

## **White Australian Adoptive Mothers' Understandings of Birth Cultures and Families**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports an analysis of interviews conducted with ten white Australian women who had undertaken intercountry adoption. The paper begins with an overview of how issues of culture play out within discourses of intercountry adoption in general, and how this occurs specifically in Australian policy in regards to intercountry adoption. The analysis highlights how the interviewees were in many ways inculcated in broader Australian discourses of intercountry adoption, as much as in some instances attempting to resist this. The paper concludes by discussing how it might be possible for white adoptive mothers in Australia to do other than remain complicit with marginalizing accounts of adoptive children's birth cultures and parents.

**Keywords:** intercountry adoption, culture, birth families, whiteness, mothering

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## Introduction

Writing about the experiences of adoptive mothers is, as researchers have long acknowledged, a necessarily difficult task (Gailey, 2000). On the one hand, there is the need to present a respectful engagement with the challenges associated with adoptive mothering, especially given the fact that negative attitudes towards adoption prevail across many sectors (Wegar, 2000). In the context of Australia - where the interviews analyzed in this paper took place – both the removal of children from their birth families and adoption have a long history of being used as forms of state sanctioned violence against Indigenous communities, specifically through the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families and placement either in orphanages or with white families (see the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Bringing them Home Report* for more information). Other histories of adoption in Australia are also salient in this regard, most notably the 'Forgotten Australians'; a cohort of approximately 500,000 children (most of whom were not orphans), who were raised in institutional care in Australia. Several thousand of these children were forced migrants from the UK to Australia, arriving throughout the 1900s, with many of the rest of the children being removed from single mothers in Australia (see the Senate report *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children*, tabled in 2004). Public apologies made to both children who were subject to forced adoption and mothers whose children were taken from them have been made over the past decade (Murphy, Quartley, & Cuthbert, 2009), but arguably these do as much to perpetuate negative stereotypes about contemporary adoption as they do to make reparations for previous adoption practices. And indeed it is this very ambivalence about adoption that highlights the

other side of the story in regards to contemporary research on adoption, namely that whilst respectful engagement with contemporary narratives of adoptive motherhood is important, such engagement cannot occur outside of the histories of adoption (as a form of forced migration) that shape current adoption practices.

Following Anagost (2000), then, we suggest that in order to understand how white Australian adoptive mothers negotiate a sense of self as mothers (and how they do so in a relationship both to their child's birth parents and to their child's birth culture)<sup>1</sup>, it is necessary to locate the decision that some women make to undertake intercountry adoption within broader national discourses about migration, mothering and culture. Whilst writers such as Quiroz (2012) usefully highlight how parents who adopt transnationally can serve either as 'cultural keepers' (i.e., they explicitly attempt to facilitate a connection between their adopted child and the child's birth culture in ways that are meaningful and sustained) or as 'cultural tourists' (i.e., adoptive parents who pay lip service to their child's birth culture but give little beyond surface attention to issues of culture), we agree with Anagost's assertion that white adoptive parents are *a priori* limited by their own culture's evaluations of other cultures. In saying this, neither we nor Anagost are interested here in excusing the considerable privilege held by white adoptive parents. Rather, our point in this paper is to ask how could such parents do anything other than mirror broader discourses about the appropriate treatment of 'culture' within intercountry adoptions (Kubo, 2010), and to look at how specifically this plays out in our interview data.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the terms 'birth cultures' and 'birth families' cognizant of their problematic status within the field of adoption studies. Alternate terms such as 'first families', 'blood families', and 'families of origin' are variously utilized and advocated for within other literature. Whilst acknowledging the potential for the language of 'birth' to reduce mothers in particular solely to the role of birthing a child (which is often inaccurate given in many cases children are cared for and parented before being adopted), we retain the term in the present paper given its predominance in the literature we draw upon and amongst our interviewees' narratives.

In making the above point about adoptive mothers, we are of course mindful of the impact of discourses of 'cosmopolitanism' upon white adoptive mothers' accounts of adoption. Willing and Fronek (2012) highlight this in their research on white Australian adoptive parents, who they suggest are very clear about the requirement that they provide a performance of cultural competency in the assessments that precede adoption taking place. As they note, cosmopolitan discourses of multiculturalism, inclusion, and respect for diversity have become a hallmark of the 'good adoptive parent', one who can promise to support their child in remaining connected to birth culture. An appreciation of this drive towards expressing a cosmopolitan attitude in the context of intercountry adoption thus informs this paper. At the same time, however, and again following Anagnost (2000), our interest here is in how the rhetoric of cosmopolitanism provides a very static, essentialist account of birth cultures, one that adoptive parents (and also possibly adoptees) become inculcated into. Such a 'frozen' account of culture arguably fails to truly apprehend the historical context of intercultural relations between birth cultures and adoptive cultures, and thus perpetuates the very issues at stake when it comes to possible reunifications with birth families.

