

Intercountry adoption and the inappropriate/d other: Refusing the disappearance of birth families

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Abstract

Whilst dominant social norms relating to families shape the lives of all people, this can have particularly negative effects upon non-traditional families. This is especially the case in terms of adoption, where a focus solely on the adoptive family can often result in the 'disappearance' of the birth family. This paper explores the location of birth families within adoptive families by first examining a sample of children's storybooks aimed at adoptive children living with lesbian or gay parents, as but one example of how policy makers may come to identify dominant cultural norms that circulate about birth families in the context of intercountry adoption. A number of key tropes are identified across these books, namely the ghostly presence of birth families, and the representation of birth parents as deviant (thus warranting the removal of their children). Given the negative impact such representations can have upon adoptive children as well as birth parents, the paper then moves to discuss the work of Trinh (1987) and her elaboration of the notion of the 'inappropriate/d other'. Moving beyond the autonomous self of liberal humanism, and towards a recognition of the interdependency of all people, Trinh's work allows for an account of intercountry adoption that recognises the incapacitating effects of dominant discourses of family. The paper concludes by applying Trinh's work to the development of policy recommendations that may help to counter the types of representations of birth families identified in the children's storybooks.

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Introduction

As those of us who study the discursive effects of language know all too well, the words we use have powerful effects. A clear example of this appears in the language used to describe families, particularly when the family under discussion falls outside the norm of the heterosexual nuclear family (Riggs, 2007). One instance where this is especially evident is when adoptive families seek to talk about their journey to family formation, and when in so doing they rely upon the language of family formation as it pertains to families formed through sexual relations between the intended parents (Modell, 2002). Whilst claiming a familial connection is a valid and important practice for adoptive families to undertake (Yngvesson, 2010), in the present paper it is argued that this may often occur at the expense of birth families, who are (at best) relegated to a position on the margins, if not completely written out of the picture. This outcome is often further compounded when the adoption is intercountry, where the disappearance of birth cultures is typically both physical and psychological.

With these issues in relation to the language of adoptive families in mind, the present paper seeks to first explore representations of adoptive families in terms of family formation (and how birth families are included – or not – in such representations), and from there to consider some alternate ways of thinking about adoptive families as always already being in a relationship to birth families. In terms of representations of adoptive families, an analysis is provided of a sample of children's storybooks aimed at children adopted by lesbian or gay couples. These books were identified through a search of amazon.com, utilising

'lesbian adoption' and 'gay adoption' as keywords, in addition to a search of two resources that extensively document books that focus on lesbian and gay families (Day, 2000; Sapp, 2010). Whilst it is likely that there are other books focusing on the topic that were not included in the sample, the sample should be considered broadly representative of children's storybooks for lesbian- or gay-headed families formed through adoption, and certainly the most well-known titles in this genre. Importantly, the focus on these books is not intended to demonise or argue against the legitimacy of lesbians and gay men as parents. Rather, the focus upon representations of adoption within books aimed at marginal, non-traditional adoptive families is to highlight how ubiquitous the normative language of family is in terms of families formed through adoption (see Ayres, 2004, for a discussion of the ubiquitous nature of adoption narratives that elide the existence of birth parents more generally in children's storybooks).

It is also important to note why children's storybooks were chosen as a means to examining representations of adoptive families, and how this relates to social policy. In order to develop policies that are mindful of cultural norms (but which also challenge such norms when they have marginalising effects), it is vital that policy makers are aware of the norms currently in circulation. Discourse analysts have long argued (i.e., Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001) that what we see represented in a range of forms of media are iterations of broader cultural norms and practices. In terms of children's storybooks, then, it is argued here that such books tap into cultural norms, and in so doing are a useful site of analysis. In terms of the topic of adoptive families and their representations of birth families, it is also arguable that interviewing families on this topic may well be fraught,

and likely not to allow for critical interrogation of some of the normative assumptions that may shape birth families. Examining children's storybooks thus affords some insight into the discourses of family (both birth and adoptive) that are considered intelligible by authors, and indeed by those who read the books. In other words, the books examined here would likely not be published or read if they did not speak some 'truth' about adoption as it is understood with the current western discursive framework.

Having provided an analysis of the children's storybooks, the paper then moves on to explore alternate ways of thinking about the location and role of birth families in the context of adoptive families. Drawing upon the work of Trinh (1987) and specifically her concept of the 'inappropriate/d other', the paper considers how adoptive families (in the overdeveloped west in particular) might rethink their family making practices in terms of the inclusion of birth parents. The paper then concludes by offering some reflections on the implications of the discussion presented below for policy on intercountry adoption, with a specific focus on the support mechanisms required to make it possible for birth parents, families and cultures to be truly recognised as part of the adoptive child's life.

