

EPHEMERA:
THE SEARCHINGS OF AN ADOPTED DAUGHTER

KATE GREENWAY

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Abstract

This dissertation utilizes self-study, memoir, and art-making in the context of personal trauma in order to witness and examine the wound that comes from being an adoptee. Using my own experience as a woman, and as part of an adoption triangle, I journey beyond the traditional case study and statistical or psychological analysis where adoption is treated as a singular event, finite and quantifiable. I examine research and theory across disciplines, as well as literary and artistic forms, to situate my own experience of adoption, with the view to unearth dynamics of power, secrecy, repression, conformity and suffering that extend beyond the official adoption process. In particular, I focus on my experience of being an adult adoptee in Ontario who was part of the closed adoption system in existence from post World War Two until the recent opening of records. I use art-making in paper and glass, combining these with the objects and small bits of ephemera I possess to give aesthetic expression to the complexity of adoptive experience. I argue that the absence of adoptive representation can be addressed through social and cultural representation, and advocate for the artistic revisioning of adoption as a particularly powerful medium to give voice to unheard/untold stories through adoption art.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Middles and Beginnings

*This contains a story and several other things. The other things might be connected within the story, or they might not; they might be connected to stories that haven't appeared yet. It's not easy to tell...*¹

I am about to tell you a story. Many stories actually, and it might be your inclination right at the start to nod sagely, or dismissively, and think, well yes, I *know* all about them, these stories. And I might be tempted to gloss over, to reinvent, or look backward with more understanding than I actually possess. So without pausing to truly see them, to reflect on their simultaneous idiosyncrasies and interconnectedness, their individuality and yet implications for larger representation, they are reduced to slashes and blobs. And so, in the stories that follow, I ask of us, both of us, the same.

Look.

I remember an art lesson, from grade one: we were tasked with drawing trees. And so we did, in paint and crayon, in two easily identifiable parts: brown slashes for trunks, green blobs and scribbled circles on top for the crowns. Mission accomplished. Twenty-five identical representations. Because we *knew* trees. But then my redheaded grade one teacher, soft-spoken and gentle, took us outside to the playground field.

“That is not how trees are made,” she said. “Look. They have branches. Large branches and smaller branches and twigs. Each leaf is different” (Actually I don’t remember that she *said* these words, or whether the words, the comprehension of this new perception, formed in my own head). I don’t know if she was exasperated and spontaneously took us outside or whether she had this lesson planned.

Afterwards we drew trees again. In different shapes and sizes, with textures and features, limbs breathing in the sky, roots grounded in earth. It might have been one of the most important

lessons I ever learned. Maybe it was the idea of closely contemplating something, re-examining assumptions. The basic instruction to ‘look.’

Look beyond, look beneath, really *look*.

I am about to tell you a story. It’s my story, but as my research reveals, it’s also a variation on the story of many others.

The premise of what follows is simple, but the resulting work will not be so. I want to tell a story about the nature of adoption and to try to understand, through my own experience, the ever-changing perspective of the *meaning* of adoption to the adoptee.

For I was adopted at birth.

In 1962 my parents, a doctor and nurse with four children living in a mid-size Ontario town, brought home a baby girl just before Christmas.

Me.

This act has shaped my life in ways that I had never really considered.

Photo of Adoptive Parents as Doctor and Nurse, c. 1945. Removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.²

I am participant and observer: I witness and testify to my own particular experience, but in so doing, I invoke the experience of many women like me, documenting fundamental truths of the many-faceted adoptive experience, such as what it was like to live under closed adoption

laws with the attenuate public shaming and legislative denigration of mothers and not-mothers, and the not-children they bore or adopted.

I had always known I was adopted. My adoptive parents were careful to never keep it secret. They never wanted the ‘you were adopted’ traumatic reveal. As soon as I could talk, I would tell people I had been adopted, to my parents’ relieved approval. Their strategy was somewhat foiled when, after pronouncing this publicly on countless occasions, I asked what ‘adopted’ meant. A little later in my cognitive development I understood that it meant I was chosen, selected, a special status conferred with all its rights and privileges: not abandoned, not unwanted.

That was the story I was told. Freud might have examined my diction a little more sceptically. Whose negation might I have assimilated as my own? And how might my current scrutiny interfere with, contaminate or muddy the purity of my original experience – the observer effect? Do I still negate the wounds?

I have never seen my first mother, never heard her speak. What did her voice sound like? Did she have a soft and lilting speech, or one more born of elocution and class, crisp and proper? I wonder what she might have said to me, if she had the chance. If she had one hour. If she had one sentence.

She never told anyone who my father was, and thus I will never know his identity. She rejected him: I do not know if he would have felt the same about me. I may have only represented a mistake that was apparently solved for him; yet equally, I might also have been a nagging that did not subside. Perhaps a romanticized notion: I will never know. With my birthmother stops any knowledge of half of my being.

I have no rights of property, large or small. No family home for generations born. No cottage escape in the wilds of the north, no accompanying traditions passed on. No small treasures, perhaps the feather she found at camp, the polished stone she might have kept in her desk drawer. Or the silver dressing table brush set, like the one my adoptive mother kept always, lacy etching on a mirrored tray, elegant and impractical. I possess a carved wooden box with a secret locking mechanism my adoptive father brought back from India, a curiosity with no monetary worth – but yet has great value. I know its provenance. Unlike the missing objects of my adoptive heritage, I am linked to its story.

A single letter was written to me in later years by my mother and was reported to be in her apartment when she died. If her ‘only daughter,’ my half-sister, cleared out these contents, they have been destroyed. I mourn this loss. I dream it’s not true. I envision what it might be like to have the privilege to know her thoughts.

I live with gaps.

Jeffrey and Jeffrey: Re Adoption of Infant Child December 19, 1962. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

I take you now on a journey, mine alone, and yet not unlike the journey of many women – mothers and children who search for acknowledgement, atonement, reconciliation and truth, and who have been separated by necessity, coercion, desperation or shame. In other words, by the effects of adoption.

Imagine what it might be like to be an adoptee like me. To first set eyes on a likeness of the woman whom you might have called mother only in your mid-life. A likeness of long ago, an image of a girl you would never have known, yet with whom, in another life, you might have later looked, curled up over cocoa and cookies, at this photo of her past.

Imagine this is the only image you have of your mother. If you could choose only one picture of your mother, what would it be? And if you had to choose one of a mother you never knew, I ask the same question. Would it be one of her youth? A baby photo? Her wedding (although, in adoptive circumstance, likely not to your own father)? Or a picture of the present, so you might recognize her should you finally meet? A picture of old age, that you might predict your own impending decline? Do you search for the likeness – a profile, the placement of a cheekbone, the way a mouth crinkles at the edges when she smiles? This is your history and your future, your family and not your family, all in a single photograph. And you will never see this woman in the flesh. This mother.

I have such a photograph, in all its enigmatic mystery. It is an object of indescribable preciousness.

It is an unremarkable photograph of people I don't know. You've seen ones like it: hanging in hallways of institutions, tucked away in attics, thrown out in estate sales or languishing in bins at the back of musty collectibles stores. This is not even the original: a copy of a print, sepia toned, some etched creases and foxing but the image clear. A fawn water-marked border frames a scene that has been repeated year after year. Three rows of girls, arranged formally, no doubt tallest to shortest, on a wooden stage. The class photo.

"Quiet please girls."

In this version all the girls - young adults actually, maybe just over twenty years old, though it's difficult to judge - look into the camera, smiles fixed upon their faces. Those in the front row sit with hands clasped demurely in their laps. Sensible sturdy shoes lead to legs crossed at the ankles not at the knees, as proper young ladies should. They wear white blouses, mostly collared, long sleeved and buttoned to the neck: the more daring among them flash bare arms, or sport a mark of individualism: a strand of pearls, a jaunty neck tie, a flicker of lace. The skirts are mid-thigh, likely navy or grey, though it's hard to tell. Black would have been unsuitable. No short hair: the style is shoulder length but pinned at the temple or neck to secure curler-set rolls and swept bangs.

"Chins up, shoulders back."

A photo of privilege, of belonging, bonds formed. Lives suspended for a moment, giggles suppressed. 'Kappa Kappa Gamma Fraternity 1948-49' reads the caption above the names. These women are identified only by first initial and patrilineal surname – names that will soon be given away, no longer traceable.

"Look at the camera now."

My attention is captured by one young woman, front row, third from the left. Her hair is clearly blond, lighter than most of the others. It catches the light, side parted and neatly pinned. Her head cocked at a slight angle. On her left wrist, a slim watch. She is one of the bare armed and her blouse appears collarless, with faint vertical patterning, perhaps pleats or flocking – it's not easy to make out. Her jaw is rounded, cheeks full and forehead high.

I am forty-three years old. I have never seen this woman before.

This is a photograph of my mother.

Photo of University of Toronto Fraternity 1948-49. Removed to maintain the privacy of those individuals involved.

*Some of it must go in somewhere. It must go in, because by the time a moment like that comes along, there's a part of you that's been waiting. Maybe from as early as when you are five or six, there's been a whisper at the back of your head...waiting for the moment when you realize you really are different from them.*³

"I finally learned what I had always known,"⁴ writes Philippe Grimbert in his memoir *Memory/Un Secret*, as he unravels the mysteries of his identity, and the pain of his life story as a kind of lie being played out, in full or partial acquiescence of relatives and participants, a theme of the 'trauma of identity' with which I can identify. I, too, have always known. We share lived uncertainty where "we have no other option but to move back and forth from memory to conjecture, from what we recollect to what we can never know."⁵ Philippe Grimbert "evokes the uncertainty of reconstructing one's life anew with only partial information,"⁶ and these comments, while contextually different, speak to my own struggle, one that is private, personal and yet also socially constructed and reinforced. Mine is the trauma of a closed adoption.

The use of the label of 'trauma' may strike some as hyperbolic, but this is also a constituent factor of the problem I examine. If loss is often experienced as trauma, how do we make sense of this in relation to those individuals who have experienced the impact of events that are difficult to express and/or have been deliberately repressed? The effects of policies, procedures and prejudices of the past linger in the present, in a populace for the most part ignorant of the impact of the collective wilful or unknowing ignorance of, or disregard for, those marginalized by adoption.

While historical consciousness of global trauma has claimed a part of our school curriculum, that of individual trauma has seemingly not. By negating, consciously or unconsciously, that these stories exist, what do we tell our students about the validity of their own experience, and personal history? Why is it when I speak of my own adoption, even cursorily, to my students I am met with embarrassment, curiosity, surprise or discomfort at such a revelation? And why do, inevitably, one or two hang back to talk to me privately about the fact that they, too, are adopted, that many of them do not share this with others?

Much of this ingrained sensitivity is a result of the cultural forces that have constructed, interpreted and mediated the adoptive experience. These, in turn, are shaped by, resulting from, or reinforced by the artistic and cultural images we have of adoption. The conditions that created a punitive, secretive or overlooked approach to adoptive issues are those same under which any artistic representations are constructed, whether created through purely imaginative stances or as products of those who are somehow touched by adoption. I recognize, moreover, that artistic creations, no matter their truthfulness, are received by a public who live under a particular cultural *zeitgeist* that may not allow recognition that adoptive studies are a social justice concern. And what of my discovery of the *absence* of cultural representation of adoption?

In seeking, examining and creating artistic products I show how artworks can help tell my story, the stories of adoptive women and birthmothers, and also shine the light on the recognition of new truths. I will foreground the relationships between art, culture and social justice, and the power of art to evoke awareness, to emotionally engage, to promote dialogue, and to agitate for change, and thus for the necessity of deliberate, thoughtfully crafted and publicly available ‘Adoption Art.’

In my adoption story, while not discounting the enormous share of love and support I've found for over fifty years at the centre of my adoptive family, there was nonetheless for me always a feeling of disconnectedness, of being uprooted. Our roots connect us to our history, our core values, our sense of who we are, and what we might become. They are stories that nourish us from deep within, anchor us to our past, across generations of space and time. Like phantom limbs, missing roots ache.

This wound is what I investigate, pulling back the scab to see what has lain festering underneath. In offering up my own journey, I encompass some of the macrocosm of closed adoption and the microcosm of the wound that has never healed my entire life. My story is told from my own subjectivity and singularity, yet the more I research, the more I see the general in the specific tale. My wounds are like those of many adoptees, and many find the hurt alienating or too painful to work through. Or, they lack the words to express such traumas, large or small.

What is the cost of secrets held or revealed? They are part of the archaeological reconstruction of my past, a similar task for any member of the adoption triad who wishes for answers to truths hitherto unknown. Yet I collide with inexpressibility and hence incorporate the visual, the graphic, the associative and the ephemeral to convey or allude to layers that might slip my own ability to articulate, even those that escape my own consciousness. Strategies of representation to express the ineffable.

I began my own search as a young adult, one that continued into my middle years and is not yet complete. The type of closed adoption I, like many of my era experienced, almost served as a type of surrogate witness protection program: identifying documents were closed, impenetrable, if kept at all. Many were lost, and new histories, new birth certificates were issued, reinforcing the acceptance of patrilineal order legitimizing children through the passing on of the

father's name. I demonstrate the importance of witnessing the storylines of women who, as in other scenarios, live lives in borders and margins, suppressing their own truths.

I gradually learned that my mother gave birth as a woman in her thirties in a successful career which offered opportunities for advancement in a world not yet aware of women's rights: she was not the young, frightened naïve girl of literature and propaganda that is written of as the norm in case studies. My individual search for her became mired in the bureaucracy of the Adoption Registry Disclosure system of the turn of the last century to an extent I have not seen documented, and there are still many gaps in my own history and past that have not yet, and may never be, filled.

Brown, Beattie, O'Donovan: First step in release of confidential documents, February 28, 1994. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

It's like a giant game of "Clue." You remember. All those board games of the sixties and seventies, family 'game night.' Our cupboard held many of the popular ones. "Monopoly" - honestly, boring until you owned half the board and could make your opponents pay up, and then boring again until someone had the decency to finally quit and spare the rest of us. "Ker-Plunk." "Parcheesi," the one no one really knew how to play and made up the rules for. "Double Solitaire" and "War" card games if you were stuck, and maybe "Pop-O-Matic Trouble" (with the dice in that plastic bubble you popped and through the magic of modern science allowed the dice

to be rolled without the tremendous effort of actually doing it yourself). But somehow “Clue” always held the most appeal for me.

“Clue” took strategy and imagination, at least in my childhood mind. The thrill of finding tidbits of information. Sifting and eliminating data with cards revealed only to you. Putting pieces together to form hypotheses. Withholding your thoughts gleefully until the final triumphant reveal: Colonel Mustard in the Billiard room with the Candlestick! (It must have been *some* candlestick – nothing I possess would render more than a headache). So I guess “Clue” is what I have been playing with my past.

My father never really spoke of adoption to me. Not that it was avoided, but it was not a topic of conversation. After mom died, and I wanted more information, I had to work up the courage to broach the subject at all, and specifically, to ask his permission to open the private lawyer files. Stoic as usual, he didn’t react. Helpful but not really interested? He retrieved the same little bits of information I had heard over the years – my birthmother was a secretary, she had lived in Toronto, the obstetrician who delivered me, knew her, knew of her. That is all he knew, perhaps all he wanted to know. He did agree to sign for the release of information. In age of openness and apparent reconciliation, I am not allowed to search my own identity without permissions: parental, paternal, legal. In frail health already by this time, had my father passed away earlier I do not know if I would ever be able to access them. Does one’s own history hinge on the permission given or withheld by another?

One spring morning a large brown envelope arrives at my second floor apartment. In it are all the legal papers in existence about my heritage. These documents reveal more truths about my history, my previous identity and that of my birthparents, than I had ever known, and answer

questions I have long held. But this is also therein a commentary on the problem of ‘truth’ and interpretation.

Jeffrey Associates: File contents concerning adoption, May 2, 1994. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

It takes a glass of Sauvignon to offset a rapidly beating heart: strange and wonderful, with the affixed gold seal of the County Court of Middlesex, ‘in accordance with the Child Welfare Act,’ is my original Adoption Order. Years later when I attend a meeting of adoptees searching for their parents, the producing of this fading original document receives gasps and whispers – in real terms I have possession of a gold mine. Most adoptees who searched did so with non-identifying information, supplied after lengthy delays through Children’s Aid, the only clues they had. None possessed an original document.

The most surreal part of acquiring this file is learning my original name – Martha Anne. It is the first time I have seen or known this information, my alter ego, my other self. I do not feel like a Martha Anne. The sounds are strange upon my tongue. This is who I might have been. With the signing of this paper, this name is replaced, erased, buried and forgotten. I may never have known this fundamental nugget of who I am. It is equally poignant to see my birthmother’s full name and signature for the first time, to note the way her capital points up crisply, the slant of her cursive, the long loops of her descenders.

In her signature she is affirming, under what I assume were the disapproving eyes of male authority, that she was the *unmarried* mother – an appendix added in handwriting to the official writ as if a fact not to be forgotten or forgiven – who signed away all rights to this child.

It was then that she became real.

And thus my searchings truly began.

Original Adoption Order, July 24, 1963. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

Consent to Adoption Order, December 1962. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

In a simple meditation of visual poetics, I pull out the phrases and key words from my legal order of adoption that resonate the most for me. The words are excised from the parent text, just as perhaps the child is excised from the mother. These are the words that label, direct, order and execute the legal act of adoption, with all its implications for my mothers and me. The words collide with trauma and joy, the historical and the present, and the relinquishment and the receiving, all double-edged activities. Stripped of connectors and context, their origin is clear and they emphasize how words, and a single piece of paper, can transform lives in devastating or astounding, and, in all cases, permanent ways.

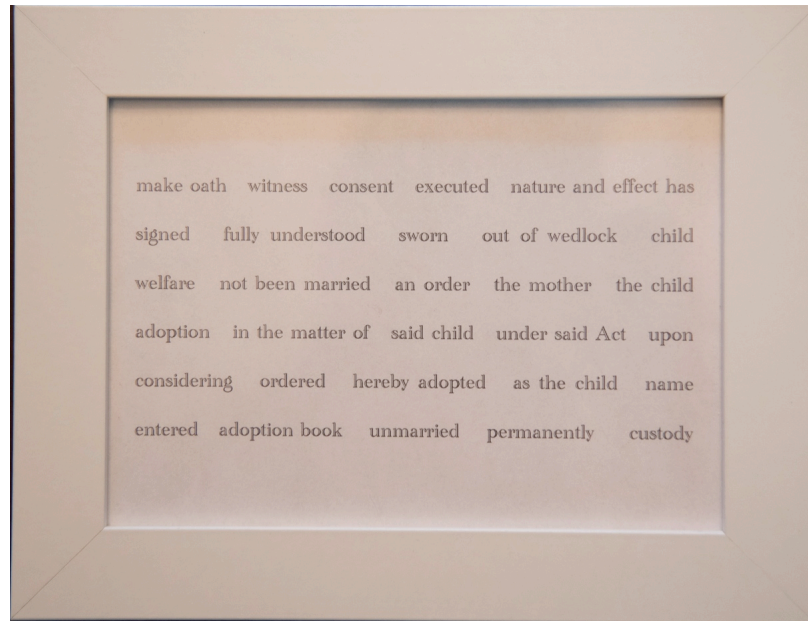


Image 1: Remembrance of Rupture (Paper) 2015, 6 ½” x 8 ½”

Because I am an adoptee who has lived under closed adoption legislation, and knows that my birthmother and adoptive mother also lived under the same conditions, and because I have also seen shifts in how adoption is presented and perceived, because I have been both a searcher and a non-searcher, because I have connections and disconnections with my birthmother, birthfamily and adoptive mother, and because I have experienced the effects of the continuum of post-war through contemporary *zeitgeist* where legislation may be shifting but not soon enough or cohesively enough to assuage the guilt and shame associated with the secrecy of adoption, I believe I am positioned effectively to tell this tale. The memoir that binds this narrative will be subjective, yet my research suggests that my experience is one of many potential exemplars of the myriad adoption stories mostly left untold. I wish to change this.

The structure of this dissertation will unfold in the following manner: in this introduction I acquaint the reader with preliminary aspects of my own adoption story. I present the structure of the subsequent chapters and the reasons for the methodology chosen, that of arts-based,

practise-led research. I explain the narrative approach, which employs a combination of memoir, auto-ethnography, narrative inquiry, a/r/t/ography, creative writing, and the inclusion of 'Adoption Art,' those works of fine art, literature, poetry and film that also help to tell my story. I also introduce the reasons for the placement of the interstitial art and ephemera as a sub-textual commentary throughout the dissertation. These works of art and ephemera serve not only to augment my answers to key research questions, but also function both as documentary evidence, and as expressions of what remains unsaid.

Perceptions of adoption and its attenuate secrecy disseminated through cultural, literary and artistic means, can serve to reflect, perpetuate or possibly extend definitions of family, motherhood and identity, yet 'otherness' appears to be central to portrayals, present even from earliest Oedipal myths about missing parents and suspicious lineage, to the 'chosen child' story, myths more recently presented to young children's brokered understanding of their social status within their new familial context. The sacrificial mother, the stern morality tale against the evils of female sexuality, the evil 'other' parent or 'bad seed' child flatten the story further. How have these perceptions shaped my identity formation, my relationships, and my desire not to parent, the figures of 'absent' and 'present' mother resonating through the 'unmother' that I have become?

While there are many papers and books written about legal policy implications involving adoption (albeit not many from a Canadian perspective), psychological impacts, quantitative studies, statistical data analyses (often with questionable methodology and selection processes), personal testimonies/self-help works on reunions, the debate between open and closed adoptions and the recent unsealing of records, the focus of research and writing appears to be within single fields, most commonly social science/psychology, and seems to end with the adoptive 'child'

and the consummation of the act of adoption or later reunion. Carole Smith notes in her book *After Adoption* that “information about the relationship between self-esteem, openness in adoption, adoptive family relationships, age at placement and searching behaviour is inconsistent...[and] a further problem is such research depends on questioning adults who were adopted many years ago when adoption had a different connotation and attitudes towards openness were limited to telling children about their adoptive status.”⁷ Most such research is underpinned with the questionable tendency to pathologize adoption.

Few scholars look across disciplines; fewer still at cultural and artistic representations/responses to the adoptive experience. What does it mean to live as an adopted person today, but as a product of an out-dated system that valued secrecy above all, negotiating a world where the stigma of illegitimacy has waned in current popular social currency, yet permeates his/her own very existence? How do the stories left and unleft to me through the ephemera of objects, words, images, and memories embody my own lived reality and how do I respond?

In examining the historical mediation of our general view of adoption I consider in broad strokes a time span of sixty years. First, the era just prior to and post World War Two, the time period my mothers would have been learning about themselves, young white women of the middle and upper middle class, growing up in conservative central and southern Ontario. They were positioned to follow a traditional arc of role acceptability: indoctrination and schooling in the art and science of being female, obedient to the prescriptions and restrictions placed upon them: dutiful daughters, respectful citizens, subservient wives, compliant incubators, and unquestioning upholders of moral and civil laws governing their own bodies.

This is the period of my conception, birth and adoption. I am the result of broken norms and expectations, evidence of sexual transgression and sexual failure. I am equally potential destroyer and potential maker of dreams. And all of us are subject to the consequences.

I also look to the two decades following this, the time period when I would have been learning similar values and mores, but in a different cultural milieu, the time of Roe versus Wade, civil rights, women's liberation, and several waves of feminism. Birth control, sexual revolution, and abortion debates swirl around in the background of the way unplanned children were handled. The strictures concerning illegitimate pregnancy and adoption shift and change, but are no less significant.

This is also the time period where my mothers lived through the *effects* of their decisions. What did it mean to relinquish a child, to deny the father, to bury the incident and move onto a different story path? What did it mean to have a change of heart? What did it mean to include a non-genetic family member in a world that primarily viewed 'family' with a narrowed definition? This period leads into the time when I began my own searchings, taking me from the 1980's into the present. It is the time my adoptive parents encouraged and hindered me from searching, the time my birthmother may or may not have begun her own search, and the time of a confession of a life-long burden. It is the time of unlocking secrets and of finding more.

Therefore this study will be less an examination of adoption practice and issues today, as it is on the lingering *effects* of the attitudes and policies of yesterday on those women who still live with these public and private influences. I will also occasionally glance beyond these borders, to earlier periods that feed into our understanding of the times, and helped shape what followed, and similarly, to the future, where we might envision how, or if, changes might occur.

Memoir, Memory, Narrative, and Truth

*One writes in order to become other than what one is.*⁸

Hannah Arendt suggested that to tell one's story is an act of freedom, "a discursive practice in which material realities and imaginary possibilities coexist."⁹ In the act of telling one's story, one assembles what one might consider a comprehensible and 'true' narrative, the transmission of selfhood through writing or oral conversation, and even in mental assemblage Sidonie Smith posits that "there is no essential original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of [such] self-narrating"¹⁰ ...Any hint of the disparate, the disassociated, is overlooked or enfolded into a narrative of synthesis."¹¹ In the writing of these snippets of autobiography, what freedom do I exercise? Do I assume a coherence that did not exist, or a linearity that explains the destination without considering the detours? Are some stories, familiar to my mouth, passed on through family members, more fabrication than substance? Has retelling worn smooth the edges and burrs? Are such stories ultimately the memories of others and not my own? And if I have to let go of some of my stories will I be "susceptible to experiences of dislocation, disenfranchisement, disarray, dissonance in [my] daily lived experiences as [I] face the loss of stories that [I] have used?"¹²

I am subject and object of investigation, excavating my past and reinterpreting it in the present. I am trapped within these discourses and my own understanding of same in this time and place, dredging up memories that, upon examination in new lights, must alter and change from what they once were, new understandings that may obscure old truths. But Rishma Dunlop's comments about interculturalism seem equally applicable to this context: "I consider my multiple voices and the issues of voice and silence in the context of my locations and my perceptions of identity. By accepting multiplicity of voice, the intertwining of speech and silence, ellipses,

autobiography and fiction, it seems possible to create new discourses.”¹³ Yes, I will attempt to construct a self, and, simultaneously, I realize the irony of such an endeavour. I understand that in my attempt to tell my story I will necessarily lie, fabricate, misremember, omit, amend and expunge, however un/sub/consciously. Surely that is now an established post-modern understanding of self-construction, one of multiple and contested truths. Yet ‘multiple’ truths do not redact to ‘no’ truth.

“We need to compose and tell our stories as creative ways of growing in humanness,”¹⁴ Carl Leggo writes. One might counter that all narratives, real or fictional, are merely aesthetic creations containing *selected* events, ordered and prioritized, to explain and support the narrator’s aim, and in the transmission from teller to recipient, also influenced and interpreted by both persons, a further manipulation of ‘fact.’ Yet within this literary structure “autobiographers cannot lie because anything they say, however mendacious, is the truth about themselves, whether they know it or not.”¹⁵ My braided, twisted and imperfect narrative memoir is about how I make sense of my life as an adoptive person, and how I make sense of the lives of the women who nurtured me, because “we need to question our understanding of who we are in the world. We need opportunities to consider other versions of identity. This is ultimately a pedagogic work,”¹⁶ and in this work I aspire to the description of Jackie Kay’s poetic investigations of adoption and identity:

Unlike traditional normalizing views of identity construction in which difference is problem or stigma, Kay’s difference is possibility. Adoption can allow great richness. It is to study poetic voices that move outside of binaries of self and other to speak as different forms of identity, forms in which culture, languages and experiences of many and other may coexist.¹⁷

My narrative testimony exists in the present and the past, the interior and the exterior, and I am observer and inhabitator. My “testimony [is] composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has

been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding... [it] does not offer a completed statement, a totalized account of those events.”¹⁸ A consideration of memoir, a form that invokes not continuity, but a single aspect of a life, by educator Alison Pryer is useful here: “the writing of memoir may be understood as a hermeneutical process that serves as entry point into a community of discursive relationships. It is a living practice, at once hopeful and uncertain, which necessarily involves the creation of fictions – both reproductive and resistant -- that write and rewrite both self and culture. As catalyst for critical and compassionate inquiry into emotional truth, the writing of memoir calls for the intimate textual intertwining of writer and reader.”¹⁹ The form of memoir and artistic creation thus invites the reader/observer into my experience, but also their own, in a dialogic response where they, too, participate in creating meaning, and consider the repercussions of normative forces on those who have other stories to tell. The forging of my adoptive ephemera with my embodied responses and subjectivities as a researcher allows a kind of transparent discourse that Patricia Hampl suggests every memoirist wishes to attempt: to enter “into speculation, into interpretation, and to use the fragment, the image, the vignette, rather than narratively linked scenes... to show and tell. To write a story and write an essay - all in the same tale, braided and twined together.”²⁰ Memoir also allows for the interpretation of a life as it is situated in a particular cultural and historical context, the story of ‘me’ and ‘not me,’ perhaps offering a counter-narrative to that of the dominant, demonstrating the effects of systems on the individual, and opening up spaces for reflection.

Literature and the Arts as Model and Research

How adoption is represented in the literature and media people see...even if they experience adoption in their own lives, [affects] the way they experience it

*and the ways they imagine the experience of those at other positions in the adoption triad.*²¹

Is it possible to find artworks concerning adoption produced in the time when my birthmother and adoptive mother were young women, and would they have had any exposure to them? My adoptive mother was raised with two sisters during the Depression, a child of poverty, but shared by her social milieu, thus not one of stratification. She was born to working class parents in a blue-collar town in Ontario, a place literally at the edges of Canada. She had no university education, enrolling in two year nursing college after high school, immediately eloping with her high school sweetheart whose parents disapproved of the match, swiftly followed by delivering her first child, and later focussing on raising a family of five.

She did like to read when I knew her, women's magazines, or the leather bound *Reader's Digest* collection I remember lining my father's dimly lit study. Less likely would be poetry; film exposure would be limited to family outings, or those re-broadcast on television, although TV was not highly regarded in our household and rarely on. I do not mean here to sell her short. She was intelligent, and quite politically aware, concerned about the ozone before it was fashionable, banning aerosol deodorant from our house; on her kitchen bulletin board was a sticker containing the Planned Parenthood motto, and she mourned that she was too late to benefit fully from the women's rights movement. We went to art galleries, she took university extension courses in later years. She just did not have the opportunity, finances or exposure that might have enabled other experiences.

My birthmother was likely more acquainted with diversity and artistic culture. She was raised with two brothers in a well off family in downtown Toronto, with all the privileges that class entails, and had a keen mind. The family owned property: an imposing home, a farm in the counties, a cottage in the Muskokas. They had the means to travel to Europe. She wrote

poetry, and thus may have been inclined to read it, attended private school, joined a fraternity, had a university education, and then launched a successful career at one of the major publishing firms at the time. As an editor, and in charge of book promotions, she had access to celebrated authors and a cosmopolitan lifestyle. I have no doubt that she would attend film premieres, go to galleries, attend the theatre, ballet or opera. A case can be made that she might more likely be exposed to, or even have sought out, works about adoption, even if after the fact. How might she have been shaped by the presentation of adoption experience? And if her experience was not represented, how might this have added to the tacit pressure put upon her by other societal factors to erase her memory, and ‘move on?’

At one of the few Parent Finders meetings I attend (a search and reunion support group with chapters across North America), I speak of the lack of representation of our experiences in public narrative, especially in art, and thus forming the subject of my research. I am not quite prepared for their reaction. One person suggests that the reason I do not find much material is because people did not talk about adoption, unplanned pregnancy or relinquishment, a fair comment. Another brings up the portrayals of the Virgin Mary and infant that usually overlooks one of the most famous ‘adoptive’ fathers in mythology, Joseph of Nazareth. A brief argument ensues over whether this is omission or denigration, and the difference between the human and divine. Sensing a stalemate of religious beliefs, I do not push further. Perhaps literal minded, imagining a similar Madonna-like portrait, they dismiss my inquiry, saying the representation of adoption and mothering could not be possible without explanatory titles or notes. I suggest that the artwork might be abstract, however this does not seem to open up acceptance any further. “What would this even look like?” they wonder. I think, that is the point, is it not? But the resistance is palpable, and, disappointed, I pass the conversation on.

I do later receive an email from one group member whom I had known while teaching many years ago. She is interested in my work, and confesses her own difficulty in coming to terms with her issues surrounding adoption. She writes that it would be interesting if they were to devote some of their meeting time to creating a work of art. She suggests that she will raise the idea of a creative session at one of the meetings and see what the response is. I note that there is virtually nothing out there regarding adoption art, and agree that it would be interesting to see how people try to express their thoughts, probably abstractly. Kind of art therapy. “I could provide materials... But you know the group better,” I write.

I hear nothing further...

I address the ‘absent presence’ of adoption in artistic representation as a key constituent piece of this dissertation. I add to a limited canon of adoption art, not only through research, but in my own artistic practice, to enlarge the scope of discussion surrounding adoption. We all need to see our stories reflected, our experiences validated, as part of a diverse community rather than a homogenous one, to be figures in the ground of adoption.

My original artworks are included throughout in both paper and glass. I fuse, layer, and juxtapose documentary, historical and imaginative images; my adoption ephemera are integral components of many pieces. Along with the inclusion of existing creative works in fine art, literature, poetry and film, a collection I am labeling ‘Adoption Art,’ my artwork will function as a secondary sub-textual throughline. In it, I investigate questions surrounding adoption I feel can be best depicted in symbolization.

For example, in a piece that I make over the course of several months due to the complexity of the tiny fragments utilized, I begin to explore how to reveal my thinking about the symbolic representation of adoption. The term ‘adoption triangle’ ostensibly denotes the

relationship between birthmother, adoptive mother and adoptee, however it is a symbol that lacks the complexity such a triad entails, and this icon is something I will continue to deconstruct.

This equilateral triangle was popularized, or what I call mythologized, in adoption language by the publication of *The Adoption Triangle* in 1978 by Arthur Sorosky, Annette Baran and Reuben Pannor, although they had not used the term prior. Despite their flawed research methodology they published a series of articles in rapid succession, which made them the *de facto* experts of the day. According to E. Wayne Carp in his study *Family Matters: Secrecy and Disclosure in the History of Adoption* the earliest use of the term was in 1974 by Ralph D. Maxfield who founded the Association for the Protection of the Adoptive Triangle. The triangle is meant to symbolize, at its vertices, the adoptive child, the birthparents and the adoptive *parents* (officially at least, but *birthmother* alone usually figures in discussions), and their inter-related/interdependent relationship. I believe when doing a more thorough deconstruction, it could suggest other triangular relationships, some fitting to the adoption experience, and some which misrepresent it. Readily springs to mind religious connotations from my Anglican church schooling, the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, something sanctified, pure, unknowable, yet accepted on faith; while, at an interesting opposition, a triangle also suggests things sexual, scandalous and complicated: a *ménage a trois*, a third wheel. How interesting then that the accepted symbol/metaphor for discussing adoption and its constituents is this ‘adoption triangle.’

I believe among other possibilities that the three points could also represent the key events of adoption itself, subsequent search, and potential reunion, or the initial creation point of the new family (the adoptive one), the maintaining of this family, and then the reconnection or reestablishment of ties with the birth family. Having people placed on the extreme points of

intersection, does accurately represent the distance between them, however the form also connotes a kind of closed system which may exist briefly, but does not necessarily continue in the way represented. The image suggests unbroken relationships, insular and excluding others such as grandparents, siblings and extended family of all parties, perhaps the farthest thing from true. The suggestion that the relationships are interdependent is also problematic when considering those who have had no contact with, or indeed any knowledge of, their original mother or family. At best, the locked form does mirror the closed system and sealed records common to most adoption experiences until more recently, so in this way the symbol might have accuracy.

I return many times in my artwork to the manipulation of this conflicted/ing icon. For example, it does not appear clear if there is an assigned position for each of the points. The triangle is always seen with its base horizontal to the ground, seemingly secure: only if balanced on one point does it begin to depict some sense of precariousness in these relationships. I also interrogate the use of the 'equilateral' triangle shape rather than scalene, as each party does not have equal voice. There are inequalities all around, from the baby who had no say in, or knowledge of, the proceedings, to the pregnant woman who places her child for reasons that usually include imperatives beyond her control, to all parties who may not be able to transcend the secrecy surrounding the construction of new family. Some advocate a 'triad' as a more positive symbol than the triangle, with the attendant idea of three-dimensionality or stability. But then who or what is represented at the apex, or fourth point?

In a large, intricate glass mosaic artwork I create, one of my first artistic representations, I ask what binds three women together besides the fact of my existence? Or is 'unbinding' a better indicator? I complicate the triangle symbol, deliberately multiply it, eschewing the simplicity of

a single icon, and alluding to other metaphoric possibilities. Each triangle is comprised of smaller pieces, suggesting that each whole is made of many lesser elements. I work organically, shifting colours from cool to warm, shifting triangle sizes so that the balanced and equilateral triangle is not the only shape representing adoption. I also shift positions and orientations, trying to give the piece a sense of ever-changing and unstable movement.

I represent the connection between the three major players in the event, how they co-mingle, even overlap and intersect at some point, inextricably connected forever, but then move on from there. Each continues along their trajectory, away from each other or point of origin. Breaking the closed form also allows for others to be incorporated, as they also form part of this story. There are triangles upon triangles within triangles beside triangles. Fractals of infinite triangles.