Importantly, we also follow Kim (2009) in attempting to problematize the location of birth parents within the narratives of white Australian mothers who have undertaken intercountry adoption. Historically, birth parents in the case of intercountry adoption have not only been absent in academic research, but have also been presumed non-existent at law and thus by adoptive parents. This convenient fiction has driven the classification of children as 'legal orphans', when as Kim suggests they are more

correctly social orphans (i.e., their birth parents may still be alive, but coercive social circumstances render it that they cannot retain custody of their children). Our interest in this paper, however, is not to simplistically return birth parents to the picture. That, we argue, would only contribute to the simplistic, and ahistorical account of intercountry adoption that continues to fuel the very understandings of adoption that we suggest above are taken up by adoptive mothers. Furthermore, exalting the position of birth parents ignores that some birth mothers or fathers may well have truly chosen not to raise their children, and of course positioning birth parents as the only answer to the challenges faced by children adopted transnationally depicts biological relations between birth parents and their children as automatically nurturing and meaningful (Kim, 2009). Instead, our interest in this paper is in how adoptive mothering is premised upon the occlusion of birth parents at a cultural level, and how this limits any genuine attempt at creating relationships between adoptive and birth families in many circumstance.

In the following section, and before presenting our analysis of interviews with a sample of Australian adoptive mothers, we take up the requirement mentioned above to foreground the cultural contexts in which white Australians undertake intercountry adoption. By providing an overview not simply of figures about adoption, but also the political issues at stake in the relationship between 'sending' countries and Australia, we seek to demonstrate the forms of intelligibility on offer to adoptive mothers in Australia, shaped and constrained as such mothers are by the contexts in which they live. Importantly, we do so not to excuse the opinions or beliefs of the mothers reported in our analysis, but rather to suggest, following Haggis (2001) and Ravenscroft (2003), that white women who engage in cross-cultural relations are

always both products and perpetrators of whiteness. Whether this can be otherwise is an issue we return to in our conclusion to this paper.

### **Intercountry Adoption and Australia**

The rates of intercountry adoption in Australia have decreased markedly over the past three decades. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2011-2012 saw the lowest number of intercountry adoptions finalized on record (a total of 333, AIHW, 2012). This represents a 78% decline from 25 years earlier, when there were 1,494 finalized intercountry adoptions in 1987-1988. The AIHW states that this can be attributed in part to changes in legislation in Australia, as well as to changes in social trends in the countries of origin of adopted children, where it is becoming increasingly possible for families to keep their children. In addition, waiting times for intercountry adoptions have risen in recent years, with the median wait now 56 months (AIHW).

Australia currently has intercountry adoption agreements with 13 countries, namely: Bolivia, Chile, China, Colombia, Fiji, Hong Kong, India, Lithuania, the Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Thailand (AIHW, 2012). Although the Ethiopian program for adoption was closed in June 2012, several of the families who were interviewed had adopted children from Ethiopia while this program was open. Clair (2012) provides an extensive discussion of Australia's relationship with Ethiopia in relation to adoption, emphasising factors that led to the closure of the program (including a reduction in the numbers of children referred for adoption as a result of

increased emphasis upon domestic adoption or children returning to the care of their birth parents, alongside contested public opinion over adoption from Ethiopia).

Intercountry adoption in Australia is currently run individually by each State or Territory government. Furthermore, intercountry adoption is also regulated by the country from which children are coming, with each country having their own eligibility criteria for adoptive parents (such as that they are married, that they are under or over a certain age, or that they identify with a particular religion). In general, Australia prefers intercountry adoption arrangements with countries compliant with the *Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption*, designed to ensure that intercountry adoption only takes place when it is deemed to be in the 'best interests of the child', and in order to protect children from trafficking. However, there are exceptions to this preference, and not all countries with whom Australia has an arrangement are either signatories to, or compliant with, the *Convention*.

