn, [use] this discursive move [to] provide further justification for their actions at the exact site of epistemological rupture” (15).

Until recently, the voice of transnational adoptees was virtually absent from the debate. It is vital that attention be given to our stories of survival, ambivalence, hardship, and perseverance. Together, we are a formidable force against prevailing racist and colonialist logics. In her narrative “Power of the Periphery,” contributor Kim Diehl avows: “Being a transracial adoptee may be the most radicalizing force in my life, one that has coursed through me with an intense and raw power” (31). Another writer, Mark Hagland, declares: “All my experience as a member of diverse, often highly marginalized categories in society has compelled me to consciously develop an integrated identity” (42). When I discovered *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, it was the first time that I encountered others who spoke to my experience. I found solace, empowerment, and familiarity in the narratives shared by transracial adoptees across the world. At every turn, I found myself exclaiming “Yes! This is my struggle too!” And by the end of the book, “Yes. This is our struggle,” and I am prepared to come out fighting alongside my impassioned transracial allies.

I conclude this essay with no guaranteed solution or painless answer to the complex politics of transnational adoption. What I have discovered, however, is that rigidity on either side of the debate is unavailing and does not equally consider the power impact that transnational adoption exerts on all parties involved. Those of us who are dedicated to the advancement of feminism in the 21st century, and who aspire to address the problems inherent in transnational adoption, must shift our attention to the overarching issues of global inequality. Injustices involving race, class, gender, poverty, political

turmoil and government corruption are factors that create a demand for transnational adoption in the first place; these are the challenges that must be given our utmost concern. But until then, may transnational adoptees continue the long trek home. Whether that place is external-- a return to our country of origin, or internal-- a place of momentary peace, may our voices resound as a universal echo in the face of adversity.

Note: This essay won an award from the Canadian Women's Studies Association in 2008. The author was invited to present this paper at a special session of the 5th Biennial Conference on Adoption held at New York University in October 2008. Panel respondents were Harold Grotevant, Debbie Riley, Holly van Gulden, and John Raible (moderator). This paper is published here with permission of the author.