Past, present, future.

If, then, but.

Conception, birth, relinquishment.

Open, closed, limbo.

Adoption, search, reunion.

Secrets, lies, truth.

Photo of Christening, Mother and Daughter, Spring 1963. Removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

I also include in the mosaic the first of the ephemeral documents about my adoption I possess. There are triangular fragments of the photo I have of myself as a baby in 1963, with my adoptive mother. She is impeccably dressed in matching coat and hat, with white gloves, and carries a baby in what appears to be a white cap and christening gown. I gently augment the colour of the mouths, the eyes and details as I imagine they might have been but cannot know, in the same manner that old black and white films are colourized. I chose this photo as an artefact of cultural history; not only did I originally believe it was the earliest photograph of myself and my mother, but more importantly, the adoption story it portrays marks a kind of ritual reclaiming in the bestowing of a name that overrides the original one given, and in the official ceremony of inclusion into a new faith and family.

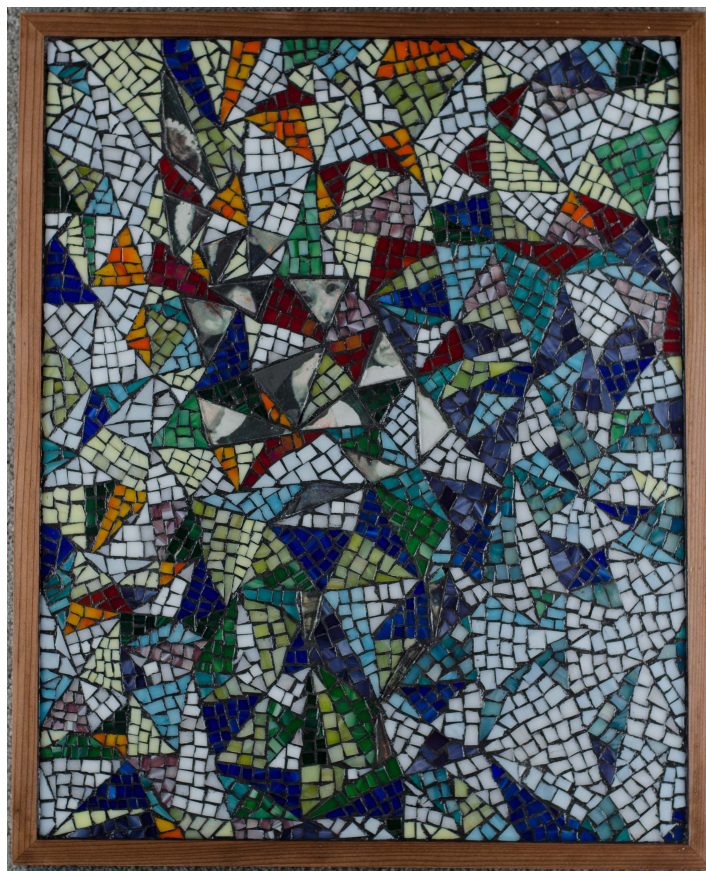


Image 2: “Untitled” (Glass mosaic, mixed media) 2012, 17” x 21”

This, among other works I produce over a seven year period, as part of the aim of this scholarly labour, endeavour to rectify the absence of representation, the gaps in story, and the often hard to describe nuances of the adoptive experience.

Arts Informed Research, A/r/to/Graphy and Non-Traditional Dissertations

*I have a great deal to say in this paper,
and I will say very little,
not because I don't want to say more,
but simply because I don't know what I mean,
know only that I mean to mean
more than this meaning.
so, I will offer you only a few words.*²²

The methodology of arts-informed practice-led research is key to my investigation, a conscious exploration of the knowledge involved in making artefacts, and demonstrated through original creative work with substantial contextualization of the work, where research is intertwined with practice, and findings are generated and theorized about in non-linear, perhaps non-verbal and non-‘scientific’ ways.²³

Research should not be treated monolithically, “but as an activity which can appear in a variety of guises across the spectrum of research and practice.”²⁴ Language and mathematics, regarded as academic pillars of logic, argument, and knowledge are yet themselves symbolic, no less so than the work of the arts. Further, as Hazel Smith posits, “knowledge itself is often unstable, ambiguous and multi-dimensional, can be emotionally or affectively charged, and cannot necessarily be conveyed with the precision of a mathematical proof.”²⁵

Thus I call upon several non-traditional methods of research and representation; for one, A/r/to/graphy, an arts and education practice-based research methodology that intertwines the identities of artist, researcher and teacher, and allows for the practitioner to combine acts of

writing and art making as forms of inquiry, “not separate or illustrative of each other, but interconnected and woven through each other to create additional and/or enhanced meanings.”²⁶ Utilizing the Deleuzian metaphor of rhizomes, it is a form that deprioritizes linearity, favors disruptions, and dismisses binaries. Instead it encourages embodied understandings and reflection on relationality: between text and image, between creator and audience, and between and among socio/cultural/historical contexts that all shape and contribute to meaning.

Further, I marry memoir with what others have labelled ‘lyric inquiry’ or non-rationalist writing, because the use of poetry, prose poetry and ‘imaginings’ or fictions, like the explicit use of story, “allow[] multiple meanings to be expressed.”²⁷ Lyric expression married with research creates “a phenomenological process and practice that embraces ambiguity, metaphor, recursiveness, silence, sensory immersion and resonance...where the inquirer brings the artistic work of writing to light not as proof...but as illumination and connection.”²⁸ Rishma Dunlop further theorizes that all such hybrid genres are ‘open texts’ that “admit the imagination of the reader...and provid[e] us with ways to move across disciplines and differences.”²⁹ The sharing of stories in this manner allows a self-reflexive practice which “enlarges paradigms of the ‘normative’ and develops pedagogical practices of liberation.”³⁰

There are many researchers who concur that such alternate research forms have the capacity to reach audiences that traditional works might not, and can engender aesthetic experiences in readers that move far beyond the intellectual or theoretical, with more embodied responses, richer conversations, and enlarged possibilities for reimagining accepted ways of being. For example, Tom Barone writes that in arts based research “empathy may be established, connections made, perceptions altered, emotions touched, equilibrium disturbed, [and] the status quo rendered questionable.”³¹ And artist researcher Kathleen Vaughan sees “the role of art as

research and research as art as less about creating new knowledge, and more as a calling forth, pulling together and arranging the multiplicities of knowledge embedded within.”³²

I realize that there are still trepidations about such approaches, as famously argued by scholars including Elliot Eisner, who labeled arts-based research a ‘soft’ form of qualitative research. He recognizes some of the tensions between conventional forms that provide conclusions and generalizability and those that open up interpretations and present puzzlements. He warns that arts-based research cannot be the application of a variety of loose methods, or the mere crafting of aesthetic pieces that trump epistemological forms.³³ He is not alone in his cry for ‘rigor’ and ‘standards’; individually and institutionally, academia still has qualms.

To counter, I note that I adhere to The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council’s (SSHRC) past and present definitions of ‘research-creation’; both the 2003 definition of “any kind of research activity...that fosters the creation of literary or artistic artworks of any kind, where both the research and the works it fosters meet standards of excellence and are suitable for publication, public performance or viewing...[and] must represent a new development, be original and innovative, or renew some aspect of the field of artistic expression”³⁴ and that of 2014, as “an approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices, and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation. The creation process is situated within the research activity and produces critically informed work in a variety of media.”³⁵ I also keep in mind advice of Lynn Butler-Kisber who speaks of the evaluation of ‘performative inquiry,’ necessitating a focus on content, form and impact:

An evaluation of content is based on a clear understanding of intent, purpose and goals, a built in reflexivity and critical reflection throughout the process and a credible portrayal. Evaluation of form is based on the degree of craft displayed in the sensuousness of articulate embodied thought, with the clarity and efficacy

of good research grounded in ethical care and thick description. Impact is based on the effect the performance has on the performers and the audience and what new avenues of thinking and possible action are opened up as a result.³⁶

I leave it in your hands to decide.

Ephemera

*We were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information. But of course we'd take it in on some level, so that before long all this stuff was in our heads without us ever having examined it properly ...certainly it feels like I always knew.*³⁷

Ephemera form the last thread of this multi-modal dissertation. I have more than feelings of disjointedness, more than questions or yearnings about my adoptive status. I also have objects, bits and pieces of a life I might have had, a connection to a world I am not a part of, an assemblage to which I have added over time, the earliest going back over fifty years: perhaps individually insignificant, collectively they both reveal and hide traces of my life, that of my mothers, and stories of adoption.

Ephemera is transitory written and printed matter not intended to be retained or preserved, derived from the Greek, meaning ‘things lasting no more than a day.’

Some collectible ephemera are advertising trade cards, bookmarks, catalogues, greeting cards, letters, pamphlets, postcards, posters, prospectuses, stock certificates, tickets...

Adoption records.

Jeffrey and Jeffrey: Adoption of Baby 'x', February, 1963. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

I explore ways of representing life experience that combines the traditional scholarly approach with creative expressions of equal academic rigour. I concur with Belarie Zatzman's invocation that "the recognition that what we choose to tell, to whom we choose to tell it, and indeed, *how* we choose to tell it, all matter."³⁸ I believe objects and images bring the tangible and visceral not contained in words alone. My own initial investigation was generated by objects – unexplained mementoes that are my only connection to a past life I never knew, akin to the atypical sources Marlene Kadar calls 'minimal narratives' which "intertwine the individual's life story with the larger story of the life of the community."³⁹ My continuing search has been encouraged by such fragments of personal history: it seems appropriate that objects are perhaps the touchstone of this inquiry, a generative rather than reductive response.

Imagine you have been left at birth with gifts from someone whose identity you will likely never know, yet who is intimately connected with you and your life, your very reason for existence. What tales do these objects hold? Are these treasures? Historical artefacts? Holy relics? Mysterious clues?

I don't merely collect or study ephemera: my life, my identity, is formed *of* ephemera. 'Ephemera' is part of the title of this dissertation, and one of the chief reasons and sources for my searchings, and is therefore central to the work I am producing. Ephemera are evidence that something existed, yet they are fragmentary sources, despite being receptacles for minutiae and detail. Often cheaply produced or handwritten, important in their moment but ostensibly useless afterward, nonetheless they are records of the quotidian life of ordinary people. As such, ephemera are rich but until relatively recently,⁴⁰ often overlooked or undervalued research sources of artefactual data, extending notions of the historical, and what is worthy of study, removing the singularity of the public, the powerful, the academy or the male.

As Maurice Rickards notes for ephemeral handwritten fragments in particular, “each item is the direct expression of a human experience. They contain traces of the practices and attitudes of a time and place and peoples, important signifiers of the social in their unadulterated immediacy, yet their ubiquity suggests the impossibility of ever fully knowing this alternate realm.”⁴¹

Actually using these ephemera not only as a means of research but to produce other objects as forms of art, I hope to render less invisible my own adoptive relationships, and understandings of the birthmother I never knew, and the adoptive mother I lost early to cancer. I layer, fragment and collage my artefactual archive of texts, objects and photographs in various mediums to build a history of my searchings for self and (m)others. I printmake reproductions of these ephemera onto glass, particularly fused and mosaic, processes which involve shattering, piecing, fusing and positioning fragments to join together, metaphors which seem to lend themselves to the multiple identities and histories of which I am a product, and the piecemeal documents and artefacts to which I have finite access.

The ephemera I mine for meaning could be considered aesthetically resonant. Theoretically, the production or expression of ‘art’ necessitates adherence to aesthetic principles of beauty or significance, wrought through imagination and skill, such that it will endure. Yet encounters with great works of art have no guarantee of producing aesthetic satisfaction, and as John Dewey tells us, art is “constructed, cultural and social, not inherent in a work itself.”⁴² Thus we can consider many permutations of ephemera *as* art in some semantic detail.

Ephemera about art such as posters, invitations, tickets and programs document through text and/or image events that are themselves ephemeral or obscure. These contain not only valuable research information, but also can be themselves of aesthetic value, made in the style of

an artist or artwork, or representative of a movement, time or place, fashioned according to then predominate principles of design, beauty and taste, or even the subversion of same. *Ephemeral art* can be thought of as primarily performative: a particular production or event where the creator will never again produce these specifics in conjunction with the viewer again. There is also more *deliberately ephemeral art* that deals conceptually with impermanence and the transitory, designed to be finite, intended to disintegrate or merge with their surroundings, or be interacted with and thus become something different at every viewing.⁴³ There is also *art from ephemera*, such as created by Nick Bantock, who suggests, “What matters is not the historical fact, but the degree of emotion evoked by the resultant piece of paper... Ephemera can provide subject, context, and texture. It has its own ingrown integrity that is hard to replicate.”⁴⁴

Art making from ephemera is what I am doing in part, but I take it a step further: the ephemera I use is personal, not collectable; is indicative of a condition and time, but not from a detached academic perspective; and is being employed for artistic purposes that go beyond aesthetics, but morph into educational and social statement. Recombining the actual with its evocative power, and a deliberate rearranging and conscious devising, I continue to play out the tension between what is and what might have been. I attempt in this fusing to provide what John Dewey would posit is the purpose of art, something that expands our horizons and provides a perspective on a realm of experiences,⁴⁵ and which I will then call a case of *art of ephemera*, a literal and metaphoric connection to the ephemera of adoption within a greater socio-historical context. The graphic inclusions thus serve to not only reinforce or illustrate the accompanying text, but also become in and of themselves a collection of documentary evidence of my adoptive experiences, art that tries to express the inexpressible, and which allows for emotional recognition and a dialogic reader response.

Pathways

The subsequent four chapters of this dissertation will be organized around key propositional questions:

Chapter Two: What narratives are being told about adoption, by whom and for whom, and what consequences do they have? How is adoptive identity constructed, and how is it mediated by others?

In this chapter I invoke my own experience in the narrative of memoir. To do this I also employ strategies of non-literal and non-linear representation, and look to memory, dream, and photograph. I introduce the ephemera I use as archival material and inspiration, and interrogate the cultural representation of adoption in film, literature and fine art, including my own. I centre on questions of identity, and the child's wish – extending into adulthood – to compose a cohesive image of self, especially due to the unique challenges adoptees face concerning the 'givens' in their lives.⁴⁶ Because identity is also socially constructed, and because the meaning we give childhood is dependent on the meaning we have of family and heredity, I will then discuss issues of nature/nurture, genetic determinism, family building, and the concept of 'normalcy.'

Chapter Three: How do we contextualize adoption and il/legitimacy? What is being asked of, and how do we institutionalize, certain kinship relationships and notions of child, family, and especially, motherhood?

In this chapter I step back in two ways to situate the personal in the public. I look sociologically and institutionally at adoption, and the current effects of past policies and practices of Church and State in the modern history of Ontario. In so doing I also narrate issues of ethics and accountability. Secondly, I step back from my own narrative to consider the

institution, meaning and ‘function’ of motherhood itself in adoptive contexts, and give voice to the other two triad members: birth and adoptive mother.

Chapter Four: What happens when secrets are kept? (When considering the effects of adoption policy/practice in the past and present)

Chapter four is a return to what I have inherited. I present the fundamental overarching problem of secrecy in adoption, and the difficulties it has engendered around relinquishment, revelation, disclosure, search and reunion for all three perspectives of the triad, in the past and in the present. I present evidence of documents as agents of social engineering, examine motivation for, barriers to, and ethics of search behaviours, and contemplate the tensions between theoretical and personal perspectives.

Chapter Five: Conclusion: The conclusion functions as a kind of coda in light of what has become apparent with the three key questions: What actions can be taken for current and future ethical practice and social justice in the Digital Age?

Here I look at the past and present, but also to the future: matters surrounding the opening of records, investigations into past practices of Church and State, and some of the current political, media and educational action, as well as how the Digital Age is changing some of these issues and practices. I also look to artistic action, and the newly emerging creation of Adoption Art exhibitions and museums as indicators of social change, and extrapolate a suggestion of how things could be ideally throughout the institutions that deal with adoption. I reinforce the necessity of hearing untold stories, rejecting cultures of silence, and contemplating how adoption studies may even inform other fields of inquiry.

Overall, I aim to prove that the public in general, and also those who experience adoption in their own lives, are shaped in part by cultural images of adoption they know. These cultural

forces include church, state, media, societal morality and convention, but also the areas of art, literature, poetry and film, imaginative creations that touch us in ways that are just as profound, and perhaps even more insidious, forces which have not been at the centre, or even much on the radar of those interested in the field of adoption studies.

Chapter 2: Stories of Myself(s) Be(com)ing⁴⁷

What narratives are being told about adoption, by whom and for whom, and what consequences do they have? How is adoptive identity constructed, and how is it mediated by others?

Affidavit of Execution, Consent for Order of Adoption, December 21, 1962. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

I hope [to] help point out...the fantasy nature of plots in which adoptees find their true identities and home in finding their lost birth parents. Indeed, the romance plot that ends in a reunited birth family and the romance plot that ends in marriage are structurally similar.⁴⁸

Relating my narrative grounds my experience in the context of the personal, but I also remember Joan Scott's caution that "experience is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation."⁴⁹ Yet Sidonie Smith posits "subjects know themselves in language because experience is discursive, embedded in the languages of everyday life and the knowledges produced at everyday sites... Every day we know ourselves, or experience ourselves, through multiple domains of discourse, domains that serve as cultural registers for what counts as experience and who counts as an experiencing subject."⁵⁰ Thus it must follow that perceptions of adoptees, and representations of experience through the discourse of image and narrative help to constitute what might be considered the adoptive self.

In adoption, issues of identity are never far from the fore. A child wishes to compose a coherent image of herself, a self-concept. She also wishes to understand her place, how she fits in to a larger construct – of the generational, the historical, the normal. And it begins at birth: *I was born*. While on one hand the seeking of origin is impossible and doomed to failure, adoptees nonetheless persist, negotiating a complicated layer of stigma and labelling by self, theorists, and the public in the attempt. Self identity is also socially derived, thus the role and construction of family, and subsequent questions surrounding genetic determinism, is another locus of investigation.

As I recount my own adoption narratives, I also wondered what other stories were being told about adoption, how the prevalent cultural and societal understanding of adoption might have attached itself to the works produced, and how abundant the material was at various time periods. Also what of the authors themselves: what role, if any, did they play in adoption, and what agenda would there be for each to tell their tale? How might adoption theory or my own experience line up with what was being written about in fiction? What discourses were/are privileged over others, what perceptions of the adoption story were perpetrated or repressed, realizing “how all of us are shaped, consciously or unconsciously in most of our situations...by the anxieties that cultural influences instill.”⁵¹

I don't remember identifying, or even noticing adoption as a concept in the films, books or magazines I consumed as a child or young adult, or even those I can recall now. Many 'adoptive' protagonists came from an orphanage: surely that had nothing to do with me. I did not look for role models. I guess I can say I really didn't see myself reflected, either through deliberation or denial, or simply because the reflections were not there. Thus I search for narratives – fictional, confessional, literary and artistic – as a significant inclusion as I work through the telling of my

own story, to uncover representations and work through implications.

I found, for example, my encounter with a particular literary work, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, 'uncanny' in Freudian terms: reading such words was a paradoxical conjunction of strangeness and familiarity, first as a projection of my parallel experience: a narrator, immersed in a context and origin story she does not fully understand but must accept, negotiates a world where she is to act like the majority, all the while knowing she is different. Our condition as readers, but also my condition as adoptee, exactly mirrors the education and manipulation of the students in the novel themselves: "You've been told and not told... You've been told, but none of you really understand."⁵²

As a reader, I substitute 'adoptee' for 'clone,' and their story is my story. They are given lessons in passing as normal; they are schooled in assimilation in the world of the other, copying a reality in which they have no part. Their childhood is 'staged' for another audience. They are told they are 'special'; we might equate this with distinction and exception, while perhaps forgetting special also means 'having limited or specific function,' 'being designated for a purpose' and even, 'of reduced value.' Adoptees brought up with the 'Chosen Child' story of origin were also told they were special, also question the meaning of such specialness, also negotiate a world where they must pass as 'normals.'

The students in the novel look forward to 'Sales,' a kind of periodical flea market of items of little worth, yet from which they create 'collections' important to their sense of personal identity. I see a link to the ephemera from which I draw my knowledge and my questions, objects that possess little intrinsic value, but are of immense personal significance.

The import of names provides another point of comparison, as adoptees struggle with sometimes partial or no information about the name that could link them to their origin. Narrator

Kathy H., like all the clones, is missing her surname, the designator of lineage or parentage. They are only granted an initial letter, fittingly empty, devoid of meaning. The wonder and fear, of who you might be modeled on, as adoptees in reality, or as the clones in the novel, the feeling of potentially finding information that is harmful or hurtful, is the reason many adoptee origin stories were hidden or sanitized before open records: "We all know it. We're modeled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps...Look down the toilet, that's where you'll find where we all came from."⁵³

The method of delivery of the story also mirrors my own: it is told in flashback mode, a kind of repetition, dreamlike. Similarly, the stories of dreams also figure into my narrative. I have a recurring dream. It's about houses, my childhood house. Except it's never my actual childhood house. But the overall premise is always the same: in one dream, in a bedroom that most resembles the room of my early teens, I enter the closet and it keeps going, Narnia-like. It turns into a back room, a nice brightly lit room with another closet or wardrobes full of clothes I forgot I had.

Or I wander in another childhood home and discover another floor or another wing that I never knew was there. In one, the house is new, by the water. In this dream, the hidden wing seems to be a second concealed apartment; I have the sense that someone else might occupy it so I have to be quiet, lest they discover me. I am not sure exactly what I am looking for. In another version of the dream the house is either a different view of my childhood house in Lockwood Park, or one that my father and stepmother later reside in. In both of these, I discover entire basement wings, stuffed with valuables and family heirlooms, awaiting sorting and claim. I feel I need to take them. Goblets and fruit bowls, crystal ware and silver trays. It appears my parents are dead and the house is up for sale. But these things are still here years later. In another version

of the dream I go on a house tour. I dream of a closet full of clothes I have never seen, given to my mother by my father when he was her boyfriend. I even wake up and write down the number ‘120 Sutherland’ – the dream gives me an address. It seems very Jungian. Or Freudian. I looked it up once, but only briefly and the analysis didn’t seem to fit. I lost interest. Yet the paper with the address on it is still in my bedside table drawer, decades later.

And now, suddenly, the parallels -- secrets, lost family, searching and finding things that were not known about before, the import of objects and their potential link to family and history, different versions of what I thought I knew revealing themselves, the questing of the adoptee for understanding of the past, for holding onto heritage and trying to understand the fundamentals of ‘home’ – the symbolism of the dream all seems too obvious. But the realization necessitated the writing down of the dream, the capturing of its ephemeral significances, in order to be thought about. The instant I did, I think, ‘Why did I not realize this before?’

Where do I go and what do I find in looking for adoptive narratives? While more literature on adoption seems to be available currently than in the past, a quick perusal of a bookstore or public library shelf in an urban setting yields relatively few choices. Many children’s stories are couched in the stories of animals ‘being different,’ an anthropomorphized fuzzy warm pill, or serve as a kind of reaffirmation of the adult’s choice to adopt and how happy the child should therefore be.⁵⁴ In poetry it appears that when the few adoptive poetic stakeholders compose works, such as Jackie Kay’s book length *The Adoption Papers*, they are viscerally connected to their words; this seems not a subject for detached stance, and the reader enters into a similar intuitive response to the images and scenarios presented, but it may be harder for those who have no connection to the topic to truly appreciate what is being articulated

or hinted at in denser sections of poetry. Certainly many passages elucidate what such a journey might entail, and could contribute to the potential for greater empathy and understanding of all parties involved.

In adult non-fiction of the self help/psychology variety, the subject of adoption is lumped into a single small half-shelf with other conditions of family building that appear to make the scrap heap, other ‘pathologies,’ and despite the shelf label proclaiming adoption, I locate no copies dealing with anything other than adopting a child from overseas. In literature for adults or young adults there are some more choices, but all vary in quality and intent, and they still remain difficult to find.

The medium of film is another method of presenting ideas about adoption, one that permeates our cultural experience. Were my mothers or I influenced by any films about adoption? Certainly they would have lived through an era where biological motherhood reigned supreme as duty, ideal and expectation, but only motherhood within stable marriage, with a ‘legitimate’ child. It is unlikely that they were exposed to academic films or documentary material about adoption. For the most part “films, journal articles and advice manuals were much more interested in adoption as a vehicle for fulfilling the maternal ideal when all else failed.”⁵⁵

Family/sex education films, a potential source of adoption portrayal, were popular methods of transmitting social values to adolescents, and may have been presented to my mothers during their schooling. The preservation of family values, predominately monogamy, marriage and legitimate procreation, or alternatively, attribution of blame, were the norm. Sexuality was hidden in technical diagrams and lectures on the mechanics, alongside the absence of counselling, birth control or information other than moralistic advice. Few titles suggest adoption was discussed with other than shameful implications.⁵⁶

Instead, perhaps in viewing widely-distributed films, likely unconsciously my mothers absorbed those ‘hilarious’ and ‘madcap’ Hollywood adventures of couples who, above all, needed to build a family. Perhaps later in their lives, as a result of their involvement in the adoption triad, my mothers might have paid more attention to, been critical of, or become more emotionally invested in filmic portrayals of illegitimate children, adoption, or search and reunion, however their increased awareness of the facts and fallacies being presented would not make them representative of a more general viewing public. Adoption in most cases is merely a plot device, allowing what is usually melodrama or sensationalism to play its course. It is these films that often create, in the public eye, a conception of adoption as lurid, prurient, shameful, dangerous and ‘other,’ except in the cases of benevolent, usually ‘orphan’ adoptions, where the child is ‘saved’ and legitimized.

Like Sara Polley, I am “interested in the way we tell stories about our lives. About the fact that the truth about the past is often ephemeral and difficult to pin down and many of our stories, when we don’t take the time to do proper research about our past, which is almost always the case, end up with shifts and fictions in them, mostly unintended.”⁵⁷ Thus I also look to narratives of my own adoption.

My brothers and sisters have never truly spoken about adoption to me. No stories of when I was brought home, how they were told, how they reacted, why our parents adopted, no stories of my place in a new family.

So I decided to interview my oldest brother and sister⁵⁸ who would have been ten and fifteen at the time of my placement, really my only other source of perception about my origins and parts of my post-adoptive story. My mother and father are dead. It is too late to have the conversations that I might have had. There are no diaries or journals to draw from. My

birthmother is dead. My birthfather is unknown. So I look to my two oldest siblings for at least a subjective corroboration of events and details. It is an oddly discomfiting process.

Easter 2012. Bright but cold, with a strong wind. ‘Family Day’ – but we are here alone, just husband and sister and I. It’s my husband who proposes we actually do the interview, after the meal I have served. I am curiously reluctant, embarrassed, and apologetic – “only if you have time,” but my sister seems happy to do it. This makes me relax a little. We sit in our living room on my parents’ cast off furniture. Easter seems the right time to begin broaching the subject of birth and a type of rebirth.

Photo of sister and me, c. 1964. Removed to protect privacy of individuals involved.

My sister begins: “memory is tricky.” She says she has impressions, memory ‘snapshots’, says perhaps my oldest brother’s memory will be different. I don’t comment – just listen. I don’t want to push, or force memories in one direction to cut off where others might come. She free-associates, rather than sticking to each question after reading; a few things come later on as she thinks. She seems comfortable, while I feel strange. Is this a non-issue for her because my parents made it one, or is it because we weren’t allowed to talk about it? Adoption was not a secret – but it wasn’t discussed – so what does that make it? I wonder why I didn’t ask more questions.

When asked about the day I was brought home, the significant milestone of the formal ushering in of a new family member, she recalls, “I remember the day you came home for sure. And the boys, well, they thought that was pretty cool. Oh and she’s a girl, I thought that was wonderful, that finally there was a girl.”

She recounts a feeling of suddenness in the space between the announcement of there being another baby coming and the time I arrived. “You were brought home, literally, like it was six days you came home out of the hospital to us – that was the old days when they kept people in the hospital for a long time; mothers stayed in longer. I don’t believe you went anywhere else. I’m quite sure of that. I had a sensation of speed because it was oh, she’s born and she’s coming home to us, and that was a wee bit of a scramble there – not a crazy one, probably more in my own head, you know, thinking, ‘That’s fast.’ I thought these things took more time.

They went to the hospital themselves and brought you home – so they came in with you. We were waiting at home. I just remember I met you in the den. We were all just hanging about waiting. I remember meeting you but I don’t remember anything else about the day. It will be interesting to hear what your brother says to see if any of this is really true...”

Post Thanksgiving 2012, radiation side effects subsiding. With nothing truly on the agenda other than the yoga I have taken up to strengthen my weakened body, the time seems right to continue my sibling interviews. I invite myself to lunch and to follow up with the same questions I asked my sister.

My brother is the oldest in our family, by almost sixteen years, more surrogate parent than sibling. He should have the clearest memory of what I ask; as well, he adopted both of his children, who have also gone on to search or not search for their own biological roots: thus I

think he should have quite a rich perspective. His account began: “You were only, you know, seven days old or something. You were right out of the hospital. I think kids at that point in time who were going to go on formula stayed in a little longer. Now, they kick them out in twenty-four hours kind of thing but then, I think they stayed six, seven days, especially the formula kids.

I remember you coming home. I remember us all holding onto you and finally being told you had to be put down. Everyone was having a turn. But, you weren’t a noisy yelling baby that day – you were a pretty ‘goo goo gaa gaa’ happy kind of kid that day. I’m sure there were other days, but certainly that day you were positive and quiet. We were all hanging onto you. You got passed around a fair bit...”

And so we continued to talk of family and memories.

The Narrative of Memory and Photograph

I think who fucking cares about our family. Like who cares about our stupid family and I’m kind of embarrassed because I think it’s our family and every family has a story. But I do think it’s interesting to look at this one thing that happened and how it’s refracted in so many different ways.⁵⁹

Photo of Adoptive Mothers and Daughters. Photo removed to protect the privacy of those involved.

“The act of witnessing stories that might otherwise die is to understand the significance of the performance of memory,” suggests Belarie Zatzman.⁶⁰ But what are the limits of

remembering? Memory – selective, surrounded with affect, coloured by events, and containing different senses of self that co-exist – defies linearity, continuity or temporality. Memories lying fallow can be stimulated to blossom through association with places and people, bringing to light flashes of being that heretofore have lain unsummoned, with new feelings about old understandings. One way of summoning such flashes, and mining for narratives of family, is the cataloguing of family photographs.

My sister mused, “I wasn’t sure how much I really remember, how much I *think* I’ve been told, and how much, as we look at it, and we look at pictures and go, oh right, that’s the day and therefore I think I knew it but I don’t really know it. Memory is one of those very quirky things, and you think, did I know it at the time? Did I know it twenty years later? And some of it I just don’t know.”

Family portrait photos. Series removed maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

Memory is full of mis-remembering, splinters into a prism of conjecture, hypothesis and enigma, thus it must be somewhat clear that memories we do hold have a greater significance for us, even if we are unsure as to what it might be. “The stories we remember and tell about our lives reflect who we are, how we see ourselves, and perhaps, how we wish to be seen.”⁶¹ Remembering (family) stories can be a source of comfort but also symbolizes what is lost or absent. And family photographs can broadside one with conflicting or unremembered versions of self and family. As I examine the family portraits taken over my childhood, looking for

similarity and uniqueness, I am now struck by the one blonde head. I don't remember feeling different. But the physical dissimilarity is almost jarring. What does this mean?

In *Memory/Un Secret*, another piece of literature I find remarkable parallels with, psychoanalyst Philippe Grimbert unravels his family secrets in memoir, fiction and therapeutic analysis. His trauma is anchored in the secrets and survival of the Holocaust. 'Lived with' truths become lies, and fantasy and reality switch, as he discovers the hidden past and missing brother his parents did not reveal to him. I do not know such trauma, but I know what such knowledge feels like when the lines blur. Philippe Grimbert struggles with what is being asked of him, bearing the burden of a secret to which he was not privy. And like me, to tell his story, he must tell a much larger story, even when the narrative is impossible and doomed to failure.

"Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of our selves,"⁶² writes Annette Kuhn in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*. She suggests that "memories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, an intertext, of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and between all these cultural contexts, historical moments."⁶³ My family and (un)family photos speak of loss, love, and the past, but also how the past is ever-changing, a shifting viewpoint from which to see and understand our world and ourselves in the present.

The photograph I wrote about of my mother as a young woman in a fraternity is one such example. It simultaneously allows me a glimpse into what her life might have been like, but also excludes me, as I can only use this one moment upon which to base any conjecture. It also allowed me the first image I had ever seen of her, a woman now dead, but frozen in time at a point younger than I was when viewing it. She was both mother and student, on the cusp of all that would be, but locked into what then became. It is a precious possession, yet it is tinged with

sadness. It fixes my birthmother in a certain milieu, but this status, the belonging to groups such as these, were also part of the sociological pressures of conformity and propriety that acted upon her not much later in her life, when faced with an unwanted pregnancy. Conservatism and the serious work of maintaining an image for herself and her family would trump any thoughts of nascent liberalism or rebellion, and I will not be part of her family. As Annette Kuhn reminds me, “the photograph’s seizing of a moment always assumes loss,”⁶⁴ of what was and can never be again.

It is hard to remember now in the age of instant digital gratification how much more difficult and expensive it once was to record auspicious occasions on film. Therefore the few pictures I have of moments related to my adoption are significant and rare. I had thought the earliest photo extant of my adoption was that of my mother holding me on the steps of a house I am too young to remember, and, I learn, the day of my christening: My sister ruminates, “Memory is a weird thing. Like remembering when you went to be christened. I don’t know whether I really remember that or I just remember because there’s a picture of that day. It’s in the family photos and mom’s wearing a suit she’s got. Maybe it’s the day you came home. You’d be able to tell from the size of you ‘cause you were pretty little. She’s in blue with maybe a white hat and white gloves on. Because she wouldn’t have had that blue suit and white gloves on to pick you up. That doesn’t make sense.”

There is actually an earlier photo of dad holding me – that is the day I came home from the hospital. This becomes a revelation when I find it in my sister’s photo album. I don’t recall ever seeing it before. And “There’s a round picture of your face, three round ones, from the hospital. ‘Cause you were pretty tiny. That’s why on that first day we were all afraid to hold you. You were so little.

Father brings home newly adopted daughter December 1962. Photo removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

Coming home from hospital December 1962. Photo removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

You were in the hospital and you had a white thing on, like a necklace almost. Are you remembering three pictures? I wondered whether I was making that up too. The frame was dark brown wood. And you were in white.”

I don’t think I knew this was me. Maybe she is confused. I can see the picture in my mind’s eye, but not where it was hung, and have no idea where it is now.

Recently my nephew sends me newly digitalized photos of old family slides. In them I find a few more pictures I have never seen before. One is clearly the first day I arrive at my new home. As my sister described, the four children are waiting in the den in front of the fire, family black Labrador in tow, lined up to see their new sister. My mother holds me in the first picture while the children look on.

There are also several shots of just my mother and I; she wears different attire than the family greeting shots, so I don’t know if it is a new day or just another time. My size suggests that the photos were taken very close to each other, very early on. Mother and new baby, the one

waited for. I know the occasion is significant, as there are five distinct photos: the moment was not to be missed.

First day home with family, December 1962. Photo removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

Adoptive mother and baby December 1962. Photo removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

The *punctum*, in Roland Barthes' terms, the wounding detail, is in the joy that is present in this image of my mother, but knowing she was then a woman of forty-two who miscarried one or several times prior to this: this is her final child, and she knows this fact as well. And then I wonder did my birthmother ever take a photograph of me? Or my birth grandmother, who would have been present at the birth? Did she wish any relic or memory, or was I not to be memorialized at all, but rather firmly and finally erased?

These few photographs I possess are gateways into a past, celebrate key moments in my experience of adoption, and suggest ways my life might have been different. They commemorate my inclusion into a new family, but also mark the absence of another one. I think about absence, recorded in photographs in conjunction with the image I was given of my birthmother.

I try to represent these aspects of self and family presence and absence through artistic creation. I must include my thinking through fragmentary flashes and symbolic means, much like the associative working of the brain, the firing of synapses. The breakdown of language to fully describe experience is inevitable, yet in my artwork, the subconscious often comes to the fore, guiding choices I am not fully aware of, yet feel the need to express. The caution from Pamela J. Downe is that “the highly questionable notion that art can and should reflect life accurately and inclusively in every detail... ignores the willful nature of the creative act.”⁶⁵ I understand this caution, and yet I counter that information disseminated in non-literal ways, whether wholly ‘accurate’ or not, nonetheless possesses the potential to repress or liberate, according to how the images are utilized, intentionally or unintentionally, and these are places for investigation and consideration. Thus the reason for the inclusion of my own and others’ “Adoption Art.”