As mentioned earlier, there are several political issues at stake in terms of intercountry adoption and international relations. Indeed, it is noted by Saunders (2007) that intercountry adoption is inherently political, with what he calls 'push' demographics functioning to increase the number of children available for adoption (such as poverty in countries such as the Philippines, the socio-economic climate in countries such as Lithuania, and cultural factors such as those stemming from the one-child policy in China). In other words, it is frequently the result of political issues *within* countries that result in children being placed for adoption in the first place, and the actions of Western countries such as Australia can be seen as potentially influencing the situation in which countries find themselves (such as through

restrictions on aid and development funding, or initiatives which fail to promote equality. See Kilby, 2007 for further discussions of these issues). As such, we argue that intercountry adoption always already occurs within such political relationships and spaces, and that this has direct implications for adoptive parents, as we discuss throughout this paper.

The sociopolitical nature of intercountry adoption is highlighted in the ebbs and flows of children adopted from particular countries (Saunders, 2007; Selman, 2009). For example, it has been noted by some researchers that adoption from countries in the African continent by families in Western countries (including Australia, the United States, and European countries) has occurred somewhat in reaction to publicity that adoption from African countries in general has received in relation to so-called ‘celebrity adoptions’ such as those of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt, and Madonna (Selman, 2009; Willing, 2009). Whilst this may not be a problem *per se*, it could be argued that it is frequently only within such representations of other countries (in this case, the AIDS pandemic in African countries which continues to result in children being orphaned) that prospective parents are able to make their decisions about which countries to adopt from, leading to benevolent and essentializing views of the cultures in question.

A final issue that is relevant across all countries from which prospective parents in Australia may adopt children is that of the rights of birth parents. This is a theme followed up on throughout this paper, and there is limited space to discuss the issue in full here. However, many authors have argued that, despite the *Hague Convention*, the rights of birth parents disappear when politically and economically more powerful

Western countries negotiate adoption arrangements with developing countries (for example, see Bowie, 2004 and Bainham, 2003 in relation to this issue in Romania). Rotabi and Gibbons (2011) argue that issues of inequality arise in relation to intercountry adoption particularly when the reality is that most children are adopted from low resource (or 'developing') countries, and are sent to high resource (or 'developed') countries. Rotabi and Gibbons argue that what is currently lacking is an equality between 'sending' and 'receiving' countries such that sending countries are seen as (at least) equal partners in their ability to protect the rights of children and their families.

## **Method**

The research reported in this paper was granted ethics approval by the first author's institution. The broad research project from which the data are taken sought to examine how a diverse range of Australian parents account for their decisions about having children, the specific modes through which they become parents, and the support they receive as parents from their broader families and community. One of the modes of family formation explored with the project was adoption (the others being domestic foster care, one parent giving birth, and offshore surrogacy, the latter of which is used briefly as a point of comparison in the analysis presented below). 15 adoptive parents were interviewed, all identifying as white Australian, and all having adopted their children offshore. Of the interviewees 10 were mothers, and these women are the focus of the analysis presented below. The 10 women included in this paper were all in partnerships or married at the time of undertaking adoption and came from all over Australia. Three of the mothers also had children they had given

birth to, and chose to adopt in order to expand their family as a result of difficulties in earlier pregnancies. The remaining seven mothers had adopted children as their sole mode of forming a family. Children were adopted from Ethiopia, China, Lithuania, the Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

Participants were recruited via a flyer circulated amongst members of a post-adoption support group. Details on the flyer invited parents whose family had been formed at least in part through adoption to speak to the researchers about their experiences of family formation. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, and included questions such as ‘What were some of the benefits you found in forming your family through adoption?’ and ‘Was it difficult negotiating the adoption(s)?’. Interviews typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim with pseudonyms allocated to participants.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis of the interviews was undertaken. This process involved repeated readings of the data set by both authors, with each reading involving an iterative process of identifying patterns across the data set in terms of common topics discussed by participants, and then checking the utility of the topics identified against the data set in terms of narrative fit (i.e., how well the topics identified accurately represent something meaningful about the data set). Through this process both authors noted that issues of culture appeared to be a significant factor shaping both the decisions that participants made prior to becoming parents, as well as their subsequent experiences as parents. As such, ‘culture’ was deemed to be a valid and important theme worthy of further exploration from the data set. In the analysis that follows we examine how the women spoke about issues

related to the cultural background of their children and their birth families, mindful of the argument we presented in the introduction to this paper in regards to the inculcation of white Australian adoptive parents into normative assumptions about cultural difference.

