MATERNAL VOICES IN PERSONAL NARRATIVES OF ADOPTION

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Across disciplines including literature, anthropology, psychology, law, politics, and social work, there is a rapidly growing body of scholarship on adoption. With the expansion of the global economy, transnational adoption has emerged as a serious subfield of study over the past decade in the United States—the “Adoption Nation,” as journalist Adam Pertman has called it. Transnational adoption, which is the adoption of children of foreign birth, is a relatively new phenomenon in the United States. Following major wars such as World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the end of the Cold War, U.S. adoption of children from Asia and parts of Europe increased. Immediately after the Korean War, a large number of mixed-race children of South Korean women and American soldiers were adopted into American families. For more than three decades, families and individuals in the United States adopted children primarily from South Korea; to date, South Korea has sent approximately 150,000 Korean children for adoption to the United States, making it the largest group of adoptees in the country. It was not until the 1988 Seoul Olympics that the number of Korean international adoptions declined rapidly because the Korean government was embarrassed with its reputation as a baby exporter. Since 1992, adoptions from China have rapidly increased after the Chinese government enacted a law ratifying international adoption. Due to the one-child policy, poverty, and disability, many families place their children in orphanages or for adoption. China is currently the world’s leading source of international adoption and provides the most children for adoption in the United States. In this sense, transnational adoption has emerged out of war and is “shaped by the forces of colonialism, the Cold war, and globalization” (Briggs and Marre 2).

The discourse of adoption is, on the whole, gendered as feminine: those involved in adoption—including orphanage administrators, social workers, organization staff caregivers, and foster nurturers—are largely female, as are many of those—such as academics, writers, and readers—who have voiced concerns. Indeed, as Marianne Novy maintains, “Adoption is a more salient issue for women” than for men (9). There is a stunning volume of maternal voices speaking about adoption, including adoptive mothers as adoption experts or biographers and birth mothers as memoir writers. The current boom, particularly in personal narratives, reflects the dominance of confessional writing in today’s literary market, the changing

1 For further discussion of this issue, see Kim’s Adopted Territory 31–34.
mores of adoption culture (i.e., birth mothers are much more willing to speak openly about their experiences), the urgent need of testimonial guides to adoption from adoptive mothers, and an extension of identity politics to include adoption.

The contemporary critical scholarship in adoption discourse is mostly composed of social science writing, advice manuals, legal publications, cultural analysis, and ethnography. The critical study of literary representations of adoption is still scant. Usually, such critical work involves canonical fiction or stories that have been examined for such concerns as orphanhood or illegitimacy and are subsequently re-examined as adoption narratives. For example, Marianne Novy’s groundbreaking *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama* (2005) offers the first book-length analysis of literary portrayals of adoption in a range of works by writers such as Sophocles, Shakespeare, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Barbara Kingsolver, and Edward Albee. Novy explores how fiction has contributed to general perceptions of the adoption triad (the birth mother, child, and adoptive parents) with reference to historical research and feminist theory. Margaret Homans, a literary scholar, also recently published *The Imprint of Another Life* (2013), in which she demonstrates how adoption itself is a form of fiction-making—or, rather, of literary creation. She analyzes classic novels such as *Silas Marner*, *What Maisie Knew*, and *Beloved*, along with drama, documentary films, published interviews, and personal narratives. While Novy and Homans reflect the growing interest in adoption in literature, there is no fully developed comparative study of contemporary memoirs by birth and adoptive mothers.

What is more, the critical issues of adoption are shifting from ones surrounding the adoption triad, such as identity, kinship, roots, tropes of the child as a gift and ambassador, the matching process, trauma, or parenthood, toward ones at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class. In other words, it has become increasingly clear that the issues of adoption can be viewed not only from within an individual or a domestic context but within national or even global realms. Explaining the interrelationship between private and national identities, Sarah K. Dorow (2006) emphasizes that not only “families are sites of national reproduction” but also “the nation is imagined as family” (5). Moreover, Laura Briggs and Diana Marrre claim that transnational adoption “opens a window onto the relations between nations, inequalities between rich and poor within nations, the history of race and racialization since the end of slavery of Europe’s colonies and the United States, and relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous groups in the Americas and Australia” (1). Critics have begun to examine how transnational adoption provides a new venue to probe identity with reference to gender, race or racial hybridity, and class in the contexts of diaspora, postcolonialism, and the new global market.

Using a Lacanian lens, I intend to start with a more fundamental, ontological position and move toward a more universal situation. I emphasize the link between ontological status and politics on a global scale: both should be strongly and mutually coupled. In this article, I examine the voices of adoptive/birth mothers in their personal narratives and call for alternative narratives that offer a stronger sociopolitical impact.
First, I will examine adoption narratives by adoptive mothers in terms of how adoptive mothers/writers psychologically cope with the ontological split within each subject and the opacity of the Other’s desire. The responses in these narratives vary. Some mothers’ reactions are marked by naiveté and outright denial as they create a harmonious bond of self-(m)other blind to sensitive sociopolitical issues—a reaction shown in many picture books, most notably *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes*. Others tactically domesticate or aestheticize the contradictions and antagonism involved in adoption, as shown in *Forever Lily*. Another common response is for adoptive mothers to engage in a forthright critique of the sending country but quickly dismiss the receiving country from its hidden participation and global responsibility, as seen in *The Lost Daughters of China*. Finally, a few meet a head-on challenge to disavow their subjective experience as well as social antagonism, resulting in inquiries into ideological as well as libidinal investment in adoption, as shown, respectively, in *Beyond Good Intentions* and *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*. In analyzing these texts, I argue that adoptive motherhood/mothering offers a space in which to encounter and embrace the ideological and libidinal excesses of adoption—the most familiar as well as the most foreign in various aspects of race, gender, class, and others.

Next, I explore the characteristics of personal narratives by birth mothers. Some remain heavily descriptive with biographical sketches; some develop more like self-reflexive, metanarrative works. Other birth mothers’ writings demonstrate a sense of victimhood and the internalization of social wrongs (a theme typical to the narratives of Korean and Chinese birth mothers, for example). Finally, some birth mothers respond by situating their traumatic experiences within a specific network in which the relationships across self, others, and the Societal Other are highlighted—a common feature of American birth mothers’ narratives. Yet, the emphasis on historical specificity and relational networks yields pitfalls as well as potentialities. The texts I will examine include *I Wish for You a Beautiful Life* and *Dreaming a World*, from Korean birth mothers; *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*; and *Surrendered Child, Waiting to Forget*, and *Following the Tambourine Man*, written by American birth mothers.

Finally, through a Lacanian–Žižekian lens, I argue for the suspension of the defense against excess/lack at the individual level in order to bring the subject into existence. If we assume that deficiency/excessiveness is the necessary primal condition for the existence of subjectivity as well as the Societal Other, we can also assume that *adoption* represents pure jouissance, a non-pathological pure desire (as discussed further below). From a global perspective, I argue, we should further radicalize the discourse of adoption. Adoption should not be relegated as a group-specific narrative of suffering or bliss, victimization or salvation, but as one that can articulate a universal complaint and launch a global assault on systems of oppression. Politically speaking, what we need is not a politics of pity, but rather a politics of justice: to disrupt the underlying fantasy and traverse the elementary coordinates of unjust power structures rather than offering assistance out of pity at the spectacle of individual suffering.
The Voices of Adoptive Mothers

My assessment of adoptive mothers’ personal narratives is grounded in their understanding of human existence and social reality: that is, the relation of the subject to its self, others, and the Other. At the ontological level, the Lacanian subject is founded on an inherent lack, yet always in excess of symbolic representations. This means that we as subjects are fundamentally split, divided, inconsistent, and alienated from ourselves. As Slavoj Žižek explains, the subject cannot “achieve full ontological identity” (Conversations 4) and, however, much it may be fantasized, there is no possibility of “wholeness” in either the realms of ontology or the symbolic. At the structural level, society is never and can never be a unified totality and is constituted through the exclusion of an excessive other (e.g., the persecution of a minority group); it is also structured by circulating around the lack of total jouissance, although it is a lack or void filled up by a fantasasmatic object that promises gratification and sustains a subject’s or a society’s desire.