Storybook Representations of Adoption by Lesbians and Gay Men

This first section is framed by the ever-growing empirical literature on representations of non-traditional families within storybooks for children.

Whilst some of this literature has primarily emphasised the positive aspects of the very fact that such storybooks exist (e.g., Chapman and Wright, 2008; Sapp,

2010), other more recent contributions have emphasised the very privileged nature of the characters contained in most of the storybooks published to date (e.g., Crisp, 2011; Jenkins, 2011; Riggs and Augoustinos, 2007; Stafford, 2009). Shannahan (2010) offers a particularly incisive analysis of a selection of storybooks aimed at children with lesbian or gay parents, and suggests that such storybooks promote a very white, middle-class and capitalist understanding of what it means to grow up with lesbian or gay parents. Most concerning, she notes, are the books that deal with adoption, a concern echoed in the present paper. In terms of the book *King and King and Family* (de Haan and Nijland, 2004), for example, Shannahan suggests that the young child who is 'adopted' is treated as a commodity with no past and no identity of her own. The implication of this, Shannahan suggests, is that the only image of adoption provided is of the benevolent white adoptive gay parents who have their 'wishes fulfilled'. To elaborate these points further with regard to birth families and cultures, it is important to first outline briefly the book itself.

The book *King and King Family* (de Haan and Nijland, 2004) carries on the story first presented in *King and King* (de Haan and Nijland, 2002). In the first book, a young prince is looking to wed, and cannot find his match in all of the princesses presented to him. The story closes with him meeting a brother of one of the princesses and the two princes getting married and becoming two kings. In the follow up book, the newly married (white, wealthy) couple leave on their honeymoon "to a land far away from their kingdom". From their vantage point in a plane high above, we are presented with an image of animals, trees, land and water, and one little brown person standing smiling but not looking up. No

buildings are depicted, and no roads. Once the couple land, they hike into the jungle where they see many animal families, on their way crossing a rope bridge and travelling on a boat down the river. On the last day of their honeymoon, King Bertie says to King Lee “I wish we had a little one of our own”. And lo and behold, when they arrive home it turns out that the rustling that had concerned them in the jungle was a little brown girl who had stowed away in their suitcase: “Oh my, it’s a little girl from the jungle!” said the queen”. “You’re the child we’ve always wanted,” said King and King”, and the child then proceeds to tell the kings “all about her adventures”. Then, and in order “to make it official, King and King adopted the little girl who had travelled so far to be with them. This took lots of documents and stamps”. The book concludes with a celebration for “Princess Daisy”.

Taking the story as summarised above point by point, we can see how the child’s birth family and culture are routinely rendered invisible, though arguably not entirely non-existent. Importantly, the story is framed in terms of a ‘land far away’, thus both exoticising the child’s homeland and depicting it as far removed from the lives of the kings. Indeed, so removed is it that it doesn’t look like a kingdom at all – there are no houses, no roads, no civilisation, and importantly almost no people. Yet although the overhead image presents nothing of a culture present in the ‘land far away’, we see traces of this as the story unfolds: who built the rope bridge? Who built and hired the boat to the kings? Questions such as these are important, as they highlight the fact that despite the illusion of emptiness portrayed in the story, the narrative cannot sustain this as a fact. What we are presented with, then, are ghosts of the culture and families from

which the little girl in the story comes; ghosts that require our attention for the ways in which they depict birth families (as missing, as absent, or as lost).

Once the little girl 'appears' (from within the King Bertie's suitcase, like a souvenir or other commodity), this ghostly narrative continues. Firstly, the girl is presented as intelligible only as something 'wanted', and as someone who has come 'from the jungle'. In other words, her utility is as a desirable object, one gained from 'the jungle', not from other people. The narrative then presents the child as easily inserted into the terms of reference of the kingdom, where she tells the kings about her 'adventures'. This is striking, both for the fact that she is able automatically to speak their language (as though difference has been erased), and also for the fact that what she speaks of are 'adventures', not people, or family or her identity as a person. This assimilation of the child is completed by the reference to her as 'princess Daisy' – a name it is unlikely comes with her 'from the jungle'. Of course this de-identification of the child from her birth culture and family is again contradicted by the narrative, which makes recourse to the 'lots of documents and stamps' it took for the kings to 'make it official'. Again, we must ask: 'who co-signed these forms'? The ghosts of birth families again haunt the book.