## **Findings**

In the first extract presented below Anna responds to what was the first main question in our interview schedule, namely a question about family formation. Notably, across all of the interview cohorts included in the project, all participants other than those whose family was formed through reproductive heterosex engaged in complex identity work in regards to the decisions they made to become parents. Given the ongoing dominance of the norm of heterosexual reproduction, it is perhaps unsurprising that this was the case. Yet despite this commonality across families formed other than through reproductive heterosex, there were significant differences between how participants in each cohort accounted for their decisions in terms of family formation. With regard to families formed through intercountry adoption, arguably a key factor that informed people's decisions was the issue of culture difference, and how to engage with it. Some mothers, like Anna below, clearly oriented to 'needs' presumed specific to cultures other than their own as an appealing facet of intercountry adoption:

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit about your journey to adoption?

Anna: Yeah, we initially decided on Ethiopia – it was the only country at the time that we qualified for, but it was also the country that we wanted to go to anyway. We wanted to go to the country of greatest need. Which Ethiopia definitely qualified, and there was a very limited choice of where to go to at that time – Ethiopia, India, Korea, China program hadn't opened, Thailand, Philippines, that was about it. So, quite limited on where you could go. Ummm so we went for Ethiopia and we put our file in there, so you had to state what you wanted, a bit of an order I suppose.

Interestingly, Anna begins by justifying the stake she and her partner had in undertaking adoption in Ethiopia. Whilst, as she states, it was the only country in which they were eligible to adopt, Anna mitigates this limitation by emphasizing that they *desired* to adopt a child from Ethiopia (e.g., 'it was also the country that we wanted to go to anyway. We wanted to go to the country of greatest need'). This desire, Anna suggests, repeats what still remains a relatively common narrative amongst intercountry adopters, namely a desire to save needy children (Clair, 2012). Yet whilst this claim to altruism structured much of Anna's interview narrative, it was at the same time juxtaposed with the statement made at the end of this extract, namely that as potential parents she and her partner could, to a certain degree, 'choose' the characteristics they wanted in a child. As such, neediness is mediated by desirability, such that the child they adopted was not necessarily the most needy, but was instead the child they found most desirable. The 'need' presumed to adhere to certain cultural differences in this sense is an appealing factor for white mothers who undertake intercountry adoption, but such appeal is nonetheless shaped by the desires that potential adopters have for a particular kind of child – one that they can 'choose'.

In contrast to Anna's account, in which cultural difference was, to a certain degree, valorized, the following extract from Mary suggests an awareness of the problems attached with cultural difference as perceived by white Australians who undertake intercountry adoption:

Interviewer: How did you come to start your family?

Mary: 10 years ago my ex-partner and I decided to adopt children from Lithuania. We decided we would go for Caucasian so that they would look like us and then the choice would be theirs about whether they would tell people they were adopted. We have friends, and had friends back then, that adopted from India, China, Ethiopia, and at a glance they were discriminated against because people are only human. Of course even with these kids there is discrimination. It was clear to us that the orphanage would have preferred local rather than overseas adopters. When we went to finalise the adoption before bringing them home we had to say that we would keep their culture with them in order to get the adoption through – mind you that never happened.

In the broader history of adoption in Australia as outlined earlier in this paper, 10 years is a relatively short time frame. It is thus notable that Mary and her partner's decision to adopt a child who looked culturally-similar to them was still driven by the potentially negative implications of cultural difference upon the family and its members. Yet instead of challenging discrimination and the terms on which it occurs,

Mary appears to accept as *fait accompli* not only that discrimination will happen, but that it is natural for people to see cultural difference as worthy of comment. Indeed, the phrase ‘at a glance’ signals how cultural difference is reduced down to initial perceptions attained from a ‘glance’, a reading of culture that epitomised many of the participant’s responses in terms of culture being simply about visual appearance (see also Kubo, 2010). This reduction of culture to appearance is exemplified in Mary’s account when she speaks about the injunction placed upon her and her partner to ‘keep [the child’s] culture with them’. Whilst, as other authors have suggested (e.g., Kim, 2009), there is a thriving marketplace for ‘keeping culture’ (that is arguably more about cultural tourism than it is about cultural keeping), it is notable that for Mary and her partner neither of these approaches to culture were honoured. Rather, culture was dismissed as something that ‘never happened’. This may well have been a product of the initial presumption that cultural difference would be minimised by adopting children who looked white. In other words, visual similarities overwrite cultural difference in a normative frame of whiteness.