Within Lacan’s epistemic registers, self-others interactions are organized around the inevitability of radical division. Each one of us is as fragmented or incongruous as any other, as much in the matter of adoption as in all aspects of class, race, gender, and sex; accordingly, we are “opaque to ourselves and to each other” (Kotsko 56). From this theoretical perspective, to view the other (such as birth mothers or adoptees) as an authentic, closed, and consistent community is to romanticize or to debase the other as non-divided and totally rhetoricalized, and to disregard the unbearable lack/excess of the subject. Either way is to mistake people as imaginary beings—as others without “otherness”—or to fix on them as a Symbolic semblance.

In the face of inescapable excess/lack in self, others, and the Other, our first response is often denial. Many picture books by adoptive mothers, especially ones that aim to be read to infants, feature an altruistic utopia that reflects this denial. Such picture books portray an upbringing free of domestic and social antagonism not only in the fairy-tale playfulness of the written text but also in such graphic elements as color, shape, and form. With a false perception of self, others, and the Other, these authors/adoptive mothers introduce a (m)other who is absolutely non-split and genuine and an Other (either the sending or receiving nation) that is fully consistent and truly altruistic; they also present adoption as an act without the least taint of self-interest and depict a harmonious bond of self-(m)other blind

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2 Lacan distinguishes between pleasure and jouissance. Beyond the pleasure principle, a jouissance forces one to compulsively attempt to transgress the prohibitions imposed on his or her enjoyment. Jouissance is “painful pleasure” as well as “pleasant pain.” Levi R. Bryant explains the differences: “pleasure is the satisfaction I get when I eat a great meal when I’m very hungry. Jouissance, by contrast, is when you compulsively eat and eat and eat, despite the fact that your continued consumption causes you a great deal of pain and discomfort. You can’t stop yourself. Pleasure is sneezing after a build-up of your nose itching. Jouissance is cutting yourself with razor blades. Pleasure is making love. Jouissance is fucking fifteen or twenty times in a single day– or doing the masturbatory equivalent— even though it’s no longer pleasurable and has even become painful.”

3 In the case of the subject within capitalism, any specific commodity may enact as well as defer desire.
to sensitive issues such as abandonment and differences of race, class, nation, or others.

In *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* (2000), Rose Lewis, a first-time author and adoptive mother, addresses her journey to China to adopt her baby girl and their return to the United States. Reviewed by Nancy Scheemaker as “a book that gracefully depicts an adoption [and] can be enjoyed by anyone seeking the excitement and celebration of family,” *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* begins with friction-free rhetoric: “Once upon a time in China there was a baby girl who lived in a big room with lots of other babies” (emphasis in the original). The illustrator uses a full-paged watercolor layout of soft colors and expressive characters such as a rosy-cheeked Chinese baby to represent the child Lewis adopts. In addition to the carefree background, the book’s illustrations center on the bond of a mother with her adoptive child and especially on mother–infant physical attachment—showing them kissing, cuddling, petting, and bottle-feeding. In Lewis’ narrative, the mother/child dyad appears predestined. Such a celebration of the maternal bond overshadows the excess of the act of adoption in the two participants. One is missing a mother; the other, a baby. But in Lewis’ tale the practice of transnational adoption heals these two—each with a missing part—into wholeness. Ending with the final page that illustrates the Chinese character for “love,” the story is conceived in a self-sufficient maternal world. Such a rhetoric of maternal love helps to locate all issues about the practice of transnational adoption within the privatized space of the family and to discount global inequalities and the inter-subjective conflicts involved in transnational adoption.4

Given the nature of the genre and children’s limited orientation in time, place, and reality, adoptive mothers (as authors of picture books) may have simple intentions: to amuse children by affording pictures of familiar and pleasing objects, to foster the habit of reading, or to initiate an appreciation for the graphic arts. But whatever the intention may be, they soothe—or, rather, beguile—children readers with a false perception of self, others, and the Other. More specifically, they spare the child from confronting the excesses of the act called adoption/abandonment and shield her from witnessing a life of misfortune, gender, race, or class inequalities and a world of hegemonic or hierarchal dominance.

This positioning extends beyond the children in the picture books to the adults (including the authors themselves) in the memoirs of adoptive mothers participating in transnational adoption. Assuming a heroic position, some adoptive mothers situate themselves in self-enclosed, linear narratives of either victimization or salvation. Their decisions to adopt are ostensibly made only to meet the needs of children, although to some critics, “pursuit of the best interests of children in adoptions is [no more than a] modest fiction” (Goodwin 8). Adoptive mothers are hesitant to specify their parental desire to have a child, and hardly ever do we read

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4For an extended discussion of this point, see my “Picture Books on Asian Transnational/-Racial Adoption” in *Canadian Review of American Studies*. 
in their stories an appeal to their own “interests as citizens” for being a fully realized mother in American life (in light of Foucault’s notion of governmentality).\(^5\) David Eng asks, indeed, if it is not the case that “the transnational adoptee operates as a guarantee for her parents’ access to full social recognition and rights to participation in the public sphere and civil society” (*Feeling* 102). But if these aims are virtually invisible in the motherhood or kinship relationships presented in these texts, so too are any connections with consumption in today’s multimillion dollar global adoption industry, where “motherhood has become a class privilege” (Moosnick 75). Yet motherhood and consumption practices are mutually dependent in contemporary North American social life, as Janelle Taylor observes in *Consuming Motherhood*. More than a personal experience, motherhood and mothering practices are driven by historically specific ideologies. Today, it could be the consumption of caring that shapes the image of mother; for example, mothers’ consumption of products on behalf of their children become vehicles for the acquisition of the role of a good mother. Put simply, “it takes more than a baby to make a mother,” in the words of Stephanie O’Donohoe, “and mothers make more than babies” (1).

Many memoirs by adoptive mothers may soften the antagonism of the Other, others, and subject by domesticating the adoption issues and mimicking biological families as if they were going to raise a biological child of their own. Disinclined to regard a broader social context beyond the family, adoptive mothers may see only “age” as the “defining difference” between themselves and birth mothers (Moosnick 69) and their desire as barely aiming beyond the child. They even enact pregnancy by either accumulating baby products or drawing an analogy between the length of the adoption waiting period and pregnancy to express all its joy, fear, and excitement.\(^6\) They are “paper pregnant” or, in Jana Wolff’s words, are “expecting without pregnancy” (45). In their personal narratives, adoptive mothers (especially those of Chinese children) frequently evoke the themes of “gifts” (of love from the birth mother to the child or from one woman to another) or “destiny” (which is often signified by a red thread according to ancient Chinese belief). Given the nature of gifts (compared to the idea of exchange), that adopted children would not be assigned monetary worth as commodities thereby exempts them from the harsh and impersonal world of global capitalism. As Ann Anagnost argues, the trope of gifts in transnational adoption signifies a “refusal and resignification of the meaning of monetary exchanges” (401). Also thanks to an invisible red thread or other literary images that connect themselves to adopted children through fate, adoptive mothers attribute an apolitical meaning to a historical condition and the social contingency of kinship. Thus, able to crystallize their lives into a meaningful whole,

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\(^5\) Signe Howell states that “Governmentality, as a mode of thinking that gave birth to liberal benevolent supervision by the democratic state for the best interest of its citizens, is a well-established phenomenon in Western Europe” (230).