Turning to the next book examined here, this theme of the absent presence of birth families again plays out. In the storybook *Felicia's Favorite Story* (Newman, 2002), Mama Ness and Mama Linda are depicted as living in a lovely two-story house with their adopted daughter Felicia. The story of the adoption is told as a favourite bedtime story. The impetus for adoption is as follows: "We have so

much love between us [thought the two women], let's find someone else who can share our love and be part of our family". From here, the narrative moves forward to the time when "Our baby was born in a beautiful country called Guatemala. Sometimes, Felicia,' Mama Linda said, 'when a woman has a baby, she isn't able to take care of the child. So she does the most loving thing she can do: she allows the child to be adopted by parents who can take care of the baby and who want a child to love. Such a woman lived in Guatemala'" (13). At this point we are presented with the imagery of Guatemala in the form of Aztec temples and forest. The story continues by stating that once the women arrived in Guatemala, "a baby girl with big brown eyes and shiny black hair was waiting for us" (16). "And as soon as I saw you and Mama Nessa,' Felicia said, 'I cried'. 'That's right,' said Mama Linda. 'But only for a minute,' Felicia reminded her. 'Yes,' said Mama Linda. 'Only for a minute. You stopped crying as soon as Mama Nessa and I picked you up and held you in our arms. After that you hardly cried at all'" (19).

In contrast to *King and King and Family* (de Haan and Nijland, 2004), perhaps, *Felicia's Favorite Story* (Newman, 2002) does make mention of Felicia's birth mother. Yet even though this is the case, the theme of a ghostly presence continues: we see nothing of Guatemala as a modern civilisation populated by people. Rather, we see ancient temples and no representation of people other than the baby herself. Further, and whilst the sentiment of 'a woman who does the most loving thing' is noble, it does nothing to populate the story with people for whom 'allowing' adoption is the only choice. This is compounded by the use of the words 'the child', which constructs children placed for adoption as divorced from the people who conceived and bore them: Felicia is *her* child (i.e.,

the child of the 'loving' mother who 'allowed' the adoption, not just 'the child' belonging to no one). In contrast to this disembodied and relatively disempowered image of the birth mother, Felicia is presented as an active agent who 'waits' for her adoptive parents and who 'only cries for a minute', as though all her needs are fulfilled by the adoption.

In the storybook *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson and Parnell, 2005), we are told the story of two boy penguins who live in Central Park Zoo and who do everything together. "They are in love", we are told, and part of this love involves the mimicry of the other penguin couples, in both the building of a nest and their attempts at trying to incubate a stone on the nest. Noticing their attempts, the zoo keeper has an idea: "He found an egg that needed to be cared for and he brought it to Roy and Silo's nest". They sat on and tended the egg until "craaack! Out came their very own baby! She had fuzzy white feathers and a funny black beak. Now Roy and Silo were fathers. 'We'll call her Tango,' Mr Gramzay decided, 'because it takes two to make a Tango'". "Tango was the very first penguin in the zoo to have two daddies". An important addendum is added in the form of an author's note at the end of the book, in which we are told that the book is a true story of actual penguins in the zoo, and that "Tango, their only chick, was born from an egg laid by another penguin couple named Betty and Porkey. That couple had often hatched their own eggs, but they had never been able to care for more than one at a time. In 2000, when Betty laid two fertile eggs, Rob Gramzay decided to give Roy, Silo, and one of those eggs a chance to become a family".

Leaving aside the issue of anthropomorphisation, *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson and Parnell, 2005) is troubling for the ways in which it presents, only to dismiss, the role of 'Betty and Porkey'. Whilst in the author's note we are told that the egg was theirs, in the story of the egg hatching we are told that the chick is named 'Tango because it takes two to make a Tango', and further that 'Tango was the very first penguin in the zoo to have two daddies'. This information is factually incorrect and contradicts the narrative: it took four penguins to make Tango (Betty and Porkey as 'birth parents' and Roy and Silo as 'adoptive parents'), and Tango has three dads (Porkey, Roy and Silo). Whilst this storybook is somewhat more transparent in its inclusion of information about Betty and Porkey, they nonetheless still only function as plot narratives in the reported desires of Roy and Silo. Further, the language of deficiency is introduced, where the egg 'needed to be cared for', but Betty and Porkey 'had never been able to care for more than one at a time'. This construction of Betty and Porkey as inadequate parents thus paves the way for the construction of Roy and Silo as the only ones who could give the egg 'a chance to become a family' – it is their agency that centres the story, not that of Tango, Betty or Porkey.