Of course as was the case with Anna, not all of the adoptive mothers sought to minimise or avoid cultural difference. Some of the participants spoke of being critical of the notion of racial matching (i.e., white adoptive mothers seeking to adopt white children, as was the case with Mary), whilst nonetheless expressing views about birth families that were marginalising, as was the case in the interview with Anthea:

Interviewer: What was it like when your son was placed with you?

Anthea: He is from the Philippines, so they were looking for someone who would make sure that he had some cultural experiences and that we were willing to keep up stuff. A lot of people only want white children – they are white and they only want white children – whereas I don't have a problem with that. What was a problem for me was being worried that the adoption might be reversed. Before the adoption happened I went to meet his birth mum and I was so nervous, I was just working myself up into a frenzy wondering you know was she going to try and steal him back. And actually some months later his mum did try to get him, but like her life is just not together, she's not capable, and you know like the reasons that he was removed still remain.

In this extract Anthea undertakes complex identity management work in terms of positioning herself as someone not driven by issues of culture. Indeed, Anthea's narrative almost positions her as an exemplary white adoptive mother who can be seen as 'willing to keep up stuff' in terms of the child's birth culture. Yet at the same time, this depiction of willingness is undermined by Anthea's strongly voiced anxieties over potential reunification. Whilst Anthea does not specifically mention culture when speaking about these anxieties, at the heart of her concerns, we would argue, lies a certain safety in the fact that the child's birth mother remains 'not capable' of having her child returned to her, a capacity that Anthea states is diminished by the fact that the reasons for removal remain. Given the fact that these reasons likely relate to poverty and the cultural context in which the child's birth mother lives, it is arguably the case that Anthea's ability to retain custody of her child hinges upon cultural difference and the 'push' factors noted above, and more

specifically, the disparity between the cultural authority accorded to white adoptive mothers and the (lack of) authority accorded to birth parents located outside Australia (Rotabi and Gibbons, 2011). Anthea stated this more clearly in response to a follow up question:

Interviewer: And what was it like when you had your second child?

Anthea: You know one of the best things about doing overseas adoption is that, unlike foster care here, her birth family is overseas. Yes there are disadvantages to her not growing up knowing her birth family, and we hope to address that as much as possible, but I don't have that issue. The good thing is I don't have to put up with worrying about if we are going to run into an irate birth family down the street who think their kid has been stolen off them. She is just mine and that's it and we can just totally get on with life.

Anthea's construction of physical and cultural distance as a positive thing mirrors reports from other parents interviewed as part of the broader research project who had undertaken surrogacy as their chosen mode of family formation. For both some adoptive mothers in our sample and many of the parents in the cohort who had their children through offshore surrogacy in India, having birth mothers or surrogates 'over there' created a safe psychological distance that was perceived as non-threatening to the participants. In terms of what would constitute a 'threat', both of the extracts from Anthea presented above evoke the language of 'theft' – in the first extract Anthea reports anxieties from when she adopted her first child that the child's birth mother

would ‘steal’ the child back, whilst in the second extract she reports the benefit of intercountry adoption as not having to ‘run into an irate birth family down the street who think their kid has been stolen off them’. Whether or not Anthea is aware of the discourse surrounding intercountry adoption as akin to ‘child trafficking’ (Smolin, 2004) we cannot know. Nevertheless, the language of ‘theft’ highlights why cultural distance is such an important factor for Anthea, as it provides reassurance that she can ‘just get on with life’, safe in the knowledge that the birth family are of no threat to her. Of course in saying this we do not wish to dismiss the heartfelt commitment that adoptive parents make to raising the children who have come into their lives. Any parent faced with the possible loss of a child is likely to experience anxiety and wish to avoid this at all costs. Our argument here, however, is that for some participants the desire to minimize perceived risk came at the cost of dismissing the legitimacy of the child’s and the birth family’s right to a connection with one another.

Importantly, not all participants were dismissive of birth families and culture. At the same time, however, even those who reported engaging in practices that maintained some connection with the child’s birth culture still presented a very limited and essentialist view of culture, as evidenced in the following two quotes:

Interviewer: And what things do you do with your children to create a sense of family?