I also discover that notable by its apparent absence is the depiction of adoptive experience in one aspect of cultural construction: fine art. This ‘absent presence’ is a gap I try to mend. Those few artistic representations that do exist are limited, often both in scope and artistic merit, and difficult to find, primarily located on websites and in limited edition artist books such as Carol Flax’s *Some (M)other Stories, A Parent(hetic)al Tale*. In it she incorporates the predominant 1950’s concept of unwed mothers as moral lawbreaker or sinner, a public conception that would have infused my mothers’ experiences, to investigate the act of relinquishment. Carol Flax, in the beginning of her personal story accompanying the visual states,

I was born in 1952. A time when one didn’t do things like get pregnant ‘out of wedlock.’ These were mean times for single unwed women. Perhaps they were mean times for all women. Women going to hospitals to have babies without the sanctity of marriage often gave false names, possibly pretending somebody else had committed this sin of becoming pregnant and even worse the unholy act of giving the baby away. Now these babies have grown up. They are no longer mistakes.

They are adult people. They search for mothers who never existed, whose names are nowhere on the record. Sometimes these women forget what *nom de sin* they used and can't even trace themselves.⁶⁶

One of the final pieces in the book has a strip of photographs interwoven and cut out – both sets of parents, and children who turn out to be full siblings. Across the background reads “spoke to her for the first time shortly after my fortieth birthday. I hear a voice exactly like my own she said”⁶⁷ and then the text is hidden behind the photographs, as if too personal to share with the viewer. At the bottom is repeated, “Now I’m looking at the world through both my mothers’ eyes;”⁶⁸ it is an outcome I had once hoped for.

Collage from artist’s book Some (M)other Stories: A Parent(hetic)al Tale. Photo removed. Rights held by third party and distribution is prohibited.

My mother tried to keep the subject of adoption open, and later encouraged me to search for my birthmother: it was I who resisted. But many adoptees had the reverse experience: for artist/ photographer Joanna Fisher the subject of adoption, and especially her birthmother, were taboo when growing up, thus:

Throughout [her] childhood, [she] produced many drawings, collages, paintings...Consciously and unconsciously [she] would sneak the other woman [i.e. her birth mother] into those creations. She was the princess in the tower, awaiting her rescue. She was the Queen who rode upon a white horse, searching for her long lost daughter, so that they might rule together in happiness. She was the sorceress, the flower, the eye, the heart, the anything [Joanna] could possibly make her so that she was a presence in [her] life.⁶⁹

In her artwork Joanna Fisher combines photography and photo montage of women’s and

childrens' faces in black and white, with words and phrases that represent her own adoptive experience, and seem almost like ransom notes cut from the text of newspapers, perhaps not so far off an analogy.

Photo collage 'Silent' and Photo collage 'My Mother is My Universe' by Joana Fisher. Rights held by a third party and distribution is prohibited.

She writes in one of her blog posts on adoption,

Friend 'B', who has known me since middle school, asked me "what I thought about being adopted." My response was probably not as friendly as it could have been. And I'm sure she wasn't ready for it. I told her it was the worst thing that could ever happen to someone. I told her - as if it wasn't difficult enough to be separated from your mother, you are then expected to call another woman by that name, and more often than not, expected never to speak of that first woman again.⁷⁰

I hear in her voice her pain, her bitterness. I also consider how I might have responded to the same question. What do I think about being adopted? I think this cannot be considered in isolation. The meaning of the individual, and the idea of childhood is dependent on the conception we have of family and heredity: identity can be found in its relationships. We must also contemplate what can be discovered when investigating the very notion of family itself.

In a Family Way

*I have my parents who are not of the same tree
and you keep trying to make it matter,
the blood, the tie, the passing down*

generations.

*We all have our contradictions,
the ones with the mother's nose and father's eyes
have them;*

*the blood does not bind confusion,
yet I confess to my contradiction
I want to know my blood.⁷¹*

Like motherhood, 'family' is socially constructed and varies according to time and place; adoption further troubles these narratives. Consider from earlier times pronouncements on family and deviance: "the most important moral and legal rule...is that no child should be brought into the world without a man... the group consisting of a woman and her offspring is sociologically incomplete and illegitimate."⁷² Diversity in the conception of family begins in the 1960's, with the rise of multi-generational and single parent families as a result of more relaxed attitudes towards the dissolution of marriage through divorce, which, in turn, eventually paves the way for single parenthood by choice. Changing attitudes to same-sex couples and their wish to parent provide another paradigm shift of what constitutes a family, as does the increasing use of assisted reproductive technologies. However even now "white western two parent families have generally been regarded, explicitly or implicitly, as the model or template against which we compare all families, regardless of culture, ethnicity, race or class. Psychotherapist Sally Sales labels this "the hegemony of the traditional family."⁷³ She describes two broad stereotypical categories into which others who do not fit this model fall: the 'deviant,' those far from the supposed norm, such as same-sex couples or teen parents, and the 'variant,' such as adoptive and stepfamilies, which more closely emulate the model. Both still find they have to 'prove' their legitimacy, measured by a template against which they must, of necessity, always fall short and therefore carry with them conscious or unconscious feelings of inferiority.

“The cultural discourse about adoption, especially since 1920, has been about the future, meaning and social function of the family.”⁷⁴ The very titles of books like *Thicker Than Water* and *Like Our Very Own* point to the tacit understanding of the biological underpinnings of family, appearing to be one of the standards by which ‘normative’ families have been and are measured, a surprisingly insidious and conservative ideal that adoptive families must emulate. What does this emphasis on the nuclear family and bio-essentialism mean? Certainly it translates into the *zeitgeist*, and cultural representations of what a ‘real’ family constitutes, despite revisions by the U.S. Census Bureau, and Statistics Canada’s most recent 2011 census defining family as “any two people living under the same roof.” In “The Birthmother Dilemma” Kate Livingston points out

many feminist considerations of adoption explore the ways in which dominant heteronormative discourses of the family essentialize bio-genetic kinship as normal and ‘natural’ while positing adoptive kinship as comparatively unnatural and constructed...[This] bias in law and public policy...has produced devastating effects that marginalize and exclude non-normative individuals and families.⁷⁵

The advance of new reproductive technologies has also actually reinforced old notions of the importance of sexual reproduction in the creation of family, relegating adoption to a further inferior position only when such technologies fail.

Marianne Novy writes “representing adoption is a way of thinking about the family, exploring what a family is, that is at the same time a way of thinking about the self, exploring distance from the family.”⁷⁶ This pull is part of the quotidian experience of the adoptee, who, on one hand, might be told by family that the past does not matter, yet knowing that it does in some measure. Perhaps receiving cultural messages about the importance of ancestry creates a rift in his/her identity: if the self is in large part created by what others say s/he is, and central to this influence is friends and family, juxtaposed with community, the disconnect may prove confusing

for an adoptee thinking about what family means. As Sally Sales observes, “Adoption had always worked to simultaneously install a new family origin whilst sustaining the centrality of the previous kinship history. Adoption is constituted through a paralyzing paradox.”⁷⁷

Adoption should be part of a perception of diversity, and could actually serve as a metaphor for the social construction of all families, because, in essence, “all families are surprise families. Parents and children meet as strangers and grow up together, surprising one another with interests and talents that are not exactly what had been expected. And they continue to love one another anyway.”⁷⁸ Yet there are pressures, internal and external, in deconstructing what family means to the adoptee. Marianne Novy cautions against the reductionism of the adoption plot which urges the either/or binary of finding the real family: either the adoptive family or the original is depicted as the one to which the adoptee truly belongs, and in which they find a sense of identity, but the inherent tension is a struggle nonetheless.⁷⁹

Carol Flax, Art Installation, “Genetics Lesson,” 1990. Rights held by a third party and distribution is prohibited.

Carol Flax’s 1990 “Genetics Lesson” examined her feelings about family through the use of digital media and technology. She explores a place without embodiment that nonetheless exists, and performs as a metaphor for her work, “a realm that mirrors [her] own experience of being without genesis, being without kin, being without knowledge.”⁸⁰ In 1997 a collaboration with Ann Fessler entitled ‘Ex/Changing Families: Two Stories of Adoption’ examined

psychological aspects of adoption, and its actual and emotional costs as they relate to family.

Both artists look at social implications and the discourses that inform how adoptees make sense of their identities, their understanding of family, and their place in the eyes, laws and stories of others.⁸¹

Ann Fessler, "The Cliff and Hazel Room, Art Installation, 1997. Rights held by a third party and distribution is prohibited.

The interactive installation is divided into 'rooms,' and the text and sound track of societal disapproval is triggered as viewers move through many of the spaces: in one "Bastard bastard bastard" shouts one voice; "She isn't one of us," proclaims another, while neglected babies' cries are heard. In the 'Cliff and Hazel' room, Ann Fessler presents life with her adoptive parents. Included are pictures facing away from the viewer and hung away from the wall, suggesting the gap in her biological history, as she struggles to understand the meaning of 'family' for her. For these artists, while they might push against the binary adoption plot or normative family definitions, there is no seemingly acceptable alternative: "we know what we are [not] but know not what we may be."⁸²

Paper Family

*All the women...reported that the actual signing of the adoption papers was traumatic.*⁸³

Jeffrey and Jeffrey, Request for marriage certificate, 1963. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

One of the key differences in family formation in adoption is that ties are enforced by paper, not blood. Regulation, approval, and manifestation is embedded in the creation of, signing of, transmission of, or withholding of, legal documents: paper is thus an insidious form of social engineering. Sealed records only add fuel to the fire. Consequently, it is no wonder that documents play a large role in the emotional component of adoption participants' experience: one signature changes multiple lives irrevocably. It is also not surprising that the significance of paper then figures into a large number of artistic representations, in all forms, of its impact. It is also where I find many personal connections, knowing how much is therein contained, and one of the reasons documents figure highly in this dissertation, both in their original form, and in artistic manipulation.

In fiction, in *Find a Strange, Say Goodbye* all kinds of paper documents are key to understanding the adoption experience: permissions, letters, diaries, adoption papers and relinquishment papers all play a part. Natalie will face the task of sifting the information she collects in order to arrive at some kind of truth, and much of this will involve written accounts.⁸⁴

Collage, David Schultz, "Non-Identifying Social Genetic Report," 1998. Rights held by a third party and distribution is prohibited.

Documents are the basis for the inquiry of another artist, the sole male adoptee artist I have encountered, that of David Schulz in “Non-Identifying Social, Genetic Report” (1998) who received such a report from his adoptive mother at the age of twenty-six, which prompted a search for his birthparents that ultimately failed. The artist uses verbatim quotations from the adoption report provided his mother by Lutheran Social Services, handwritten across photographs, maps, and advertisements that stand in for what he might imagine accompanying the details of the report, which he says, “contained a confusing mixture of objective information: ‘[David’s birthparents]... met at a drive-in and dated steadily;’ and subjective observation: ‘[David’s birthfather]... seemed immature for his age.’” There are also entries that document his reaction to the report and subsequent actions, such as one dated “12.1.97. Just got off the phone with Judy Raney at L.S.S. She said she just spoke with my birthmother and said she got really upset when she found out I was looking for her.”

David Schultz is, of course, reduced to merely hypothesizing and substitution in his imagery, as he possesses no artefacts of his birth or family history other than the stark words of the ‘official report.’ One can see how precious every scrap of information is, no matter how trivial, each to be pondered and re-examined and re-imagined without ever having a confirmation or end point. There is a sense of documentary in his work despite his forced imaginative stance, yet also a feeling of frustration and tension in the juxtaposition of the sterile and disembodied words with the very personal tidbits of information gleaned, and his own handwritten logging of personal journey and interaction with the ‘report.’

Collage, David Schultz, Artist Book, “Non-identifying, Social Genetic Report,” 1999. Rights held by a third party and distribution is prohibited.

Documents also feature strongly throughout *The Adoption Papers*, and the title reinforces how key they are. The child does search and find the mother, and clues to her own original identity, through the “adoption papers” of the title, and it is here that I make the most connection with the work, biographically and emotionally. The tracing of the autobiographical through fragments, through snippets of official writ, information doled out in parcels by others who have the capacity to withhold, deny or assist in the release of information, is a process with which I am familiar.

Chapter 2, “The Original Birth Certificate,” identifies a document often falsified and locked away from the adoptee, information in the poem withheld from the searching daughter by an unnamed bureaucrat: the man, who holds the paper and the power, “slow as torture,” discloses the information she craves. Chapter 3, “The Waiting Lists,” shows the machinations the adoptive mother undergoes “trying to look ordinary” and thus being removed from a long waiting list, another literal/metaphoric document. The daughter in the poem’s ‘present’ also speaks of the arrival of a “slim manila envelope” containing one piece of paper which contains all the information she is able to gain about her birthmother, a surreal moment. Such information was now kept, as she notes, on microfiche, another kind of remove from the tangible: the documents are illusory, not real, like her sense of her mother. The information in the document is the barest five disjointed facts, constituting her entire heritage, around which she constructs fantasies of the birthmother, who, no matter how completely the daughter tries to evoke her in her imagination, remains “faceless.” Papers again figure in section of the poem titled “Baby Lazarus”: the adoptive mother is informed “the adoption papers /can’t be signed”⁸⁵ until the baby passes a physical examination. Using papers in this instance is a medium for confirmation of an identity: “I’m not a mother/ until I’ve signed that piece of paper.”⁸⁶ Conversely, the birthmother also

refers to the paper she signed: “I had no other choice. / anyway it’s best for her./ my name signed on a dotted line.”⁸⁷ The signature of one mother is required for dismissing the claim to motherhood, while another signature is required to grant motherhood: all seems to hinge on the act of putting pen to paper on a legal document, one name traded for another, one mother traded for another.

In chapter 5 the daughter contacts a counselling agency to try to trace her biological mother through more paper: marriage certificates. In chapter 10 “The Meeting Dream,” the daughter recalls about yet another paper document, this one personal: “her sister said she’d write me a letter” and she fantasizes about the details, “the colour of her paper” and even the physical attributes of her mother’s handwriting. I, too, fantasize about such a letter, having been told my own birthmother composed a document to me that she never mailed, and one that may or may not exist today. To hear her words, to see her writing, to know her story, all contained on a piece of paper lost, destroyed or withheld.

Cover Artwork, Carol Flax, Some (M)other Stories, 1995. Rights held by a third party and distribution is prohibited.

In Carol Flax’s *Some M(other) Stories* she uses documents as part of her finished artwork, such as the certificate of live birth that reappears on several pages of her artist’s book, the repeated use reinforcing its significance. In another section, the image on one page of a sepia-toned little girl in a white frock who appears to harken from an earlier time, facing the viewer

with no discernible expression also interacts with an invocation of a document. Text across her body reads, “I was born to a woman who thought and thought and then signed a paper relinquishing all rights to be my mother.”⁸⁸ In a fold of what appears to be almost newsprint cutouts, more allusions to documents, are fragments of two words: nature and nature. The photograph is not grounded and she is literally surrounded by, subservient to, and simultaneously denied, documents that alter her fate.

The significance of documents is something I try to portray in a fused glass work I call “Palimpsest.”



Image 3: “Palimpsest” detail (Fused glass, photo-transfer), 2012, 10” x 11”

It shows three layers of documents, bearing the weight of officialdom and authority, and earmarking significant moments in my ongoing adoption journey, falling as if let loose from the pages of a scrapbook or album. One is a 1963 lawyer’s letter outlining the terms and conditions of my adoption. Superimposed upon this is another letter, from early 2004, this one stating that contact has been made with my birthmother.

Lastly, there is a letter from the same agency, this shaded more darkly in grey, starkly declaring the death of my birthmother and the return of the unread introductory letter I sent, the abrupt closure of a major door to my unknown past. All these documents interact with each other, just as they have in my own life. Seeing through glass to other layers feels appropriate, suggesting distorted reflections of a not quite stable world, looking at one document through another, physical objects fused into associated stories. While not scraped away like wax tablets, the texts do overwrite each other, each one partially changing the reality established in the previous, each one further obscuring what was, yet never erasing it.

Faultlines and Borderlands: Nature, Nurture and Coming Home

Whose family is irrefutable? Who does not need some proof, some corroboration? ⁸⁹

The degree to which families are bound by blood, the role genetics plays in the forming of an individual, and the debate over the influences of nature and nurture in individual identity and family composition are still ongoing, rancorous, and curiously popular. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the role of genetic pre-disposition played a dominant part in discussions of the perils of adoption, with common perceptions that not just physical characteristics but those such as “poverty or laziness could be inherited; some also believed a person’s future lay at the moment of their conception [and that] taking an unrelated child into the home was taking step into the unknown.”⁹⁰ Adoptive parents wanted children born of ‘good stock’; adoption agencies and maternity homes catered to these notions in their policies and advertising; and tests of mental and physical aptitude were conducted before a baby was placed.

These prejudices and fears about unknown heritage may have diminished, but they have not entirely retreated: perhaps they have merely been sublimated.⁹¹ The most current ‘scientific’

findings appear to say that both nature and nurture matter, to varying degrees, and in varying strengths, to individuals, on a case-by-case basis. Their influence cannot be dismissed; neither can it be quantified. An adoptive parent, for instance, might wonder why their progeny appear so different in personality and aptitudes from themselves, when a biological parent might wonder the same thing: biogenetic ties are no clear indicator of the kind of mirroring that many parents wish to find.⁹²

Many adoptees, and their fictional counterparts, appear to seek fundamentally a sense of ongoing family history and continuity over time. In *Glass Mountain* the adoptee only achieves this for herself through having a child of her own, recognizing herself and child as a ‘real’ family, positing, “Here was the continuity she craved...she was connected, bound, and it was right.”⁹³ But in this we have a type of corrective biography: apparently her own life as an adoptee is so unfulfilled, due to her lack of genetic ties, it can only be corrected through biological regeneration. This uncertainty may also present for the adoptive parent. In *The Snake-stone* James/Sammy’s mother confesses, “When we decided to adopt you, we were taking a step into the unknown. We knew nothing at all about you, except that you’d been abandoned. I was very nervous James. I kept looking at you and thinking, ‘What will he be like? How do we know he’s right for us? What if we don’t like him?’”⁹⁴ These are vestiges of the lingering fear of what a non-biological child might bring to the family, old stereotypes of the ‘bad seed’ or ‘damaged goods,’ due to the unknown bloodline. I do not know if my adoptive parents harboured, even secretly, some similar trepidation and uncertainty over my unknown lineage, or how I might ‘fit’ into their established family.

Coherence and connection, genetic determinism or environmental conditioning: what holds primacy in my ‘self,’ and how I regard my original or adoptive family? There are things I know,

evidenced by appearance, things I don't know, such as probability of diseases and conditions I may eventually be diagnosed with, and things that fall in between. I am blonde and blue-eyed like my birthmother while my adoptive family are all dark. I had early onset myopia, getting glasses in grade three; the few pictures I have of my birthmother in later years reveal her wearing thick glasses, and she will become blind in one eye, although I do not know the cause, while, as they age, my adoptive family require reading glasses but no one ever wore glasses constantly. All except my mother were tall, strongly built; I am shorter and more lithe. My skin is fair and burns easily; my teeth needed extensive orthodontics; I have flat feet and a second toe longer than the first. But it is not only physical characteristics in which we differ.

Photo of birthmother and half sister, date unknown. Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

While maybe not passed on genetically, personality, aptitudes, behaviours, and inclinations are potentially shaped not just by the environment one finds him/herself in currently. To what degree child-rearing practices and family can influence, adjust, support or diminish individual tendencies is not clear-cut. The differences I experience may just be a product of my own individuality, and no different had I had the same genetic code as those I lived with. But the element of the unknown in my heritage does provide an extra level of difference. They are extroverts, I am an introvert. At the family table when I was a little girl, at times my mother would say, "And now everyone be quiet, it's time for Kate to say something," which would

paralyze me even further. I tend to be more neurotic, more emotional, inclining to worry and stress. I am artistic; these things were foreign to my family's understanding. Do these passions come from another place? I enjoyed school and all things academic; they tolerated it as a means to an end. Athletics were much more important to them; I was uncoordinated, untalented and uninterested. I did share a love of reading with my father, who took me on weekly trips every Friday evening to the local library where I loaded up on the maximum allowable to take out for junior members (and had them all read before the weekend ended). Both 'sets' of family enjoyed camping, the outdoors, and cottaging, grew up comfortable with animals and large groups of people. Shared connection or chance?

Common experiences strengthen ties, build memories and cement a sense of belonging and familiarity. Yet when I later learn my birthmother loved the water as much as she did, often disappearing to be alone on her own sailboat, and think of my own desire to live by water, its ability to calm me, and the aptitude I have for boating, or when I learn of how much she loved dogs, and think of my own obsession and attraction to them, when I learn of her voracious reading or tendency to fierce loyalty, her early love of performing, I cannot help but wonder if any of it can be attributed, even partially, to some common tie of blood.

Carol Flax, "Home is Not What you Imagine it to be," Interactive Web Art. Rights held by a third party and distribution is prohibited.

In one of her earliest explorations, a piece of Web art with hyperlinked pages, artist Carol Flax also interrogates the idea of nature versus nurture and the role it plays in the notion of

home, family and identity for adoptees. Around the edge of one page is a series of instructions about ‘home,’ such as ‘Go home’ and ‘It’s time to go home,’ innocent enough sounding until one connects this to the text at the centre of the page which states boldly, ‘Home is not what you imagine it to be,’ and links to another page with the caption ‘what makes you think you’ve come home?’ The words and images are not stable or permanent; neither is the notion of home for adoptees: home is and is not.

I also explore the notion of home, the pull between genetics and environment, and the place of family. In one of my research forays I venture to the map library in the basement of York University. I have the address of my birth home, the place where I would have been brought up. I want to see if there are any maps of the area from the period of my birth, or earlier, the period of my birthmother living in her family home. I ask for help from the librarian, armed with dates and the downtown Toronto location. As we uncover several geographical surveys of the area that have to be pieced together, the librarian asks what the subject of my research is, and why I want this particular area.

Map c. 1950s locating my birthgrandparents’ house. Image removed to maintain the privacy of those individuals involved.

And I lie. At least partially. It’s a reflex. I tell her that the research is centered on the study of maternity homes in Toronto, and I am looking for where such homes might be located. I don’t know why I don’t tell the truth. Perhaps the explanation will take too long, and seem

convoluted. Or perhaps it's just too personal, and I don't feel like revealing this intimate detail to a stranger.

Photo of my birthmother's family home, c. 2012. Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

In the art piece I later compose, I take the street address and use it as a base for the image. I pinpoint the home with a bright red marker. It is a large corner house, hidden behind fence and hedge with grandeur of scale, one of only three on a green island of land. I collage over it the map and the photograph of my adoptive mother holding me as a baby. You can see through the photo to the map. Both the map and the woman have a claim to 'home.' The image of nurture is juxtaposed with the outline of what influence a different physical place and environment might have had. Falling oak leaves leave a trail, but neither mother nor child see them. I choose oak, a sturdy and long lived species, observer of generations. But these are the leaves of a family tree, now detached. Genetics and environment will both play a role in how I come to consider home.⁹⁵

"Home" (Fused glass, phototransfer), 2015, 8 ½" x 11," Kate Greenway, 2013. Image removed to maintain the privacy of those individuals involved.

But it is as if I can never be certain of the academic and scientific pronouncements as authoritative. I cannot deny the emotional involvement in trying to determine how my li(f)ves might have played out. In a previous artistic exploration I consider more literally the competing discourses of my own identity formation. In this artwork the first page of my adoption order is transferred onto a rectangle of glass the colour of old paper documents.

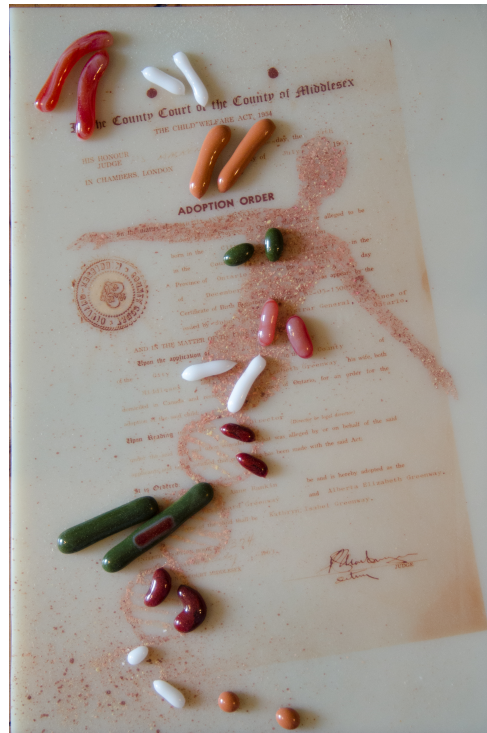


Image 4: “Nature versus Nurture” (Fused glass relief, enamels, phototransfer), 2013, 8” x 12.”

Some of the detail of the writing is deliberately scraped off, difficult to read as if its influence is hard to determine. The document merges with a painted pixelated figure, which could be of either gender, an allusion to my birthmother’s unknowing of my gender previous to my birth. The body is not solid but composed of small particles that dissolve into a spiral of DNA. Shapes suggestive of chromosomes parade across the page in raised three-dimensionality. All of the elements vie for importance.

Further complications in my thinking arise when I am presented with a family I never knew...

Unexpected Relatives

Again I hear my own question addressed to my mother, unanswered: how are you going to deal with my hurt? ⁹⁶

In 2006, when my father has been dead for just a month, I am in a car travelling back from an uncomfortable surreal family Christmas with my brother and family, where we pretend that everything is normal. They have their own family rituals. I feel like a maiden aunt, a charity case. The outsider. My cell phone rings. I am told of a phone call to my posted contact information of years ago. It is unbelievable, but I suppose Christmas and miracles have a certain affinity. A man claiming to be my cousin wishes to speak to me...

After gathering my courage I dial the number I am given. It is a strange call to be making. I speak to two people: the male cousin, who initiated contact, and his elderly mother, the sister-in-law of my birthmother. We confirm that we are indeed related. I don't remember much of the call. The sister-in-law said, "I had a voice like an angel." The cousin said, "I'd be a very different person if I had lived there." The sister-in-law also said, "I'd done well with the family I had." She told me my mother said to her, "There's never a day goes by when I don't think of that young woman." To me, that is a precious gift.

Now I locate a letter on my hard drive, written the same evening as the phone call. I do not recall if it was ever sent. A letter of introduction, of tentative connection, to strangers who have a particular tie to my past:

Wednesday December 27, 2006 9:32 p.m.

Dear ---

I am still overwhelmed by your phone call. I am going to admit now that after writing for an hour, my first letter was lost to the ether a mere seconds ago, (I love technology) so I am not sure I will be able to recapture my initial sentiments, but here goes.

Thank you for making the call. Once I learned that my mother had passed and that my contact letter had been returned I had given up hope that I would ever connect with my birth family. But as my friend said, Christmas is exactly the time for just such miracles.

I grew up in a loving family with four siblings, and have been married for almost 13 years to a kind and gentle man whom I love very much. We are childless by choice but nurture children through our teaching as well as raising two beagles and tending a large garden in our rural property. I am artistically inclined, with that most recently expressed in my hobby as a stained glass artist. I enjoy reading, and love animals. My husband and I also enjoy cooking, spending times outdoors, and with each other.

As to “who am I”, that is a more pressing question. I am a quiet rather shy individual, a good listener, with something of an intellect, who does not “suffer fools gladly.” I have a good sense of humour and can be very emotional. I appreciate old fashioned manners, courtesy and respect for others. When I am comfortable, my friends would say I am rather gregarious and blunt. A study in contrasts.

I am so glad to have made contact with you and I look forward to a continuing relationship if you would also wish this. Please know that I will take any reunion as quickly or as slowly as your family requires – I have no desire to cause anyone any pain or discomfort. I have so many questions – who am I, where did I come from, who is my family – but I respect any limitations anyone may have. I only wish to connect and to have a sense of my history, and to possibly establish a new a lasting connection with those whom I never knew before.

Thank you for picking up the phone and making a connection. I remain

Your cousin,

On the day before New Year's Eve, 2006. Mandarin Restaurant, Scarborough. Neutral ground. I am to meet three people to whom I am related by blood. It is all happening so fast. I carry with me my layette and my search file of documents. The question from the grey haired lady who hugs me: what colour was the blanket I was left in? This is a test. Of legitimacy? I am in a fairy tale, and the answer must be correct, or the consequences dire.

I produce the blanket. I pass.

Notes:

My mother tried to find me twenty years ago but was discouraged by the lack of information and thought 'it was too late anyway.' This would have been a few scant years before I began to try.

She was pregnant at thirty-five, not a school girl, but an established editor at a major publishing house, editing the likes of Farley Mowat. She went away on an extended trip with 'granny,' the matriarch who regularly travelled on cruises around the world. They spread the story that they were going to 'London' – which *one* was not specified. They went to both. Later, they wouldn't slip up if asked where they were. Thus a lie became true.

She has a nickname that seems to cross genders, used more by friends and family than her given name. She loved the cottage, the north, boats and sailing. Often she sailed alone.

It is at the cottage, the second home, that the sister-in-law might have made a realization. In June, she and my birthmother, her husband's sister, share a room. In late August, they do not.

The sister-in-law attributes this to a falling out of friendship; in reality it is so my birthmother does not have to undress in front of her, as her secret pregnancy is now showing.

She loved to read and had almost a photographic memory. At the end of her life she didn't cook well for herself because there were always books to read. She could quote liberally.

Her first breakdown came in the late 1960's, at the cottage again. The same sister-in-law almost christens her child Martha, my given name. My birthmother is distraught, and her secret comes out. It is the first time she speaks of this, and only to her, her brother's wife, who does not tell anyone.

The second and last time she speaks is after my published letter in the paper 'seeking lost family'. A now elderly infirm sister-in-law rides the Go train alone for the very first time to confront her. Yet offers an out: "We'll speak of this only if you want to." This confrontation forces my mother to tell her husband and daughter about me for the first time. In 2000. Thirty-seven years after my birth. I will later make the odd realization that the year 2000 is when I start searching in earnest on my own part: co-incidence or synchronicity?

In 2006 this sister-in-law speaks with her son about the letter. I do not remember why, possibly around my birthday. She had lost the article along with contact information. The son phones the *Toronto Star* archives. The contact info is about to be obsolete as the third party address provided will be defunct in less than a year.

I am taking notes like I am in a college lecture. About my own life. This is absurd.

I am given some photographs of the woman who bore me.

Photo of reunion with birthfamily, December 2006. Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

We take our own photograph.

I am so stiff I almost fall into the fishpond.

Later I look over the notes I took at this first meeting. There are gaps in what I reveal to the reader in the first iteration. Perhaps I worry that my own discoveries are not of interest. But family history, knowledge of my birthmother, all is important.

What else do I know?

She loved Winnie the Pooh and could quote verbatim from it. When she was dying she, her daughter and her niece spent all day quoting to each other in the hospital.

She 'was brilliant.' She knew all kinds of trivia.

The men in the family would get into one of their heated discussions and not back down, thinking they were right. She would quietly correct them and move on.

She was always nice to everyone. Never spoke ill of anyone.

She always kept in touch with her fraternity friends. In her 70's she went to a reunion with them where they worked at a lodge in western Canada.

When her sister-in-law changes the name of her baby, after my birthmother's breakdown, granny is told of the choice in writing. A glimpse into the judgmental/ imperious matriarch:

"What a curious name. I shall always think of Indian food when I see her."

She was active in the Church – she served dinner on Christmas, worked in the soup kitchen. My cousin thought a life of service was an easy transition for her due to her personality.

Towards the end after (my) grandfather died, she practically lived with grandmother, who was "used to being taken care of." My birthmother was devoted to her. Her 'only child', later did the same thing with her mother; she became her whole life; as a result their mothers favoured

both daughters. I wonder if my birthmother felt she owed her mother for the counsel, the trip, the secreting away of her shame, and the solution to her problem of illegitimate pregnancy.

My birthmother told the sister-in-law that she wrote a letter to me. She stayed up all day and night writing in fits and starts. The sister-in-law said, "Well I hope you mailed it," and she said, "No, I don't think I will." The sister-in-law thinks the letter was still in my mom's apartment when she died. It might still exist. She may ask the daughter to look for it if the time is right.

I find this a wounding detail. Mother, and later daughter, wrote long, heartfelt and undelivered letters. Neither had the opportunity to ever hear the words of the other. This is the gap that hurts, perhaps the most.

Years later I stumble across another archive, containing documents pertaining to my grandmother. She is the daughter of privilege. I note that she has not only passed on her own name but her middle initial to her daughter. I wonder at this seeming narcissism and control; or perhaps it is more properly a declaration of family ties.

I hear her tone in some of her correspondence. She is educated, detailed and thorough, uses the third person, and is not afraid to speak her mind: this is my maternal grandmother, imperious in the way of an old school mistress.

In a collage of works of paper, I contemplate my absent family. I hang the pictures together as one might encounter an ancestral portrait wall in a family home, tracing lineage and history and significant moments in time. The frames are intentionally sourced and purchased as antiques and collectibles, age and patina adding the feeling of permanence and substance. The colours are muted. All the frames contain both absences and presences, and how I imagine I might fit in the hallway display of family pictures, as I grow from baby to woman.

One has a torn photo fragment of ‘mother and daughter’ – which would be my birthmother and half sister. Around it are fragments of the ‘official’ family tree of my birthfamily, showing my half sister as the *only* child of my birthmother, with this version of ‘truth’ edited by my birthmother herself, in collusion with a lie that some family members would have known. I find this difficult knowledge.

“Birthfamily” (Paper Collage), 2015, 8 ½” x 11.” Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

In another piece I juxtapose an advertisement for the book *Expectant Motherhood* that my birthmother was promoting at the time of her pregnancy. Superimposed over it is my own baby picture, almost newborn. I am wearing the lacy white knit baby clothes I was left with in the hospital, the gift from mother and grandmother. The baby, myself, is crying, and reaching out to a mother she will never see.

“Expectant Motherhood” (Paper collage), 2015, 8” x 11.” Portions of the collage contain material with rights held by a 3rd party and distribution is prohibited.

The other compilations contain a series of photos and documents that represent different aspects of my absence, as per the blank silhouette that appears in each. These faceless, nameless figures are of the baby and girl who might have interacted with these places and people, these moments and celebrations, and even though she was not part of these experiences, still lays claim to them in some way, and of the mother herself, who likewise cannot be fully separate from the child. In one small wooden frame is a photograph of the delicate beribboned baby jacket I was left with. Over it is the silhouette of a pregnant birthmother, cut from the note my adoptive mother left her, thanking her for the gift of a child.

“Layette” (Paper Collage), 2015, 5” x 6 ½.” Image removed to maintain the privacy of those individuals involved.

In another the baby is crawling across historical photos of the area of Georgian Bay/Muskokas that the long-standing family cottage lies. The cottage was a central meeting point for family, a spot particularly loved by my birthmother, and the site of a litigious battle over property and boundaries, a legal fight taken up by grandmother and family for decades. Likewise this baby is cut from the legal document signed by my birthmother transferring her ‘property’ to another.

“Cottage” (Paper Collage) 2015, 6” x 8.” Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

A young child in a later frame seems to be reaching out to touch a point on the map that fixes the family cottage in a particular location, making it more concrete, more real. Yet the child is not: although specific in her construction from the adoption order, and the identification of her original name, the name linking her to the birthfamily cottage on the map, faceless, she is still not concrete.

“Map” (Paper Collage), 2015, 7 ½” x 9.” Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

Another frame, pictured below right, places two objects in counterpoint: the background is one of my birthmother’s meticulous and detailed editing notes. She does not let anything escape her keen eye and critical pen. The page is filled entirely. Over this is a figure of a girl, cut from parchment, with no writing at all. She is entirely blank, unknown, unnotable and unseen.

“Editorial Note” (Paper Collage), 2015, 8” x 10 ½.” Portion of image contains materials with rights held by a third party and distribution is prohibited.

In the collage pictured on the right is a small colour photograph of the family home in downtown Toronto, still standing, which I first saw only this year, showing its imposing

grandeur and sense of permanence. Despite the inviting and centrally visual doorway however, the house seems to be an impenetrable fortress and the teenage silhouette of the girl sits curled up outside. The girl is literally made from her mother, cut from the letters of my birthmother's initials, showing how the birthmother is now back at work and perhaps without thought for this growing girl, who will not be invited inside the family home.

"Home?" (Paper collage), 2015, 5" x 7." Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

The last framed paper art positions the newspaper column I placed decades ago against a torso of a woman and the deliberately cut-off photograph of a young girl from an earlier time, her face just as unidentifiable as my own. Some of the words of my plea are clear, the rest continue beyond the limits of the frame, just as they do in real life. A figure of a woman seems to be reading or touching the text. It is cut from crinkled gold paper, perhaps suggesting worth but also lack thereof, a crumpled and thrown away object: here I confess I am not sure what drove me to this selection, and that I am only reconsidering in retrospect what it seemed to fit if the woman is me.

"Seeking Lost Family" (Paper Collage), 2015, 5" x 7." Portions of the image contain materials with rights held by a third party and distribution is prohibited.