These notions of deficiency are repeated in the final storybook examined here. *Dad David, baba Chris and ME* (Merchant, 2010) tells the story of Ben who, at age seven, is adopted by David and Chris. We are told that Ben cannot live with his birth dad Alex and birth mum Val because they "weren't looking after me properly" (4). David tells us that "I wanted to have an ordinary family of my own" and "I wanted [David and Chris] to adopt me because they were fun and caring and ordinary" (5). David shares some of his anger about being removed

from his birth parents, but states that “Dad David talked to me about my birth mum Val and my birth dad Alex. I said I often worried about them and wondered how they are. But Dad David said he knew they were OK or we would have heard and he promised that when I am older, and if I want, he would help me find out more about them” (7). With this information in mind, David is able to settle into the family and enjoy life with his adoptive fathers.

Whilst out of the four storybooks examined here *Dad David, baba Chris and ME* (Merchant, 2010) provides the greatest recognition of the birth parents, it nonetheless does so through a frame of deficiency. Whilst the book goes into quite a lot of depth about many aspects of David’s journey as an adopted child, only two pages are devoted to his birth parents, and in many ways these two pages first construct them as deficient, and then dismiss them as something that can be easily gotten over and as only relevant in the future. The here and now of David’s birth parents and their possible ongoing desires and wishes are swept away by the wave of ‘ordinariness’ and ‘specialness’ offered by his adoptive fathers. Of course the point here is not to deny that children placed for adoption often do experience considerable abuse prior to their removal. Rather, the point is that this is not something that can be simply made better by adoption. Rather, the issues of identity and belonging that are experienced by children who are adopted may be lifelong, and certainly cannot be addressed through a narrative that compartmentalises or reduces such issues (Yngvesson, 2010).

As this first part of the paper has highlighted, the presence of birth parents, families and cultures in the sample of children’s storybooks examined here is

either a ghostly one marked by stereotypes and dehumanisation, or a presence of deviancy used to legitimate adoption. In a number of the stories the children themselves become objects alongside their birth parents, with both children and birth parents operating as plot devices for the desires of the adoptive parents. As suggested in the introduction to this paper, this type of narrative is not limited to the storybooks presented here, but rather may be considered ubiquitous to the narratives of adoption that circulate within western societies (for more on this see Ayres, 2004 in reference to children's literature more broadly, and Riggs, 2010, in reference to media representations of adoption by lesbian or gay parents specifically). As a counter to these negative depictions of birth parents, families, and cultures, the following section engages the work of Trinh (1987) to explore some alternate ways of thinking about the location of all members and aspects of the adopted child's family.

The Inappropriate/d (m)other

Trinh's (1987) writings on representations and experiences of otherness provide valuable insights into how dominant discourses of the other can be challenged. Trinh's central argument is that it is only through recognition of the fact that otherness is within us as much as it is outside us 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 recognise both that those other than ourselves do indeed represent an incommensurable otherness that cannot simply be assimilated as a counterpoint to our own self, but at the same time that we are foreign to

ourselves – that we are never self-identical. Trinh thus uses 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, 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. 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 the 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, and for some birth parents and children, it might well mean the taking of psychological well-being.

Given the negative nature of appropriation that occurs in the context of adoption, it is thus important to consider how this is rendered acceptable to adoptive parents. As per the examples provided earlier from children’s storybooks, it is primarily the case that appropriation is made acceptable via the construction of birth parents as inadequate or deviant. Of course what disappears in this construction is 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 them 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.

Putting together Trinh's notion of the inappropriate/d other, and the points about adoption summarised 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 are always already 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). Birth mothers in particular are thus 'inappropriate/d (m)others': they are treated as sites of appropriation (as are adoptive children), but their experiences and existence can never be entirely appropriated or rendered invisible.

So what does this mean for adoptive families and their relationships to birth families? Trinh's (1987) work again here provides insight as to alternate ways of conceptualising the complex relationships that shape adoptive families. Trinh suggests in relation to otherness and notions of the self that we need to move beyond an understanding of interdependency as one in which one party is always already enslaved to another. Rather, she suggests, what is required is the need to develop a ground between parties that belongs to no one – that there can

be a place that is marked by all of the party's fundamental reliance upon the other. At present, this ground does not truly exist in the context of intercountry adoption, as the depth of the interdependencies of all parties is not adequately recognised.