Amy: Well I guess I think rituals are really important, so like on Christmas eve every year I cook Ethiopian food and we have like a Christmas eve celebration. And like, we have in interpreter who we met over there and

we pay him a couple of times a year to go up and visit her family and take photos up and we send clothes and a little parcel and whatever else. And then he brings some photos back, he takes them while he is there and sends them over. She knows that her family, her birth family are there. I don't know how we are going to deal with the problem of how she is going to reconcile all of that when she gets a little bit older, but personally I think the good parts outweigh that.

In this first quote there is an interesting disjuncture. On the one hand we would follow Quiroz (2012) in suggesting that cooking food once a year that is seen as representing the child's birth culture is a form of cultural tourism. On the other hand, Amy reports going to some lengths to ensure that the birth family have some capacity to stay in contact with their child. Between these two disparate takes on cultural connection, however, appears to lie an understanding of culture whereby it is something that adoptees must reconcile – it is not necessarily something that adoptive parents must truly incorporate into their parenting. Instead, for Amy the emphasis is upon the 'good' parts of adoption rather than the notionally bad parts (i.e., having to reconcile birth and adoptive families). These two parts are only separable, however, if birth culture is seen as reducible to food or photos – that is it not a possibly central part of an adoptee's identity (whether that be through a sense of loss of cultural identity, a sense of connection to birth culture, or a westernized understanding of birth culture provided to adoptees by adoptive parents). This gap between culture as central to identity and culture as an isolated factor was evident in the following extract also:

Interviewer: What things do you do to create a sense of family?

Fiona: Well we try wherever possible to do Thai cultural things with him. And we're quite fortunate because one of the other adoptive families we know, the husband is Thai, and just recently we went up to the Thai temple. We do get involved as much as we can. There's not a lot of things here for Thais but we get involved in those things. We did have him baptized Catholic but recognized that on his Thai birth certificate it says he's Buddhist. So we expose him to both. We sent him to a Catholic school but left it to him to decide, but at age 8 he decided he wanted to be baptized.

Here Fiona makes a distinction between doing 'cultural things' with their son, and acknowledging the broader implications of decisions made about their son that potentially marginalize his cultural heritage. For example, a distinction is made between 'getting involved in those things', and supporting their child to follow the religion derived from his cultural background. Enrolling a young child in a school with a particular religious affiliation is arguably likely to result in the child following the religion endorsed by the school (and in this case also by the parents). To suggest that the child made a 'choice' of Catholicism over Buddhism is not simply to ignore the influences upon this choice, but it is also to position Buddhism as outside of birth culture.

In addition to minimizing culture to specific artifacts or seeing it as a 'choice', some participants emphasized an account of birth culture in which the culture is implicitly seen as at best doomed, and at worst pathological. In the following extract from

Alison, we again can see the complex identity management work undertaken by adoptive mothers to legitimate their decision to adopt. We can also see how the loss experienced by Alison in terms of not being able to conceive through IVF becomes replaced with a narrative of 'saving' a child from Ethiopia:

Interviewer: Could you tell me about how your family came to be?

Alison: We went through intercountry adoption. We tried to create our family through IVF as we couldn't have biological children. After many cycles the clinic rang us and said there were no eggs left and that was like a death to me and it was a very hard time. We got the call when we were in the car and had to pull over as I was about to vomit and then out came a lady from the service station with a little Ethiopian boy and that was my key. We had to go and do all the training and we went on the waiting list and it took us 4 years. We were first allowed to have 1 child and then we got approved for 2 children after we moved house. The family were poverty-devastated and the family were relinquishing them. We try to celebrate their culture, we quite often cook their food, we have artifacts around the house.

Again echoing our research on surrogacy, there is a strong narrative of 'once was lost but now I'm found' (Riggs & Due, 2013). In other words, for some white heterosexual adoptive mothers (as was the case for some of the heterosexual parents in our broader research project who had their children through offshore surrogacy), infertility functioned as a plot narrative that was subsequently replaced with a

narrative of agency in finding a ‘solution’ to infertility. In this extract Alison’s narrative shifts from the ‘death’ of IVF not working, through to the ‘key’ of seeing an Ethiopian boy with a (presumably) not Ethiopian-looking mother, and finally to the ‘solution’ of adopting two children from a ‘poverty-devastated’ family. Whilst this narrative shift from loss to success is perhaps understandable given the strong desire many people experience to raise children, in the case of adoption this narrative requires a very particular construction of culture (i.e., the Ethiopian boy seen at the service station is taken as a sign of adoption, rather than as possibly a sign of a mixed-race family), and a very particular construction of birth families (i.e., as ‘poverty-devastated’, as ‘relinquishing’ – a very different word to say, forced surrender – and as assimilable again via things such as food and artifacts).