\(^6\) Janelle Taylor observes that “Prospective parents liken the long wait through the various stages of the adoption process to the gestational biological time of pregnancy itself, a process that culminates in the fax transmission of the agency photograph of their child’s face” (154).
they do not need to “critically analyze how the child reaches their loving arms” (Moosnick 13).

Such as act of disavowal is especially noticeable in Beth Monte Russell’s *Forever Lily: An Unexpected Mother’s Journey to Adoption in China* (2004), in which the author aestheticizes and mythologizes her voyage to China as well as her return to the United States with a baby girl. Russell tells her story of traveling to China to support her friend, Alex, in adopting a baby from an orphanage. Yet, upon arrival, Alex withdraws and ultimately decides not to go through with the adoption. After Alex confesses that she does not want this baby, Russell bonds with it and ends up adopting the baby herself. In Russell’s narrative, however, this “unexpected” journey turns out to be “predestined.”

Throughout the memoir, Russell interweaves current situations with dream sequences. Conveniently corresponding to the real-life events, these rambling dream segments—occupying one-fourth of the book—“reveal” that she was actually an empress of ancient China with an illegitimate child who had to be taken away for adoption. Gradually, it becomes clear in the story that those dreams are more than messages from her subconscious mind, but are instead the remnants of her past life experiences. Thus, adoption, reincarnation, and fate are all interwoven together. Russell is reassured by her spiritual advisor and her encounters with apparitions like the Virgin Mary that the baby, Lily, is the child from whom she was separated in a past life in China. With regard to her spiritual reading of adoption, she is destined to become its mother. She seems to know this on the very first night with the baby at the hotel: “I feel as if I am looking into a face I have always known, always dreamed of, or always wished for” (Russell 55). Even several years prior to the trip, she had prophesied to her friend, “I know I will have one child, it will be a girl, and I will have her when I’m thirty-seven years old!” (184). By the end of the memoir, the reader should not be surprised at the revelation that as a teenager the author could speak Chinese in her sleep (213).

Such an aestheticizing or mythologizing of adoption in *Forever Lily* operates ideologically. Russell’s memoir consists of ideological fantasies that naturalize and normalize profound contradictions and antagonism involved in adoption. The ideological fantasies may even obliterate the entire ethico-political condition that allows adoption (either domestic or international) to prosper in the first place and covers up the mode of our own participation in it. The fantasies formulate an imaginary relation to the given social structure and a subject’s relation to the lost object. They teach us how and what to desire. Moreover, the mechanism of ideological displacement renders invisible the structural problems of adoption and reduces the fact of a social, systemic predicament to individual, attitudinal failures or a faux-humanized battle between good and bad characters (i.e., between adoptive and birth mothers).

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7 An Amazon.com customer made a sarcastic comment in a review of *Lost Daughters*, noting that “North Americans buy vast amounts of goods made by China’s sweat shops, so you can be sure that there are many more ‘red threads’ tying us all together than simply those of love for an unknown child in a distant land.”
Ideologically, the adopted child is seen merely as a site of emotional—but not eco-
nomic or political—investment. In addition, adoption is not openly associated with
“abandonment” but is regarded as an individual “choice” (although a poor one).
In many such personal narratives, adoption is more often rewritten as a “plan,” first
initiated by the birth mother with the best of intentions, and then participated in by
many well-meaning people. In these narratives, adopted children are raised in a well-
planned environment as the center of attention. Or, more radically, as in Russell’s
Forever Lily, one simply accepts the entire process as a matter of destiny—the red
thread of fate.

Heavily laden with ideological fantasies, Forever Lily first portrays individuals
who hardly look beyond the Imaginary-Symbolic façade of appearances. People are
seen, in other words, as transparent subjects without depth, without any gesture
toward split or alienation. In the memoir, Russell simply categorizes maternal fig-
ures as victims, villains, or saints. As an innocent woman living in the third world,
the birth mother is victimized by China’s patriarchal tyranny. As a villain, her friend
Alex is a mother who holds back her love and gives up the adopted baby. In contrast
to those two, Russell gives herself the role of the ideal: the loving, understanding,
and competent mother whose needs are subjected to those of the child. What is
more, Russell claims that in her past life she was actually an empress of China, giv-
ing away her illegitimate baby girl for adoption only because she was pressured to do
so by others. The child she gave up for adoption becomes Lily, the infant she adopts
in the present time. Ironically, through reincarnation, she becomes ONE—both an
adoptive mother and a birth mother. Ideologically, such a fantasy simply dissolves a
long-standing tension between birth mothers and adoptive mothers and a distinc-
tion between third-world and Western women. Indeed, Russell’s memoir reaches its
dramatic climax at this very core of ideological representations of adoption.

When adoptive mothers of many picture books and memoirs confine adoption
to an individual journey or one within the domestic sphere, they gentrify the antag-
onism of adoption and reduce it to a discourse or a practice devoid of history about
militarism, racism, colonization, imperialism, or globalization. Confronting head-on
the antagonistic forces behind transnational adoption, adoption scholars criticize
the evacuation of histories from the circulation of children and insist on restoring
history to the process of adoption. For example, in Belonging in an Adopted World
(2010), Barbara Yngvesson examines how adoptees construct a sense of belonging-
ness at the intersection of race, kinship, and nation. In The Kinning of Foreigners
(2007), Signe Howell offers an anthropological study of kinship and globalization
with an emphasis on legal, cultural, and psychological involvement. In Kinship by
Design (2008), Ellen Herman provides a complete account of the history of modern
American adoption, beginning as early as the 1900s. Toby Alice Volkman’s edited
collection of essays, Cultures of Transnational Adoption (2006), not only shifts focus
away from adoptive parents to adoptees and birth mothers but also explores diffi-
cult issues of roots, birth culture, and media representations. For its part, Adoption
Matters (2005), edited by Sally Haslanger and Charlotte Witt, raises serious ques-
tions about natural and unnatural families, as well as about constructions of race
along with constructions of family. Interestingly enough, several of these critics are also adoptive mothers, working to specify how such a practice is historically constituted and seeking to contextualize its relationship to a given mode of production in either donor or receiving countries.

In contrast to the works primarily intended for readers of scholarly studies, only a few personal memoirs by adoptive mothers extend beyond individual concerns and the domestic scale. In these memoirs, authors integrate their personal reflections with critical examinations of adoption and its complex dynamics within a concrete context. Part memoir and part sociopolitical commentary, they demand not just greater recognition of the diversity of American family kinship, but political attention or even activism. Such works include Karin Evans’ *Lost Daughters of China* (2001), Cheri Register’s *Beyond Good Intentions* (2005), and Jana Wolff’s *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother* (2010)—books that I will discuss in the following section.

A national bestseller, *The Lost Daughters of China* is narrated in the voice of an adoptive mother and a reporter. As an adoptive mother, Evans offers a personal memoir/travelogue of her own adoption of a baby—the waiting process, the trip to China to adopt a baby girl, and the adjustment back in the United States. Like many personal narratives of adoption, Evans also employs the conventional tropes of adoption—including the fulfillment of a plan, gifts, love, red thread, paper pregnancy, and the miraculous nature of the relationship—to express the emotion of maternal joy and sorrow in a way that hardly permits her to avoid the same pitfalls I discussed above. It is no wonder that Susan Greenhalgh criticizes the book for obscuring the political and cultural violence of the practice of adoption in China (613). Nevertheless, as a reporter, Evans also investigates demographic, political, cultural, and economical forces that have led to what she calls the lost daughters of China. Providing in-depth interviews, statistics, information, and scholarly footnotes, she addresses the issues of female infanticide, child abandonment, population control policy, rural poverty, and human rights—all as the book’s subtitle clearly suggests—“Abandoned Girls, Their Journey to America, and the Search for a Missing Past.”