In terms of dependency, then, for adoptive parent this requires recognition of their dependency upon the fertility of others, along with their dependency upon the capacity to adopt that is engendered by living in a context that enables them to do so (i.e., white middle-class adoptive parents living in the overdeveloped west). For birth parents, the issue of dependency is highly complex, but this does not mean it should be skirted around. In one respect, the dependency of birth parents upon other people who are able to raise their children is entirely a product of a context that fails to support them to raise their children themselves. This arguably must be the first point given attention in any discussion of international adoption (a point that will be returned to in the conclusion to this paper). But given that for the foreseeable future disparities in access and capacities to parent are likely to continue, we must recognise that birth parents are to a degree dependent upon those who by the fact of their privileged social location are able to raise other people's children. As will now be discussed, these varying dependencies require policy responses that create the possibility for the space belonging to no one advocated for by Trinh (1987) to exist.

Conclusion

As Manley (2006) notes, and despite the existence of the *Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption*,

intercountry adoption continues to fail birth parents in multiple ways. To summarise, 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 (as the analysis presented above of children's storybooks would appear to indicate) 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.

First, there must be a 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 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. Such an agenda must take into consideration the place belonging to no-one as outlined by Trinh (1987), a place that western governments to date have been reticent to engage with. Place for most governments is about territory to be claimed, with rights apportioned on the basis of citizenship. With the ongoing impact of globalisation upon the poorest nations, however, it is arguably the case that western nations are beholden to those nations upon whose backs and labour the privileges of the overdeveloped west are built. Recognising that there must be a place in policy that does not directly benefit the receiving nation would represent a step towards creating a

place that *equally* and on their own terms takes on board the needs of birth and adoptive parents.

Second, there is the need to ensure that all adoptive parents engage in pre-adoption support services that are external to their adoption agency. Whilst post-adoption services are available to support adoptive parents in most receiving nations, there is often a comparative paucity of pre-adoption services aimed at supporting adoptive parents to explore the loss and grief that likely informs their journey to adoption. In terms of moving away from a place of appropriation and towards one in which recognition of interdependencies is possible, it is vital that pre-adoption services are available to help adoptive parents to undertake this work. Importantly, such work may help to engender the place in between that is owned by no one by facilitating recognition that both adoptive and birth parents come together in the context of loss and grief, but that their losses and grief are incommensurable. To recognise the loss and grief of another is not to assimilate it or use it to warrant one's own response to another. Rather, it is to recognise that we are implicated in the loss and grief of another in contexts where discourses of family continue to privilege certain family forms over others, and where children are treated as prize possessions and thus objects of commodity (Riggs, 2010).

Finally, any policy that seeks to adequately recognise birth parents in regards to intercountry adoption must properly support adoptive parents not only to explore their own loss and grief, but to have some comprehension of the context in which the other lives. Appropriation is best facilitated by distance and

emotional remove from those whose possessions or lives are being appropriated. Presently, at best adoptive parents might travel to the child's home country to negotiate the adoption. Unfortunately, there is nothing inherent to this experience that allows for any comprehension of the lives of the birth family and their culture. Indeed, it could be suggested that any visit cloaked in officialdom and regulations will fundamentally be incapable of engagement with the broader culture. Instead, and if any given country wishes to receive children for adoption, then it must consider its responsibility to facilitate the experiences of adoptive parents that would allow for some connection to, and awareness of, the child's birth culture, and where possible family. This should not be in the form of an exoticised spectacle of the other, but rather an embodied opportunity to comprehend the incommensurabilities that shape birth and adoptive family lives, so that the latter can at least begin to come to terms with the responsibility they have to the former.

In conclusion, and to return to the beginning of this paper, the language we use to describe families in the west all too easily allows for the treatment of adoptive children as possessions that are appropriated from their birth families and inserted into the lives of their adoptive parents. Whilst as noted in regards to the children's storybooks examined in this paper, traces of birth families and cultures often remain, such ghostly remnants do not suffice to recognise the loss and grief of birth families, nor the often enduring connections between children and their birth families and cultures. Without reifying the logic of blood is thicker than water, it is vital that those involved in intercountry adoptions recognise the complexities associated with family formation in this context, and attempt to

ensure that a place where one party's proprietary claims do not trump those of another (at the expense of the child), but rather that interdependencies can be recognised and responsibility taken for ensuring that the complexities of adoptive family formation can be acknowledged, rather than sidelined.

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I begin by acknowledging the sovereignty of the Kurna people, upon whose land I live in Adelaide, South Australia.

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