Roots and Rhizomes: The Family Tree

...one's biological and historical roots as well as one's immediate life history – the one is insufficient without the other.⁹⁷

I wonder to myself how far the reaches of 'family' extend, especially with regards to birth relatives, living or dead. I have two documents that should link me to this birthfamily and yet actually serve to exclude. A copy of "The Family of __," the paternal line of my birthmother, used in one of my paper collages, presents a family starting in London, England in the late 1700's, a long traceable lineage. But the single name listed for my birthmother's progeny - my half sister - is evidence that I am not a part of this family, even if I am. If it is of the same period, the second document I was given is a small booklet titled *The __ Family Two Hundred Years, 1770 to 1970*, 'edited and with some additions by (my birthmother).' Perhaps it was meant as a Christmas gift for family. My birthmother appends some entries, anecdotes about her (our) grandfather and life on the farm...The personality of family I have never met. While it gives me a sense of nostalgia for a time and place I have never known, and I imagine placing myself in the same anecdotes, I don't feel the tug of commonality. Maybe because of the time I have spent previously researching war and Remembrance, it is another entry that pulls me in, makes me feel some connection: "the third son of __ ... enlisted in the Canadian Army Service Corps and served with the first Divisional Train..."

August, 2007

Dear __:

I hope you are well. As the summer draws to a close I thought I would update you on some of my year. This past fall I began working towards my Masters in Education part time. It's been quite a commitment, and at times one I am not sure I can cope with, but I am really

enjoying the courses so I am doing my best to make it work. Right now, I we are doing some renovations on our family room, so it is torn apart, and because my husband and I are doing it ourselves, it will remain so for a while. I am looking forward to a décor that's not quite so 1970's, and to insulated walls!

I thought that you might be interested even more in the trip that my husband and I did at the beginning of the summer. We had planned to do a kind of WW1 and WW2 history tour of Belgium and Normandy for a while now with another couple who are also interested in such things, so right at the end of school the four of us went for two weeks. Notwithstanding all the good food and copious amounts of French wine, the trip was quite a moving experience for all of us. We went to Ypres and saw the Menin gate, saw many sites and memorials around the Somme, and were at Vimy for Canada Day. We then spent time along the beaches of Normandy, one at the Juno sites, and a parallel day at Omaha and Utah. But one of our other missions was to visit the graveyards of any relatives who might be buried overseas. Our friend has an uncle who fought during the landings in Normandy, and we found his grave at Rhys cemetery not far from the beaches. My husband's great uncle fought at the Somme, and he is listed on the Thiepval memorial to the missing. As for me, I reread the typed history you gave me before leaving and found in the listing for ____ that he was buried near Arras, which is one of the towns we planned to stay in during our trip, so I sought him out. I kept a journal during my trip so I am enclosing some of what I wrote, as well as some photos (I have many more) of the place, so that you might see for yourselves where he is lain to rest. While I am a little timid at sharing, I thought you might find it interesting.

Yours,

Aubigny – June 30, 2007

Precarious driving to the northwest of Arras to try to find Aubigny Military Cemetery. Only 13 km away - but not on any road known to man. We lurch from village to village. Some are on our coterie of maps – from the town info centre, from Google, from CAA. None match, most roads are unmarked. This sets the precedent for our day. Yet with three navigators and many negotiations we make it.

Aubigny is a pretty village. We pass a tiny square full of pink flowers and a little fountain in weathered blue bronze. Through town and up a tiny road of one lane - can this be the place? – is the cemetery. Red poppies line the ditch where we leave our car, and we walk up to the iron gate. There are a few crosses near the front from WW1. But not much, until we realize that past the cemetery proper is the ‘Extension’, down a level, white stone in all directions. It is this vista that catches our breath, this unexpected opening up of identical stones in precise rows.

I am searching for a blood relative, a great uncle who died in WW1. I have a scant few lines typed into a family history: ‘____. Canadian Army Service Corps. Killed in France, May, 1917. Buried in Aubigny Communal Military Cemetery Extension. 13 miles west of Arras on the road to St Fol.’

My husband stayed up late on our last night printing maps. I find two documents I have not seen before. He has accessed the National Archives and printed out copies of the Attestation Papers on file for both of our uncles. I read these new details hungrily: of average height, with gray eyes and light brown hair. “What is your birthplace? ‘Picton.’ Are you willing to be vaccinated? ‘No.’ Are you willing to fight overseas? ‘Yes.’” There is no question about dying.

He signed up in September, less than one month after Britain declared war on Germany. He would be one of the first round of fresh face recruits. Later, I realize my husband’s uncle and

mine have signed these papers less than three days apart, in the same place, Valcartier, Quebec. Two young men from rural Ontario in their early 20s – I wonder if they met?

We find his plot - but not as listed on the register: there is confusion between Roman and Arabic numerals. And he is listed there with a wrong middle name. How many entries are incorrect? Keeping track of so many? We locate him in a row nearer the rear of the cemetery, with comrades who died May, 1917. ____ ‘perished of his wounds’.

I wonder about this young man, two times as young as I stand now, two times removed, as he is the great uncle of my birth family, only recently met. Who were his friends? I scan and record others of the same approximate age in Canadian divisions. So many others died alongside. Did they share a pint? Laugh? Or brawl? Compete in tall tales of bravery and conquest in war or in bed? There is another driver from Canada there. Did they drive together? Was it in that car that they were shot? I read inscriptions. Try to capture all I can.

The birds are impossibly loud.

I rise and think I should have some words to say, so I retrace my steps and kneel. “I don’t know you,” I whisper. “But I came. Someone came to visit you. Rest knowing that.”

We sign the register. What to say. I stare helplessly. How do I feel so much for a man I have never met?

I do not know if you have any other information about ___, but since he was in the First Division, I am surmising from my research that he likely fought at Vimy in the weeks before, and that his wounds might have been sustained in the Third Battle of the Scarpe, which was part of the battle of Arras. I am not sure of this, but the dates and places seem to add up. I also have some bits and pieces about the battle, and the Canadians’ participation in it, cobbled together unedited from the Internet should you wish to see it.

I hope this finds you all well and happy.

Photo: Graveside, Aubigny Military Cemetery, France, June 2007. Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

The sister-in-law writes to me, “the information and pictures you sent to us about ____ with your thoughts and feelings were most interesting and very touching – it would please your grandfather greatly to think that you so enjoyed going to all that trouble.” It pleases me to contribute to the family history. If I can’t be *on* the family tree, I can still be a part of it. Research and paper substitutes for flesh and connection.

And I wonder, has the original drawing of ‘family’ ever been amended? Or do I remain unlisted? Likely so, although I fantasize otherwise. It’s hard to imagine yourself as absent.

We have another meeting a year after the first in the same restaurant, the cousins, the sister-in-law, with the young sons of my female cousin. The sister-in-law tells me she has read and re-read my letter to my birthmother, the one I gave her at our first meeting, a sentimental gesture as the closest iteration of ‘birthmother’ now available to me. It seemed right at the time. She ‘has worn smooth the creases.’ Tells me that I have the same turn of phrase, “oh rats,” being one of them. Later I will wish I had not given it away, as I cannot picture my own thoughts. How did I even begin? Did I address it to her given name? Did I call her Mother?

I am told a few more family stories. I am told my layette blanket was grey and yellow because they did not know what gender I would be. “Now that I know,” says the sister-in-law, and produces a hand knit poncho in yellow, grey and soft pink, which she presents to me. It is a

touching gesture. I keep it in my front hall closet, ready to wear. Yet years later, I have never worn it. I am not sure why. What does this say about this object?

Time passes. There are some cards exchanged. “I’m hoping we might see you again in the not-too-distant future.” A letter containing a few more photos, now of grandparents and strangers in stiff formal wear, an essay my mother wrote in university, clippings from a newspaper about a family home. Ephemera.

And then. No contact. The brittle limb of the family tree is broken off.

The ‘family tree’ brings to mind that adoptive family experience is often expressed in horticultural terms. The idea of a limb not originally existing, but nonetheless deliberately chosen for whatever its qualities and incorporated onto the existing stock with anticipation and loving care, in many ways serves as a metaphor for the formation of adoptive families.⁹⁸

Yet the ‘family tree’ is always problematic for adoptees, knowing the original ‘wound,’ however scarred over, is nonetheless still present in their current iteration of family. The piece of fused glass Adoption Art I create in response collages the headers and footers of a selection of agency, legal, and local/provincial/federal government documents concerning my search efforts, detached levels of bureaucracy holding and withholding information about my origins. Family tree projects are often given to schoolchildren without consideration that missing or deceased relatives, through war, divorce or other traumas like adoption, figure as psychically problematic, painful, as well as difficult to depict. In my case I overlap the document scraps with a jungle forest, both a metaphor of the tangle of sources with which I have tried to navigate my history, and suggesting the complexity and density of a family tree I can never fully access. I work three dimensionally, showing roots, branches and leaves that grow from many sources, each representative of someone on the adoption journey, and reaching out beyond the borders of the

The second image is of a tree, an allusion to the idea of a family tree, where ‘leaves’ are used as icons to denote one’s ancestors: this is how one typically pictorializes a genealogical account. Yet this tree is not whole: on one half there are leaves in full blossom, discernable and present, representing the half of my lineage I know and can access; on the other half, the tree is barren, with no leaves or markers that lead back to the unknown family of my birth. More ‘leaves’ are falling or swirl in the spaces, perhaps able to be caught, or perhaps just about to be blown out of reach. Placed at random intervals over top are rectangles of glass, some clear, some in the colour of leaves, all fused with fragments of photos. The glass, in some cases, acts to emphasize the words underneath and presents a clear image, or conversely, with the coloured glass, works to obscure the image and the underlying text. These are all photos of family: on my birthmother’s side going back three generations; on my adoptive mother’s and father’s side the same. Yet most of them I have never met. Only my own mother’s sisters, as represented by the children holding hands or dolls, or old photos of mother and father, are representative of family I have some knowledge of. Grandparents and great aunts, these are generations dead before my consciousness. This is even more true of the photos I have of the birth side of my relatives. They are not really family to me, as they are not knowable, merely notions or the idea of family. For all photographs then, I deliberately cut off major portions of them: bodies are missing heads, heads are missing eyes, relationships are severed, and identifying any one person or place or time is almost impossible. Instead the photos are mere impressions, suggestions of ‘family,’ in the way I feel about such relationships in my life.

Continuing the idea of family that is unknowable, enigmatic, and impenetrable, in ‘Family of Strangers’ I try to express what a family photo album of birthfamily might look like

from an adoptee's perspective. Using the same metaphor of people and a history that is severed or partial, utilizing some of the same images, and also other 'family' photos, these are

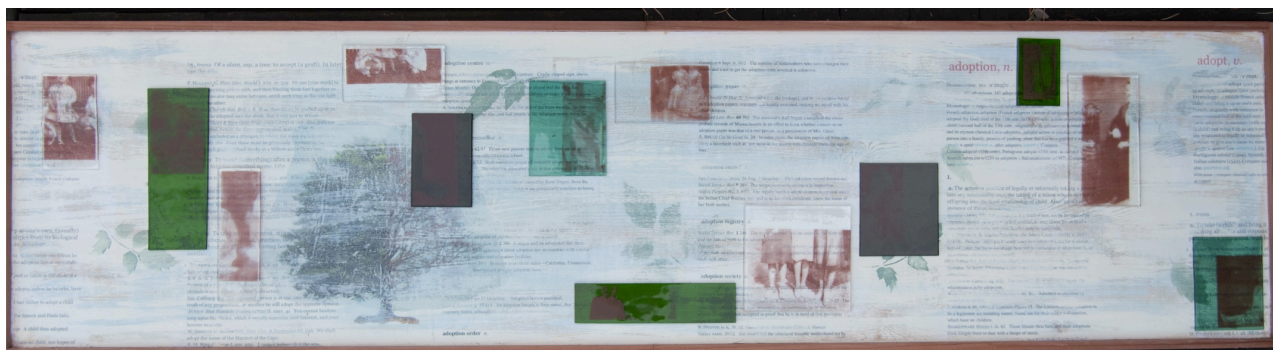


Image 6: "Ancestry" (Milk Paint, phototransfer, fused glass on wood), 2015, 13 ½" x 48 ½"

transferred, sepia image onto vanilla 'paper,' and contained in an 'album' that when opened, reveals more questions than answers. No photo is complete. They are merely impressions, suggestions of family and ancestry.



Image 7: "Family of Strangers" (Fused glass, phototransfer, findings), 2015, 9" x 12."



Image 8: "Polaroids" (Fused glass, Organic matter on Masonite), 2015, 9" x 15."

In another notion of (dis)connected family, I once more take up ideas of photograph as record, and the icon of family tree/leaves. I enlarge an extremely close up graphic of a leaf, showing its veins and its composition. I hope, however, that it is also evocative of a fingerprint, that indicator of both individuality and genetic linkage. Also included are real dried leaves, brittle and fragile, another indication of the ephemeral. As well, the leaves heritage I, and many adoptees, must live with.

The Reach for Family

*Legal authorities have taken a branch of one family tree and grafted it onto another to establish a pretence of permanence.*⁹⁹

I have a half-sister.

I am handed a photo collage of her and an old boyfriend with my mother. He is no longer 'in the picture.' *Har har*. Another of her alone with my mother. Both have bad haircuts, over-permed. I guess it's the 90's?

When I met the cousins, I am told that 'the time is not right' to tell her of this encounter. 'Maybe someday.' That my birthmother told her and her husband about me only very recently. I do not hear how the husband takes the news. My half-sister is shocked. Outraged. She wants nothing to do with me. I wonder how the fact of my existence affects hers? How her psyche has been displaced, such that she cannot come to terms with this, an educated woman in her forties.

I leave it at this for several years. Until curiosity prompts a small Internet search. I find a more recent picture. She has had the education of Ivy League and international stature, now teaches at a university in the southern United States. Do I begrudge her these advantages? I might. For now, I catalogue them. And avoid contact. In a darker mood, a whimsical mood, a vengeful mood, a drunken mood, who knows? I have an email address.

There are conflicting opinions on whether my experience is typical. According to one expert,

adoptees may find that their half sibling, who are usually much younger than they are, may suffer jealousy in the initial stages of the reunion – if the birth mother’s subsequent children do not know about the adoptee, the second born child will grow up thinking she is the first born. This child may feel displaced by the adoptee and experience confusion as she struggles to redefine her role in her family, just as adoptee must struggle to establish herself with birthmother and newfound siblings.¹⁰⁰

Journeys after Adoption concurs, “birth siblings may reject the adoptee, thereby influencing a birthparent to pull back for fear of alienating the others.”¹⁰¹ Yet Joan Vanstone’s Canadian study in 1979 found a very high sibling contact success rate: ninety-eight per cent favourable¹⁰² and Adoption Reunions Canada mitigates their original stance on difficulties between birth siblings with, “jealousy will probably be a short-lived reaction as the siblings adjust to each other. The majority of adoptees say they are well accepted by their siblings and often develop close relationships over time.”¹⁰³

I wonder how (a)typical my half-sister’s reaction is, seek out fiction that might show me a hope of change of heart. In the first I pick up, *Out of the Blue*, difficulty in adjustment to the knowledge of birth siblings is central to the dynamics of the half sisters. I wonder if this is the jealousy of my half sister. But does she understand that in hoarding the knowledge of her/our/my mother she is denying me part of myself? “Birth siblings – brothers and sisters - may never be able to comprehend that life for the adoptee has never been and never will be the same as knowing and growing up with one’s birth family.”¹⁰⁴

And what is the script for this type of encounter? In my circumstance my half sister changed from an only child, holding a position of primacy and singularity, to being one of two offspring. I changed from being the youngest in birth order to being the oldest, a role I have never played. I always knew of my existence and how it came to be; she did not. Is surprise part

of the denial and rejection? Might it pass over time? Or by existing, have I sullied her image of her mother, who doted only upon her? Does she worry that I might try to claim rights over inheritances?

And “what do reunited siblings talk about? Those most successful seem to be those who focus on their sameness and find differences interesting and not personally threatening – nonjudgmental. Sameness often leads to discovery of synchronicity... coincidences that have connected the through years of separation... the same occupation, same vacation spot, same china pattern.”¹⁰⁵ I can only speak vicariously, having never met. But I experience this synchronicity through Proquest. She is a coordinator of women’s studies and an assistant professor of English. I just read her dissertation online. She is a feminist who explores literature, art and female identity in interdisciplinary ways. She even coins her own terminology for this study, hoping others will continue the work she promotes.

It is uncanny. The parallels in our work abound.

She also writes in her dedication that she wants to thank her parents, who read to her and surrounded her with books and a love of learning from the time she was born. She indicates that they were the catalyst for her trajectory of learning, that she wouldn’t have made it without them.

I did.

(Our) Mother would die later the same year.

And I have a note that she is born one day before my own birthday.

I don’t know how I feel about all of this.

Sending a Birth Sibling a Letter

You want to make initial contact as private as possible, for her sake as well as yours.¹⁰⁶

I suppose it might be like a salesman making a cold call. It is strange to send a letter to someone you don't know. When the person you don't know is related to you, that complicates the process further. And when you already know they are predisposed against the idea, well, the task becomes one that is postponed indefinitely.

I trusted in the wisdom of "when the time was right," already overwhelmed by the meeting with blood relatives and the unleashing of conflicting emotions I cannot name. But apparently "the time has not been right" for over five years. While I might have ruminated for a while longer before acting, my diagnosis and another trip to Parent Finders gave me that extra nudge, despite the trepidation of further rejection. Not knowing if you would be rebuffed and actually being so are two different things. "In some ways what do you have to lose?" I was told.

"Right now you don't know if she would reject you. Remember, you don't know the circumstances under which she was told. The shock might have been coupled with other stresses. Your birthmother died not long after. Perhaps she was sick then and this was one more thing that seemed to have to be dealt with."

Another member added, "And does she know how to contact you?"

"No," I admitted.

"Then how do you know she hasn't changed her mind?"

A fair question. And I have begun to resent, or just realize, that again I am being passive, waiting for someone else to take the initial step. Why should these virtual strangers be the guardians of information about my own identity, the judges of what is appropriate and when?

While I had a work email address for my half-sister, dredged up from sleuthing the Internet, in this case a real old-fashioned letter seemed more appropriate. People share email addresses – colleagues, children, spouses - all may see such a letter that is so intensely private. But similarly, to what address do I send a written letter? I had thought to her work, but then was reminded that “you don’t want some secretary opening this and reading it first.” So more investigative work to try to find a home address. By figuring out the approximate drive circle to her work, armed with a spouse’s name from a published joint conference paper and associated blog, and some real estate listings, I have two plausible addresses.

I am advised to send the letter registered mail, so that I can track it, and so that the addressee must sign for it: a clever idea. No supposition that the letter could have become lost or misplaced somehow by another person.

I compose rather quickly, sitting on the outdoor wrought iron couch under the spreading maple tree I planted as a sapling. The breeze through the leaves cools the early summer heat. I gaze into the blooming garden, taking into account advice from others who have so composed letters. “Don’t reveal all, or their curiosity will be satisfied without having to write back, if that’s all they want.” “Make it non-threatening, conciliatory.” “Don’t send pictures” - I’m not sure why. “Establish what it is you want from the contact” - the barest information, health records, family history, letters or meeting, a real relationship? And then wait.

I am afraid that if I ponder too long, try to edit too thoroughly, I will lose the nerve. So a self-imposed deadline of tomorrow prompts me, before I enter Mt. Sinai hospital for my scheduled surgery. It seems somehow like an appropriate gesture before this milestone. To summarize your life, to define how you wish to proceed: what is the appropriate tone? What snippets are included, which are too intimate, too flippant, too pleading? Will she be impressed

by the diligence with which I found her, or repulsed and violated by the intrusion? Has she held onto the same kind of secrecy our mother did, never telling her own husband and child of my existence? Another hurdle to overleap. And what do I really want from this?

The letter is sent the day before my surgery. I track it online. But maybe the address I chose is a summer home, and the letter will languish until fall. Maybe I have it wrong. I did not place a return address on the outside of the letter in case that tipped some balance, an identification that caused the letter not to be claimed before being read; but now I read on the Canada Post site that this means the letter, if undeliverable, won't be returned, and thus once again I will not know if it was not accepted or simply not received. But at this point, there is really not much more that I can do.

July 2012

Dear ____:

My name is Kate. I believe from the information that I have gathered that you are my half sister.

I realize that this letter may alarm you a bit and it is difficult finding the right words to say. The information I have enclosed is private and personal and I do not want to upset anyone. I have intruded, but I couldn't let the rest of my life pass staying silent knowing I didn't try to reach you.

I wasn't sure how to approach you and decided writing a letter was the most comfortable way for me. I have wanted to speak to you for some time now, but haven't had the courage. Recently, as I will explain, my circumstances have changed, making contact a little more pressing.

For the past twenty years I searched for my birth family and after missing contact with my birthmother, my search has led me to you. I was born in London, Ontario in December, 1962 to the mother we share. I was adopted as an infant and raised in a happy home with four other siblings. Yet I had always wondered about my birthmother, whom I did not know, and what traits I might have inherited from her. As well, I have always wondered about other children born to her. As mine was a private adoption, there are virtually no records or history available to me.

I am a drama and English teacher, having once worked for a time in professional theatre, and currently am also a graduate student in arts research and education. I live in a rural community close to the city of Toronto with my husband and dogs. We like to travel and spend time at historical and cultural sites, and in nature. While I was a dancer and gymnast growing up, I would describe myself as artistic rather than athletic. My own hobbies include gardening, reading, writing, and working in stained glass. I tend to be a bit of a homebody.

I wonder if any these traits might sound familiar. I am interested in you and what you are doing, who you are as a person. I do not wish to disrupt anyone's life. I was hoping that we could exchange letters and perhaps have a phone call or meeting in the future, but only if you are willing. I will certainly respect any decision you make about this, and understand that you may need some time to think it over. I do, however, have also one request, whatever your ultimate decision is regarding further contact.

What prompted me finally over my inertia is the fact that this year I was diagnosed with invasive breast cancer, and have been undergoing this rather long journey. I have completed chemotherapy and, by the time you receive this, will have finished surgery, with hopefully a positive outcome, and then be awaiting radiation and further treatment. As you might imagine, this have caused me to re-evaluate many things, not the least of which is the recognition that time

to do things is not infinite. I would like to know whatever medical history you might be able to provide. I have no real knowledge about any inherited tendencies to any diseases or conditions, and this is difficult when dealing with health issues, especially now. In particular, I understand from the tiny bits of information I have that my birthmother had a lumpectomy/mastectomy, but I do not know what kind of cancer she might have had, or any of the factors that might have contributed to this. This would be very helpful to me.

I really hope you will give me the opportunity to get to know you. As I am on medical leave from work, and am currently in treatment, other than being at hospitals, I am usually home. There are several ways you could be in touch...

I don't know what else to say. I hope you will contact me.

Parent Finders Part 2

I do return a few more times, but feel no real connection to the participants, perhaps because I am a newcomer. I get the sense that they have had no new members for a while. I nibble Bulk Barn Chex mix and listen to the same stories in slight variation. A woman breaks down. Another dismisses the tactics of records holders, who preside over information they will not part with, or who even lie to the inquirer. "No wonder we have difficulty trusting people," she concludes. Another tells of a disastrous relationship with a half-brother, who is alcoholic and abusive: the relationship is severed. I have no news to report. The silence on my letter is a certitude. I wonder if I might try again, or acquiesce to what it appears is not going to happen.

Perhaps I have hit the limits of family.

I have investigated what I could, where I could. I do not know, had I been more readily accepted, what new or enduring relationships might have formed. And while I am saddened by all that will never be, I do reject the polarities of finding out which family is 'real': both and

neither is the correct answer for me. I do not wish to add to the over-simplification of the adoption plot. Instead I hope I have expressed as openly and honestly as possible what it can mean to be a product of a dual parentage, where many things will never be known. My individual identity, and that of belonging to groups both of blood and of design, are wrapped into each other in ways that cannot be disentangled, and cannot be disregarded. I realize that except in cases of international adoption where children may be coming from places of war, civil unrest, extreme poverty or ignorance, where records may be lost damaged, never kept or intentionally obfuscated, that openness in adoption to greater degrees is the norm. But it is a norm I will never experience, and there are many like me for whom access to information may not grant us any greater understanding of who we are and where we came from. We are a variant of the variant family, but no less deserving of at least a sympathetic understanding of the power that gaps and silences may yield.

In The Beginning,

*Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning.*¹⁰⁷

In what other ways is the story of adoptee identity told? Perhaps to start the tale of my self, I must begin at the beginning, yet immediately there is an inherent tension. Is it possible for something to be born without parents? Adoptees can say they were born, but all the details of their entrance into the world are shrouded in uncertainty; they not able to even tell their own origin story except through the mediation of another. Archetypal narratives - "Moses, Oedipus, and fairy tales - [also] give imaginative expression to our preoccupation about origins and identity,"¹⁰⁸ tales of children with unknown or questionable pedigrees. Are adoptees somehow monstrous, many having no knowledge of original parents? From where do I come? I wonder

about the unintelligibility of my origins. Perhaps my own access as adoptee to narrative authority depends on me being able to tell the story, however fragmented, of my beginnings.

The idea of no origin, no ‘truth’ takes up Foucault’s theory of genealogy:

It is not the search for origins, and is not the construction of a linear development. Instead it seeks to show the plural and sometimes contradictory past that reveals traces of the influence that power has had on truth...The beginnings of things are not in some identity, some whole, some ‘truth’, but in numerous accidents, events, oppositions; it is an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within and from underneath...So we are always ‘made up’ not of a solidity and wholeness but of the fragmentary, the momentary, the fragile, and open to dispersion ourselves.¹⁰⁹

I do not have a creation myth. I do not know the specifics of my conception, gestation, or birth. Was it a difficult or easy labour? Did my birthmother hold me or even see me before I was given away, and who controlled this decision? When did she know what she would name me? I know only after recently receiving my original unaltered birth certificate what my birth weight was, a figure that seems is the essence of a birth announcement. When did she leave the hospital and the city forever? The origin story of an adoptee does not really begin with ‘I was born’; ours is a different natality.

Province of Ontario Statement of Live Birth, January 30th, 2012. Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

Adoptive mother Jennifer Gilmore also muses

What is the narrative arc of my son’s birth and how much of that narrative bears repeating? The story of a biological child’s birth is the story of when his mother’s water broke, or how his mother was rushed to the hospital, the duration and pain or ease of labour...Our story is longer and it is shorter...Is that story—the story of my son making his way to us—not the story I should tell?¹¹⁰

The protagonist in the novel *Brother and Sister* also seeks for an origin story, an understanding her own beginnings: “I want to know where I come from. I want to know if I’m like her or not. I want to know about my father. I want to stop – not knowing.”¹¹ In textile artist Sandra Turley’s artist’s book *This Original Self* (2001) is another exploration of sudden split identity and new origin story, when the artist works through learning of her adoption only as an adult, a work I am particularly haunted by.

Image: Devore Printing, “By Eating Into Cloth,” This Original Self, Sandra Turley, 2001. Rights held by a third party and distribution is prohibited.

On the covers what looks like a close up section of a foxed, watermarked document reads with discontinuous words like “we understand,” “choose to call,” and “in the adoption,” suggesting some kind of legal agreement, the order of adoption or perhaps the official statement of relinquishment. The blotches on the text suggest not only age, but either simultaneously the disregard for the importance of the document, as it is been damaged, perhaps improperly stored, but as well its significance, like an artefact rescued from obscurity and now brought to light. As well, one wonders if the blotches came from not just external damage, but tears fallen from a mother. In subsequent pages lines of textual fragments scroll across the top and bottom margins of most of the pages with breaks and gaps, and it is not clear how the sentences, if they are indeed such, are meant to be constructed. “By eating into cloth and creating a nothingness,” reads one line; is Sandra Turley speaking of the nothingness she feels, or the nothingness that has

been left to her? When she speaks of “creating something out of an absence” not only might she be referring to the physical construction of the book, in burning away parts of cloth, but also of the absence of the birth mother and her origins. Words frame a series of almost translucent cloth cut outs created by devore printing,¹¹² further images of incompleteness, or suggesting an attempt to burn away the excess to get at the core or the truth, the artistic process mimicking the artist’s own personal journey, just as I find parallels in my artistic process, in my case fusing fragments of my life together in a kiln, in flashes of heat, or flashes of momentary insight.

Image: Devore Printing, “Absence become a Presence?” This Original Self, Sandra Turley, 2001. Rights held by a third party and distributio is prohibited.

The final pages of the book contain no fabric, but only a framed rectangular space indicating the emptiness, nothingness, absence that is present. While the stigma of adoption is supposedly a past or non-issue, this work presents us the counter-narrative: a very real struggle over the adoptee origin story, and perceptions of fragmented, missing or incomplete identity. “It’s like walking past a mirror you’ve walked past every day of your life, and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange.”¹¹³ Ghosts of who I might have been, what might have been. Ghosts inhabit my mirror. It is this tension that I negotiate as I construct my own identity and my place in, and understanding of, family, and how others consider the same.

In Lacan’s mirror stage of development, a child comes to recognize its image, but as it looks, it sees the image as an ‘other.’ A child recognizes itself, yet loses the self in the other.

This symbolic region becomes a metaphor for the adopted self. Mirrors are a negative of the positive. Things are reflected backwards, not exactly as they are – a slight shift – familiar yet strange, something not quite right.

Sisters, Spring, Date and location Unknown. Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

Adopted parents may fantasize about shared physical characteristics or personality traits with their child, and relatives, friends or strangers who may not know of the non-genetic link between parent and child may see resemblances. My sister, tall, dark haired and brown eyed, as are all my family, recalls, “We played this little game. It’s amazing the number of people who say, ‘Oh, I can see how you look so much alike.’ I’d just nod my head and say okay because you were blond haired and blue eyed and it was like, ‘Really?! Okay, fine.’ But people did that a lot of times who didn’t know you were adopted, so I always found that amusing.”

Yet real or imagined resemblance also occupies part of the adopted person’s mind. Adoptee Alexandra in *Tell Me My Name* tries to explain her feelings of intense dislocation in the simple act of self-recognition: “Why should I look in a mirror [she thinks] when I don’t know who it is looking back?”¹¹⁴ Mother Emily tries to work through a response to this, but remains uncomprehending: “Mirrors? What does that mean? Is she trying to tell me she can’t see herself, doesn’t know who she is?”¹¹⁵

The answer is yes.

I Dub Thee: The Significance of Names

You always have this knowledge of yourself, and it's very close to yourself, of fate I suppose, that you could have been somebody else, that you could have led a completely different life, that you could have had a different name, you know that you could have had different parents, a different house, different religious upbringing, political upbringing. Everything could have been different but for that moment in fate.¹¹⁶

We intuitively associate our identity with our name, reinforced in introductions, social gatherings, and in documents allowing us to become part of public record. Freud and Shakespeare both recognized the relationship between names and identity; at the baptism of infants in Christian traditions, at the ‘Reception of the Child,’ one of the first questions asked in the ritual is, “What name do you give your child?” The Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, Article 7, even specifies “the child has a right from birth to a name” (as well as, ‘as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents’).¹¹⁷ Names confirm our existence.

I made a promise long ago. My mother, in her growing awareness of the 1970’s women’s liberation movement, recognizes how her name obscures her identity. At a nurse’s college reunion she is no longer A___ W___, but partially or fully concealed by a nametag that reads either A___ Greenway or worse, “Mrs.” Greenway. While my father reacquaints himself easily with old friends, she is limited to facial recognition of women last seen twenty or thirty years previous. She takes to hyphenating her name, a small act of claiming her own right to exist separately from her husband. And she asks me never to change my name. Her request, her story, and the preciousness of a name that was not haphazardly given but bestowed, elicit a promise I kept. My surname is an essential part of my identity, and like many, I have looked up the etymology of my names.

My adoptive mother named me after her best friend, a gesture that seems overwhelmingly sentimental.

Photo of my adoptive mother and my namesake, christening, c 1963. Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

My sister remembers, “When they were talking about your name, what you were going to be called, I tried to get my head around the spelling, ‘cause it didn’t make any sense to me. I remember focussing on that. Kathryn. ‘Cause I only knew a Catherine who was Cathy. And then mother explaining about her friend and thinking who the heck is this and why is she named after her? I couldn’t figure out why you were being named after somebody I’d never met. Like I was the centre of the world. And mother explained she’ll be called Kate, it will be spelled differently and don’t worry about it.” Mother’s friend became my godmother, one whom I saw on rare occasions, but who would dutifully send a birthday or Christmas gift of romance or exotica – a delicate beaded ostrich egg lined with satin, a European fairy tale with hand-painted watercolour illustrations.

My adoptive mother also liked the cadence of Kate Greenway, alluding to the 19th century children’s poet and artist Kate Greenaway who wrote of childhood, flowers, and innocence, whose books I now collect, and who sometimes I am asked whether I am a relative of. I was to be called Kate by my family. Somehow the formality of Kathryn never stuck.

Names in adoptive circumstances have multiple significances. *Adoption Reunions Canada*, for example, suggests “closed adoptions have been the norm for so long because of our culture’s

tacit acceptance of the patrilineal order, which legitimizes and recognizes children only through the passing of the father's name to his children."¹¹⁸ Thus, like me, the simple fact of lacking a surname from a male renders the progeny illegitimate. In the case of birthmothers, as Ann Fessler notes in her many interviews for *The Girls Who Went Away*, "girls were usually asked to take an assumed name when they entered the maternity home and used this fake name with the other girls, separating the pregnant identity from the identity she would resume when she went home."¹¹⁹ It is unclear whether this psychic split was intended to actually help the young pregnant woman, who might be able to distance her trauma by relegating it to this fictional 'other' self, or whether it provided a modicum of comfort to the girl or her family with an extra layer of anonymity. Practically, it meant in later years women tracing fellow women from the institute, or children seeking information about birthmothers, were further frustrated.

Names also can be withheld in varying degrees, confidentiality, legality and choice merging, as in my case, where the name of my birthfather is missing from all official documents, and from any oral account of my adoption. I do not know whether my father was identified to anyone, and even if he was, with no genetic testing in the 1960's, he would be labelled only the 'putative' father, one who could deny his involvement. The lack of name will forever prevent me from knowing about half of my parentage, half my origin.

Another extremely significant aspect of the links between names and identity is wrapped up in an adoptee finding out what they were originally called. An adoptee learning his/her birth identity or the names of his/her birth parents for the first time will need time to assimilate and process the new information, which often elicits conflicting emotions. If part of your identity is wrapped up in your name, which name for an adoptee reflects this? Is it the name you have gone

by for years, the original name that disrupts the permanency of what you thought was your name, or does it lie somewhere in between the two?

I was not a Greenway, but a _____, not Kathryn, but a Martha, with a different middle name of Anne, not Isabel. I remember loving the name Anne when growing up; conversely Martha seemed stodgy and old-fashioned, and now I cannot disassociate the name from Margaret Atwood's chilling and efficient 'Martha's. What would it mean to have grown up with these monikers? What does a name truly denote? Certainly kinship. Belonging. I wonder why I was thusly named, if these two given names had significance, or history? I will later learn that 'Anne' is my birthmother's middle name. While not daring to keep me, she nonetheless enacted a small claim and connection: a gift. I never will know why Martha. My names become a symbol of an alternate or lost identity, and not knowing the story of my naming, another part of the story of 'I was born,' is just one of many stories I am left without.

"Giving a child a name is one of first ways parents actualize their parental role; a means of self definition for the parents – the name is a 'thread of continuity.'"¹²⁰ This has different import for birth and adoptive parents. In fact, the whole idea of naming a child you will be giving away seems to me somewhat bizarre. Names are so intimate, a form of attachment and claiming, and yet birthmothers were urged not to bond, perhaps not to even see the child. Is naming, therefore, an act of subversion or protest, a small gesture of defiance? Or is there a kind of Biblical reverberation, like the ritual renaming of Christian converts, Simon into Peter, signifying rebirth? If it is a legal requirement to name the baby for identification purposes, and to signal his/her personhood, then the elimination of that name must function in reverse. Then how are these ideas of the giving and removal and re-giving of names reconciled?

My renaming from birth to adoptive mother was equally troubled when bureaucracy intervened. Names, at once so crucial to a sense of self, can yet be so casually misapprehended by others. On several documents my name is spelled with a C, ‘Cathryn,’ a seemingly callous disregard for accuracy, and having to be corrected in the negotiations for my formal adoption papers. And my amended birth certificate spelled ‘Isabel’ incorrectly, ‘Isobel’ remaining a legal name until I found the energy to change it in my early twenties. And names are only one outward label that point to identity.

Adoptive ‘I’dentity, Genealogical Bewilderment and Adopted Child Syndrome

*Some of it must go in somewhere...Maybe from as early as when you are five or six, there’s been a whisper at the back of your head...waiting for the moment when you realize you really are different from them.*¹²¹

I realize that the very concept of identity is a disputed one. Martha Nussbaum in “The Politics of Subjectivity” states, “We believe that the different positions make an autonomous whole, but the feeling that we are constant and consistent occurs because of ideological pressures for subjects to make order and coherence.”¹²² Julia Kristeva posits that a unified concept of selfhood is a misrecognizing of a subject, that there is no coherent self, and Joan Scott suggests that we read categories of identity as “contextual, contested and contingent.”¹²³ In the film *Secrets and Lies*, this is explicitly explored in adoptive contexts: the message appears to be that “our identity is a product not of genes or fate or artful construction but of the arbitrary and accidental: coming to terms with this reality, however ugly or unglamorous, is redemptive.”¹²⁴

I know mine is a historically and culturally specific discourse of adoptive identity, yet one that has not changed as much as the forces of openness and modernity would have it. Opposition,

confrontation, and discrepancy become exacerbated with the adoptee, who knows that fragmentation is a *sine qua non* of existence.