To historicize and politicize the practice of international adoption, Evans adopts a feminist stance. She exposes the misogyny of traditional Chinese culture and ethics that exists in spite of the law and government policies. She repeatedly calls readers’ attention to baby abandonment, female infanticide, the cultural preference for boys, and patriarchal Confucianism—all of which indicate women’s subordinated status in China. To demonstrate the value of women in China, for instance, she quotes a passage from the *Book of Odes* (an anthology attributed to Confucius):

When a son is born,
Let him sleep in the bed,
Clothe him with fine dress,
How lordly his cry is!
May he grow up to wear crimson
And be the lord of the clan and the tribe!

When a daughter is born,
Let her sleep on the ground,
Wrap her in common wrappings,
And give her broken tiles for her playthings.
May she well attend to food and wine,
And bring no discredit to her parents! (qtd. in Evans 85)

Throughout the book, Evans repeatedly expresses her eagerness to see the day when Chinese birth mothers may feel safe and brave enough to tell their own stories and their lost daughters can also “speak up and search out the truth about their homeland” (221), both of which are part of her call for a bond of global sisterhood.

Although “a history of adoption is necessarily a history of women” as Julie Berebitsky asserts (9), Evans’ critique and feminist focus on a collective identity is still limited in scope. It is insufficiently radical for fundamental change and fails to attend to the structural basis of international adoption. Her line of argument is problematic not only because she defies today’s multiculturalist tolerance for the other’s differences or because she fails to judge each country by its own cultural and societal mores. Nor do I rest my reservations about the book upon her representations of Chinese men and women, although some readers hold that Evans reinforces Western stereotypes of Chinese misogyny and constructs China as a regime of authoritarianism (in fact, sexism is still deeply rooted in Chinese dualistic tradition, and violations of human rights abuse in China are neverending).

Rather, the book is deficient in its lack of a global observation. Evans does not provide a global perspective on the worldwide phenomenon of transnational adoption. As Karen Dubinsky observes, “Children move from south to north, east to west, poor to rich, brown [or colored] to white; over 50 percent of them end up in one country alone, the United States” (20). In the latter statistic, one sees why transnational adoption indicates not only economic disparities within a single national border but also a struggle to cover up or make apparent the flaws or inconsistencies of global capitalism—specifically, in the aspects of the flow of capital and the international division of labor. In this sense, motherhood as a class privilege extends from domestic to global contexts—it is more than a local struggle between rural and urban “classes”—and points toward the inequality of global capitalist economy.

Thus, encountering today’s symbolic deadlock is much more challenging and traumatic. It is far more than attempting to define birth parents’ poverty as an individual choice, psychologizing adoptees’ social predicament, fantasizing different scenarios of abandonment, or merely attacking the exotic and sexist Other nation. Given such responses, it is no wonder that “we seem increasingly willing to grant to children what we are far more reluctant to grant to their parents” (Fass 13). In the name of the so-called best interests of children, we disavow fundamental antagonism, the invisible mode of participation, and global responsibility. This response
chooses, in the words of Hannah Arendt, a “politics of pity” instead of a “politics of justice.” Such a response suggests that we would rather spotlight the spectacle of individual suffering via the distinction between an observer and a distant sufferer rather than aiming at “settling accounts” by investigating institutions and abstract rules of justice (Borneman 1).

But Evans also unwittingly provides a misleading dichotomy of the East and the West. Throughout the book, she continually contrasts a sexist Chinese mentality and morality with that of the United States, which she portrays as a country with only racial strife (187–90). Although arguably a matter of degree, this portrait falls into the trap of binary polarity: a sexist China versus a non-sexist United States; or, a non-racist China versus a racist United States. Such a binary representation involves a mutual implication, forming a cycle in which each extreme supports and includes the imaginary other. Following on this logic, one is inclined to fantasize the other, in the expression of Lacanian theory, as “the solution to social disharmony or the cause of it.” Without locating excess within oneself, one “fantasmatically projects [one’s] own excess onto others defensively” (Rothenberg 216), and insistently recognize the other’s difference and particularity. Although “the middle kingdom” has been thought by many Western societies to advocate racial equality, Han Chinese harbor an equally racist mentality toward other races (especially people of darker skin), as M. Dujon Johnson demonstrates in his book Race and Racism in the Chinas: Chinese Racial Attitudes toward Africans and African-Americans (2007). The silence about racism merely reflects the Chinese lack of self-reflection about the subject. Likewise, the United States is not free of discrimination against women.

Evans’s lack of feminist critique of American adoption—as in the problematic representations of women (birth mothers, adopted daughters, and adoptive mothers included) as “grateful rescue objects” who call for the protection of male power from either supplying or receiving governments or both (Hübìnèt 121)—allows first-world women to view themselves as liberated and “potential ‘saviors’ of their ‘less fortunate sisters’” (Short 133). At the same time, Evans patronizes third-world women as passive victims and victims alone, thereby romanticizing their abandonment of children as a noble act or a well-contrived plan. Moreover, Evans’ binary portrait reinforces a persistent presumption not only that “the empowerment of women is a particularly Western or European phenomenon with roots in the Enlightenment,” but also that “modern and liberal values and ideas on women have spread from the West across the world” (Towns 5, 6). While the state of women today is often evaluated as “a standard of rank in international society” (Towns 1), Evans’ binary portrayal of women hides an underlying and subtle racism.

In addition to Evans’ Lost Daughters of China, which addresses the issue of adoption outside familial parameters, both Cheri Register’s Beyond Good Intentions and Jana Wolff’s Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother, respectively, explore the ideological dimension beyond adoptive parenting and divulge the secret involvement of

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8 For a further discussion of the circulation of feminist knowledge and politics as cultural imperialism, see Yu.
adoptive mothering at the libidinal level. Register, an American mother, internationally adopted two Korean-born daughters in infancy in the 1980s. Wolff, a Jewish American mother, domestically adopted a male baby in 1991, one born to a Mexican American mother and an African American father.

Targeting well-meaning but obtuse and patronizing adoptive parents, Register in Beyond Good Intentions: A Mother Reflects on Raising Internationally Adopted Children depicts ten worst-case scenarios (one in each chapter) to reveal the ideological excess and destructive consequences inherent in the best intentions and deeds of adopting parents. As clearly expressed in the chapter titles, the ten “pitfalls” can be categorized into two types. The first type of mistakes adoptive parents make—including those identified in these chapter titles: “Wiping Away Our Children’s Past,” “Holding the Lid on Sorrow and Anger,” “Parenting on the Defensive,” “Believing Race Doesn’t Matter,” “Raising Our Children in Isolation,” and “Believing Adoption Saves Souls”—highlights a disavowal of antagonism generated by adoption, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and other factors. As indicated in other chapter titles—“Hovering over Our ‘Troubled’ Children,” “Keeping Our Children Exotic,” “Judging Our Country Superior,” and “Appropriating Our Children’s Heritage”—the second type features an elevation of their adopted children’s differences. In the book, adoptive parents err in either erasing the otherness of the Other or glorifying it. In other words, rather than being open to the split of self, others, and the Other, they consciously or unconsciously exclude or complete it in order to maintain their imaginary facades or symbolic mandates.

