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The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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# A Long Journey Home

## The Personal Politics of Transnational Adoption

by Molly McCullough

Molly McCullough is a student at the University of Victoria. She presented this paper, which received an award from the Canadian Women's Studies Association, at the Biennial Conference on Adoption at New York University in 2008. Pact is grateful for her permission to publish excerpts here in slightly altered form. To read the original paper from which these excerpts were taken, visit [johnraible.wordpress.com](http://johnraible.wordpress.com).

*"We on the periphery, learning and watching  
From the outside, have a particular power  
With revolutionary roots."*

—Kim Diehl

As a transnational/transracial adoptee, I know that transnational adoption irrevocably transforms the lived experience of biological parents, adoptive families, and adopted children—in many ways that are not overtly apparent. 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 scholars who assume a rigid position on either side of the transnational adoption debate are regressing rather than progressing. At stake here is a multi-voiced narrative that encompasses the biological mother, the adoptive family, and the transnational adoptee. If the objective of confronting a multifaceted debate is to unearth one-sided solutions, the effort becomes futile. Scholars must approach this controversy with flexibility as they collaborate with those of us who live every day the reality about which they theorize. 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 accorded to children who leave 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*, John Raible notes in his essay "Lifelong Impact, Enduring Need" this "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." It is from this position that I scrutinize the politics of transnational adoption. I offer a feminist critique from the

perspective of an "outsider within." To write from a primarily academic perspective would do a great disservice to those of us who sit "on the periphery."

Growing up as the daughter of a white, single mother, our visible differences elicited all-too-predictable reactions over the duration of my childhood. "Is that your real mom?," my peers would query. "She's not dark like you." At a young age, I began to internalize prevailing Western assumptions rooted in racist logic. Instead of recognizing these attitudes as a reflection of white supremacist values, I misconstrued them 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 a racist society.

Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin, the editors of *Outsiders Within*, state: "...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'." Indeed, as Harvard Law Professor Elizabeth Bartholet maintains in "International Adoption": "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." Under these circumstances, the transnational adoptee is inevitably positioned as Other against a homogenous backdrop that is perpetually reinforced. In Rachel Quy Collier's "Performing Childhood," she asserts: "An adopted child...is given a (new) name, language, religion, cosmology, worldview; she is, in a sense, colonized." Transnational adoption is a problematic affair that must be deconstructed in order to comprehend the gravity of its consequences on the lives of the biological mother, adoptive family, and transnational adoptee.

Transnational adoption is a troubling phenomenon of the last half-century. Anthony Shiu, in "Flexible Production:

International Adoption, Race, Whiteness,” observes that laws enacted in the U.S. since the early 1990s—designed to accommodate the desires of privileged 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. It is distressing that even the titles of many of these laws emphasize economic, rather than social or humanitarian, objectives. Who would imagine that the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996 has anything to do with the creation of families? 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.”

Shiu cites numerous examples which describe, in painful detail, the self-absorbed and self-indulgent attitudes of white adoptive parents. None of the parents depicted in his article possess the slightest sensitivity regarding race, class, identity and culture. I do not doubt the veracity of these anecdotes. 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. There are grey areas that should be acknowledged.

Transnational adoption is often framed from one of two mutually exclusive positions: adoption as rescue (middle-class whites as the saviors of vulnerable, racialized children), or adoption as kidnap (affluent Western whites displacing children of color from their birth families and countries). Karen Dubinsky, in “The Fantasy of the Global Cabbage Patch: Making Sense of Transnational Adoption,” notes that neither of these tropes is “particularly illuminating.” Reductionism will never serve us well in an attempt to understand the complexities of transnational adoption; binary simplifications only distort a situation in which there are perhaps as many elaborately interconnected sets of facts as there are people involved.

In the arguments swirling around transnational adoption it is generally the mother—biological or adoptive—who bears the brunt of critical scrutiny. As Oparah, Shin, and Trenka acknowledge: “The real alternative [to adoption] is found in welfare policies that support poor mothers of color 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.” 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.”

In “Complicating the Ideology of Motherhood: Child Welfare Law and First Nation Women,” Marlee Kline describes the nexus out of which, I would argue, the power and prestige of transnational adoption also arises. Kline maintains: “the

ideology of motherhood speaks not only to gender roles and behavior, but it also constructs some locations within social relations of race, class, sexuality, ability...as more appropriate for motherhood than others.” Most salient in Kline’s essay is the assertion that “mother-blaming” obscures the wider context of “racism, poverty, ill-health, and violence.” 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 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 the birth mother, it is important to realize that the adoptive mother is, herself, a product of societal control; larger institutions of discourse regulate her behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions. She is not an autonomous agent in the process of transnational adoption, or in the subsequent selection of her child. According to Oparah, Shin, and Trenka, we must endeavor to “connect [transnational] adoption to broader struggles for decolonization and social justice,” rather than support the individualization of blame.

Much more attention should focus on the biological mother, whose voice has been erased from this debate. 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.” 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. 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.”

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 ethnicity has resulted in exoticization, tokenism, and ostracization, but rarely full acceptance or genuine integration of perceived differences. There are no easy solutions to mitigate the discomfort as I battle to embrace a hybrid identity. In “From Orphan Trains to Babylifts,” Tobias Hubinette asserts:

*Today, in the leading [Western] adopting regions... a discourse of multiculturalism celebrates [transnational] adoptees as bridges between cultures, symbols of interethnic harmony, and embodiments of global and post-modern cosmopolitanism.*

In a perfect world, who knows? Transnational adoptees might be worldwide emissaries of multiculturalism. But this is not a perfect world, and that is much too tall an order. Indeed, it is presumptuous to ascribe this dubious honor to adoptees who never chose this path in the first place. The potential for a “bridge between cultures” may exist, but widespread problems with race, class, and gender have yet to be resolved.

Proponents of transnational adoption cannot dismiss the elusive, subversive nature of Western ideology if they wish to imagine cultural bridges. It is a mistake to suggest that inequality gaps can so effortlessly be repaired. Furthermore, Oparah, Shin and Trenka observe that advocates of transracial adoption “often invoke the aphorism ‘love sees no colour’.” This is a disconcerting assertion, through which the ideals of white privilege are governed and reinscribed.

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 “Power of the Periphery,” 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.” 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.” When I discovered *Outsiders Within*, it was the first time that I encountered others who spoke to my experience. I found solace and empowerment in the narratives shared by transracial adoptees across the world. I found myself exclaiming “Yes! This is my struggle too!” And by the end of the book, “yes, this is our struggle.” I am prepared to come out fighting alongside my impassioned transracial allies.

I can offer no painless answers to the complex politics of transnational adoption. What I have discovered, however, is that rigidity on either side of the debate is not helpful. Those of us 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 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 in the face of adversity.

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