In *Adoption – Opposing Viewpoints* adoptive identity is taken up in a different light: “adoptees are more susceptible than non-adoptees to identity conflicts in their late adolescence and young adulthood; many seem preoccupied with existential concerns and have feelings of alienation and isolation resulting from the breaks in the continuity of life through the generations that their adoption represents.”¹²⁵ Adoptees have the problem of having to integrate their social and biological worlds in ways that others do not, which may affect them to varying degrees. In the novel *Brother and Sister* for example, Nathalie, the ‘sister’ of the title, declares in what might be a case of Freudian negation, that she is not traumatized by her adoption: She asks, “Does it matter...My being adopted? Does it make any difference? Certainly not to me,” to which her brother replies, “Then that’s what does make you different. Apparently. Not feeling set apart,”¹²⁶ suggesting his split subjectivity, or the ubiquity of his self-perception as adoptee.

Marie-Christine Leps notes “individual identity is actually relational...think of identity not as origin in space, or essence in place, but rather as a series of ongoing negotiations.”¹²⁷ The problem, though, for the adoptive self, is that one *starts* with fragmentation as a base line: this is not a subconscious or unnoticed parameter, or theoretical construct: to the contrary, it is *de facto* the problem to which subjects turn their initial attention. Whomsoever begins the task of examining his/her adoptive identity begins with the overt unavoidable knowledge that large pieces are missing. As Jackie Kay herself explains, being an adoptee “you have a sense of difference quite strongly.”¹²⁸ I posit that first it is imperative that such stories of fragmented identity come to the fore in the hopes of reclaiming some kind of agency for all those whose experience might differ, counter, or subvert the norm. As Tara Fenwick explains, “Sometimes,

when we become aware of conflicts in negotiating this subjectivity, we learn about resistance and voice, about positioning ourselves as different to the dominant.”¹²⁹

Fragmentation, difference, and possibility all play in tension together in *The Adoption Papers*. Jackie Kay notes, “I think the adopted person’s identity is even more fluid than a person who is not because everything that is behind them is moving...the past is unknown to them...[and] constantly open to dreams, imagination, fantasy and interpretation. It’s something that can be re-invented: the possibilities for the adopted person to constantly reinvent themselves are endless.”¹³⁰ Fittingly, the child’s voice in the poem begins with her search for her birthmother, and her search for self to overcome a kind of prejudice from others who think that adoptees have a kind of ‘false self.’”¹³¹

Many theorists have written about adoptee identity formation over the years; the predominant psychological standpoint was the assumption of adoption’s abnormality, and thus the research conducted generally assumed negative effects and pathology due to suffering and loss, and set out to corroborate this. Identity conflict, identity confusion, lost identity, collapsed identity structures, hereditary ghosts, and identity diffusion, among other terms, have been used to discuss or dismiss adoptee identity formation. This does not discredit all of the findings: certainly the disrupting of one potential life course, no matter how early, or how ultimately successful the placement, must have some kind of effect on a child’s development, and one, especially for late discovery adoptees, that might not dissipate in adolescence or adulthood, in what David Brodzinsky and Marshall D. Schechter label “the lifelong search for self.”¹³²

Florence Clothier in 1939 wrote with a popular Freudian psychoanalytic slant of the ‘family romance’ and ‘inverted family romance’ problem adopted children have,¹³³ yet nature-nurture studies, and investigations of mental development in adopted children were conducted

throughout the 1930's and 40's, concluding average or superior intelligence for placed adoptive children, contravening researcher expectations. In 1948 Harold M. Skeels conducted a study of adoptive children with "inferior social histories."¹³⁴ He specifically selected his sample assuming detrimental effects on the child's mental development. He concluded, however, that "mental retardation" of such children is no more likely to be found than with a random sampling of the population and, in fact, there was a greater incidence of superior intelligence.¹³⁵

Over-representation of adopted children with apparent personality disorders in burgeoning post-war psychoanalytic practices prompted further research. It was Erich Wellisch's writing that began another way of looking at how adoptive children's (mal)adjustment could be explained. He published his 1952 letter to the editor "Children Without Genealogy: A Problem of Adoption" in which he discussed the maladjustment of adopted children and coined the phrase 'genealogical bewilderment' to explain this. H. J. Sants, working in the same clinic, picked up on this term, and in the *British Journal of Medical Psychology* in 1964 wrote "a genealogically bewildered child is one who either has no knowledge of his natural parents or only uncertain knowledge. The resulting state of confusion and uncertainty fundamentally undermines his security, and thus affects his mental health."¹³⁶ He used this theory to unravel why adoptees might want to search for their birthparents, which he, among others, considered an abnormal preoccupation, all stemming from this factor: "a characteristic of the genealogically bewildered...is their relentless pursuit of the facts of their origin."¹³⁷ Psychiatrist Max Frisk conceptualized the 'hereditary ghost,' a variation on genealogical bewilderment, as a way of understanding how an adopted person, and other members of the triad, might feel the 'ghosts' of what might have been follow him/her: ghosts of unknown birthparents, siblings, the lost self, the other child who might have been, the ghost of the perfect child imagined by adoptive parents,

and so forth. To strip a child of knowledge of his/her heritage was to deprive him/her of his/her 'genetic ego.'

In 1960 Marshall David Schechter wrote that most adoptees are affected by their loss, and this was the reason for their over-representation in therapy and psychiatric practice:

It would appear that children who have been adopted have potentially a more fertile soil for development of neurotic and psychotic states. The knowledge of their adoptive status, so often coming in at the time of the Oedipal conflict, can seem to prolong and actually prevent the resolution of this particular area of personality development.^{138 139}

Arthur Sorosky, Annette Baran and Reuben Pannor, active researchers in the field in the 1970's and founders of the Adoption Research Project, claimed that without information about their biological heritage adoptees "cannot form cohesive and complete identities,"¹⁴⁰ and published corroborating reports: "it would appear that adoptees feel a greater lack of biological connection and continuity than has been heretofore accepted. These feelings of genealogical bewilderment cannot be discounted as occurring only in maladjusted or emotionally disturbed individuals."¹⁴¹ Their use of the term in their widely disseminated 1978 book *The Adoption Triangle* also helped to give it currency, despite heavy criticism on their small and biased sample size and questionable scientific methods. Alexander J. Mackie, writing in 1982, also cites the term, in his discussion of how adolescent adoptees have the difficult task of integrating into [their] identity two genealogies,"¹⁴² contending that they act out because they cannot contain anxiety over these identity issues, such that a negative identity is seen as better than no identity. The term has great sticking power: in discussing the implications of new reproductive technologies in 1993, Canadian Dr. Patricia Baird, the then head of the Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technology was quoted as telling reporters, "Discovering that one of their genetic parents is a stranger they know nothing about could put children [conceived with donated

sperm or eggs] into a state of ‘genealogical bewilderment,’ the same problems adopted children have struggled with.”¹⁴³ In pursuing “the question of whether full integration of the personality is dependent upon establishing biological roots” in *Modern PsychoAnalysis* in 1998 Joan Hertz also picks up the term, and concludes “sealed records leave adoptees in a state of genealogical bewilderment.”¹⁴⁴ Despite critiques of the causal link between not knowing genetic heritage preventing normal psychological development (conversely knowing then allowing it, as an argument for opening records), and the problematic notion that a child must only belong to one ‘real’ family, presumably one of the ‘right’ genetic heritage, the concept has not entirely fallen out of favour. In *Familiar Passions*, the adopted protagonist brings up some of this same pseudo-psychology still being disseminated: “Once some years ago I read an article in one of your magazines. About adopted children. How they suffer from what’s called genealogical bewilderment. Like Hans Anderson’s ‘Ugly Duckling.’”¹⁴⁵ The author must have thought to be on the cutting edge of diagnosis, and even uses the same fairy tale as Sants did to explain the concept.

Another supposed pathology was the ‘Adopted Child Syndrome’ coined by psychologist David Kirshner, who drew on psychoanalytic theories and the writing of Marshall Schechter and B. J. Lifton¹⁴⁶ and “rediscovered this phenomenon among [his own] adopted clients.”¹⁴⁷ In appearing as an expert witness at the 1984 murder trial of an adoptee who killed his parents, and in many subsequent appearances as an authority, he suggested ‘Adopted Child Syndrome’ as a “useful framework for understanding the origins and dynamics of dissociated rage and unintegrated elements of identity.”¹⁴⁸ He posited that adoptees suffer from this syndrome, making them more prone than the general population to anti-social behaviours.¹⁴⁹

Betty Jean Lifton in her memoir *Lost and Found* (1979) wrote of her own psychological trauma as an adoptee. She claimed “the obsession to find out who you are is universal” and for the adoptee it is an attempt “to recreate yourself, to give birth to yourself under another set of circumstances.”¹⁵⁰ Unlike others, she thought, the adoptee has not “caught a glimpse, however fleeting, of his own ghosts...the adoptee is cut off completely from this past [and] suffers,”¹⁵¹ and thus adoptees are always attempting to fix the rupture or break in their narratives. Her use of the ‘Adopted Child Syndrome’ in her work helped to cement the term in the public’s consciousness.¹⁵²

More recent theorizing suggests a complexity in identity formation for adoptees, rather than assumed abnormality. David Brodzinsky’s research in 1992 suggested adopted children search for their identity all their lives, and that “adoption issues and identity emerges, wanes, re-emerges and settles again in the life course of the child.”¹⁵³ Harold Grotevant in his 1997 article “Coming to Terms with Adoption” suggests that with three important aspects of identity – self-definition, coherence of personality, and sense of continuity over time, with the interconnected issues of uniqueness and similarity - that “most of the unique identity challenges facing adopted persons are about ‘givens’ in their lives,”¹⁵⁴ rather than the choices others may have had the freedom to make. He posits that in their identity formation, coherence of the life story is a “benchmark for evaluating how meaning and a sense of integrity are constructed and maintained over time,” and permits examination of how one “makes sense of being an adopted person.”¹⁵⁵ Wayne Carp, in critiquing the work of his predecessors in 2002, observes that most of the studies and research claiming the harm adoption wreaks upon adoptees and their identity was the result of a flawed methodological approach that included biased, small and self-selected samples that produced worthless results, and wonders how they were even published.¹⁵⁶

At the same time, this is not to deny that adoption can provide some inherent differences and difficulties for adoptees and their sense of self.¹⁵⁷ As Jennifer Gilmore writes in *The Mothers*, “I’ve got adult friends who didn’t know their biological parents and I don’t know that it was better for them. They have a lot of fantasies about where they might have come from, who their parents might have been. They have to decide as adults if they want to find these people, strangers really. It can turn their worlds upside-down.”¹⁵⁸

I, too, try to speak my truth about identity and origin, in one of my earliest creations of what I term Adoption Art. I utilize the photograph I received of my youthful birthmother and try to convey the knowledge of my ‘other identity,’ the tension adoptees can feel between fragmentation and plurality. I choose a dark amber glass to image transfer the photograph, taking the sepia tones of the original many shades darker, so much so that it begins to obscure the image, suggesting the ways that the young women in the portrait, including my birthmother, are unreachable, distant or remote. This muddying effect was done intentionally, and although the acid I use to tone down the silver foiling to bronze goes further than I intended, it maintains the feeling of a historical document that is not easily accessible, and portraits of people who existed, but are unknowable. My birthmother is present, but only partially, difficult to see or access.

The adoption triangle, that iconic symbol, is alluded to in the neat squares composed of triangles on the right side of the piece, but, looking closely you can observe that their arrangement also forms rows of letters: K for my current name at the top, shifting to M for my original name at the bottom, both vying for dominance. Although all the triangles are comprised of clear glass, they are subtly textured in different ways to underline a feeling of a lack of total cohesion or unity, and this is further emphasized as the neat arrangement of triangles begin to literally fall apart as they interact with the torn fragments of the fraternity photo; I imagine the

photograph as laid on top of the triangles, eating through or separating my two identities and causing the stability of both to begin to crumble.

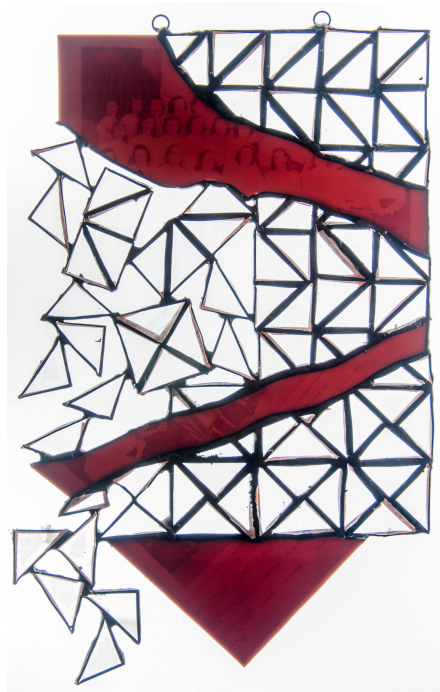


Image 9: “M & K” (Stained glass, phototransfer), 2013, 8” x 12”

To find fictive accounts that do not assume an adoptee will always struggle with self-identity, it seems that one must primarily turn to children’s fiction rather than adult fare. For example *It’s Okay to be Different* is a very elementary picture book that highlights the possibilities and even advantages of difference, rather than its ‘othering’ potential. The refrain “it’s okay to be” is repeatedly completed with various possibilities, and “its okay to be adopted” is just one more thing it’s okay to be. While it is somewhat troubling to have the difference of “curly hair” equated to the difference of being adopted, nonetheless, the upbeat intention of the book is encapsulated in its final line: “You are special and important just because of being who you are.”¹⁵⁹ For older readers a similar epiphany comes at the resolution of the young adult novel *Requiem for a Princess* where the revelation of adoption originally precipitated an existential

crisis, but ultimately the adoptee openly talks to her parents for the first time about her adoption: “I thought it mattered – now I know that it doesn’t.”¹⁶⁰ In Penny Callan Partridge’s poem for adults “Portrait in Five Parts of a Daughter of Four Parents,” she notes there are two sets of parents from which to draw your talents, inclinations, and physical appearance, or as she puts it, “four different mirrors”¹⁶¹ to the poet’s self-identity. It would be a positive step to read more stories that promoted ideas of difference not equated with problematic identity issues, while still recognizing the unique challenges faced by adoptees.

This balance between acknowledgement of difference, but not pathologizing it, is akin to finding the balance between the sel(f)ves of the adoptee; even as a subject we are not sure what story we are telling in relation to the world. Paul Ricoeur thought of the ‘self’ as a fiction through which we understand our lives, and Paris DeSoto explains the adoptee’s urge to search in similar terms: “although an adoptee’s search for origins may start out as a search for identity it ultimately becomes a search for narrative.”¹⁶² In investigating my own adoptive identity, I invoke both the ‘wound’ and possibilities in responding in my artwork.

In the first piece I start with a self-portrait: stark and unflattering, a photo I took of myself at my nadir, the barest essence and expression of ‘self’ that I can find. I borrow two metaphors: that of the ‘break’ and of the ‘mirror.’ The photograph is fused onto glass and laid onto mirror, to allow for a kind of doubling, between the self portrayed in the image and the self(ves) being reflected back. The viewer cannot help but see themselves reflected: s/he participates in this creation of my identity, as do I. I then break the image deliberately, to suggest the shattering of one version of ‘self’, and, as in the metaphor of a broken china plate, attempt to piece it back together. The shards will not quite fit or recreate wholeness, and even though I carefully collect

all the shattered fragments, something remains missing. The rupture is all too present. My husband finds this artwork disturbing.



Image 10: “Pieces of Mysel(f)ves” (Glass, mirror, phototransfer), 2014, 9” x 12”

In the second piece, there is another way of looking at the incorporation of the ‘self that might have been’ with the ‘self that is.’ Instead of being expressed in terms of breaking or shattering, this abstract piece is meant to suggest fusing together, a blending, fluidity and hybridity with additive potential rather than reductive. Instead of showing a literal self-portrait, I think about other aspects of my personality. I work organically, selecting colours of the sea that I gravitate to naturally, connecting me to my birthmother’s love of water as well. Some of the pieces are polished sea glass, found in world travels. There are bevels acting as jewels to catch and refract the light. The shapes in the collage range from geometric to more organic, some suggesting bubbles, some flora, all flowing into each other. The challenge I set for myself is to use only pieces of scrap glass that exist already, rather than cutting to fit. I feel like this is a way to represent how the pieces that were already in place for me had to find a way to be worked

together harmoniously. The gaps in between the glass are meant to invoke less the idea of separation, and more of spaces in which to grow, and a lightness of feeling. A viewer will still participate in this creation of self as there are portions of mirror in this piece as well, but they are smaller, round, and integrated into the whole. Pieces of myself will also be reflected as I look. Also incorporated are selections of text from my Adoption Order, showing my original name, my adopted name, and the parents who made this version of my life possible. I include the seal from my adoption order, the official stamp of legal authority to make this version of self. These fragments combine in a cumulative way, building upon each other, creating a different kind of hybridity.



Image 11: “Pieces of Myself Be(coming) (Mixed Media, glass, phototransfer), 2014, 12” x 12”

The artwork may be too pretty. I do not mean this piece to gloss over or negate the feelings and identities expressed in the original, or that there is an easy solution or ‘better way’ to think about these identities. I realize as well that many of my works suppress one vision of in

favour of another. But all are possible, all co-exist: in recognition of this I borrow my titles from a line in a work of a/r/tography: the first abridged title dwells only on the fissures and gaps of the self-portrait, and the double identity; with the complete line and addition of the words both ‘being’ and ‘becoming,’ I suggest there can be growth and movement, and that the gashes or wounds might also be considered openings, and possibilities.

These are only a few of the stories told of adoption in various artistic mediums, and more are needed, stories that can help to disrupt the ‘single story’ of the consequences of illegitimate pregnancy, the problems of adoptee identity, or the discourse on birth and authenticity. It is necessary to have stories told *by* triangle members, rather than *for* them, stories that explore complex, often conflicting societal messages, and expose hypocrisy, injustice, and silencing, and the forces that act upon birth/adoptive mothers and adoptees long after any particular act. Whether fiction or memoir, image or text, those narratives that seek less to label and quantify, but rather to serve as a form of inquiry, are valuable tools in complicating the stories of adoption, and in allowing us to reframe our thinking and dispel silences. Thus I continue to narrate my own personal story, and connect it to the ‘public,’ as an example of reclaiming voice.

And Then

There can be truth in madness, dreaming, poetry, or prophecy, which is higher than literal truth; this we might describe as a narrative ethic, whereby: a metaphor or a fiction might open a door that cannot be opened by approaches too weighed down by duty to literal truth.¹⁶³

If I could, I would write to you.

The aquarium pulses. Dalmatian fish glide past in schools, black and white markings flash like unread banners in the blue serene.

There is no feature, no landmark to guide me. An almost thought is no substitute for connection. My hands are as paralyzed as options. Still I write.

Both are mother, both are gone. In wisps, I see a gossamer place the colour of regret laid over the years I did nothing, said nothing, to both, to either. If I could write to you I might say I have inherited your curses: my breasts also betray me. In deep weariness, I do not know if your incremental extinguishment or unknown fate, sealed behind papers not for my eyes, is mine to inherit.

The paired Shitzus next door yap at unseen hazards: staccato angry bursts.

I might apologize to birthmother: not wanting you more, waiting too long. What could I need with a mother who did not need me?

I apologize to adoptive mother: assuming connection while undermining it. We were too much alike, despite our genetic differences.

Bitter tea like steel.

If could write you, of your ending, my beginnings.

I might send these words to an executive, a party girl, containing a secret like a kernel. Through the seasons of the body, a seed burrows its way through the crust, nourished and growing.

My other self pulls across time. As your child, I would have lived elsewhere, bathed in the rosebud arbor of an unknown grandfather, called by an alien name and sung to sleep in its cadence, soothed by strange hands and unfamiliar tongues. Instead, I have only a tithe of gifts, a benediction and ransom, and unanswered questions. Would you have been proud? Was I held, just once, maybe even with tenderness? Whispered to while toes curled, with farewells and regrets? Was there ever a moment where you thought you might have...

Ashes.

If I could write you, mother, would it change what might have been?

I know now of a wife, never sure of her own worth. As your child, when did loss transform, your own womb still quivering with stillborn children who yet lived amongst your hairbrushes and bronzed shoes? Was I consolation, packaged in white lace?

How can I write you? You are and are not.

Being real, you are no less a fantasy, that is your legacy. Through time and rain, I am and I am not: that is mine.

I might ask: being chosen, being abandoned: which is mine to claim?

But that is adoption. And that is what I cannot write.

CHAPTER 3: Adoption and Some M(other) Stories¹⁶⁴

How do we contextualize adoption and il/legitimacy? What is being asked of, and how do we institutionalize, certain kinship relationships and notions of child, family, and especially, motherhood?

*Adoption isn't a concept to be learned, a theory to be understood, or an idea to be developed. It is a real life experience about which adoptees have had and continue to have constant and conflicting feelings, all of which are legitimate.*¹⁶⁵

It is necessary to take a step back from my personal narrative and consider how adoption itself has been/is conceptualized, and the processes and the procedures that enabled, allowed, or hindered family forming in this manner. And while diversity and openness to a wide range of arrangements and understandings of how kinship functions is common today, it is not necessarily a universal truth, and it certainly was not the case for my birthmother, my adoptive mother, or even myself, in the early 1960's, in our positions as child/mother/family, and we all live(d) with lingering traces of these notions.

Historically “adoption has been susceptible to varying conceptualism of childhood, from a state of passive receipt of care, to emerging views of children as people with rights that extend beyond fundamental needs for nurture and psychological parenting.”¹⁶⁶ Prior to the Second World War illegitimate children were still being thought of in terms of the problems they presented, and the social breakdown they represented. For example *The American Journal of Sociology* in 1939 opined, “the bastard, like the prostitute, thief, and beggar, belongs to that motley crew of disreputable social types which society has generally resented, always endured. He is a living symbol of social irregularity, an undeniable evidence of contra moral forces; in short, a problem.”¹⁶⁷ Yet by the end of the war, with a universal desire to return to a stable society focussed on rebuilding family and prosperity, with pro-natalist agendas, and with the

availability of children needing parents due to the ravages of war, adoption became part of the solution to adult desires and made children subject to policies that promoted such strategies.

The post-war period through the 1980's, the time my mothers would have been subject to such practices, have particular salience for my own adoptive story, because "like language, adoption sets human beings apart. Like language, religion, governments and other cultural institutions, adoption is socially constructed, governed by laws, attitudes and unstated prejudices."¹⁶⁸ While I do not attempt to document in strict quantitative terms, and do not draw on the inclusion of statistical charts or data (for one reason because there is no central registry in Canada archiving the total number of adoption orders completed in each province, and Statistics Canada does not keep discreet records on adoption practice), nonetheless I draw upon established public and private agencies, governmental bodies and experts in the field to document how adoption is handled in North America and Canada in particular, and the implications for the adoption system over the last fifty or so years.

In Canada adoption is a jurisdictional responsibility of the provinces, rather than being regulated federally, thus qualifications and regulations vary province to province. The first provincial legislation was passed in New Brunswick in 1873, with the final province to adopt a statute being Newfoundland in 1940.¹⁶⁹ Each province has an adoption statute or legislation within a Family Services or Child Welfare Act. Adopting inter-country is thus made difficult because of the plethora of organizations and agencies involved, and because it is felt that enhanced stability and security for the child is assured if placed within their own community.

According to *International Adoption in Canada* (1984) the basic legal requirements for the adoption of Canadian-born children are that "persons eligible include a couple applying to adopt a child unrelated to them; the spouse of a parent (step parent adoptions); and single adult

persons; there must be a valid written consent to adoption signed by the natural parents or by the Director of Child Welfare if the child is a permanent ward; the child to be adopted must have been in the adoption home for a ‘trial’ period of at least six months at the time a petition of adoption is heard by the court; and the decision of the court is based at least in part on a report prepared by or under the direction of the relevant provincial ministry assessing the merits of the proposed adoption.”¹⁷⁰ These basic requirements remain unchanged.

The main approaches to adoption are public (adopting a child from the child welfare system), private (with no agencies in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Northwest Territories or Nunavut) and international, (the others being adopting a stepchild, and kinship adoption/adopting a birth relative, which proceed directly through the courts). Less common are direct placement adoptions, where birthparents choose someone they know to adopt the child, and the more recent custom adoption, which respects the customs of Aboriginal peoples in raising a child not their own according to First Nations practices.¹⁷¹ In all cases, it is expected agencies will search for a family that best suits the child, rather than searching for a child for the parents, a reversal of earlier norms.

However, the requirements and eligibility criteria in practice during the period surrounding my relinquishment were restrictive, cumbersome and often arbitrarily applied. In the 1950’s “adoption agencies set up forbidding guidelines and standards in order to choose the most ‘worthy’ parents out of the many who applied to adopt. Only those who were considered young enough, in perfect health and free from any chronic illness, financially above average, married for the first time and to a man or woman of the same race and religious faith, who didn’t have and were able to prove they couldn’t have children, were considered eligible to adopt a child.”¹⁷²

Researcher Louise Raymond noted that there were at this time advocates for the idea of dropping infertility requirements.¹⁷³ A 1966 survey of adoption agencies found “45% had age limit of 40 for the woman. The assumption, not the rule, was that the couple should be married for five years” (to demonstrate infertility, maturity and stability) and “ten societies only accepted childless couples.”¹⁷⁴ Author Rael Jean Isaac advocated for the dropping of the criterion that couples with children already be deemed ineligible and noted some inconsistency between agencies: “some agencies still cling to rigid policies; others will consider a couple a little over 40, will accept couples seeking to add a third or fourth child, and will not rule out couples where one was divorced.”¹⁷⁵ I know that my adoptive father’s and mother’s ages of over forty years old when applying through public agencies was considered a liability, and may have been a key factor in my parents’ rejection. Add the infertility requirement, which meant their existing four children were an additional detriment, and it is clear they stood little chance at all of adopting through public means.

How Much for that Baby in the Window? Stories of Private Adoption

*There was always a system of private adoption operating in Canada providing an alternative for people who were considered ineligible through the public system...[and] in both the U.S. and Canada the pressures for development of the private system were greatest when the supply of children was most scarce.*¹⁷⁶

D. W. Winnicott in 1954 wrote of the benefits of private adoption, or at least the speedy execution of the transfer of child to a new family before any psychological damage has been incurred, marking a shift in thinking. He comments the “argument against agency method professionals is delay. In order to make certain the baby is healthy, observations and investigations are made, and all this takes weeks or months, so by the time the adoptive parents have the child in their care too much has happened already in the infant’s life.”¹⁷⁷

Whereas previous experts had thought necessary time to screen and observe the child for aptitudes, health, behaviours and other risks, which meant keeping the child in agency or foster care before being assured that the child was a suitable risk for the adoptive parents, D. W. Winnicott was among those who noted that the earlier the transfer, the less potential emotional trauma for the baby. According to him, at the time “only 30% of adoptions [were] arranged through adoption societies...it often happens that a gynaecologist or a general practitioner meets during the same week a mother who is unable to keep her baby and a family wishing for some reason or other to adopt a child; what could be more natural than for an adoption to be arranged?”¹⁷⁸ This is essentially the story of my transfer.

Rael Jean Isaac advocated, however, that the process would be smoother if a professional, presumably a social worker, was engaged in arranging the adoption,¹⁷⁹ suggesting that such people were not always involved, as did Louise Raymond in 1955, who advised that a trusted lawyer could ensure private adoption was legal in the state, that the birthmother had been given adequate time to consider the relinquishment properly, that the surrender process was undertaken in proper legal form, to keep the process confidential and the identities of all parties secret, and that a paediatrician examine the baby,¹⁸⁰ again suggesting differing practices with more or less regulation depending on location and time period.¹⁸¹

In 1965 Rael Jean Isaac also noted the prevalence of independent placement, or the ‘grey’ market, which was the subject of scrutiny and disagreement.^{182 183} A great majority of authoritative texts of the time assumed the public system was the only ‘proper’ way to adopt; some states in the U.S. outlawed private adoption outright. As noted by Iris Goodacre it “seems to be the view of adoption societies and local authorities that adoptions which are not sponsored by an agency are undesirable.”¹⁸⁴ Historian Rickie Solinger comments that although on one hand

this may have been for genuine concern for unscrupulous operators, black market deals, coercion, and to eliminate any monetary transactions over dealings with human life, on the other hand, the private market was providing competition with the public market and undermining the authority and professionalism of the social worker.

In a 1966 survey, the well-being of adopted children and success of the adoption appear equal in both systems, however there were significant differences in other details of private adoption: “nine of nineteen couples were turned down by another agency, adoptive mothers were older – nine were over forty, and from a higher social class. Natural mothers were also slightly older.”¹⁸⁵ In the same study it was noted it was “impossible to say whether natural parents who chose to proceed privately did so deliberately, out of ignorance for available services, or because they found it difficult to have their baby accepted by an agency” and that “of eight children in the sample placed by third parties, four had been found homes by doctors, two by those connected with the medical profession,”¹⁸⁶ as in my own case where an obstetrician friend of my surgeon father brokered the deal. As far as I can tell, this is the only ‘professional’ who was involved.

In 1978 Arthur Sorosky noted the key difference between public and private was the relinquishment process. In independent adoptions the birthmother maintained her legal rights to the child prior to a final court hearing, before which she may have been able to request the return of the child despite months of adoptive placement, whereas in public/Children’s Aid placement the birthmother signs over all rights to the adoption agency, with the agency assuming guardianship before placement.^{187 188} There were still fears of impropriety however, as one researcher worried: “It appears the private adoption market in Ontario is functioning with limited actual controls... no one knows what fees are being charged, and there have been no investigations of any abuses within the system.”¹⁸⁹

Private adoption was usually chosen because of its focus on the placement of newborns, and for its expedited timelines, as relatively few newborns were available for adoption as compared to the number of families wishing to adopt, and “doctors and lawyers justified activities with reference to the ever-growing and hard to meet demand for white babies and with contempt for the way that licensed agencies conducted their business.”¹⁹⁰ In Canada in a 1988 study, University of Guelph professors Kerry and Michael Sobol found “incredible competition as prospective parents vie for approval,”¹⁹¹ a trend that has only become worse in present day.

My brother recalls, “We were told a matter of a couple weeks before you were brought home from the hospital. Because remember it wasn’t even sure, they didn’t know up until the last moment whether they would get you or not. Because it was a private adoption, as opposed to a Children’s Aid adoption. So as I remember, it was quite the thing. Dad’s connection with, I guess he was an obstetrician, made it possible and that wouldn’t have happened until very late. So I don’t remember it being a long period of time between ‘we’re having a baby’ and ‘the baby’s coming home.’ Maybe a week or two.

I don’t have any idea whether they visited you before bringing you home. Mom and dad were very, uh, *private* in a lot of ways about everything, so if they had gone they certainly didn’t tell us about it, which makes me suspicious that they hadn’t been to see the baby. They certainly were excited enough about it. Not in my memory I’m afraid.”

Feminist historian Rickie Solinger notes further incentives for private adoptions, especially for middle and upper class women, who, in opting for placements managed independently by doctors and lawyers, thus allowed themselves to avoid public services, institutions, and the accompanying compromises of freedom, invasions of privacy, pressures to reveal the father’s name, and authoritarian approaches to rehabilitation. With private adoption, they could obtain

medical care, shelter and food, a placement with little or no delay (as little as a few days versus potentially several months or more) perhaps even input as to where and with whom their baby was placed, with no questions.¹⁹² She noted that private agencies served more girls from college age, and girls of middle class homes, and that middle and upper class women who could afford such services chose physicians in private practice.¹⁹³ This at least partially describes my birthmother: in her thirties, well off, and making private arrangements.

While restrictions such as parents being of the same religion, being a married heterosexual couple, and falling within certain age limits have been lifted in contemporary practice, there are yet explicit and implicit ideas about suitability of adoptive parents, and these vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, and among differing agencies and public/private facilitators.¹⁹⁴ What does not vary province to province is the requirement for all potential adoptive parents to complete a home study by a qualified social worker; in addition, most provinces require some kind of readiness training.¹⁹⁵

The cost of adoption currently varies depending on the method used, from zero dollars or nominal charges for public adoption/foster care, to licensed private agencies (for profit and non-profit) whose associated cost might range from \$15,000 to \$25,000, to international adoption that can cost upwards of \$50,000 in agency fees alone.¹⁹⁶ The time involved can be mere months, but likely years, and even up to a decade, becoming more complex in international adoptions. In contrast, the paperwork for my private adoption was initiated a week after my birth, and I was told anecdotally by my father, a piece of family lore, that he has a receipt for the cost of the proceedings – of \$1 (of course, the lawyers he had on retainer, were not attributed to the cost).

Jeffrey and Jeffrey – Re: Birth Certificate Martha Anne, January 1963. Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

Claire Marcus writes in her 1981 book *Who is my Mother?* that her adoption was a private one and, like me, the adoptive parents' doctor arranged it; also like me, the new parents paid one dollar as part of their covenant. But there is no question that private adoptions incur fees. One policy paper on Canadian private adoptions stated in 1984, "Ontario's legislation has encouraged the development of private adoption agencies funded by adoptive parent user fees. The fee limit in the Child Welfare Act seems to have been ignored and no one appears to know what fees are being charged, or how potential adoptive parents gain access to private services, or on what basis parents are chosen for respective children."¹⁹⁷ It does behoove us to ask at what point legitimate service transforms into unscrupulous practice, marketplace transaction encourages commodification of children, and how profit might take precedence over people.

An aspect of current practice in private adoption is the composition of a Parent Profile given to approved licensees, which may also be posted on several national adoption websites, where birthparents can select adoptive parents for their child. If a 'match' is found, a meeting with some or all parties, depending on the degree of openness wanted, will work out an adoption plan, and include information about the birthparents' social and medical history. The birthparents must give consent, but may not do so until after the child is at least seven days old.¹⁹⁸ The child may be placed directly from the hospital or after a longer period of time. A birthparent has twenty-one days after consent to revoke the agreement if s/he changes their mind.¹⁹⁹ The adoption practitioner will subsequently make at least three home visits in the first six months

during the period of adjustment, and will make a report to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. An application is then made to the Ontario court to finalize the adoption, and a judge issues an order conferring legal parental status to the adoptive parents. Similar processes, checks, forms, agencies and approvals are in place across the provinces, varying in specifics or corollaries, but offering the same basic protections and rights.²⁰⁰

All public adoptions are handled through local Children's Aid Societies and there are similarities in procedures to private adoption. A Structured Analysis Family Evaluation (SAME) home study and Parent Resources for Information and Development and Education (PRIDE) curriculum must be completed before being considered eligible for adoption either privately or publicly. However there are also key differences. The wait is inevitably long; for example, Newfoundland currently says the wait to adopt a child three years of age and under with no known developmental issues or special needs is about eight years. That number alone cannot help but be a deterrent, and a driving force to alternate means of acquiring children. Prospective parents in Ontario adopting publicly attend an information session and complete an application, including their adoption preferences, which some criticize as akin to a shopping list. Then several resources are accessed, included the AdoptOntario program, Adoption Resource Exchange Conference, Adoption Resources Databank and Canada's Waiting Children, to locate potential matches. In all cases matches will be considered only in the 'best interests of the child.' If found, the child (as it is likely not a newborn being adopted in this process) will make several visits before being placed; thereafter a probation period of six months to a year or more ensues, including visits from an adoption worker, before the adoption is finalized in Ontario Court.

According to the *Revised Statutes of Ontario* 1960, many similar processes and timelines were in place during the era of my own adoption in 1962-63. Adoption laws were still

determined provincially not federally in Ontario, defined under the Child Welfare Act Cap 53, Part IV. A birthmother may have given signed consent to relinquish after seven days; consent could be revoked up until twenty-one days following consent, but only if the court was satisfied it was in the best interests of the child. A six-month waiting period or more of residing in the new family, with affirmations of proper conduct and living conditions was necessary, before application for an Order of Adoption.

There were also some significant differences in the considerations of eligible parenting between then and now. An 'Order of Adoption' would not be granted by the court if the applicant was unmarried, a widow, widower or divorced person, unless there were deemed special circumstances which justified such an 'exceptional measure.' There is not even mention of same sex couples. Name changes, specifically mentioned, were in accordance with the desires of the adopting parents. No training or sensitivity curriculum was required or available for adoptive parents. Interestingly, section 71 of the statute stated that if a child was born out of wedlock, that fact shall not appear on the Adoption Order (a section in effect since 1958), presumably to protect all parties from shame: how interesting that my own Adoption Order has that very fact deliberately appended in handwriting, making it unmistakably obvious, and drawing attention to my birthmother's transgression. Does that also make my order technically legally unsound?