As we suggested above, birth cultures were not only depicted by some participants as doomed, but also as pathological. The following extract from the interview with Emma evidences not only a strong narrative of ‘rescue’, but also a clear narrative of what the child was being ‘rescued’ from:

Interviewer: And what about the community – what do you think people in the community make of your family?

Emma: I’ve sometimes seen reports about adoption pointing to poor outcomes or whatever. The thing that always seems a bit problematic about that to me is, it never asks the question “compared to what?” – and you know, at one level you could look at one of our children and acknowledge that he’s had a hard time of it since being adopted, but to that

I would say “yes, but he’s alive”. You know, his life isn’t all that we would aspire for it to be, but the alternative would be that he would be dead. Would it have been better if he had continued to stay in an orphanage til he reached 13 or 14 and was out on the streets by himself? So you know, it’s kind of, it’s one of those things I think, we often miss out on asking “compared to what?”

In this extract Emma concedes that the life of one of her adopted children hasn’t been easy, but she mitigates this concession by implying the possible alternate outcome, namely being in an orphanage or dead on the streets. Similar to previous Australian research by Riggs (2009), such a construction of birth countries and cultures pathologizes such countries and cultures as inherently damaging to children, thus constructing the ‘choice’ between remaining in the birth culture and being adopted to Australia as clearly favoring the latter. What disappears in this contrast is an understanding of both the risk and protective factors that exist in any culture. Instead, birth countries and cultures are reduced to inherently pathological situations for children to live in.

## **Discussion**

Whilst the findings presented in this paper would tend to suggest the entrenched nature of white Australian adoptive mother’s understandings of the role and meaning of culture as something either to be managed, excused or dismissed, we would argue, as we did earlier in this paper, that this is the product of broader Australian understandings and evaluations of cultural difference. That the white adoptive

mothers interviewed for this paper seemed to, on the whole, buy into normative understandings of birth cultures and parents is thus perhaps understandable. Nonetheless, we have written this paper not simply to state the status quo, but also in the hope that discussion about the place of culture in the context of intercountry adoption might produce change.

A key entry to such a discussion is presented in Trinh's (1987) writing on representations and experiences of otherness. Trinh's central argument is that it is only by recognizing the fact that otherness exists *within* any individual or culture as much as it is located outside of individuals or cultures that we can truly grapple with the operations of otherness as a practice of exclusion. In other words, and in opposition to simply positioning difference as the province of the other, it is necessary to recognize both that those other than ourselves do indeed represent an incommensurable otherness that cannot simply be assimilated, but at the same time that we are foreign to ourselves – that we are never self-identical. Trinh thus introduces the notion of the 'inappropriate/d other' to highlight both that the other cannot be appropriated in the simplistic ways that are often attempted in western discourses of otherness (i.e., cosmopolitanism), and that at the same time those other than ourselves are located right at the heart of our sense of sense – it is only through our relationship to others that we come to be in the first place, and thus we are fundamentally reliant upon others to maintain an illusion of a coherent sense of self.

With this summary of Trinh's work in mind, we can reflect upon what this might mean for families formed through adoption and their relationship to birth families and cultures. In terms of appropriation, it is important to consider how it is that birth

families are treated as sites of appropriation in the context of international adoption. Appropriation occurs when something belonging to someone else is taken by another. In the context of adoption, what is taken is complex: it is relationships (between birth parents and children), it is reproductive labour, it is future opportunities or outcomes that might arise from raising a child, it is connections to birth culture and the role of children in the future of that culture as a changing and shifting entity, and for some birth parents and children, it may result in a negative impact upon psychological well-being. Given such negative implications of appropriation in the context of adoption, it is thus important to consider how this is rendered acceptable to adoptive parents.