In fact, adoptive parents never merely have a dual relationship with the adopted child because they always desire beyond the child toward the social Other. Desire, in Lacan, is essentially desire of the Other’s desire—desire, that is, for the Other and by the Other. Adoptive parents desire to identify with an ideal/complete image of self or family (ideal ego), through which they achieve a sense of wholeness or “appear likeable to themselves.” At the same time, they desire to identify with the very point of the gaze of the Other or ego ideal, with that place “from which they are being observed” and judged as “likable” as, for example, a mother (Žižek Sublime 105). In the process of identification, the adopted child stands in for the lost object that promises a life of wholeness or even extends to the call for a harmonious society—a “fantasy” that provides the object-cause of desire. Indeed, desire “leads the subject in the direction of ideologies,” which, as social fantasy, in turn fills in the lack of the Symbolic or covers over political and social antagonisms (Bjerre and Laustsen 88–89).

Aiming beyond addressing “vexed issues” in “a degree of negativity” with historical specificity (Grice 66, 65), Register obliges readers (especially adoptive parents) to confront the unacknowledged investment in their individual fantasies and the ideological excess of adoption practices. For example, Register warns about the adoptive parents’ colorblind love in such a race-conscious society. Agreeing with Register, I would add that colorblind altruism not only denies the reality of social antagonism but also traumatizes transnational/transracial adoptees. Colorblind
rhetoric does not acknowledge that a given society is inevitably marked by fundamental antagonisms of class, race, gender, and other categories of identity. Raised in an assumed colorblind utopia, the adoptee is expected to live up to the multicultural ideal. Thus, because it is presumed her subjectivity can be thoroughly assimilated and her splitness is denied, her failure to achieve these goals is regarded as the result of ingratitude or even diagnosed as a psychological disorder.

On the other hand, Register also cautions against an undue emphasis on adopted children’s exotic differences and the primal wound. Indeed, the glorification of their differences ideologically generates an excessive effect. The identity of adoptees is reduced to a unified, non-split totality, one that is self-evident as well as authentic, trapped within an essentially prescriptive discourse. They become the Other devoid of otherness—in the sense, as Žižek argues, where “the other is okay in so far as this other is only a question of food, of culture, of dances” (“Interview”). In addition, “the primal wound” as the dominant trope of the discourse of contemporary adoption further directs much critical energy toward the past and depoliticizes everyday common concerns. The adoptees are traumatized not so much by the absence of origin (the lack of knowledge of one’s familial, ethnic roots) as by its over-presence (the excessive association with the origin). It is not by a harrowing history in the past, but by present-day oppressive ideologies and practices that they are most afflicted. Their affliction, that is, results from their being regarded as the exotic other, and their birth countries as ones “robbed of their rich literary, professional, and intellectual traditions... overwhelmingly inhabited by dehumanized, one-dimensional characters” (Willing 262).

While, respectively, Evans constructs a political and historical context of international adoption and Register examines the ideological excess of adoption at the level of rational critique, Jana Wolff in Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother explores the subjective libidinal investments in adoption. Viewed as a “good example of the emotional Catharsis” (Melina 12), the book discloses, in the author’s own words, “secret thoughts” and “raw emotions” (165)—these thoughts and emotions are dark yet open, politically incorrect yet psychologically honest. Avoiding sugar-coating fantasies or ideological mystification, Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother exposes the split of the author’s ambivalent feelings—“of amusement and terror, of surrealism and sarcasm, of familiarity and alienation”—and her experience of interracial adoption as “amazingly funny, amazingly threatening, amazingly touching” (Wolff 18). Unfolding a journey of adopting an interracial infant, Wolff’s book, consisting of twenty-six short chapters, asks and answers difficult questions such as: “Could We Love Somebody Else’s Child?,” “What If We Get a Dud?,” “Unspoken Preferences,” “Can We Return This Child: Feelings That Top the Taboos,” “Friendly Racism: Are They Staring, Or Am I Paranoid?,” “Mother and Child Reunion: Is She Going to Kiss Him or Kidnap Him?”

In Secret Thoughts, Wolff actually reveals nothing unknown to the reader. Rather, Wolff reveals the things one already knows and adheres to and yet is unaware of. The book discloses what Žižek calls “the unknown knowns”—“the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they
form the background of our public values” (Reality). Secret Thoughts demonstrates how the experience of adoption enables adoptive mothers to look at adoption and themselves awry so that they can confront within themselves what is the most foreign and also most familiar. While adoption can serve as “a catalyst” for “complementary understandings of family, kinship and identity” (Wegar 2), transracial adoption, as Nora Rose Moosnick suggests, can be characterized as “a potential space” where “racial assumptions can be made problematic” (141). More specifically, adoptive motherhood becomes an “adventure” (Riley 172), particularly, says Moosnick, for those with children of different races or nationalities because they are “the most likely to experience identity alterations” (137). As Moosnick observes, speaking of adoptees and their racial identity: “not only did their racial awareness change, but additionally their racial location [also] became muddled” (138). The practice of adoption challenges Wolff to confront racial uncertainty and has shaped her as a champion for human potential. Wolff in Secret Thoughts records the journey of an adoptive mother who dares to face an inherent excess such as racial, sexual, or class antagonism.

The book tries to undermine this libidinal economy of adoption because it is the psychological investment on the unconscious level that maintains the status of current state of adoption. A deeply rooted racist excess is clearly demonstrated by Wolff’s depiction of four adoptive grandparents’ responses to her decision to adopt a child of a different race:

In time, once they realized that we were going ahead with this adoption, all four prospective grandparents said to us in one way or another: “We will love your child, wherever she comes from and whatever he looks like.” Significant pause. “But the world is still a racist place, and you may be making your life, and you child’s life, a lot tougher.” And, I suppose, their lives, too. (102)

This passage expresses exactly today’s mode of disavowal of our own racist excesses: we do not have racist beliefs ourselves, but the racist Other believes on our behalf. The Other, who believes, does not need to exist factually, as long as they are assumed to exist. “Although nobody effectively believes,” as Žižek maintains, “it is enough that everybody presupposes someone else to believe and the belief is actual. It structures reality” (Reality). In our allegedly post-ideological era, such a detachment enables us to continue to operate within the ideological structure and yet conceals our much deeper commitment to it. Today, ideology depends on a subject’s ability to distance herself from any engaged position and from her own investment in the object of desire.

The Voices of Birth Mothers

Recent adoption studies have shifted their focus to the role of the birth mother, echoing “the idea of biology as a crucial or definitive feature of the family” (Witt 136). The rise of birth mothers’ voices shows an extension of identity politics to
adoption based on biological determinants. Their memoirs, on the one hand, des-
tigmatize birth mothers as “unwed mothers” for surrendering the child and, on
the other, illustrate a psychological quest to dialectize such complex problematic
situations.

Generally speaking, a sense of victimhood and the internalization of social
wrongs characterize personal narratives of Korean and Chinese birth mothers. Some
internalize social wrongs as personal sins and render themselves easy victims for
exploitation; some, although exposing and targeting social wrongs, still fall into
the trap of internalizing social wrongs because of their desire to be re-recognized
as good mothers and responsible citizens. Until very recently, the voices of birth
mothers have been woefully underrepresented, especially those from such coun-
tries as Korea and China—the former and current largest suppliers of children to
the United States.

Edited by Sara Dorow, *I Wish for You a Beautiful Life: Letters from the Korean Birth
Mothers of Ae Ran to Their Children* (1999) contains letters written by twenty-four birth
mothers to their children. Although their children are identified as the addressees,
the anthology explains to the reader the thoughts and emotions Korean birth moth-
ers experienced immediately before, during, and after the adoption. Its sequel,
*Dreaming a World: Korean Birth Mothers Tell Their Stories* (edited by Sangsoon Han;
2010), gives voice to seventeen Korean birth mothers. Their stories are more con-
temporary (the most recent adoption is dated in 2004) and provide a more inclusive
spectrum of readers, addressing their children and the public. In addition, they are
more explicitly religious in tone and content, in keeping with Ae Ran Won’s reli-
gious origins (it was established in 1960 by an American missionary), and they are
more diverse in their decisions regarding adoption: a few stories involve domestic or
open adoption and one story ends with a birth mother’s resolution for single parent-
ing. Besides, the sequel deals not only with why the birth mothers relinquish their
children for adoption but also how the mothers themselves are also relinquished by
society.