Abuses of the statutes are dealt with in the final section 80: anyone who gives or receives payment, directly or indirectly, in consideration of adopting a child, or to procure a child, is liable for a fine of up to \$2,000 and/or imprisonment of not more than three years. The same statutes were in effect in the 1970s. In the offenses section listed in 2011 it appears that a person who contravenes statutes against payment for adoption services are liable to a \$2000 fine or

imprisonment for up to two years. It is strange that penalties for such moral abrogation some fifty years later seem to have remained static or even been lessened...

The Church, The State, and the Illegitimate Mother: Institutions of Support and Coercion

*Adoption demonstrates a sense of optimism about society's ability to engineer happy outcomes for child while also deprives birth parents of any legal parental status and historically has rendered them strangers to their children.*²⁰¹

Adoption regulation, policy and practice easily reveal inherent difficulties when government or religious authorities intervene in the construction and legitimizing of family. For one thing

legislation concerning women is frequently last to be shaped, dictated by current socially fashionable views of women, buffeted back and forth between liberal and conservative stances. When legislation exists, it's usually restrictive or punitive towards women or pitifully limited – consider law or policies regarding women's health or well-being, including abortion, birth control, sexual assault and post adoption reunions. Although these issues impinge primarily on women, they remain regulated by predominantly males.²⁰²

Adoptive mother Marlene Webber wrote in 1998 of further implications: “of all social contracts except marriage, adoption probably has the most far-reaching consequences; and orders, which are irrevocable, are made when those most affected have least control over their destiny.”²⁰³

Rickie Solinger posits even more directly that adoption itself was an economic system where unmarried white women provided the public a supply of a valuable commodity: white babies for the adoption market. She adds that the treatment of unmarried pregnant girls in the postwar era reflected a powerful and enduring willingness in our culture to use women's bodies to promote conservative political goals.”²⁰⁴ Unmarried pregnant women were expelled from school by law until the early 1970's, or likely fired from employment. My birthmother withdrew from her

editorial job in 1962 before her pregnancy began to show, and returned to the same company and was promoted through the ranks. I do not know how ‘secret’ her secret was. Was it an enlightened executive who turned a blind eye to her predicament, or because she discreetly ‘took care of it’ that she was able to pick up where she left off? Did she take an unexplained leave of absence, and then claim a change of heart? Or was this also in conjunction with some kind of political favour for her influential mother and father, her judge grandfather, stalwart community icons?

In considering struggles of the birthmother and adoptive parents, it is clear religion held large sway. While being a member of a particular religion is no longer a mandated criterion, for Christian sects, of which my adoptive parents were members, regular attendance at church used to be one of the significant determining factors of suitability for placement of a child into a ‘deserving’ family. Louise Raymond in 1955 tells us in certain U.S. States it was “a matter of law that a child who is to be adopted must be adopted into the religion of the original parents wherever ‘practicable’ but that “there has been some tendency toward the relaxation of religion requirements by adoption agencies.”²⁰⁵ Yet a decade later Rael Jean Isaac observes that the question of religion still figured largely in adoption approvals and that mixed marriages were not usually accepted.²⁰⁶ Strict provincial laws in Canada in 1965 required the religion of the natural mother be the same as that of the adoptive parents²⁰⁷ and in 1966 Iris Goodacre looked at twenty-eight eligibility criteria and found that the most common rule was related to religion: only one of ten societies would consider accepting applicants without religion. In surveys of 71 agencies “85% won’t accept applicants without some religion, 75% will only consider Christians, and 51% only accept churchgoers.”²⁰⁸

Jeffrey and Jeffrey: Proposed Adoption of Baby _____, January 1963. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

The institution of religion plays another important part in the story of adoption, with its role in providing institutions for unmarried women and babies, known as ‘maternity homes.’ Most homes were originally the projects of evangelical females acting in the interests of preserving family, helping fallen women, and bringing them back to respectability through marriage, maternity, family and faith. Homes associated with the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, various Protestant denominations such as the United Church of Canada, Presbyterian, Ecumenical, the Salvation Army and some private institutions then comprised a majority of homes long after the evangelical mission became secondary. While there were also some homes run by charity-minded individuals, it is difficult to find any listings of other religious denominations. In the lists provided from Origins Canada and several other adoption support agencies, there are no homes in Canada listed as affiliated with the Jewish faith, or Islam. This may have to do with how illegitimacy is viewed in the religious texts and doctrine of the faiths.²⁰⁹

Maternity homes, viewed as a haven or a jail, a place of sanctuary and anonymity or a place of seclusion and punishment, took as their clientele a primarily homogenous segment of the unwed motherhood: many had a whites-only policy, some refused women of a certain age, and all had varying views on the best way to house, rehabilitate and occupy the inhabitants. In

church-run homes residency was often predicated on mandatory relinquishment, and many former residents claim workers concealed information about available social assistance, even citing “mass coercion and varying degrees of abuse.”²¹⁰ Such claims have received more intense scrutiny in recent years²¹¹ and due to increased public pressure, several institutions have begun investigations by both internal and external examiners. For example, the Salvation Army is conducting an internal review into past coercive practices. One key witness, a former child welfare worker states, “the Salvation Army accepted teen mothers into their maternity homes on the condition they would surrender their baby, city social workers purposefully withheld information about revoking the adoption or the option of temporary wardship, and... unmarried mothers were punished in a Salvation Army hospital for getting pregnant out of wedlock.”²¹² The United Church of Canada, the religion of my adoptive and birthparents, and the religion I was born into, is conducting its own review, and published a paper called *Maternity Facilities: a review of historical adoption policies and practices in 2013*, which focussed in particular on the decades stretching from the 1940’s to the 1970’s, gathering information primarily from the United Church General Council Archives in Toronto, and through solicited first-hand reports by former maternity home residents. “Overall, the United Church was responsible, either solely or jointly, for five maternity homes, one postnatal care centre, and several other facilities that may have occasionally served unwed mothers.”²¹³ The paper concentrated on the dedicated maternity homes, one of which was the Victor Home in downtown Toronto, whose mandate was to provide support and shelter to the unwed mother, with “no distinction made to race, colour, nationality, language or creed,”²¹⁴ and whose residents arrived generally through referrals from ministers, doctors, child welfare agencies, family and friends, and in later years, organizations such as Planned Parenthood and Birthright. I am particularly drawn in to investigate this Toronto based

institution, as it is a logical place to conclude might have housed my birthmother, herself a downtown resident, during the last months of her pregnancy: could she be secreted away discretely under such care? Or was the proximity actually a deterrent? I try to place myself in her shoes as I read about the experience of other unmarried pregnant women of the time; it is part of making my imaginings concrete.

Residents received shelter, medical care, and training in household duties and child rearing. They were expected to contribute to daily chores, as well as often to an associated laundry service and sewing operation. There were ties to Wellesley Hospital, classes and tutors, and religious activities in the form of daily prayer, hymn sings and services. Residents were encouraged to keep in touch and “for many years a weekly dinner was held for former residents.”²¹⁵ Victor Home files contain correspondence from former residents “expressing thanks and gratitude for the services they received at the home.”²¹⁶

As increased numbers of younger, high school-aged girls arrived to Victor Home in the 1950’s and 60s, services such as group and individual counseling and more focus on education was provided. But some former residents, including prominent author/reporter Michele Landsberg, condemned United Church maternity homes, especially the Victor Home, for failing to meet the material and emotional needs of residents. Michelle Landsberg’s concerns focused on the absence of adequate counseling prior to giving birth, lack of trained staff, lack of services after birth, and a dearth of general compassion. She also called attention to an antagonistic relationship with CAS, confirmed on both sides by Victor Home staff as well as by CAS social workers. “Residents were often caught in the crossfire, further limiting their ability to access appropriate counseling and other casework services.”²¹⁷

How might my birthmother have fared in such an environment? She would have been

older and more experienced than many of the girls. She had finished her education and was in the working world in an upwardly mobile white collar job. Yet I know she also felt that she had no choice at the time. She might have been the protagonist in the short story “A Well Imagined Life,” set in the 1960’s, who cuts through any sentiment as she recalls her experiences as a girl with an unplanned pregnancy who is sent away to stay in a maternity home. She is keenly aware of how she is being hidden in an institution intent on simultaneous redemption and shame: “It’s a different time and it’s one of those homes for girls, a place for pregnant girls to go away to and have their babies quietly, a convent type thing where it is hoped that all the hushed holiness will keep the girls from heaving and grunting too loudly.”²¹⁸ The narrator here, while she cannot escape her body, struggles to maintain a sense of separate identity, one that does not include motherhood or the doctrine of the day on maternal duty, and absolution through relinquishment. The event is nonetheless traumatic, and the only benediction given by her, and to her – and perhaps to my birthmother - is “eventually you will find a story you can live with.”^{219 220}

My birthmother may or may not also have had dealings with the Children’s Aid Society, another institution aligned in part with adoption, but designated with the State. It, and the social workers who work under its auspices, has also seen its role changed over the decades, and has felt equal criticism over how it conceptualizes the ‘problem’ of illegitimacy and adoption, and social workers’ belief in the correct course of ‘treatment’ for unwed mothers. In the 1918 *Children and Youth Social Problems and Social Policy Manual for Social Workers*, the underlying tenet, no doubt derived from the evangelical origins of most maternity homes, was “it is a serious thing to relieve parents of their parental obligations. It is often our duty to persuade or constrain them to care for their own children. The family relation is not to be lightly broken.”²²¹ This may also have had to do with a belief in the importance of eugenics, thus in

good conscience a child could not be given to an unsuspecting stranger who then must live with the resultant defects.

The attempt to preserve family and keep mother and baby together subsequently diminished in popularity. In the 1930's 'progressive social workers' aligned their thinking with the theory of the influence of environment over heredity, and thus adoption was viewed in a more positive light.²²² In the United States child welfare workers laid out principles of what they called 'sound adoption practice.' They promoted the idea that they were serving the needs of the child, who required a new home, with the key concepts of investigation, matching, supervision and regulation forming the cornerstone of their practice.²²³ Birthmothers were 'counselled' as to the 'realistic' choices that lay before them. Birthparents were investigated for physical, mental and moral heritage, and prospective adoptive parents for suitability, including psychological reasons for wanting to adopt, financial stability and preparedness. Babies were also screened for defects, given a thorough medical examination, and testing against parameters of 'normality,' a process entailing months or even years.²²⁴ Once 'matched,' the adoptive family was placed under scrutiny for a prescribed period under the supervision of the professional social worker. Social workers characterized the complexity of the adoption process, and "often portrayed adoption as a risky transaction and positioned themselves as the risk-managers best able to protect adoptive parents, children, and ultimately, the larger society,"²²⁵ a process of "ongoing rationalization of adoption by social workers advancing a model of kinship by design."²²⁶

Throughout the late 1940's and 50's the religious foundation and potential 'salvation of sinners' model of previous decades was rapidly being replaced by 'modern' notions of rehabilitation as derived from a basis in psychological theory:

After the war social workers struggled to discard the two most basic assertions that had previously guided their work...these girls and women were no longer considered the best mothers for their babies. And they would no longer be expected to pay for their illicit sex experience and illegitimate pregnancy by life as ruined women and outcast mothers of bastard children. Social workers were now to offer unwed mothers a plan that would protect them from lasting stigma and rehabilitate them for normative family roles.²²⁷

Casework replaced evangelism, and social workers believed that unwed mothers could work through their problems and achieve positive and permanent change if unwed mothers came to understand and accept the necessity of adoption. But “while many agency workers did serve the mothers well, enthusiasm about the baby sometimes eclipsed focus on the mother’s human predicament...agencies did not offer follow up.”²²⁸ The use of ‘the science’ of psychiatry as a basis upon which to form social policy was fundamental from the 1940s to the 1960s. Diagnosed a neurotic, a mother could be ‘cured’ by the simple act of giving up her baby. With the help of the professional social worker, individualism could triumph over the past, and a girl could re-enter society and normal life, providing they exchanged this for a healthy baby.²²⁹

“Adoptive couples [also] had to apply for approval by Children’s Aid, another social service agency or a private worker before they could adopt. Couples underwent several interviews and supplied medical information from a family doctor, [along with] letters of recommendation from family members, coworkers, friends or ministers extolling their parenting virtues.”²³⁰ After the placement there was a probationary period, during which the social worker visited the parents, and determined all was satisfactory, before the adoption was officially legalized and a new birth certificate was issued.

I ask my sister about the involvement of Children’s Aid in my adoption, and the processes, checks and procedures she might remember my adoptive parents undergoing. She responds, “Children’s Aid thought it wasn’t a good family for adoption because there were too

many kids. I remember mother being disgusted with them: 'For heaven's sakes, we have a perfectly good income, and why wouldn't you want to adopt somebody into a family with siblings, it would show we have a track record of being able to do this,' and she was very indignant about it. And dad was *really* indignant about it. About somebody judging him. But I wasn't part of the discussion. I was just aware of it because it's something I heard on my way – and it stopped when they were aware there were small children around. But I remember being amused by it because they were so bristly about it.

I know there was some discussion about Children's Aid – you know, how they had to do those home visit things, and I remember mother telling dad to behave himself because she was afraid he would say, "Oh for heaven's sake, don't be stupid," to some, you know... I don't know in the end whether in some discussion they had with Children's Aid had anything to do with you or was just a generic thing. I don't know if they had to do a Children's Aid visit in order for you to be adopted or whether that was for some other reason. Like maybe they were trying to adopt through some other system, through kids in care already, or whether that opened it up for you to be adopted. I just remember that's the reason it stuck in my brain, because I thought it was funny that she'd said to him to behave himself."

My brother tells me, "[There were] very few hoops to jump through apparently. The Children's Aid had said they didn't think they were appropriate candidates for adoption because we already had four kids, and mom's age (forty-two). So they went through a friend essentially. I've forgotten who the doctor was. I think he was a friend of the family's and, basically, the doctor presented the idea of adoption to the mother and she said yes, and that was the only process. That's one of the reasons you don't have a lot of records about medical history and that

kind of stuff because it wasn't a process adoption. It was pretty much a 'You want to do it?' 'Yes, okay,' 'We're on the way.'"

The screening of risks post-adoption seems to have been overlooked in my own case. While my sister responded, "Did anyone visit after you were adopted? I wouldn't know. I would have been at school. It would have been during the day," my brother was more definitive: "Did anyone come check later? No, because it was private. I don't know why the mother went private, why she didn't go to the Children's Aid, for support. But, there was no follow up, as there was with a CAS adoption. We could have been beating you regularly and nobody would have ever known..."

Image: Children's Aid Society, RE: Adoption of Martha ____, July 1963. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

But later my sister recalled, "It was kind of like I got little snapshots. I have a snapshot in my head of mom and dad in the living room, having a little bit of a discussion about Children's Aid, just like a snapshot. Or a visitor or somebody coming in... Why would I even know that?"

When I asked my brother if he spoke to our parents regarding adoption as a family forming option in his own case, who completed two public adoptions through Children's Aid in the late 1980's, he responded, "Knowing that mom and dad adopted made the decision to adopt easier. We felt very relaxed about it as a result. I think if we hadn't had an adopted child in the family we might have had a lot more questions but we kind of went, 'It's Kate, come on, it's

okay.’ Literally, that was the case. It did remove a lot of questions we might had had or concerns we might have had, to see a happy normal kid who had been fully integrated into the family already there, so that made it a lot easier. Which is why I think it’s important you talk about adoption, because I think it the old style of keeping things secret only contributed to the questionable response of people to adoption. I don’t think they have that anymore. So definitely it made it easier for us.”

Children’s Aid workers and practitioners began to speak of the need for a shift in policies enacted by the social work profession back in mid century, especially around processes and delays in placement. In 1953, D.W. Winnicott was critical of legislative policies that involved delay, and “complications that arise from the effective management of the infant prior to adoption.”²³¹ He declared, “When early weeks of infancy have been muddled an infant must necessarily be a burden and adoptive parents should be fully informed.”²³² Another suggested reform that gained slow conceptual traction was the manner in which the adopted child’s background was treated. Arthur Sorovsky in 1978 points to a shift in the prescribed or desired level of secrecy surrounding the adoption process, noting by the mid 1950’s in America, the Child Welfare League “made a policy statement saying the following information should be available to adoptive parents at time of adoption: facts about the birthparents, emphasizing human strengths, which will help the adoptive parents to accept their child and eventually give him positive information about his birth parent.”²³³ During the 1960’s most agencies had some kind of record-keeping system and method of providing non-identifying background information to adoptive parents where available. There also remained, however, discrepancies between agencies, and differences in training, personal bias, efficiency and the ability of social workers, if there were social workers available for clients at all.²³⁴

There were also concerns raised over the seeming arbitrariness of selection of worthy candidates as adoptive parents, and the power held by such individuals. *In Adoption Policy and Practice* 1966 the adoption societies surveyed all had at least some untrained workers: “several had no qualified member of staff at all, although generally they were very experienced... With too many applicants, societies did things like defer for several months or only look at every 10th application. Another secretary said she automatically discarded ‘unlikely looking couples’ as for instance indicated by the style of their letters.”²³⁵ Rickie Solinger noted some concerns in the period over the conception held by many professionals and government workers of unmarried mothers as breeders and providers of a product for quick adoption, and not enough on the girls themselves.^{236 237}

Another debate about the involvement of the State in social policy emerged around the treatment of the unmarried mothers themselves, in an era where ‘single parent’ was not in the lexicon, even conceptually. In *The Unwed Mother*, a collection of scholarly papers published 1966, some of the accepted wisdom regarding the treatment of illegitimacy began to be openly criticized. Rose Bernstein, a social worker and advocate for the erasure of stigma surrounding birthmothers, wrote an article titled “Are we still Stereotyping the Unwed Mother?” In it she posited that while unwed motherhood was a violation of the social norm, when social workers spoke of the problem of how to prevent it, “We are unable to clarify what we are trying to prevent – unsanctioned sex experience or out of wedlock pregnancy.”²³⁸ She also questioned the prevailing norm of ‘treatment’: “It might be well to examine our uncritical assumption that for the mother who must relinquish her child, early separation is invariably indicated.”²³⁹ Even more startlingly she questioned the very assumption of adoption as a solution itself, “that adoption is the preferred plan for the babies of unwed mothers; that the girl who relinquishes is healthier

than the one who keeps hers.”²⁴⁰

In the eyes of authority childbearing without the validation of legal marriage did not constitute maternity or socially sanctioned procreation, thus these mothers were ‘not mothers’: “the legitimization of sex and maternity was the province of the State and the community and were not the rights of the individual.”²⁴¹ Indeed the acceptance of the authoritative view was seen to be a step in the girl’s rehabilitation.²⁴² The fight for reproductive rights and autonomy over procreation and motherhood is an important feminist victory that affected the choices of women with unplanned pregnancies, choices women such as my birthmother did not have.^{243 244}

I wonder how my birthmother was treated during this process. By relinquishing me privately, did this mitigate her involvement with officialdom? It may have eased her transition from non-mother to mother to un-mother. It is this very notion of motherhood, its function and how it is viewed that also contributes to my story, and the story of the other two key figures of the adoption triad: birth mother and adoptive mother.

Mothering and Othering

*When she renounces her child for its own good, the unwed mother has learned a lot. She has learned to pay the price of her misdemeanour and this alone, if punishment is needed, is punishment enough.*²⁴⁵

If “there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood,”²⁴⁶ what do we mean by motherhood and what is the function of ‘mother,’ in particular as complicated by adoptive processes? Motherhood as an identity still remains fraught: how are others positioned at the fringes then to view themselves?

If the young, poor, single, or gay are less fit to mother than the middle class heteronormative conventional family, as has been historically assumed, then we are absolved of

guilt when we take their children. If we believe that the mother of another culture does not love her child as much, we permit and endorse the international pillaging of a nation's precious resource and their future: their children. Conversely, if their troubles are not viewed as ours, if they do not need our help, we tell ourselves we are absolved of responsibility. If a birthmother is only an incubator, or an adoptive mother merely a pretend mother, or if all women are expected to fulfill their 'biological destiny,' we are still able to exclude, punish and label, continuing some practices and policies, and ignoring the effects of those that have been revised.

Many feminist historians such as Andrea O'Reilly note that the notion of motherhood is "continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors."²⁴⁷ But we can recognize holdovers from the 19th century "middle class ideology [that] held that all women possessed an innate maternal instinct and that this instinct was the essence of woman...[and that] the apex of motherhood depended on the successful passage through the perils of childbirth."²⁴⁸ All women were expected to be mothers, were expected to *want* to be mothers. Motherhood was instilled in females as the pinnacle of a woman's achievement, a civic and religious duty; cultural and social pressures and rewards then acted upon women to fulfill these expectations. Mother became nurturer, primary caregiver, and role model. And fundamentally it appears motherhood and biology are inextricably linked: to this day, to be a mother is to produce offspring, not acquire them. Although these values may have shifted slightly by mid 20th century, and a woman may be acknowledged as an equal partner, a wage earner, an entity on her own, ultimately she is expected at some point in her life to become a mother, and with that term comes all its semantic baggage.

If this is normative motherhood, those women who lie on the borderlands trouble these expectations. The consequences for involuntary, or voluntary childlessness are exclusionary and

derisive. In the 19th and early to mid 20th century those women who were married and of at least a certain class who did not have children were regarded with pity at the least, more likely with disapproval, suspicion and condemnation. Women who choose not to parent, especially if married and living what is regarded as a heteronormative financially secure life, are still seen as suspect, emotionally unfulfilled and less of a woman in many respects today. I know this for a fact. I experience these unvoiced suspicions, the silences following the question, “Do you have children?” which is really asking, “Are you a mother?” I also note my own haste to gloss over the awkwardness, when ice-breaker has become political elephant in the room.

Mother.

Birthmother. Natural Mother. First Mother.

Adoptive Mother. Unwed Mother. Biological Mother.

Real Mother.

The nomenclature of mothering, especially in adoptive circumstances, is problematic: the term ‘birthmother’ equates the act of mothering with biological gestation and delivery, suggesting that ‘other’ mothering is somehow secondary. “Unwed’ mother pejoratively points out the absence of religious or State normalization. ‘Adoptive’ mother feels like an unwieldy apologia, a second best status that cannot shake itself free to be simply ‘mother,’ denoting an artificially constructed relationship. “Natural’ mother invites the binaries of ‘unnatural’ mother. Is it possible to find language that complicates and celebrates rather than reduces the strata of relationships and statuses involved in family building?

I think about what it means to be a mother, have a mother, have mothers. What language do I use? I read books with titles like *Voices from the Adoption Triangle* and *Who Is My Mother?*, the adult version, it seems, of that childhood primer: *The baby bird hatches. He doesn't*

understand where his mother is so he goes to look for her. In his search, he asks a kitten, a hen, a dog, and a cow if they are his mother.

*They each say, "No."*²⁴⁹

I empathize with the baby bird. I, too, have searched, and failed. I have tried to find my ‘real’ mother, a certain kinship relationship I cannot fully explain, and which pains me to use as a term. But what terminology is appropriate? And not only the mother, but the child is referred to in questionable terms. When a child is ‘surrendered,’ it is in the language of the spoils of war. A child ‘given up’ for adoption suggests a donation of some kind or evokes a kind of disinterest that does not capture any of the emotional upheaval the mother undergoes. The child is ‘illegitimate,’ and the mother ‘unfit,’ both dependent on the sanctifying effect of an established marriage.

The language of marginalization changed over the decades of the 20th century, but the denigration remains somewhat constant. In the 1910’s, armed with newly designed intelligence tests, unwed mothers were diagnosed with ‘feeble-mindedness,’ their subnormal intelligence leading to their excessive sexual activity.²⁵⁰ With the problem of how to categorize women who could not be so labelled, and a rise in concerns over social delinquency in the newly branded ‘adolescent,’ unwed mothers transformed into ‘sex delinquents’ who were dangerously sexually aggressive.²⁵¹ When a shift from working class to middle class girls seeking help for unplanned pregnancies prevented workers from sully the sexual mores of their own social class, popular categorizations of the unwed mother included ‘neurotic’ in 1940’s, who possessed unresolved Electra complexes, subconscious desires for pregnancy, and were psychically weak; ‘moral lawbreaker’ in the 1950’s, where inability to obtain an abortion or birth control meant public shame and the need for personal redemption; and ‘social problem or mental patient’ in the

1960's, where psychology questioned why girls 'allowed' themselves to become pregnant.²⁵²

Leontine Young, a prominent social worker, promoted this new social theory in her 1950's tome *Out of Wedlock*. She believed the unmarried mother had a poor relationship with her parents and "wants subconsciously to have a child and is filling her own psychic needs in becoming pregnant...everything points to the purposeful nature of the act."²⁵³

In the 1960's, when my birthmother was pregnant, women with illegitimate pregnancies were also labelled as 'psychotic' by mental health professionals, potential grounds for a medically induced abortion. Ironically, they were also routinely rejected by hospital abortion committees who refused those grounds and "often claimed the problem was temporary, with sanity recoverable upon delivery."²⁵⁴ Rickie Solinger notes if an unwed mother opted to keep her child, she was robbing society of the 'payment' for her deviance from the social norm and "violating consumerist principles." This was then equated with "severe mental illness," which helped to prop up the policymakers' position.²⁵⁵ Rickie Solinger also identifies the seeds of further state intervention into private female reproductive decision-making in the future, warning, "the state's view of white unwed mothers as desirable reproducers which supported and, in part, created the post-war adoption craze is closely related to some anti-choice movements today...activists who want polices that will protect the foetus until they are adopted at birth by deserving families."^{256 257} In all cases was the unquestioned dogma of the period, as promoted to my mothers: an unmarried girl gives up her child because it is the 'best' solution.

Birthmother

*Birthmother. What kind of stupid-ass word is that? I know what it means and yet it sounds like such a fake word, something made up, like those sloppy politically correct words that exist just to make a fool out of you.*²⁵⁸

In the News

A woman rises

It's 1962 and therefore I know

John Glenn orbits the earth

Wilt Chamberlain scores 100 points

Sean Connery creates 007

and Andy Warhol creates a soup stir.

The first Wal-Mart opens

the Audio cassette is invented

'personal computer' is first mentioned

tuition to Harvard is \$1250 and

Lifesavers cost five cents.

The Cuban Missile Crisis begins. And ends.

Life declares cancer may be infectious.

Marilyn Monroe dies of an overdose,

Jackie takes you on a White House tour

Eichmann hangs in Tel Aviv

Martin Luther King Jr. is arrested

And Nelson Mandela is jailed

while the Beach Boys croon 'Surfin' Safari'.

Coppertone gives you the fastest tan under the sun,

and ViewMaster stereo pictures give you the world.

Mom can have a Hoover Vacuum for Christmas

Coke has a refreshing new feeling

and more doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette.

Sex and the Single Girl sells two million copies

and, of course, even single girls

can use Pursettes tampons.

It's Avon Calling, and Max Factor

and I dreamed I was in my Maidenform bra.

'Big Girls Don't Cry' is number 1.

A woman rises. A woman gives birth.

An *unmarried* woman signs a form.

But no matter how hard I look

This is not news.

What is the cultural narrative of the birthmother? It appears convoluted and contradictory, a narrative more often told about or for them, rather than by them. Birthmothers are conceptualized as somehow unnatural or artificial, for instance, because they are, and are not, mothers. They are mothers through the physical labour of childbirth but are not mothers because they do not raise the offspring borne. They are unnatural for breaching the moral order, becoming pregnant in some illicit way. They have exerted their female sexuality, often

voluntarily, perhaps without understanding of the potential consequences, as a result of lack of education about, or the availability of, birth control; or involuntarily, through pressure, coercion, or rape: thus are they victim or agent? In whatever manner they have become pregnant, they are then thrust into a series of demands and processes that if they ‘choose’ adoption, result in stigma, cloaked in the guise of rehabilitation, redemption, rescue and second chances. They are a case and a cause. Often abandoned by lovers, family, and social institutions, and sent away to mitigate shame and disapproval, their self-worth might erode to the point that they come to believe the messages of deserving punishment. Their birth experience, often their first, may be isolated, frightening, and painful, and may affect them for years to come. They are sacrificial mother as well, because they give up a child to ‘do the right thing.’ They are discouraged or prevented from further contact with their baby, given no information as to its fate or wellbeing, and then condemned for being abandoning and unfeeling. And about all of it, they are expected to remain silent.

Those women who relinquish with full agency, who may have had the means and support to keep a child, but nevertheless do not choose to parent, fall even further from the normative view of women as innate caregivers, and indeed, theirs is an untold story. They are condemned for their unnatural stance regarding supposed biological imperatives, and they problematize the notion of all motherhood as an innate desire. While once regarded as selfish for wanting to keep their babies, the same censure now seems to apply for those who wish to give them away. These women must mitigate these narratives by also remaining silent, because they fall so far outside the script of the maternal. As Frances Latchford decries, “as the stories of autonomous birthmothers are erased, so too is the political import of their decisions and experiences as sites of resistance against imperatives of naturalized motherhood and bio-essentialist notions of

family...she has a right to choose whether or not to mother her biological child, just as a pregnant woman has a right to choose whether or not to carry a child to term.”²⁵⁹ I wonder to what degree my birthmother ‘chose’ and by whose terms.

The presentation of the non-teen birthmother such as my mom, or the not unwed birthmother, is also a more uncommon story. I read of it only in 1979’s *Familiar Passions*, which follows the adoptive protagonist, who searches for and finds her own birthmother. The circumstances of her birthmother’s pregnancy are close to what I know of my own conception: “It was unforgivable really! She wasn’t a girl, she was thirty-eight – old enough, people would say, to know better. She could hardly blame youth and innocence, blame her seducer...Such an undignified situation for a middle-age, middle class woman.”²⁶⁰ With age, apparently, comes the burden of more culpability than that of the ‘ignorant’ or ‘innocent’ youth. But as always, there remains the seeming inevitability of relinquishment.

In thinking about the roles women like my birthmother were expected to fulfill, and how these messages were conveyed, I turned to vintage magazines of the period from the mid 1950’s to the mid 1960’s, surrounding the time my birthmother became pregnant and my adoptive mother miscarried. I sought out popular magazines that helped to normalize the idea of the nuclear family and the necessity that women produce children and become homemakers in order to be complete. I wanted to manipulate their messages and images in other ways, to demonstrate some of the subterranean communication that was also present, about propriety, im/morality and what happened when women transgressed the social order. I wished to find original materials, feeling somehow that using reproductions would not transmit the uncovering of such conscious or unconscious ideas with the same force. Perhaps I wished to have the same unmediated

experience encountering these messages and images as that of my mothers, turning the same pages they might have, feeling the paper in my hands.

In a vintage paper collage I explore how the life of the central figure, the dreaming young woman dreaming of her life might play out if she relinquishes her baby. I imagine her at a crossroads. The cultural messages she receives tell her she must remain pure and unsullied, fulfill her role as future wife, mother, homemaker and consumer. “[Her] whole life is before [her],” a life of love, romance, and privilege, as long as she remains true to the ‘proper sequence of things.’ Yet this woman is pregnant, and must make a decision. The anchor just behind the nurse holding a newborn suggests what the child represents to her. The two mystic apes on a shelf who see no evil and hear no evil could refer to both the messages the woman receives from outside, or to her decision to give her child to someone else in order to simplify her own life. Thus in this way she is redeemed and purified, and “[her] whole life is in front of [her]” again, her “problem solved.” The degree to which this decision is made with agency is not clear.



Image 12: “Problem” (Vintage Paper Collage), 2014.

Ephemera: Narratives from Creative Archives

*Some ephemera were deliberately preserved in family albums or attic trunks because they were beautiful images, held sentimental value or marked an event of historical importance.*²⁶¹

Throughout this dissertation I return to ephemera. I have used it to search for the truth of my origins, and I have found it as a result of my efforts. It is both subject and object, research aid and artefact. But most importantly, it is also part of the narrative of my adoptive identity, connecting me to my birthmother, as a way to move from the theoretical and speculative, to the personal; from the narratives of others, to those I find or create in my life. The use of ephemera has an inherent tension however: these are historical artefacts giving factual clues, but also an archive leading back to another type of imaginative stance.

I encounter such ephemera in many ways, particularly in relation to my desire to acquire information about the woman I never knew. I find ephemera as a result of early attempts at searching for more information about my origins when I travel to the North York library Genealogical Centre. I have a full name, and a place of residence for my birthmother from the lawyer's file. Armed with only these, I access the City of Toronto Directory from the archives. I lie to the research librarian, as is customary for those searching for birthparent information at the time. It was the 1990's. I am doing 'genealogical' research. That way, I can't be judged, or refused help, which is not uncommon. I spend all day pouring over microfilm readers, and find entries I think might be applicable. Records begin in the late 1950's. She is listed as living in downtown, with a male (possibly her father?). Her occupation is listed, changing each year: secretary, account manager, editor. Until the entries end. This is because she marries, and changes her name. But I don't learn this until over a decade later. For now, I am stopped.

As the Internet becomes a more pervasive vehicle of search in later years, I glean other bits and pieces. Very recently, following links, I find a site called ‘Adoption.com.’ On it is posted my details. But this is not information I have ever listed. I have not registered with this organization. I do not know who has posted this information, how long it has been there. Could someone else have been looking for me? This piece of ephemera is unsettling.

Ephemera is also what I receive when I press my private school connections while I can. An administrator from my school, who can make discreet inquiries, contacts ‘the old girls’ society at another private school, looking for records that might remain. Two photocopied sheets emerge, extracts from a collection of 1940’s yearbooks.

Scraps of information are given to me about my mother as a young woman. Four bullet points, some creative writing, and a graduation quote comprise her biography. She is the Assistant Editor of the school yearbook, foreshadowing her eventual literary career. It is suggested that she is academic, intellectual. There is a deprecating allusion to a foreign name, whom I look up to find is a Polish concert pianist and a politician of significance, which suggests an interest, if not ability, in music. I wonder why this specific comparison.

She is also a poet, her work published each year in the private school yearbook. The years 1943-45 are reflected in her patriotism, sentimentality, and call for the return of troops and peace, and her private school education is reflected in her classical references and emulation of notable poets. It is in her personal touches that something of herself is revealed. The Georgian Bay cottage that I later learn is part of her heritage of privilege is clearly an elemental pull. ‘Dark pines, earth-bound’ and ‘grass, frost-silvered’ decorate her poetic diction and vision of her world. Her love of the water is alluded to.

There is a small photo. I stare at my teenage birthmother. I try to find my features in hers.

Photo of my Birthmother in High School. Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

My Birthmother's poetry in High School Yearbook, 1941-5. Personal consent not obtained.

She loves dogs. For some reason I cling to this.

As I contemplated these artefacts it occurred to me that I recently travelled to my own high school reunion. While I possess the yearbook containing my photo and grad comment, it was not until I perused the remaining yearbooks on display at the reunion that I rediscovered a watercolour painting I had made. In it, are several iterations of me as a child, one looking out over an undefined vista and waving goodbye, a vista that in reality depicts a view from our Lake Joseph cottage deck circa 1964. The painting was intended as a 'self portrait.' I was struck by parallels and connections among these representations of my adoptive mother and myself at roughly the same stage, though years apart. Both women as young adults left their mark on their schools through artistic expression: painting and poetry. Both artworks had to do with cottages. Both contain the importance of the natural world, and water, to the composer. And both photographs show long haired blond girls, with, of course, resemblance in feature. It was as if I was looking at my birthmother through me, and vice versa: the girls, their work, almost interchangeable.

Thus I layer two pieces of fused glass with our images and text and include a space in between them; the viewer also gets a sense of looking through one thing to another, or looking

through gaps, or through time. The poem and the artwork are deliberately inverted so that my birthmother's portrait lies in front of her daughter's art, and my portrait lies on top of her poetry; separate yet connected.

Image: "Double Vision" (Fused glass, phototransfer) 2015, 7 ½" x 10 ½". Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

In another iteration of search and ephemera I very recently chance upon this article, originally published in 1950 in several Western Canadian newspapers, yet re-posted only a month prior to my finding it on a fan blog, of my birthmother's brush with fame. It is so strange to read such a complete story of her youthful days. It appears one of the songs she composed, was sung by a guest at the lodge: none other than Bing Crosby.

On returning home, she planned to take the song to a Toronto music publishing firm and have it published. It appears that never happened.

I had thought I had found all that I would ever know about her.

I recall another instance, perhaps the most strange and unsettling encounter, where I find elements of my birthmother as a working professional, from ephemera found late one night on the Internet not many years ago:

On Sun, 18 Jan 2009 18:09:57 -0500:

Dear archives:

“How do I obtain access to the W_____ division archive- Editorial dept - I have several boxes I am intersted in looking at.

Thak you”

In looking at this first email now I am struck and embarrassed by it. Note the haste, the errors, the lack of spell check or formatting. When I discover my mother’s name on the Internet, it is as if I cannot get the words out fast enough. Maybe I don’t believe this is real. Maybe I am afraid this is ephemeral, that if I don’t grasp the details immediately they will evaporate. The import of the information to me is clear. And I do not care about anything else except obtaining it.