As per our discussion of intercountry adoption earlier in this paper and our subsequent analysis of interviews with adoptive mothers, we would suggest from our findings that it is primarily the case that appropriation is made acceptable via the construction of birth parents and cultures as inadequate or pathological. Whilst these findings draw on a relatively small sample (though not one atypical for qualitative research, see Mason, 2010), the sample was nonetheless constituted by a representative group of white Australian adoptive mothers who attended a post-adoption support group who variously practice what may be seen as either cultural keeping or cultural tourism. The findings are supported by the ways in which our analysis of the theme largely mirrors previous research on how white adoptive parents understand culture (e.g., Annagost, 2000, Kim, 2009). The robustness of this finding across our project in Australia and others conducted in the US suggests the importance of examining what disappears in the construction of birth parents and cultures as inadequate or pathological, namely the fact that the formation of adoptive families is entirely dependent upon the fertility of birth parents, alongside the existence of a context that

positions the latter as incapable. In other words, it is the capacity of others (to reproduce) and the ways in which they are incapacitated (by societies that fail to support them to raise their children) that makes it possible for the incapacities of adoptive parents (i.e., infertility) to be in some ways resolved. Combining Trinh's notion of the inappropriate/d other, and the points about adoption summarized above, then, it is possible to suggest both that the reproductive and familial role of birth parents can never truly be appropriated, but rather that attempts at appropriation or overwriting the role of birth parents may often be a reactionary response to their 'inappropriate' location (i.e., in that birth parents highlight the dependency of adoptive parents upon others, and further that because this dependency doesn't simply disappear, the ghost of birth parents continues forever as an absent presence for adoptive families).

So what does this mean for adoptive families and their relationships to birth families? As Manley (2006) notes, and despite the existence of the *Hague Convention*, intercountry adoption continues to fail birth parents in multiple ways. To summarize, Manley suggests that such failures occur when adoption policies do not ensure that children are truly 'orphans', and when there is a lack of recourse for birth parents to challenge the adoption of their children. Given that dominant discourses surrounding adoption in western societies appear only to reinforce the idea of children who are adopted as *a priori* being orphans, and that no agency or resistance is accorded to their birth parents, then it is important to consider closely how policy may respond to such dominant discourses in order to better protect both birth parents and children who are adopted.

It is also important that there is commitment on the part of receiving countries and adoptive parents to addressing the inequities that give rise to adoption in the first place. This cannot be simply lip service, nor simply aid to foreign countries. Rather, there must be a long-term agenda for addressing issues such as war and poverty, both of which contribute significantly to the circumstances that prevent birth parents from raising their children. As Trenka, Oparah and Shin (2006) suggest:

We must work to create and sustain a world in which low-income women of color do not have to send away their children so that the family that remains bequeaths power to some mothers but not to others . . . It is critical . . . that a real transnational feminist solidarity 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 (p. 13)

Finally, and to re-emphasize our points throughout this paper in regards to culture, it is vital that training and assessment undertaken with potential adoptive parents focuses on how 'culture' is understood, and the implications of this for undertaking intercountry adoption. International (e.g., Kubo, 2010) and Australian (e.g., Willing & Fronek, 2013) research continues to suggest that what currently occurs in the name of 'culture' as part of training is much closer to cultural tourism than it is cultural keeping. Furthermore, and as Dorow And Swiffen (2009) suggest, dominant understandings of culture amongst white adoptive parents function within a logic where cultural difference is seen as assimilable, which reduces the threat that birth families and cultures potentially represent to adoptive parents. Here threat refers both to what some of our participants explicitly spoke about in terms of concerns that

children might be reunified with their birth parents, but also implicit threats relating to how racial differences within families can be experienced as destabilizing or marginalizing for white adoptive parents who are anxious to retain their location within the privilege confines of whiteness (see Anagost, 2000; Kubo, 2010). Working with potential adoptive parents to unpack their own assumptions about culture and their location within broader cultural stereotypes about birth cultures is thus an important facet currently missing from pre-adoption training and assessment.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, and as we hope this paper has highlighted, the experiences of contemporary white Australian mothers who have undertaken intercountry adoption appear to still be very much shaped by normative understandings of cultural difference. This has implications for all parties involved, and the long history of research on experiences of transracial adoption would suggest that these implications are significant and must be taken seriously. The first step, as we have undertaken in this paper, is to identify current understandings of culture amongst white adoptive parents and place this alongside the broader cultural context in which such understandings are rendered intelligible. The next step, as we have indicated in this conclusion, is to shift these findings into practice. Whilst intercountry adoption numbers undertaken from Australia are currently low, understandings of culture and the meaning attached to birth families and cultures will remain salient both for those adopted in the past, and those adopted in the future.

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