Whether or not a critique of sexism and oppressive patriarchal reality is visible
in the letters, the birth mothers of both collections repeatedly express guilt and
shame; in addition, they often emphasize at the very end of their letters that they
will live decently as good citizens and become a mother their children can be proud
of on the day of reunion. For example, some birth mothers write:

> I promised you that your mom is going to work hard as a member of this society and live my life
> as a good Christian who obeys God and seeks first the kingdom of God. (*Wish* 112)
> If in the future we do meet, I hope that we will not be ashamed of each other. (*Wish* 78)
> I will do my best to be a mother whom you can be proud of. I hope you can grow to be a
> son I will be proud of as well. (*Wish* 64)
> I wanted to be able to show her that I tried hard to live with pride and strength. At the time
> of our reunion, I would like to be a proud mother, rather than an ashamed one. (*Dreaming* 52)

In their desire to be re-recognized properly and accepted again by society, these
birth mothers ultimately internalize institutional wrongs and identify themselves
as helpless and expiatory victims. In this sense, their right to tell their suffering is grounded on portraying themselves as victims—ones who are helplessly affected by circumstances and are able to formulate a specific narrative of pain.

Published in 2011, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother: Stories of Loss and Love* (edited by Xinran) is the first collection of stories from Chinese birth mothers ranging from young students and successful businesswomen to poor peasants. Like the two books on Korean birth mothers discussed above, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother* is characterized by shared stories of guilt and remorse. In greater depth and with lively anecdotal detail, it reveals the political, economic, and cultural forces that shape the gender hierarchy in China that restricts birth mothers’ decisions regarding their newborn girls. The book explicates outdated Chinese traditions (e.g., a preference for sons), modern policies (e.g., the one-child restriction), and economic necessities (such as punishing poverty or discriminating against women in practices of land inheritance). Further, the collection honestly portrays the emotional and physical abuse the mother suffers for her inability to bear a son and the various ways by which unwanted girls are disposed of—by drowning, smothering, or abandonment by the side of a road, on a doorstep, or in a train station.

Ironically, in *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*, these acts are most often performed by women—by mothers-in-law, midwives, or other maternal figures. Participation in infanticide, as well as the abandonment of newborns and aggression toward sterile women or others who do not bear sons, show these women’s conscious or unconscious internalization of hegemonic ideology. In the book, even a successful businesswoman gives up her child for adoption because of her internalized fantasy of Western values. She confesses:

> I convinced myself that it must be much better for a child to be adopted to a middle- or upper-class family in the West than to have to put up with a life in a society as fiercely competitive as ours. Besides, she’d going abroad to study anyway when she was older. (Xinran 154)

The birth mother’s act undermines the idealization of motherhood and biological ties and verifies what Drucilla Cornell maintains: “There is an old Italian saying that blood seeks blood. But blood also robs, rapes, and murders blood” (29). Even as it also conveys some positive themes, *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother* shows just as clearly the detrimental effect of internalizing dominant ideologies.

The general perception of these three books on maternal voices from Korean and Chinese birth mothers is greatly influenced by the editors, whose involvement with the books is evident. In *I Wish for You a Beautiful Life*, Sara Dorow’s editorial comments and the viewpoints in the introduction by Sangsoon Han and the foreword by Jeff Mondloh and Maxine Walton are intimate and consistent with the letters presented. Editorial engagement is also apparent in its sequel, edited by Sangsoon Han, the director of Ae Ran Won. In *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*, Chinese birth mothers—due to various political, economic, social, and cultural pressures—can articulate their voices only via Xinran, who—as mediator, editor, author, and
interviewer—recounts the diverse and heartbreaking stories of Chinese women and collects them together with her expanded commentaries.

In spite of the different levels of their editorial involvement, the editors of the three books aim to speak truth to power, and the voices of birth mothers are characterized with varying degrees of internalization of social wrongs and thus with varied senses of victimhood. All such shared features might well fall into what Slavoj Žižek calls “the cult of victimology.” Strongly criticizing the ideology of victimization, he argues that it “penetrates intellectual and political life even to the extent that in order for your work to have any ethical authority you must be able to present and legitimize yourself as in some sense victimized” (Conversations 140). Thus, the editors speak truth to power at the risk of reducing birth mothers to subjects with “a complete determinism and . . . therapeutic pessimism” (Verhaeghe 50).

Many current scholars have not only criticized the evacuation of histories from the practice of transnational adoption but have also insisted on specifying such a practice as historically constituted. In a similar vein, American birth mothers and authors of recently published memoirs do not view adoption only within an individual decision-making process. More than pivoting on one single event or personal loss, their memoirs recount the collective memory of physically and emotionally traumatic incidents, correlating individuals’ traumas with those of others in their social networks and reflecting the sociocultural–political turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s. Situating themselves in relational networks as they endeavor to contextualize their traumatic experiences, these birth mothers/memoirists are acutely responsive to networked others, notably parental figures or siblings, and seek or even demand an explanation of their traumatic experiences from the big Other. In short, their memoirs, displaying a relational self, are ontologically open to significant others and reflectively aware of and sensitive to their specific cultural/political locations.

Karen Salyer McElmurray’s award-winning memoir Surrendered Child: A Birth Mother’s Journey (2004) is one such example. It recounts not only her relinquishment of her newborn child for adoption, but also her troubled family upbringing, her disturbed relationship with her parents, unspoken family taboos (including an aunt’s manic depression and a cousin’s suicide), her hippie days, and her eventual reunion with her grown son. It also addresses regional and national backdrops, including Kentucky in the late-1960s/early-1970s, the Vietnam war, the Watergate scandal, and the 1970s oil crisis. The surrendered child of the main title refers to

9 For example, as Ann Anagnost notes, “Celebratory representations of cultural difference, which are often detached from immigrant histories in the United States, may not only pose problems for adopted children in developing an understanding of their racialization, but this dehistoricization also maintains the separations that constitute racialized boundaries in U.S. society historically” (Position 391). Likewise, Toby Alice Volkman observes more specifically that an “overwhelming celebratory view of China and Chinese culture is sometimes questioned, especially by Asian American parents,” for “exoticizing and mysticizing and obsessing about Chinese culture while ignoring the living, breathing Chinese American culture at our doorstep” (“Embodying” 39). In a study of Korean adoption, Eleana Kim points out that the evacuation of history is also encouraged by the South Korean government for the benefit of the master narrative of South Korean’s economic miracle (76). Accordingly, David Eng claims, Restoring collective history to the process of a transnational adoptee’s social and psychic development is crucial to the survival of the global family” (“Diasporas” 33).
both the abandoned son and the author herself, who was surrendered at fourteen by her mother and by “her own abrupt abandonment of childhood to pregnancy and marriage” (Mooney 198).