It’s raining harder than I would like to drive in normally, but the file boxes have been pulled and I can’t postpone for fear they will be sent back to the archives again and I will lose the chance to find my mother. The drive gives me something to focus on, adjusting the speed of the windshield wipers until they can work no faster to sluice off gushing rain, alternating the defogger on and off, either enduring air-conditioned super chill or encroaching clouds that almost make me miss the Main Street exit. Still it’s no surprise with my sense of direction that I have selected ‘east’ and not ‘west’, and thus must navigate the maze of one-way streets with some logic and luck to arrive at the basement of the university library. ‘Find my mother’ is both an overstatement and an understatement. She won’t literally be there; she’s dead after all, as I now know. And I have no idea as to what I might find, or even what it is that I am looking for in the publishing files that have her name on them.

That’s more than overstatement: that’s a lie. I have been looking for her for a long time.

A game of ‘Clue’ is what led me to the archives. I Googled her name. Tell me you haven’t done it. You wonder just what’s out there in the ether about you. You sit alone, maybe at

night in your room so no one can see this somewhat self-indulgent narcissistic side of you. And if you find something unpleasant, it's just as well that no one else knows. In my case a photo of me and the stage management gang at Stratford, circa 1989, with big glasses and bigger hair. In her case, a cryptic listing of file box numbers. But unmistakably her nickname. And 'she' was found in the file boxes of a library archive a few hours away.

You expect a certain musty smell to libraries: it's hard to keep dust motes, mould spores, and finger oils smelling pristine. And the basement archives could be worse: they are surprisingly warm and well lit, conservatively of course, with mock Tiffany lampshades in green and amber glass regularly spaced on the long wood tables. There is only one other person seated, no doubt a graduate student working through some arcane chore. I sign in and settle down to my task. A few minutes later the archivist, a trim woman with a long black bob and a lilting accent I can't place interrupts me to introduce herself. It is she that has pulled the files and with whom I have been corresponding. She shakes my hand enthusiastically. She wants to meet me. Apparently not many people are interested in these files. Any questions and she's here to help. I nod vaguely and smile.

My own files are crammed into cabinets that don't close, so full that the tops of them are chewed off. I pretend I will cull them but the task seems so daunting I always manage to drift off for summer holidays having once again moved this to the bottom of the priority list. Steve's files are neat, though many have mysterious figures and columns handwritten in ink. She was an advertising manager and then editor. Letters are mimeographed in purple ink. Carbon paper and onionskin mix with a few notes on scrap. Lists of partygoers and contacts feature highly.

What I'm looking for is small I think. Her handwriting. Other than her signature I have never seen it. Some indication of her expression, her turn of phrase, at least in writing since I've

never heard her voice. Any personal notes. And also, a timeline – she left secretly to have me, but when? And when was she back? And what might that say about her? Career-driven? Guilt racked? Maybe even a hint of my parenthood, since the name of my father has never been revealed. “He played tennis and had a bad arm.” That’s the sum total of my paternity.

In a simple piece, “Paternity,” I will later zoom into this gap, as illustrated in my certificate of live birth, the unfilled portion where evidence of my birthfather might reside. Instead I remain a kind of immaculate conception, with no hint of paternity: he is a figure erased. The glass, like a glowing piece of paper, is overlaid with a textured glass that slightly skews the written information; thus, as for me, looking at this space will never been exactly straightforward: it is a closed opening, a pause, a void that has implication beyond the few unwritten lines.

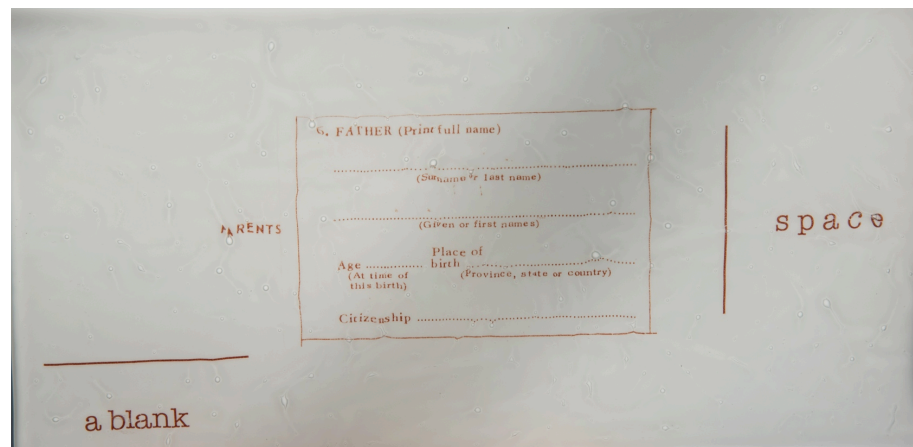


Image 13: “Paternity” (Fused Glass) 2015, 6” x 12”

He was someone she knew socially so perhaps that meant a work associate. An author. A boss. Especially since she organized publicity events, parties, and campaigns. Would there be love notes in the file? Maybe someone mentioned very frequently, more personal than informational? “Hey ____, meet me at the water cooler at 3:00?” Could the office politics stand for this? “P.S. How was your vacation?” is written on one. Signed Jack. That would be the boss.

But really, after hours of reading I find almost nothing and I stir to leave as the archive closes. I have copied some of her editor's notes on books she has helped to publish, taken notes on minute details:

She is Advertising Manager. In January 1962 she works on selling the book "Expectant Motherhood." I try not to see the irony.

June, 1962: last evidence she was working (3 months pregnant, about to show), and still selling the 'how to survive pregnancy and motherhood' book. Surely she now knows of her own predicament?

Signs her letters most often "Cheers," or "Yours very truly."

June 1964: "All mimeographing copies must be passed to ____." (First indication of return to work)

Congratulatory note on promotion to editor October, 1965.

June 1966. Editor's Note. A.A. Milne's *Prince Rabbit*: she labels it a book that even Eeyore would have to admit is not lacking in 'smack.'

This turn of phrase sticks with me. A sense of her humour?

I take digital images of all of her editorial notes, so that I might later contemplate them, parse out other findings.

June 1966. Editor's Note. Farley Mowat's *Curse of the Viking Grave*: "Much of the story's power comes from Mowat's attachment to the country and the animals."

Farley Mowat. I received *Owls in the Family* as a book prize for finishing first in grade three. It's remote, but a connection. It's all I have really.

I have to ask the archivist as I leave though, “So why exactly are these files here?” My unspoken question is, if you aren’t looking for the birthmother you never met, why would you keep this stuff?

This prompts a larger discussion of the fonds, where she is the only full time archivist. “So and So is the expert - he will be sorry to have missed me... I must have many pieces of publishing history at home from my mother.”

“None,” I say. Of course, I have not, and will not, explain the reason why.

She offers to find me the bibliography of the company and I feign interest. It takes a long time and she can’t produce it.

“That’s okay,” I say, hoping for escape.

But she “can tell me stories. We were lucky. We met lots of authors here, doing research. The founding editor came here, until he started declining. And Farley Mowat. We let him use the staff washroom.”

“Oh,” I say, (enthusiastically?). Then there is nothing more to say.

I thank her, leave with my clues, and drive back in the rain.

As Meghan O’Rourke notes describing Anne Carson’s elegy *Nox*, “a mourner is always searching for traces of the lost one, and traces of that physicality—bits of handwriting, stamps, stains—add testimonial force: this person existed. Because the dead person is absent and voiceless, the bereaved is always experiencing the lost through other things: books, ideas, language, memory. The photos, the fragments of letters, the scraps of translated language enable one to ‘show the truth by allowing it to be seen hiding.’”²⁶²

This feels true to me. I revel in finding and touching documents my mothers might have handled, created or signed. Sam Rowe elucidates some of the tensions inherent in such paper

products: they are a vehicle for thought, for centuries the prime method of recording and communicating aspects of humanity and modernity. Their power emanates from the objects themselves, the marks made on them and the uses to which they are put. Yet they also appear, in their banality and ubiquity, somehow insubstantial and ephemeral, and their apparent impending demise in the digital age makes them more so. And “the desire to get close to paper – to handle or smell it, to arrange and rearrange it, to admire its quality or examine its imperfection, to save it even when one no longer has any use for it – is always elegiac.”²⁶³

The importance of such objects, archival material, and ephemera, cannot be wholly expressed. I later manipulate these textual materialities found in the publishing fonds. The archival ephemera allows me to write not just about them, but to create with and through them, joining the private story with public evidence, giving them a *veritas* of documentary history, where archival evidence becomes part of the narrative. The boundaries between research and creation blur in the making of a hybrid form that helps to emphasize the sensory nature of working with objects of personal/public history.

In this instance, using my birthmother’s words and expressions, in the order in which they appear, in work letters, memos and editorial notes, I parse out found poems, suggesting a subtext that could have been present, an underlying psychological state of being, as she came to terms with the growing reality of her unplanned pregnancy. It is part of a conversation I never/might have had. I select “American Typewriter” font which is slightly nostalgic, evoking the typewriter she would have worked on to produce her own text and translate her thoughts onto the paper. The look of the word then becomes part of its meaning.

The first found poem states simply: “I must say I don’t like/ the answers I am getting/ it don’t look good.” I wonder what gave her her first inkling of this eventuality. One missed period? Two? Morning sickness?

The second I imagine as a conversation between her and my birthfather. It is possible that he was a work associate or one of the authors she represented. I sometimes fantasize about having a famous author to call dad. In this poem, I fancy her struggling with the confirmation of her pregnancy and the next steps she will have to take: “I told you I’d be back / crying/ figuring out/ two ways we can do this/ so far as I can see/ one/ (God Help us/ to try/ to figure out.” The ‘two ways we can do this’ suggest adoption or keeping the child; at this time in history abortion would not likely have been the second option. She must face the censure of family, social milieu, work, partner, and society at large, yet the decision is nonetheless a considered one, one that causes further anxiety and distress. She knows she will soon have to make her pregnancy known to her parents, and find a way to cope with the consequences. The parenthetical comment beginning ‘God Help Us’ is set apart by only the first bracket, as it is in her letter, the second one being omitted in error; however it suggests the open ended nature of the predicament. There will be no closure.

In the next piece I imagine her talking to me: as the foetus in her womb, and as the girl and woman across the years. How might she envision trying to explain her choice to her child, to invoke all the pressures of time and place, the horror of her upper class family. She realizes it may be difficult to understand her reasons, and yet she tries to articulate them in some fashion, while also leaving a door open to a different future, as unlikely as that is: “you may be a little surprised/ simply because/ should have been able to provide/ with time/ unfortunately/ not

permitted/ at home/ also the explanation/ I won't have the/ opportunity to acknowledge/ directly/
temporarily at least/ I can pass this on."

In the fourth piece I see her having made the decision to relinquish. I am the 'unfortunate instance' she is giving away. There is also the suggestion that this act will cause gossip and speculation that is beyond her control: "I am sending you/ one of the unfortunate instances/ I am afraid/ you will doubtless hear."

In the fifth of the series is the enactment. The baby is relinquished, yet she stills attempts an explanation or justification, and an expression of loss, 'since I' maybe alluding to her lack of options, her career aspirations, her parents' influence and statue. But this is left unstated and unfinished, as though she cannot find the words: the best she can come up with is a platitude: "here it is/ I am very sorry/ that I am going to have/ to miss it/ since I/ best of luck."

In the last poem, drawing on the knowledge that she at least thought about a search, and perhaps wrote a letter to me, I envision her years later, her mistake long past and her life established, but yet with a longing to know what became of her daughter. In equal terms it could be the words I would use in describing my own wishes for some knowledge, contact and understanding: "biographical questionnaire/ a recent photograph/ this information would/ be most helpful/ shall look forward/ hope/ pleasure/ of meeting you."

The need to find 'documentation,' the only way to make the missing story of my mother become concrete, and through her a sense of continuity, means every morsel even tangentially related to her becomes significant: those with abundance can curate, those without grasp for every scrap. I know that these poems are complete fabrications, yet to me, logical possibilities of interior monologue and private conversations, part imaginings, part wish fulfilment, but also in part drawing upon the *zeitgeist* of a time and place that did not support women who dared to

express sexuality. The use of personal ephemeral archive material in extracting such word collages is at the centre of such conceits, the intersection of the physical and imaginary. They also indicate my birthmother was good at her job: a piece of ephemera to be proud of, but also one tinged with something else. It was a job she would not want to give up, despite an unplanned pregnancy. What the ephemera does not reveal is anything of her shame, or of her loss.

The Shame Game

*It was like a darkness that I wanted to get rid of, and I thought that if I did as I was told and gave the baby up, I could get rid of the haunting darkness and the shame.*²⁶⁴

Shame is a constituent feature of adoption, and often revealed in birthmother accounts; I have to imagine the condition of my birthmother's psyche at the time, having nothing more than ephemera through which to piece together my birthmother's journey through shame and loss. She, like many birthparents, may have felt guilt at placing their child up for adoption, a feeling of unworthiness. They have failed at being a parent, being an adult, being responsible. They fear, in many cases rightly, the rejection of others. Birthmothers may reject or berate themselves for mistakes, choices, lack of choices. This is exacerbated by the veils of secrecy imposed on the process by law, family and community.

This vintage paper collage suggests the secret held by both birth and adoptive mothers. The illegitimate baby appears to be nothing more than a manifestation of sexual impropriety. The text at the top of the page reveals societal condemnation, overt or covert. The text and image at the right hand side of the page is more ambiguous. This mother/ daughter image might be of the unwed mother as a child, who laments her lack of sexual education and knowledge of pregnancy prevention. "What mother didn't tell you about" might also refer to the adopted child and

adoptive mother, who hides the secret of her daughter's origin, to prevent her from the knowledge of the original 'sin.'



Image 14: What Kind of Woman (Vintage paper collage), 2014

Advocates of disclosure wanted to see adoption discussed openly so that there would be no shame or secretiveness for either the adoptee or the relinquishing parent,²⁶⁵ and this was also part of the push to the opening of records in many states and provinces, and to reconfiguring the very methods of adoption practice, from closed and secret to open and transparent. However, as in my own case, where my search led to a birthmother in her mid-seventies, “a person searching now must realize they are searching in an environment totally different from that of the birthparents. Bearing a child out of wedlock evoked such incredible shame that denial of the whole experience became a way of survival for the birthmother. The shame and guilt followed many into their seventies and eighties.”²⁶⁶ As my own birthmother communicated, “She had no choices at the time.”

This shame, lack of choice, and secrecy is depicted in many memoirs and creative works such as the film *Philomena*, based on a true story of Philomena Lee, who is sent to a convent, forced by the nuns to give up all rights to, and knowledge of, her out of wedlock child and doomed to carry this secret, and her shame, with her for fifty years. The novel *Brother and Sister* presents two different versions of agency and regret, alternate possibilities for my birthmother: one birthmother wished she had had the means to keep her child and has never moved past the adoption; the other gave it up willingly and has moved on.

It is difficult to remember, or imagine, the climate of morality and repression women like my birthmother endured in the decades pre Roe versus Wade. Ann Fessler's 2011 documentary film *A Girl Like Her* reveals the enforced shaming of girls and women who 'transgressed' in this period. In image and text we see educational films suggesting, "All things considered, it's the girl who sets the level on conduct on a date: you create or prevent situations of sexual arousal or demand."²⁶⁷ Voiceovers from the birthmothers interviewed counter there was no Sex Ed. in school, little discussed at home, and no birth control other than the rhythm method in the early 1960's, the period of my own mother's pregnancy, unless you were married. "You brought terrible shame to your family or anyone who knew you" if you became pregnant. "If you had a child out of wedlock you weren't a good person."²⁶⁸ One woman noted "neighbours' children threw things at us in the backyard" of the maternity home, and out front of the home it was common to hear drive-bys with cries of "fucking whores."²⁶⁹

These narratives can, however, be rewritten with the potential to move past shame. In the novel *Tell Me My Name*, for example, birthmother Emily does assert herself as an adult, where she was not able to as a young woman: "I'm not quite sure how it is that the way I loved eighteen years ago has so much to do with my present ability to vote on tax bills and serve on committees

and so forth...I guess the answer lies in [the] province of public relations, which is projecting the image of private relations so that the public won't be offended."²⁷⁰ This birthmother is taking control of her own story and rejecting the enforced shame she had to endure.

I wish this had been the positive outcome my birthmother might have claimed for herself. Very late in life she confessed to her husband and child, but sadly she was not given absolution. Her betrayal was seen doubly, and her shame was reinforced. There may have been a rift, an ultimatum given. All I can attest to for certain was that she never broached the subject of contact again, and I never would meet my mother. I am her shame.

i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)²⁷¹

*There is the ever-present potential for conflict and the certainty of loss...a new beginning for one person in adoption inevitably means loss for others.*²⁷²

Another lens through which to consider the birthmother narrative: usually viewed as an event in which everyone gains, simultaneously adoption is an event that is engendered by loss. In most cases this permanent and irrevocable separation of parent and child can never be undone. The birthmother may feel relief, but this might also be coupled with anguish akin to the grief of a death, and there is no end to this grief because there is no closure to the act of giving up a child, even if a future reunion occurs. Several studies have confirmed this, such as Jeffrey Haugaard's interviews with birthmothers who voluntarily relinquished, who found that birthmothers still felt overwhelmed by the loss of children relinquished over nineteen years previously.²⁷³

Further, this grief is of a kind that is not acknowledged by society. Parents are urged to forget about their loss, ignore their pain, and to pretend it never happened. Suppressing the grief may even be a condition of acceptance back into her own family circle. Adoption researcher David Brodzinsky noted over twenty years ago that "little attention had been paid to the

psychological needs of birthmothers over the years”²⁷⁴ although he reported the beginnings of change; however it is still painful for those who often had the decision to relinquish made for them, or viewed it as the only choice, if abortion was unobtainable or unacceptable, and keeping the child due to financial hardship, ignorance of aid or support systems if available, parental disapproval, and societal censure proved too much to fight against. They may have had to try to cope by rationalization, avoidance, and denial. Adoptees also have difficulty grieving because they cannot fully understand their loss during their childhood, and, in adulthood, the loss has been sublimated for so long. Birthdays, a yearly embodiment and reminder of such conflict, acquire a double-edged significance. Adoptive mothers also mourn: their womb, their failures, their own brand of loss. All parties have been told to put it behind them.

loss of biological connection

loss of personal identity

loss of control

loss of virginity

loss of birthmother's childhood

loss of relationship

loss of biological child

loss of the idea of biological parenthood

loss of family ties

loss of cultural heritage

loss of dreams

loss of siblings

loss of genetic material

loss of connection

loss of fertility

loss of normalcy

loss of first child

loss of confidentiality

loss of native identity

loss of sexual self-esteem

loss of trust

loss of history

loss of shared destiny

loss of stories

loss of loss

loss of...

I, too, have experienced loss in my adoption. I have lost the knowledge of a birthmother. The relationship I might have had. I have lost my adoptive mother to cancer. Lost the chance to ask her the questions I never dared to in my youth.

I contemplate loss as I try to connect with a mother, even if only on a metaphysical level. Twice the journey will fail. In my journal of the day of my first attempt I write:

October. The year doesn't matter. The date is insignificant, the day is warm. It is Sunday. I leave on errands, and tuck this one in neatly, taking a camera, and an emailed map of Mount Pleasant Cemetery with a section and plot number. The arched stone pedestrian entrance gate leads almost directly to the wedged-shaped section I seek, plot numbers nailed into tree trunks, and I think, "This won't be hard." I walk to the edges to delimit my task, and think to wander in

a more or less methodical fashion through the rows, the upright stones and flat markers inset in the grass, in the same way I shop for groceries. A man playing bagpipes amidst one row seems strangely apropos, not the cliché of ‘Amazing Grace’, but with the strains of tribute, loss and dignity when words lack. I don’t want silence.

As I walk the plot numbers become increasingly worn, cast over with leaves, haphazardly placed. I reach the edge of the section, try the margins, but the promised lot number does not come, and the light wanes.

I return home.

Like many adoptees, I fantasize that my birthmother may also have experienced loss and regret over my relinquishment. I wonder if she ever wanted to keep me. If the mores of the 1960’s were different, would my life also have been?

This vintage paper collage depicts in simple image the idea that a birthmother might want to keep her child.



Image 15: “How Do You Keep (Vintage paper collage), 2014

The soft focus mother and baby is an idealized portrait, paired with the reassuring text that “It’s easy to care for baby.” But the second woman looking at the unseen viewer reveals that the reality is much different. Without support, financial or emotional, without resources, and without adequate information, “how do you keep” a child, especially one whose origin would have to be shrouded in secrecy for his/her and his/her mother’s sake? The second woman has her finger to her lips, either invoking the secrecy of the pregnancy, the secrecy of the relinquishment, the secrecy of the future adoption, or the secret desire of the birthmother.



Image 16: “Broken Womb” (Clear/textured glass fragments), 2012, 16” x 16”

I try another depiction of the story of loss, above, this time in glass art: a woman’s loss of choice or self-determination, another woman’s loss of fertility or dreams of family. Composed in clear glass fragments with slight variations in texture and pattern that are not quite matched, I suggest a ripping out of a baby from a birthmother’s womb. I wish the lines to be sharp and

harsh. I choose jagged shapes, and more triangles, to allude to things being severed, such as the family ties that will never mend, or a shattering of lives. The hole in the centre is both a suggestion of the vagina, and of the missing child. I also invoke the 'broken' womb of the adoptive mother, the one that has betrayed her. The pain of this loss is equally sharp.

I find themes of loss and regret depicted frequently in fictional adoptive constructs, a trope comforting to imagine, such as in the novel *Tell Me My Name* which opens with the protagonist writing fragments of letters that are never sent, a ritual of self-flagellation because it is her relinquished daughter's birthday, a true psychological trigger for many birthmothers: I am told my own birthmother thought of me every year on my birthday. I also believe she might have written me: being so wrapped up in a literary milieu, it seems logical to imagine she might have at least once poured her secret thoughts into words on paper. As Emily writes, "Imagining, I tried to fix her in an orderly succession of stills. In a series of time-lapse stills, she unfolded like a flower."²⁷⁵ These words haunt. I, too, might have unfurled, petal by petal, in my birthmother's dreams. How did she cope with such loss?

Loss and coping also figure into sections of *The Adoption Papers* when poet Jackie Kay writes about the transfer of the baby from one mother to the next. The thought of her daughter searching for her when she comes of age haunts the birthmother, who wonders how to explain such a feat - ("Sorry never seems large enough").²⁷⁶ Would Joyce Anne, educated and articulate, have been able to find the words to truly express her own decision-making? This is counterpointed with loss on the adoptive mother's part, her disappointing infertility and her struggle to overcome it and become a mother anyway through adoption. She, too, undergoes societal pressures, adoption being a somewhat furtive alternative to natural conception. I think

about my adoptive mother: her miscarriages, her wish to still mother a baby, her worries about ‘failure.’

My own fantasy plays out as I conjure up the ways in which my birthmother and I might have forged a relationship and overcome the loss as I read the young adult novel *Out of the Blue*. In it we have a picture of birthmother as loving mother, who wished she could be ‘the right kind of mother.’ The birthmother and child are reunited and, at first, she explains, “Part of me did want to keep her. I even bought little things, socks, and put them away. But at the same time, I knew I couldn’t really be a mother, not the right kind. There was a sad regretful place in me for years.”²⁷⁷ I think of my own ‘little things,’ the white knit booties with satin ribbon drawstrings laid away carefully, relics of my birthmother, touched by her hands, chosen for me, small treasures. But I know the gifts did not come without cost. Yet the fictional narrative I read is wrapped up much too neatly: the mother declares her birthchild is “a daughter who’s not really a daughter, and I don’t know if I’m a mother or friend or what.”²⁷⁸ It is as if playing mother to her new found daughter has merely been an amusing pastime or brief diversion, and her rejection allows reversion to ‘normal’ family life. Perhaps I have an overly romantic notion of how reunion may have played out – but reading the ending stings. I know I was not part of the ‘norm.’ And I know I was also rejected. Yet more loss.²⁷⁹

Power and Pressure: The (Un)Wanted Child

*Life history grounds...stories of personal experience in their wider social and historical context, and pays attention to the social relations of power.*²⁸⁰

Another birthmother tension I am forced to imagine is that of the desire to relinquish and the degree to which the decision was coerced, potentially more by my birthmother’s influential parents than by her own hand: a matriarch whose own father, prominent barrister and judge, was

listed in the Who's Who of Canada, her husband an established and respected businessman, they perhaps had even more at stake than their daughter. *The Passionate Eye: 40 Year Secret*, a Canadian documentary, reveals some of the forces working on single pregnant women of my birthmother's era, and how these traumatic moments might be held onto forever in secret. In most cases parents took over the decision-making, and unsympathetic medical staff dispensed little comfort or treatment to girls whom they thought deserved to "suffer for their sin."²⁸¹ ²⁸²

Many women interviewed for the film *A Girl Like Her* reiterated the lack of choice and that the nomenclature of 'unplanned' equalling 'unwanted child' was an invention,²⁸³ but "not knowing options was as bad as having no options." After birth they were "told repeatedly if you never hold him, you'll be fine,"²⁸⁴ the mantra of the time, despite protestations from the mothers. Several revealed it was mere hours after birth that a social worker came to make her sign adoption papers. It was also noted "the contract – also known as the surrender or relinquishment paper – was originally modeled after a property deed or bill of sale, especially in private adoptions."²⁸⁵ I am one of those commodities, a sought after possession. How far removed am I from other incidents of human beings bought and sold? How freely was such a contract signed? When people say, "It's not that way anymore," birthmothers rejoinder, "It's still that way for a lot of us."²⁸⁶ The lasting devastation of relinquishment is clear: of the one hundred women who were interviewed for the film, thirty had never had another child, they would not 'have other children later on and get on with their lives.' Even in the credits many women interviewed about incidents that occurred fifty years ago still refused to be identified by other than their first names. This is one of the clearest indicators that adoption continues to be a traumatic event for those who lived under the prevailing norms of shame and secrecy, and the relaxing of such norms in the present does nothing to alleviate the weight of what has been carried through the years.

The script I might prefer to follow is that of loss and lack of agency, of a mother who wished she could act in different ways. But “the assumptions of close ties between parents (particularly mothers) and children is a relatively modern one and dates from the work in the 1930’s and 40’s of Anna Freud, D.W. Winnicott, and John Bowlby on maternal deprivation. The centrality of the mother in the child’s early life has become an assumption of the late 20th century,”²⁸⁷ and narratives of adoption can reveal cultural anxieties surrounding this idea of maternal desire. Therefore to examine the construction and deployment of ‘maternal desire’ is to invite transgressions of the definitions and boundaries of motherhood, as in the short story “You Have a Baby” where the unnamed protagonist relates, “Your friends tell you that there is no greater gift than the gift of life...Thinking about this gift, you wonder if a card wouldn’t be just as nice, or maybe cash.”²⁸⁸ She pushes against the restrictions of the normative: “People tell you now you will be complete. This makes you wonder what they thought of you before. Incomplete, obviously.”²⁸⁹

Poet Sandra McPherson has more empathy for a birthmother’s decision to relinquish with full agency, a version perhaps closer to my story. In “Last Week of Winter” she writes of having lunch with a friend who reveals, “She is a secret mother...These years I’ve known her! / She gave away a child instinctively / So her own life could begin.”²⁹⁰ The poet shows compassion for a variation of her own shared experience: “Yes, I lean toward her, / My birthmother too...homework not housework...Despite motherhood threatening to push/ her body further from the desk.” She writes that the decision was best for her mother, but whom she also believes did not abandon her in her thoughts.

I want to believe these words.

The Imaginary Mother

*...the trouble is mystery and the consequent mixture of fantasy and fact.*²⁹¹

Jackie Kay recalls in a 1997 interview how, like most adoptees, she “had an imaginative – an imaginary – birthmother that [she] carried around with [her]” and rather than the birthmother giving birth to her, she wanted in her writing “to give birth... to that birthmother ...she was my creation rather than me being hers.”^{292 293}

In Elyse Gasco’s short story “Elements,” the imaginary birthmother becomes manifest. The death of the narrator’s adoptive mother coincides with dreams, imaginings or hauntings of the birthmother who ‘finds’ the daughter she gave away and torments her psychically. This story starts and ends with the line “First, we are taught not to grieve,” with the final coda reading, “And second, there is this urge to forgive,”²⁹⁴ an apt summary of subtle societal directives with regards to adoption. This is not a teary-eyed reunion full of connections: the narrator does not believe the truth of the ghost’s assertion of motherhood, perhaps due to her trauma over the recent loss of her adoptive mother. The creation of the ghostly ‘imperfect’ original perhaps allows the narrator to move on from grief over the ‘false’ mother, back to that of the ‘true.’ But there is an element of the imaginary to both mother creations, and the ghostly figure of the mother or child that was, is not only relegated to fiction.

A Ghost Story

You’ll think I’m lying. Or crazy.

I have just arrived home after the second night of parent teacher interviews. The night is dreary, rain has teemed down all day. Almost December. I would have been later but the sick dog is getting worse. He has cancer, and although the final interview was scheduled for the last

slot of the night, I plead my case to the student and she comes early. The dog doesn't like to be away from me now. Or maybe it's the other way around.

He pines, for his recently dead littermate, for our absences, maniacally blazing a trail in the grass, day or night, his nails worn down past stubs, his paw pads deeply cracked and bleeding. The regime of pills is causing him nausea; yesterday he threw up water. He shakes. Involuntarily.

I am hand-feeding the sodden, shivering creature bits of buttered white toast from a china bowl like an invalid of yore, trying to trick him into thinking he is stealing food from a dinner plate. He is not convinced. The TV has been on for company all day. Judge Judy is delivering a verdict.

The phone rings. When I have to say hello twice I am about to hang up on what I think is a telemarketer. A female voice asks, "Is this Kate?" Her voice is soft, distant, but not aged. I can't quite hear. I am not really paying attention. Snatches of words come through while the TV continues to blare; the remote is on the table and I don't want to disturb the dog nestled beside me. He is finally still. I'm distracted but trying to figure out to whom I am listening. It will become clear to me who I am talking to in a minute, I think.

The female voice continues. I think she mentions giving Bandit, my sick dog, a bath. Something about a picture. Is this my mother in law? A long-distance friend with a pre-Christmas catch up? No one identifies themselves on the phone nowadays: niceties of a bygone age, I think to myself irritably.

"He melted cheese all over... We had to do it again."

I surrender, disturb the dog, and reach to press mute on the remote.

"I'm sorry," I interrupt firmly, flatly. "Who is this again?"

"This is Kate Greenway's mother."

Silence.

The impossibility makes me feel physically ill. The voice returns.

“Maybe I’ve dialled incorrectly. I’ll try again.”

“Okay,” is the sum total of all I can think of to say before the click.

I am listed as K. Greenway in telephone records, not Kate.

Both mothers are dead.

There is no explanation for this.

“This is Kate Greenway’s mother.”

Words I wish to hear again from one.

Words I wished I heard for the first time from another.

The wet, muddy dog shivers and sighs against me. My stomach is heaving and I feel suddenly very alone. I press *69.

“We’re sorry. The last number that called your line is not known.”

Now I’m the one shaking. Yet, I hang up the phone and wait, impossibly, for a ghost to ring again.

In ghost story “Elements,” gardening is used as a vehicle for escape and a metaphor throughout the piece; the garden is a well-worn symbol in the real world in relation to adoption, suggesting a searching for roots, ideas about transplanting, nurturing, grafting and establishing or re-discovering family trees. In the story, the narrator’s almost obsessive retreat into the stability of her gardening, a seemingly tangible activity, allows her to remain in the present and future, rather than the past, where her lost birthmother resides.

I, myself, used the same metaphor in writing about both my adoptive and birth mothers, albeit chiefly about my search for birthmother, in 2007, one month before having contact with

birth relatives. It is therefore from a more imaginative standpoint than I might have today, and several years after both adoptive parents passed away - my mother, notably, from a recurrence of breast cancer - which will later resonate even more strongly with me. In it, I tried to make sense of the relationship I had with my adoptive mother, one that had been laden with emotional complexity. I should pause to note here that I have only ever referred to her as my 'adoptive' mother in this paper, for clarity. She was, and will always be, 'mother.'

Roots and Wings

I plant the tulip bulbs a spade deep in the loose sandy earth, a promise of spring. In some places the tangled overhang of dying perennials prohibits getting close enough: tansy with its pungent, faintly repugnant smell, yellow pompoms melting into brown, tall wiry stems and single needle thin leaves. Woody hibiscus stalks, now holding papery brown pods containing seeds like pieces of black gravel, a few last bubblegum pink flowers gamely braving the chilling air. Spreading geraniums, hairy oak leaves scrambling over the soil and jumbling amidst malva, pyrethrum, salvia. And the roots of all pushing deep into the earth, long fleshy taproots, mazes of hairy spider roots, roots that travel down and down and seem to have no end, or those that are threadlike and delicate, that barely graze the surface, easily bruised and chopped. Roots that anchor, transform the breath of the sun and the sighs of the rain in thirsty gulps to leaves and flowers, sepals and stamens, of such richness and diversity as to be unimaginable. The stuff of seasons, of cycles and recurring growth. Without roots you die. This is particularly apparent when you have no roots.

I had always known I was adopted. My parents, a nurse and a doctor in London, Ontario, had built up a life together following World War Two, replete with four children. There were

two miscarriages towards the end, and it became apparent that my mother, after bearing three boys and a girl, would not be able to carry another child to term. Since their lives were full and relatively privileged, they applied to Children's Aid to adopt a child with a medical defect they could hope to assist. A child with a harelip for example, or deformity of limbs. They thought that they would be able to bestow upon such a child the benefits of their profession and accrued position in the community, a wish that was met by suspicion and refusal by Children's Aid. Feeling somehow that their family wasn't complete, they turned to private adoption.

One of the pieces of lore my father passes on to me, chuckling, is "the call." On a weekend in mid December, 1962, my parents hosted a formal Christmas party. Carloads of perfumed holiday guests filled the rooms, women in oh so politically incorrect muskrat stoles and mink wraps, men sporting tweed hats and Export A cigarettes. My father tells of the glamorous gown my mother wore "leaving little to the imagination" as he remembered. Amidst Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett blaring on the imitation wood hi-fi, and the clink of ice cubes in highball glasses was a phone call taken in the study: a doctor, at Victoria Hospital, phoned to say they had a baby girl a few hours old who was in need of a family. And then the deliberately provocative birth announcement placed in the paper the following day: "Mrs. A_____ Greenway and Dr. R_____ Greenway announce the arrival of their baby daughter, Kathryn Isabel, on December 12," leaving the more than slightly hung-over guests gingerly nursing their black coffees with incredulity, hazily recalling mom's tight fitting gold floor length gown and wondering...

Wondering is what I did about my birthmother. In the void left behind, the space is filled with wishful thinking and what ifs. In my early childhood this took the form of imagining my role as the undiscovered princess from an obscure royal family, one who would show up from

Slovenia or some other little known European principality to reclaim their unfortunate cousin and bestow upon me my rightful heritage. I believe the Disney Corporation beat me to this version of my life.

Or in my adolescence imagining affinity with another troubled teen, one who broke through the taboos of the early sixties before sexual liberation and free love was the norm, especially in conservative small-town southern Ontario. Here was a girl who had suffered, who had been taken advantage of, been rejected by her family and forced to make the difficult decision to carry a baby, to remain nobly on her own. An equally romantic and indulgent fantasy, another self-identification attempt.

Then there were the years of nonchalant indifference in my twenties, despite the newspaper clippings my mother occasionally presented me with from the “Have Your Say” section of the Saturday *London Free Press*, with photos of happily reunited birthmothers and long lost daughters. “You don’t have to worry if you want to start looking for your natural mother,” my mom would assure me in her frank tones. And although I appreciated her sentiment, sentiment was not at the heart of my early adult life, where I concentrated instead on exerting my independence, the provincial girl set adrift in downtown Toronto on the edges of St. Jamestown squalor and Cabbagetown chic. But nonetheless something pulled at me. Gnawed at me.

If you’re not adopted you don’t realize. The things like wondering who you look like. Where you got your eyes from. The physiological arguments about nature versus nurture taking on more than academic meaning. Wondering if I received my love of arts, which no one else in my family shares, from my birth family. Being told I look English or Irish or Scottish and asked what my heritage is. Questioned about blank medical histories in doctors’ offices, made more urgent after my sister has a hysterectomy and my mother eventually succumbs to breast cancer.

Not knowing if I have anywhere anyone who resembles me, sounds like me. Maybe even a sibling I have never met. The desire to search grows.

So I dig. I sift through layers of bureaucracy, become mired in the detritus of the past. In my methodical way, I obediently register with the Adoption Disclosure Agency. I dig further. My father agrees to the release of information contained in my private adoption files. Saturday trips to the research library in North York to do a “genealogical search” – never admit your intent or you may be refused - revealed a few scant details about her life and family. Once I raised the nerve to drive by the house whose address in the tony neighbourhood of downtown Toronto I had obtained through cross-referencing city census records, a tip from the adoption group. Yet my sense of respect, conservative nature, or plain fear held me back from actually setting foot on the property.