The subtitle, “A Birth Mother’s Journey,” is understated in the sense that the memoir is much more than a single person’s story. McElmurray devotes more than one-third of the book to the portrayal of her own mother: aloof and even asocial, her mother suffers from obsessive compulsive disorder and insists on bathing her daughter and wiping her bottom even when the daughter reaches the age of thirteen. Indeed, the memoir is addressed more to the mother than to the son. McElmurray also details her relationship with her father, the one she actually blames for “not rescuing her sooner from her childhood” (98). In addition, her experience of relinquishing an infant for adoption is intertwined with other traumatic events, including her maternal family’s history of mental illness, suicide, and social and political disturbances. She has kept writing about, in her words, “the missing or [the] loss” (Kingsbury), but till the end of the memoir, she is still unable to explain or justify her actions, as she herself admits. Why did she give up her son? Or why did she not give her son to her father to raise as his own since her father wanted to adopt the child? Indeed, what McElmurray provides in the memoir is the “context, not excuses” (Ferriss 218). More specifically, McElmurray “re-creates the sense of confusion of those times” rather than explaining, clarifying, or even reconciling the traumatic events of the past (Pace). What she intends to do is to reflect her specific situations and show how a self is strongly connected with networked others.

Likewise, in *Waiting to Forget: A Motherhood Lost and Found*, Margaret Moorman chooses not to insulate the stigma of her teenage pregnancy within her orbit. Rather, she situates it along with other traumatic incidents such as her father’s sudden death and her sister’s psychiatric breakdown. Self and others are inextricably engaged in her narrative of trauma; such a self-other connection is further developed into self-other-society schema. Moorman describes cultural stereotypes of unwed mothers and a mixture of grief, guilt, judgment, and changing sexual mores surrounding premarital pregnancy and adoption. She emphasizes that “we honestly believe that we are making individual moral choices, while in reality we are simply responding to the zeitgeist,” and “in most cases it is the prevailing moral climate that makes real reproductive choice possible or impossible for a pregnant girl or woman” (Moorman 162). Therefore, she concludes in the last chapter by saying, “Now I wondered if my decision to give away my child had been shaped by pressures I had not understood and was incapable of resisting” (201). She seems to grasp, in other words, that her explanation of the traumatic past is anticipated from the Other, to the Other, and about the Other.

More recently published, *Following the Tambourine Man: A Birthmother’s Memoir* (2007)—written by English professor and feminist critic Janet Mason Ellerby—also features a relational self and a reflection of specific conditions (those of the 1960s). Yet, in *Following the Tambourine Man*, Ellerby particularly elaborates the lingering shadow of sorrow (also the name of her relinquished daughter): as suggested in the title, “under his dizzy, dancing spell,” she cannot help following “the tambourine
man, endlessly escaping, always on the run” (275, 239). In a memoir that spans forty years, she recalls her privileged childhood, her unexpected pregnancy, her consequent expulsion to the Florence Crittenton Home for unwed mothers, the birth and adoption of her first daughter, her series of five marriages, and her current relationship with her colleague; she also explores the conservative suburbs of the 1950s, the political and cultural ferment of the 1960s, and the shifts in adoption culture over time.

It is, however, Sorrow, the relinquished child, who haunts Ellerby and shapes the trajectory of the story, even after she is found. Ellerby has endeavored to contain the lingering excess that penetrates every minute of her life by giving birth to three more children to replace the lost daughter. Even while being embodied by Sorrow (the adopted daughter), the disturbing excess is also signified bodily and sexually, individually, and socially. The adolescent Ellerby is embarrassed about her bodily changes, ashamed of her pregnant body, and condemned by her parents for her “sexual excess” (150). A disturbing excess is also derived from subjects of family taboo such as suicide, adultery, and murder, and from the Other’s inconsistency or incompleteness, reflected in political scandals, assassinations, and the Watts Riots in Los Angeles.

Yet, at the same time, the lingering excess in the memoir is repressed or denied individually and collectively. Ellerby does so through her own fabrication of fairy tales, while her parents express their intolerance for excessive emotions (39) and place demands on their children to “hold back, deny, smother, check, and repress” (72). Excess is repressed by the societal Other through, for example, the exclusion of racial Others and an ideology of the ideal family. For example, Ellerby depicts San Marino, the place where she grew up in the 1960s, as “a lovely, protective enclave inhabited by people . . . [whose] homes were all unique . . . with a room for each child, a garage for two cars, a yard for a dog, and a family room for the television” (71); more importantly, “there were no African Americans, no Asian Americans, and no Latinos” (62). Even the memoir itself is an attempt to contain the excessive impact of adoption via Ellerby’s efforts to contextualize the event and locate the self in the network of relationships; yet, unlike other memoirists, Ellerby, who has studied Lacanian psychoanalysis, suggests the eventual failure of such an attempt, concluding the memoir with an acceptance of the lingering excess:

Now I realize that my “lost baby dreams” will continue to haunt me . . . . When she intrudes, I will try to calm her by replaying the day of Mase’s birth; I will take pleasure in my daughter returned . . . . The circle of my journey closes, but not completely. It will fall open again and Sorrow will rush in . . . . With empty arms, I will carry her on through the years ahead, never forsaking her, never letting go of Sorrow. (289)

She recognizes that human life is never just life; rather, humans are possessed by a drive not merely for the lost object but the loss itself. What she is driven toward is not the lost baby but the “loss” itself as an object.
Indeed, the memoirists’ emphasis on historical specificity and self-situatedness in a relational network yields potentialities. First, they do not domesticate the issue of adoption, engaging in merely abstract considerations of “love,” “good,” or “right.” Moreover, the primacy of responsive relationships prevents their falling into self-pity and a sense of victimization and “provides the stimulus for the growth of [women’s] empowerment” (Surrey 59). Although they avoid abstract moral absolutism and the fiction of autonomous selfhood, these memoirs, however, yield some pitfalls. First, the affinity with others—who serve to mirror back unlimited subjective possibilities—could impede the memoirists’ assumption of ontological splitness as held by Lacan, resulting in their quests for an authentic self or a being of wholeness. It is no wonder that McElmurray, Moorman, and even Ellerby in their memoirs all seek closure to multiple losses by a recovery of a missing/authentic part of self that remains rooted in others or the Other. Second, although the memoirists place their traumatic past in a meaningful context, their demands on and frustrations with the (in)consistent Other assert their dependence on it. The problem is precisely that they, believing in the name-of-the-father, “cling to the idea of authority that can be blamed for the state of thing” (Bjerre and Laustsen 56). In Lacan, the goal of analysis is first to assume the non-existence of the Other—namely, “the lack of any external guarantee of his/her act” (Žižek, “Afterword” 214)—so that “it was me, myself, who created them all along” (Bjerre and Laustsen 57). The more they rely on the Other, the harder it is for them to break the shackles of the past and the imaginary dyad that holds them.

Third, although these American birth mothers/memoirists do not internalize social wrongs or render themselves easy victims as do many Korean and Chinese birth mothers who represent themselves in memoirs and letters, they stand in a situation bordering on another trap. Presenting adoption as the result of historically specific power relations or cultural mores, these memoirists exhibit what is structurally necessary as contingent. They discount what lies behind the narrativization, historicization, or symbolization of adoption—that is, a structural, transhistorical condition appears as a mere historical contingency. Instead of internalizing social wrongs, they externalize the structurally determined necessity. As Henrik Bjerre and Carsten Laustsen argue in *The Subject of Politics*,

the critique of ideology must be performed in two steps. The first is to show that a discursive order which gives an impression of being “destined” or universal is really contingent... The second step consists in showing how it isn’t the factual, historical conditions that are the real basis or ‘problem’ of the discourse. On the contrary: behind the discursive strategies lies a structural and transhistorical necessity. (41)

Indeed, Ellerby’s sorrow is both historically and structurally constituted. Sorrow, whether her child or the emotion, is elevated above the rest as the fundamental deadlock, as a pivot around which Ellerby’s personal, familial, gender, national, and racial identities revolve. Ellerby does not recognize sorrow as a necessary primal condition for the existence of subjectivity. What if sorrow is a “pseudo-cause” that
mediates the relation between sociality and ontology? What if the ultimate trauma is not the loss of sorrow but the lack of the loss? What if to cling passionately to sorrow is simply to minimize the unbearable anxiety of having to admit the lack/excess of the subject and the Other? The externalization of structural impossibility is likewise manifested in _Surrendered Child_ by McElmurray’s insistence on writing—not writing to achieve a cure (although she claims it) but simply to reproduce itself as drive, to continue it and to return it to its circular path. Such a circularity of the drive is seen again in _Waiting to Forget_ as Moorman attempts to shed “skin after skin, year after year,” in order to reach an authentic self, deeply buried (100)—all, actually, in pursuit of a self unattainable—always already lost.

Coda

At the individual level, some adoptive mothers are indulgent in their narcissistic maternal love as expressed in their personal narratives, especially as represented in picture books read to toddlers. Some are inclined to stick to a fatalistic view of their adoption experiences, as in most picture books or in memoirs like _Forever Lily_. Some, more introspective, are able to place the adoption story outside the ideal, cozy domestic setting: to articulate a feminist critique of patriarchal sexual structures that make adoption possible (e.g., _The Lost Daughters of China_)—or even to challenge what lies behind their own good intentions and confront their own dark fantasies (e.g., _Beyond Good Intentions_ and _Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother_). As for the need to assume greater responsibility for adoption in a political sense, most of the adoptive mothers/authors of picture books choose to deny or ignore it. Some choose to subvert silently or by resorting to psychic power: Russell, the writer of _Forever Lily_, enacts “a delicious sense of subversion” by meditating in the shadow of the Great Wall of China (Russell 38). Some authors endeavor to disclose demographic, political, cultural, or economical forces: to call for a sisterhood of women (e.g., _The Lost Daughters of China_), or even to challenge their own roles in perpetuating this global phenomenon (e.g., _Beyond Good Intentions_ and _Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother_).

On the other hand, birth mothers in their personal narratives may focus on their personal “sins” and expect another chance at social acceptance as well as offering better representations of themselves. They may also try to reason out their traumatic experiences through their relationships with significant others or through the sociocultural–political lens. But how to end the lingering excess of the trauma or what they aim to change—except recovering “the fact” of the traumatic past—seems as unclear to the reader as perhaps it is to the writers/birth mothers themselves.

These questions lead to the end of Lacan’s theory and his view of the aim of analysis. In Lacan, the analytic treatment can be first delineated in terms of what is not. From a traditional therapist’s viewpoint, the recovery of traumatized victims within the existing structure of power indicates a sign of successful healing and the end of therapy. But unlike, say, Freudian therapy, Lacanian analysis does not aim to
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The goal is not to provide medicalization or emotional support, nor is it to suggest an ideal model for identification, reeducate vis-à-vis social norms, or help traumatized birth mothers re-form relationships of trust with others and the Other by regulating their desire. The goal of Lacanian psychoanalysis, rather, is to bring into existence a subject who is no longer attached to the deficiency/excessiveness of the Other by trying to answer, fulfill, repress, or avoid it. She would “re-coordinate the situation for herself, locating the excess [and the lack] in herself” instead of accusing the Other of its failure and the others of their deprivation (Rothenberg 207; emphasis mine). The new subject (as the birth mother) is able to assume the existence of the fundamental lack/excess as the necessary primal condition for the existence of the subject as well as the Other. The very ideas of “a difference between the mask and the true self behind it” and “the Other as the guarantee of the consistency of one’s being” are illusions (Bjerre and Laustsen 37). In Lacanian analysis, the suspension of the defense against the excess/lack is the first step.

In the next, Lacan invites us to follow Joyce’s example to “create our own sinthome at the place of the lack[/excess] of the Other”; here, one learns to “experience the singularity of the organization of its jouissance” (Rothenberg 181) and to subjectify the cause of one’s existence as a (birth) mother by assuming the signifier adoption as pure jouissance, as a non-pathological pure desire. “We all enjoy a certain level of jouissance in our positions as privileged or victims,” as Karen Coats writes, “for which we must claim responsibility” (134). Such identification does not suggest that one must “enjoy the humiliation” or submit to social and political inequality. Rather, it takes the place of what is forever lacking/excessive and provides the subject with a unique organization of jouissance by which to emerge as the agent of a particular desire to live on. Thus, the new subject (as the birth mother) is able to remain psychologically mobile without remaining stuck in the Other’s desire or demand. The subject begins to speak as “I” instead of “me.” She may still be victimized, but she is no longer a victim. She is able to say “I was,” “I did,” “I will,” or “I want to” rather than blaming others or the Other or excusing herself by saying “It just happened to me,” asking “Who did this to me?” or accepting “That is my fate” (Fink 62).

The transformation to the Lacanian subject also means politicizing subjectivity and transversing the existing fantasy of the Other. An ontological change suggests the concomitant mobilization in politics and culture: a real change involves both “alterations in the ideals, desires, and jouissance of a significant number of individual subjects” and “changes in laws and public policy” (Bracher 73). In this sense, maternal voices of transnational adoption can be articulated from a more radical position, one neither bound to the domestic domain of family relations nor to better representations or compensations (of birth mothers), neither to mutual recognition (of adoptive mothers) in identity politics, nor to the household harmony (of adoptive mothers) or the search and reunion with adopted children, nor even to the specifics of historical and cultural location. On the contrary, they can radicalize further the discourse of (transnational/transracial) adoption—not to define it as one within a group-specific narrative of suffering or bliss, but as one that can articulate a universal complaint and launch a global assault on systemic injustices. Thus, what
I oppose the perception of transnational adoption as a problem of teenage pregnancy, a cure for infertility, or a practice of celebratory multiculturalism. That is to say, our concerns should be confined neither to the welfare of the baby nor to the debate on transracial/same-race placement.

Politics proper is a move from the particular to the general. In the light of Jacques Rancière’s philosophy, politics proper emerges when a singular appears as a stand-in for the universal (see Rancière). In other words, a particular wrong—as is involved in transnational adoption—can be sublimated or elevated to a universal wrong, and, therefore, the particular calls for a global response. As Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher explain, “A truly political (in the original) claim emerges when an individual, or group, maintains that the particular injustice under which he is suffering is not completely distinct from all other forms of injustice—it is just one example of the violation of the universal norm of justice” (171). Yet, the dimension of politics proper emerges only momentarily and will be soon and well integrated into the system: the particular wrong may be readily contextualized as a specific predicament, addressed as another cultural issue (along with religion, race, gender, or others), met with monetary compensation, proper recognition, authentic representation, and tolerance of differences, or, much worse, conflated with a desire for consumption in today’s capitalist market. Instead of alleviating the antagonism provoked by this particular wrong, individuals retain the anxiety of the Real and open up the constitutive gap of the symbolic by over-identifying “transnational adoption” with its ideological claims (e.g., in the name of paternalistic humanism).

In other words, we over-identify with the symptom of the existing global order—adoption—and insist on adopting ALL. It is a move from “A thing like this should not happen HERE!,” in the words of Žižek, “to a thing like this should not happen ANYWHERE” (Welcome 49). We resist falling into the trap of a politics of pity, of merely spotlighting the spectacle of individual suffering: of saving a single child we adopt or of helping a birthmother we befriend. For Žižek and colleagues, “pity is a failure of the power of abstraction” (Neighbor 185) because “justice is cold and abstract and the face is the ultimate ethical trap” (Stewart). In the end, we focus on the present symbolic deadlock—what fundamentally over-determines the very horizon of transnational adoption—rather than on the recovery of the traumatic past, the hope for the future collective voice of Asian American adoptees, or the empowering bond of birth mothers. Thus, prior to the closure of the momentary political opening, we must bring the symbolic as a whole into question and thereby further open radically new horizons of possibility.

Works Cited