Years passed and various states of the search happened, with setbacks and pauses for life to happen. I had no illusions. I knew many adoptees never find any trace of their birthparents, run into slammed doors, or find an abusive situation, one that becomes incredibly troublesome to navigate. And I am not here to wrangle through the legal implications for all parties who have a stake, knowing like any other issue of immense personal significance there is no one answer that will satisfy all. Open records? Identifying or non-identifying information? Rights of refusal? Monitored meetings? It’s only clear that the emotional toll is heavier for some than others. For every teary-eyed reunion there are accusations, guilt and recriminations, or dead ends.

For me, among other things, there was a phone call at work, out of the blue, informing me of the potential for initial contact. Passed information. To her about me. Anything I want her to know? With no time to think or plan how do you encapsulate a life of thirty years, in five minutes? Later, I was given a report.

“She cried. She was glad to hear I grew up with siblings. I had two beagles – oh my. ‘There is never a day goes by when I don’t think of that child.’ Disclosure - she had never told anyone. Contact – she needed time to think.”

Small steps. A letter handwritten on ten pages of stationary, at the dining table on a November long weekend, where I tried to express how I felt about my situation and hers. The return of the letter unopened when news of her passing that Christmas was telephoned. Condolences. Silence.

Acceptance.

I like to think of her, as I dig in the garden. She was a young woman of the sixties, bound by convention and morality. Whatever her circumstances, whatever her background, she made some incredibly difficult choices. I could have become something that entrapped her into a life she didn’t want, who rooted her and me into abuse or poverty or ignorance. Instead, I now realize I was given wings, by induction into a large family, with love enough to include one more, and roots that reach down into, while not my original history, a history of my own making, blended with my family then and the family I now create, tangled and overlapping.

I look up and see seeds, samaras and pods waiting to spread their bounty further and further afield – gloriously bursting in the larger, rounder, clearer sun of fall, silken threads and grainy specks in the breeze, winging their flight over fields and gardens far away, a surprise gift. Strong roots have given life to life. And generosity and quiet love have given me new vistas. Roots and wings.

And I like to think now I also gave my birthmother wings, to fly into her destiny the way she should, dreaming of becoming who she needed to be, feeling the winds lift her in gentle

communion. Roots connect us to the past, but wings carry us into the future, unfettered. These are the most important gifts we have given to each other – mother and mother and daughter.

I breathe in the sharp smell of the earth, and raise my eyes to the warming sun.

When I share this piece in a graduate writing class, I am told by several students, themselves mothers, that my outlook is ‘very mature.’ This surprises me, but they say that others might not have reacted so equanimously, to my knowledge of adoption, to the setbacks of my search, to the hesitancy of my birthmother regarding contact, or to the knowledge that I will never ‘know.’ They may be right, but I guess I always thought, how else is there to react? Now, when I read the piece I wrote, I cringe a little. It is so filled with sentiment, so essentially positive, and light in tone. I see negation, a deliberate avoidance to truly engage with my disappointment or my feelings of being rejected for a second time. I allow my birthmother a free pass. I allow myself a free pass. I have written a neat and happy ending for all parties.

Adoptive Mother

*The experience of adoptive mothers brings into stark relief the cultural construction of motherhood.*²⁹⁵

Adoptive mothers must negotiate their own psychological traumas.

Perhaps adoptive mothers have had to come to terms with the knowledge that they will not be able to produce genetic offspring. There may be a period of grieving and reconciliation before proceeding to the consideration of adoption, with trepidations surrounding the implications of becoming a mother through social/ legal processes rather than ‘natural’ ones. Their preparatory period is different than a biological mother: often parenthood is ushered in through a phone call, with little lead-time, after years of waiting and uncertainty. Adoptive mothers float somewhere in

between Madonna and monster: while mothers, they are not biological ones, creating a family through nurturance and choice, not sexual reproduction. They might be viewed as rescuers of unwanted children, and revered for their desire to help society's cast offs or orphans, or admired for their selflessness in bringing up 'someone else's child; in this way they are viewed as hierarchically superior to birthmothers who relinquish; nonetheless, they are not quite part of the 'club,' not having a genetic tie to their child, and, while perhaps not so much today, the relationship has been questioned. In 1924, for example, Josephine Baker, a physician and consultant to the United States Children's Bureau, wrote, "Of course you cannot at first just love any child as well as you do your own, and I am inclined to believe that the adopted child must show a higher standard of character and make 'good' in a far better way than a natural child to be accepted."²⁹⁶ I wonder to what degree this maxim was ingrained subconsciously through subsequent decades.

With the social imperative for women to bear children, if biological means are not available (and to opt to not have more children, or not have a child at all is apparently unthinkable or undesirable) women must become mothers through alternate means; by definition this makes them 'other,' part of a minority or deviant group. It became evident in my research that in most artworks the connection of mother and child is emphasized only through biology and genetics, the maternal body idealized as the primal and perhaps sole form of mothering. As noted by Sarah-Vaughan Brakman and Sally J. Scholz

among the different elements of a maternity grounded in the biologic paradigm, one might find a claim for the existence of a natural connection or bond between mother and child, a plea for the inherent beauty of the pregnancy experience, an appeal to the creative power of the maternal body, or even an assertion regarding the necessity of a genetic connection. When taken individually as descriptive elements to a particular situation, each of these might provide valuable narrative detail that conveys a mother's personal experience. When the elements are universalized, however, they

lose their status as mere personal description and become normative values of the maternal experience.²⁹⁷

What does this do for those who are mothers through adoption? Or for the suggestions of the primacy of the genetic bond for children who are adopted? Is embodied maternity the only maternity that counts? The biological is not the only way for a family to be created, yet artistic images and cultural narratives appear to insist on this basic paradigm, excluding those who desire to become mothers by other means, such as through adoption.

What prompts a woman to create a family through design rather than biology?

Researchers have attempted to decode this question. A 1976 study in *Adoption Quarterly* “Who Seeks to Adopt?” noted that the likelihood increased with “increased income, educational attainment and length of time since a woman’s last pregnancy,”²⁹⁸ but there are no definitive answers. In many cases adoption in order to become a mother comes after problems with their own fertility, and in the early 20th century with a declining birthrate, “doctors often blamed women for their fertility problems, arguing they had brought on their childlessness by too much education or a stubborn unwillingness to accept their own womanly role.”²⁹⁹ Such attitudes are still reflected in relatively contemporary novels: in *Tell Me My Name* the adoptive mother relates the judgment of society on her inability to produce offspring: “that we didn’t have a baby. It’s my fault. Nobody knows why, but it is. They can’t find any real reason why I can’t have a baby. They said it must be hidden in my mind somewhere, that I didn’t really want a baby... What kind of woman wouldn’t want a child?”³⁰⁰ With the current complications of private adoption as part of a marketplace in international adoptions (as Jennifer Gilmore’s protagonist confesses, “We waited for the social workers to illuminate us about what countries we might plunder for a baby”),³⁰¹ where privilege and power comes even more sharply into focus, ‘adoptive mother’ is

further complicated, and plunges down along a shaky moral continuum from desperate to morally suspect.

In more recent years, in options not previously available, they may or may not have had the means or inclination to try assisted reproductive technologies or surrogacy, pushing adoption as an option even further down the list of acceptable alternatives. Such options allow an adoptive mother to claim some kind of real biological tie to offspring, or to have the ability to experience childbirth, thus offsetting the anxieties of not being a ‘real’ mother.

My brother tells me something of my adoptive mother’s story: “Before you were born, they told us they were adopting you. Because of course you came right from the hospital to mom and dad’s. We were told at home. “We’re excited. We’re going to have another child.” I don’t know if you knew that mom had had several miscarriages. She *really* wanted another child, so she was really excited about getting you. I think it was probably at dinner one night, but it’s pretty hazy.”

My sister continues, “Had they talked about it before? No, not publicly with us. I mean, mom hadn’t talked about her miscarriages really. It’s only from slight indications that I now know she’d had miscarriages.

I know that mom had a miscarriage between you and _____. I know that they did want another child and I know she wanted a girl. So I think it was just she shouldn’t have any more kids naturally but did want another child so adoption was the logical route for that. I don’t know whether they would have adopted again. Six kids? No idea. Even when mom was pregnant, there wasn’t a lot of discussion about pregnancy – that’s that era right? It just sort of dawns on you that, oh she’s pregnant, oh there’s a baby. Oh, there’s an adoption, oh, there’s a baby. It just wasn’t discussed. And I don’t know whether it was not discussed because it was...it wasn’t that

there was something to hide, it was just we don't talk about things with kids, because it wasn't kids' business."

And thus my mother became a mother for the last time, carrying a wish rather than a baby.

Adoptive mothers are often perceived, to varying degrees, as insecure about their role as mother: gatekeepers, jealous of original mothers, holders of secrets. "The resistance of legislatures and social agencies to restructure the adoption process and to bring about more aspects of openness in adoption has also been due to their fear that adoptive parents will lose the love and loyalty of their children if the latter establish contact with their biological parents."³⁰² I cannot help but think my adoptive mother harboured some such feelings, even if never vocalized. The short story "Mother: Not a True Story," haunting by its very title, is recounted from one such adoptive mother's perspective, one who loves her daughter so fiercely she is willing to make up details about the daughter's birthmother to soothe her daughter's feelings of abandonment, and allay her desire to search. She concocts the imaginary portrait of a birthmother to permit closure for her daughter, but also to ensure her own 'rightful' place. The story incorporates prevalent official social theory of the period, but also the tensions of the personal:

It was Mother who wondered...what the purpose was of telling her daughter about her adoption. At the time, the newest books, the most conscientious, striving social workers, seemed to concur that honesty about the child's adoption was the best way to go...What a crock, thought Mother, what nerve, to imagine that half a story was better than no story at all, that one tiny thread of plot could substitute for all that was missing.³⁰³

She also now becomes angry with the imagined birthmother: "Mother thinks of her daughter's original mother and thinks this: Stupid, stupid girl. Why couldn't she have left her daughter something? A letter, a glove, a piece of her stupid hair. Was she a moron? A simpleton?"³⁰⁴ The importance of such bequeathments, such ephemera, cannot be under-estimated: my layette,

bequeathed to me by a mother I never knew, is a gift beyond measure. It lies carefully preserved, my relic of another mother who remains my own fairy tale. But also the kindness and generosity of my adoptive mother is profound, in the symbolic gesture she makes because she has no other recourse: she has no information about my birthmother. Yet she still reaches out to the universe. And only she and I will ever know. How I wish Joyce Anne could read her words.

My adoptive mother kept the layette I was left in, in pristine condition - rough woollen grey and yellow fringed blanket, cream knit beribboned dress edged in delicate lace, handmade in Italy, with matching bonnet and booties, saved carefully in a cedar chest constructed by her own grandfather.

And tucked into the lid of the chest a small folded note to a woman she knew would likely never receive it: "These were on Kate when we brought her home from the hospital. They were supplied by her natural mother. God bless her wherever she is and our thanks for allowing us to share her baby."

From time to time now I sit on the floor, pull these out of my own linen closet, and remember the mother I knew and the mother I didn't.

My adoptive mother and I squabbled frequently over the years: over broken promises and retractions, things said or not done, ways of being in the world at odds with each other's perceptions. Yet through it all was love. I think now that, despite having no genetic tie, nonetheless we possessed many of the same fissures and faults that caused us to brush up against each other with stiffness, maybe not wishing to recognize in the other, the self. In this, we may be no different than any other combination of mother and daughter. It is hard to tell.

And here is the story I penned. In light of my own encounter with cancer, it seems now even more poignant, filled with loss.

This is a Story (not) About

Things I kept

A vanilla-coloured rectangle of cardboard. Taped to it, a short piece of music: “The Etude. Viennese Refrain. Folk song.”

Certain evenings she played it: haltingly, as she tried to complete the chords; gently, so as not to draw attention. I would like to hear it played again. I do not remember the melody. I wonder if it is a waltz.

A red sweater with black and gold buttons that I wear at Christmas, a small hole eaten away by moths on the right sleeve. And an outrageous cruise outfit I could never wear: a tube top of brown sequins and a ruffled skirt in shiny patches of copper and pewter. A dancing dress no doubt.

She loved dancing.

Things she drank

Not much. Very feminine choices - a Pink Lady or Grasshopper, gin-based cocktails of a bygone age. Booze in pastel colours. She also liked crème de menthe parfaits. Listerine green syrup, melting vanilla ice cream, a harsh stab of mint.

This is a story about

Things I hear

The sound of a concerto on the hi-fi. Sometimes I could tiptoe downstairs and lie on the paisley couch beside her, feel security in her rhythmic breathing before she remembered it was too late for children to be up.

Her humming. Not off-key, exactly. It and her smile grow when she sees me.

The Etude: “This old song of the city of romance and music has that element of longing which seems to dwell in the heart of every Viennese. In the right hand, be sure to play the notes of each chord together and bind each chord to the neighbouring chord as smoothly as possible.

Andante amoroso (slow with tenderness).”

Things I inherited

Her pearls, a smooth single strand fit at the throat to adorn special occasions. Exotic teardrop-shaped garnet earrings with screw closures that pinch my earlobes.

Her muskrat fur coat, softer than mink. I don’t believe in wearing fur, but I don’t get rid of it.

Her insecurity.

Things he called her

B____. They were B and B, doctor and nurse. High school sweethearts.

He stares at the ice cubes and says, “No one was more difficult to live with, and no one would ever love you more.”

He drains his glass.

This is a story about breast cancer. This is a story about

Things I remember

She waited until the cannonballed and ‘Marco Polo-ed’ waves ebbed away. In the shallow end, hair under a white bathing cap with rubber flowers, she dogpaddled determinedly, once, across the pool’s width.

Occasional salmon salad lunches in padded, cracked-leather booths at Woolworth's, or the upstairs cafeteria at Simpson's. She had a cherry ice cream soda, I had strawberry, spooned from sweating metal containers. I wonder who the treat had really been for?

She belonged to the Field Naturalist Society.

She drank black coffee sweetened with After Eight mints.

Her bottom teeth were crooked.

Her fingernails had ridges.

I was embarrassed when she sang too loudly at church.

Things she said

She always gave her height as "five feet and $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch." Never just "five feet."

'Umbilicus' not belly button. You must call body parts by their anatomical names. When the hospice nurses ask her if she has to pee, she mutters under her breath, protesting the vulgarity of the language. She needs to "pass water."

She used to tell me, "You don't eat enough to keep a bird alive." Now she drinks Ensure, liquid chalk, for when you can't keep anything else down.

"I guess you'll have to trade me in on a new mother." Or "Buck up: what would you do if you had a real problem, like cancer?"

In literary terms, this is called foreshadowing.

Things she did

Redecorate. Clean. Raise five children. Garden. Flowers and kids spaced evenly in columns. Red salvia lined up equidistant to squat ultramarine ageratum. Only white alyssum spilt slightly over allotted edges, filling the air with its honey scent. There were never any weeds.

Her desire to move and inability to cope with the pain of moving makes her like a small puppy, constantly whimpering to be let out.

This is not a story about breast cancer. This is a story about

More things I remember

Their six week safari to Tanzania. For me summer camp and menses; for them photos of tree-climbing lions and Masai warriors. The trip of their lifetime. Eventually, a trip consists of making it to the den, to stare at the television, while her vertebrae disintegrate.

Earlier, with old-fashioned courtesy, my father asks my mother to dance, and as they circle slowly my fiancé and I rise to join them on the floor. This is the last time I remember her out of the house: dancing with her husband.

Christmas Vacation is playing on the overhead hospice TV. Chevy Chase is on a rant; her electrolytes are breaking down. She is thirsty. But she cannot swallow now and water dribbles down her neck.

My 30th birthday dinner at elegant *Michael's on the Thames*. Oily cheese appetizers. Caesar salad with pungent garlic made tableside. Reluctant to leave the hospital. They would call me if there was any change.

She dies barely a day later, early morning.

Things I wish I didn't remember

Hoping she wouldn't die on my birthday.

Things we argued about

The messy collapse of my first engagement. Living together was a bad idea, immoral. We argued. I slammed down the phone. Months of silence. My sister brokered a tentative truce. We never again spoke of this.

Why I don't get married to a different live-in man, a wish from her hospital bed. A pattern repeats itself, impatience bubbles up my throat. Because, I want to say, he's having an affair. Because it's my life. Because I don't know where else to go. Because.

She looks small. And hopeful. I sigh and kiss her cheek. I settle for, "We're having some difficulty."

Things she made me promise

To keep my own name. So that I could remain myself, not Mrs. Someone, the edges of her own identity worn away.

To try on my wedding dress. Superstitious, I balk, then comply: we both do not admit why. I return to where she is lying in darkness on foam padding spread on the floor. She rasps, "You look beautiful," pats the hem of the dress awkwardly, closes her eyes again.

This is not a story about breast cancer. This is a story about

Things as gifts

Her recipe box, white tin with hinged lid. Handwritten specialties include fruit pies (*for peach the secret is 1/4 teaspoon almond extract*), carrot pineapple salad made with lemon Jello, banana cake (*an economical way to use up overripe bananas*). The cards are crumbling around the edges.

A dozen long-stemmed red roses caught in a satin ribbon she brought to university graduation. We posed for photos that no longer exist. My hair was pink – a mistake, not rebellion, but I didn't explain.

Cassette tapes I make of her classical albums, play softly for her in the hospital as she drifts in and out, particles of her bones eroding into silt.

It is all I can think of to do.

Truths I know

She dies while I hold her hand.

Lies I know

That death is peaceful. The last breaths are ragged, catching, hiccupping.

What I don't know

Her.

This is not a story about breast cancer. This is a story about

Things near the end

Unsupervised, she often leaves the apartment. She shuffles unsteadily down the dimly lit interior hallway to the communal garbage chute and begins secretly throwing things out: photos, treasures, family, fragments of memories, shard by shard. The chute becomes a modern day midden.

Things that make sense now

She was manic depressive. Now called bipolar. This was never discussed.

She suffered severe migraines. Morphine injections in darkened rooms were necessary. Red wine was one trigger. So were emotional encounters, therefore both were avoided. My father tells me as he administers it, her dosage of morphine now would kill most people. It assuages her agony. Or ours?

I feel her body, her back, at my father's insistence. I run my fingers over the tissue paper skin, the knotted carbuncled spine, an alien lunar landscape.

Things I wish

That she could travel to Vienna.

That she and I had known each other. When I was more of a human being.

Things I confess

Sometimes, I talk to her in my dreams.

How from the gossamer veil of time she still appears, in slender heels and creamy pearls and a sequined pewter dress. Her smooth alabaster back is curved into my father's protective shoulder, and he holds her close.

A slow waltz is playing. I recognize it now.

Andante amoroso. Slow, with tenderness.

And she is dancing

Dancing.

In this piece is regret, loss, apology, nostalgia, a history of family. One fellow student wrote that, "it brings the two of you closer together in the story that is deeper than the items listed, though they are important too." I thank her for that. There are other vignettes, later edited out. Most tellingly omitted, in retrospect, is the statement, "I have a history of breast cancer.

Even though I am adopted.” In this I was attempting to articulate that the disease was part of my history, if not biology. Later, I will discover my birthmother had a lumpectomy, and later a mastectomy. I do not know if this was a factor in her death. And later still, I will be diagnosed with stage III invasive breast cancer. My original statement of my history of cancer will be more true than I thought, as is my comment about the foreshadowing of cancer, intended about my mother, but applicable now to myself. It is an irony that is unexpected. It is another tie, one of blood, both of family.

The idea of finding an image to capture this unfortunate but truthful connection lies at the back of my consciousness for several years and in one of the last pieces of glass art I make for this project I touch on an image that seems to fit. Three intersecting concentric circles represent the breasts of the three women, related by genetics or by familial ties, all of whom have genes mutate into cancerous cells that attack: all have lumpectomies. The resulting impact is great: my adoptive mother survives her initial bout in the 1970’s. I do not know how severe or what stage she was diagnosed at. I know there was surgery involved, as one time I recall being in her bedroom as a young child while she did what she called her ‘exercises’ lying on the floor (later this is a flashback, as I, too, practice post-surgery physiotherapy exercises to regain mobility and strength). For some reason she shows me her breast: there is a scar, and some disfigurement. She does not tell me there was cancer – the word was never used, and I was unaware that this was indeed her experience. I do not remember what she used as an explanation. I am uncomfortable, and look away.

I don’t know if she underwent radiation, although maybe the disfigurement was in part due to such treatment, which can exacerbate the uneven healing of scar tissue. I do not believe she had chemotherapy, as she was never away, or bed-ridden, or gaunt in the manner of chemo

patients. Such matters, like the subject of adoption, were not for children's ears. I do not know what my own body holds in store. This is also the frustration of adoption: knowing my birthmother also had a lumpectomy, but not knowing the type or stage of breast cancer, or what genetic markers she might have passed onto me that could predict my own likelihood of recurrence. I do not know when she died if there was cancer present, or if this was indeed the cause. She was also a lifelong smoker. Perhaps this is the culprit. No medical records make my cancer partially guesswork.

The glass of "Three Breasts" is chosen for its texture rather than colour. Some pieces flow into each other, reminiscent of water, or maybe of tears, or of the exaggerated texture of a skin's surface remaining more distinct, more opaque. The only colour is the barely tinted flesh colour of three partial nipples. All the breasts have been cut into, as represented by the lines marking each breast surface. None remain whole. The circles cross and intersect, connecting in places, remaining separate in others, as does the relationship I have or do not have with my mothers. Yet nonetheless we are inextricably linked by our bodies, marked, tattooed, disfigured. This is also a legacy of my mothers.

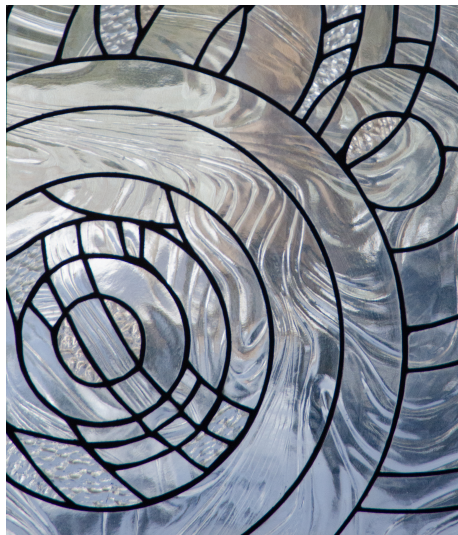


Image 17: Three Breasts – detail (Textured/Clear glass) , 2015, 24” x 30”

Real Mother

*The custody battle between birth and adoptive mothers challenge one of our culture's deepest fantasies: that there can only be one mother and therefore we have to pick the 'real' one.*³⁰⁵

As Marianne Novy explains, there are two basic adoption plot myths, and they operate at the ends of two different poles. One plot centres on the adoptee finding the original 'real' mother and resolving a sense of identity. The other promotes the returning to the adoptive mother as 'real,' with any curiosity of the adoptee satisfied, and no further desire to consider his/her original parenthood. There does not seem to be room for anything but these two extremes. Prevailing birthmother stories may be less than three dimensional, even imaginary, often providing a character foil, or the 'object' of a search rather than being a subject in her own right. Portrayals of adoptive mothers can display them as simply reactionary, as secretive about their child's adoption, disapproving or disappointed about a child's wish to search for birthfamily, or as stalwart parent to whom a child returns; alternatively, she is lauded as exemplary: as rescuer, as adoring parent with no regrets, as altruistic. Her own fears and failures, her desires and conflicted feelings with regards to mothering are rarely discussed. I prefer instead the language my adoptive mother instinctively selected: she was 'sharing' a baby somehow, not declaring a claim.

The film *Losing Isaiah* is one artistic exploration of notions of the 'real mother' and the binary conflict often set up between adoptive and birthmother. This issue is apparent right from the film's marketing campaign, showing a white mother holding a black baby, with the tag line "Who decides what makes a mother?" Yet a story written over one hundred years ago seems more able to grapple with the competing claims in a nuanced and emotionally rich way. As I read the 1909 short story "Adoption" I was strangely affected by its wisdom. The adoptive mother in

this narrative is not rescuing angel, but simply an individual longing for a child, albeit in a world that socialized her to do so; nonetheless she must compete with birthmothers, those women who are able to produce children ‘of their own’ ‘naturally.’ The story is about the strength of a mother’s love, and eventually what becomes, as the speaker in the tale calls it, “the tragedy of the unfulfilled intention.”³⁰⁶ The intended baby dies before adoption, and the narrative explores the accepted hierarchy of grief, claim to loss, and determination of ‘motherhood.’ The narrator recounts, “It touched me unutterably, the grief of this mother who was no mother,” yet the village women “many of [whom] had lost little children of their own...could not regard her loss as at all akin to theirs” and the speaker observes, “This my neighbour felt; and perhaps she dimly felt that to me her grief, hardly less than theirs, brimmed with the tragic disaster of the unfulfilled and bore, besides, its own peculiar bitterness.”³⁰⁷

Jennifer Gilmore’s fictional memoir *The Mothers* (2013) allows a window into a contemporary adoptive mother’s tribulations, a continuation of the question of which mother is ‘real.’ Jesse constantly asks, “Where do I fit in here? Most women become pregnant and they carry their babies and then they breast-feed their infants, who need them to survive...really it was just this, only this: was I the mother? Wasn’t I supposed to be the mother?”³⁰⁸ Chiefly, Jesse struggles with her would-be role, balking at the term ‘adoptive’ in front of mother. She is uncertain how she will negotiate or share the role of mother with a stranger, a birthmother, in her planned open adoption. “Am I allowed to ask where I fit in here? There is the woman who gives birth and that is not I. And then she is in our lives...however she chooses to be. I accept that, but...when do I get to be the mother? Perhaps never.”³⁰⁹

I have thought about my mothers and their roles in my understanding of myself, and my understanding of them. I try to imagine what my adoptive mother might have wished for, and

how I might have fulfilled some void in her life. I try to find a way to represent my impressions of my birthmother, a woman I only know through mediated reports: I could not have a reunion, but perhaps I could have a sense of her that might compensate somewhat. Both mothers are ‘real’ to me.

The competing claims to motherhood, the notion of the ‘real mother,’ and Marianne Novy’s observation of the seeming public binary demand of only two options - ‘reunion or return’ – are problems I contemplate. Both women who can have been said to be my mother come with distinguishing prefixes – ‘adoptive,’ or ‘birth.’ But I reject the binary. I interrogate my double identity, double parenthood and competing notions of motherhood in adoptive contexts in a piece of mixed media mosaic Adoption Art. At the centre of the piece is a formal studio portrait of my (adoptive) mother and self, complete with hand-inked ‘touch ups’ from the photographer in the practice of the period to smooth the hair and correct imperfections. Undated, it seems that this might have been taken shortly after my official adoption, a kind of pseudo-birth record for a non-biological gestation, a crafted ‘announcement’ of my arrival. It is an image of serenity, of the iconic ‘mother and child.’ But this photo does not tell the whole story.

Studio Portrait of adoptive mother and baby December 1962. Image removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

I complicate the ‘presented’ information, first by casting the portrait in a misty blue glass, softening and obscuring the definitive, then by adding in real and imagined textual elements. All of my names, from least to most intimate are present: baby ____ (Female), Martha Anne ____, Kathryn Isabel Greenway, and Kate, taken from letters and legal documents. My mothers are also called by varying names denoting roles and relationships, judgment and censure. Fragments of both mothers’ signatures and handwriting were taken from work letters and publishing files from the archives I visited in my birthmother’s case, and personal letters to me in my adoptive mother’s case, and fused onto glass pieces. Selecting and extracting these “incidental, unself-conscious fragments”³¹⁰ became a very intimate act, revealing in their shapes and characters something of the authors.

My adoptive mother’s letters are rounded and precise, the penmanship of a bygone age combining with propriety and constriction. I hear her voice and read over her shoulder, see with her eyes as she composes the dutiful letters to a daughter away at camp or school, missives of little news but expressing sentiment and connection. My birthmother signs her letters ‘Yours very truly’ or ‘Cheers.’ Yet all hand written notes on the tops on these documents are addressed to a nickname clearly used daily. In ordering production glossies of authors at the publishing house she writes ‘soonest’ or ‘rush rush,’ as if always behind, always under pressure, always not quite finishing in time, dependent on others to facilitate her work, and her quick slanting hand is a pharmacist’s almost illegible signature. There are also actual clips of legal documents, and crafted keywords about my adoption and relinquishment, referring to the mothering and unmothering that this baby would undergo.



Image 18: “2 Mothers, 2 Daughters” Detail (Glass and mixed media mosaic) 2013, 18” x 24”

Though there appears to be a ‘single story’ about the mother and baby, I hint at a larger truth. For example, one of the pieces reads, “Miss you, Love Mother.” Through not identifying *which* mother, and by repeating and separating the phrases, I hope to call into question attachment, loss and remembrance. The multiple labels attributed to the same people are another way of highlighting this. For all three of us, I show just a few of the myriad identities assigned, an indication of the constructed and relational nature of identity. The blue and white tiles and findings create an unified look, but also fragment and separate the individual pieces. Triangles in varying configurations, not all equilateral or balanced, suggest the adoption triad once again. The shards of mirror are chosen to reflect the viewer, to allow the viewer to literally see himself or herself in this situation, and think more deeply about the consequences of unplanned pregnancy, miscarriage and infertility, particularly at this time, and the competing claims of motherhood.

In my birth and adoptive mother’s era, being a young woman in post-war Canada and continuing through the 1960’s, females were caught in several double binds. While there was

pressure to have sex appeal, be popular, have a boyfriend or go steady, simultaneously there were taboos against having sex, despite the growing numbers of young women who did not uphold this standard, and began to revolt against such sexual norms. According to Ann Fessler's research by the 1950's about 39% of unmarried girls had 'gone all the way' and by 1973 it was 78%.³¹¹ The crime, therefore, of most women over fifty today was not so much being a sexual being, but getting caught. Couple this with the understanding and availability of sex education and birth control: widespread education was not available in the school, and we know the pressures on educators who must still today negotiate a delicate balance between community standards of morality, fears of promoting sex before marriage, and knowledge of other forms of sexuality, and providing the necessary information to young people so that they can make informed choices.³¹² In the late 1960's sex was still being referred to as "the marriage act"³¹³ and if Sex Ed. was provided, it was often cursory and limited, offering information on the mechanics of impregnation and perhaps advice on the rhythm method. Acquiring birth control, if and when decriminalized, was difficult and embarrassing. The pill and IUD were not usually accessible to single women; the most popular device, the diaphragm, required a doctor's visit.³¹⁴ Condoms were dispensed behind counters. It is no wonder so many women lost the pregnancy lottery.

I do not know if my birthmother, being older, educated and of some means, was able to obtain birth control. She still lived at home with her parents, who were prominent members of the community: would she have been able to circumvent the possibility that someone would find out, lest she be shamed as a 'loose woman?' Even if she did use birth control, it failed. Perhaps she only had a single encounter, maybe unintended. Or maybe she had a more long-term liaison. I wonder when it first occurred to her that her body was no longer hers alone.

The problems of conception and pregnancy from both a birthmother and adoptive mother perspective are examined in Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers* in a point and counterpoint structure that in some places may illuminate the hopes and fears of the mothers in my life. The section "I always wanted to give birth" opens with the adoptive mother revealing her distress upon learning she could not do "that incredible natural thing/ that women do,"³¹⁵ but how she eventually opted for adoption, a distant second best that was "something scandalous/ telling the world your secret failure/bringing up an alien child/who knew what it would turn out to be."³¹⁶ Chapter one "The Seed" contrasts the fecundity of the birthmother, where impregnation "only took a split second,"³¹⁷ with the fruitless trying of the adoptive mother for five years who "crave[s] discomfort" and wants the "tearing searing pain"³¹⁸ of childbirth. Both women are in situations from which they cannot escape, both trapped in their bodies and unsure of the next steps. The body is further emphasized in chapter two, where the birthmother speaks of "her body as a witness"³¹⁹ to the birth, that despite her wish to deny it, "I cannot pretend she's never been."³²⁰ One has an excess, the other an absence of procreative potential: neither is the balance the woman wants.

I think about how the whole life-changing journey for birthmothers, adoptive mothers and adoptees all really begins with the fact of a pregnancy, and/or a wish for a pregnancy, and wonder how to capture this in my Adoption Art. Unbidden, I have a buried recollection rise forth, of a call made from a university basement public phone - in a pre cell phone era, the most private place I can manage. I am an undergraduate; I am on the Pill but I have missed my period. It is long enough past that I am panicked and make a call to my sister, who works with public and women's agencies, for the name of a pregnancy clinic. Not much else; I don't remember if I travel alone or with her; perhaps there is an image of the clinic, of whiteness and pamphlets, or

perhaps I have co-opted it from a movie. If I am pregnant, I will have to face the same choices of my birthmother. I know, however, that I will opt for abortion. Will I tell my parents or keep this a secret? But it turns out that I do not have to make the choice. All I feel is relief.

I imagine a pregnancy test like a translucent curtain simultaneously obscuring and revealing a future you cannot escape from: waiting for results, hoping for one outcome over the other. I look to the historical, from the earliest records to the most modern methods of determining a woman's pregnancy in the creation of a glass panel in multiple parts.

Beginning with an ancient Egyptian 3,000 year-old pregnancy test the hieroglyphs prescribe over the course of several days to "take barley and emmer. She should moisten them with her urine. If they flourish in their entirety, she will be with child."³²¹ This prediction's truth lies in the estrogen and progesterone hormones secreted in the urine that may have stimulated vegetable seeds to sprout.



Image 19: Pregnancy Test (Fused glass, phototransfer, glass paper), 2012, 20" x 9"

Another ancient detection method suggested spreading mashed up dates and beer around on the floor and recording how many times the woman who sat on this vomited; the greater the nausea, the greater chance of pregnancy, perhaps an early warning system for morning sickness. In the 1920s, the discovery of the hCG hormone present in the urine of pregnant women linked to ovary growth meant injecting urine into sexually immature rabbits, which would induce ovarian development. If pregnancy was indicated, unfortunately ‘the rabbit died,’ a colloquialism for pregnancy I still remember. In the late 1940s, scientists determined that when female urine was injected into a live toad or frog, the amphibian would produce eggs within twenty-four hours if the female were pregnant. All methods were unreliable. The latter was likely a method that might have changed my birthmother’s life.

Reclaiming Voice

*The great contract of literature consists in this: you tell me your story and somehow I get my story.*³²²

“How do we get at the truth? A fundamental responsibility of the art-making process is the act of telling a story and telling it well...When an artist sets out to record her own history – personal as well as cultural – the act provides insight to the underpinnings of the society in which the artist’s vision arose, and offers insights into that society’s own view of itself.”³²³ With changing attitudes about openness in adoption, open adoptions themselves, and the unlocking of records over the past several years, there appears to be more first person accounts of what life was like for a ‘girl in trouble.’ These shared narratives allow engagement with readers who may also be struggling with past repressions and injustices, allowing them a vicarious voice. While for some the distancing of fiction might allow for a different identification and interaction, it is the engagement with real stories left untold until now that for me holds the greater power.

Ann Fessler's 'Everlasting' is one such engagement, an audio composition of oral history. It collates clips from interviews with birthmothers in the Baltimore area who gave newborn children up for adoption between World War Two and Roe versus Wade, and combines them with looped archival video footage of pictures like nurses pushing rows of babies in strollers. The installation 'Closer to Home,' remounted from two years previous, served as a companion and as an entryway to the latter. The exhibition is entered through a passageway, which seems appropriate, perhaps an allusion to the birth passage, where images of educational films and newsreels circa 1940's-60's demonstrate some of the misinformation about sex and gender roles given to young people of the period. 'Everlasting' is installed in a theatre-like setting with elegant parlour chairs placed in a circle that invite viewers to sit and listen to the taped interviews of women's private experiences. The number of chairs, seven, is significant, as it stands for each of the women whose voices are represented. Thus when a viewer/participant sits in a chair she is literally putting herself in the place of one of the women who is speaking.

Ann Fessler states that her intention was to show this piece of missing women's history, which, because it was so secret and shameful for so many women for so long, was not told, and even when it had begun to be brought to light, the story was told by others. She wanted to give the importance of telling their own stories back to the women participating in the creation of this oral history installation and, by extension, those who view and participate in the experience.

Audio/Art Installation, "Everlasting," Ann Fessler, 2003. Rights held by a third party and distribution is prohibited.

“Another message widely received at the time was that a baby surrendered for adoption was unwanted by its mother—that’s why the baby was available. Without the voices of the mothers telling the story from their perspective, it’s the message many people (including adoptees)³²⁴ would still believe.

In choosing to interview local women who lived near where the exhibition took place, Ann Fessler also hoped to drive home the point that these pressures, inequities, and silencings were happening in this community, not somewhere else, and that we are all culpable. She states,

I want women’s voices to override/overwrite the authoritative voice-overs of the educational films and newsreels of the time that had an agenda other than to entertain. I hope to educate more people, reach a wider audience, and also implicate film in the dissemination of negative stereotypes of ‘unwed mothers’ at that time. I want to transport audiences back to the 50’s and 60’s through the archival footage and make them aware of the attitudes and social climate that prevailed during what is now referred to as the ‘Baby Scoop Era,’ when unprecedented numbers of women were asked to surrender their firstborn because it was socially unacceptable for a woman – especially a middle class woman – to be a single mother, even if she were, say, 24 and a nurse.³²⁵

A kind of art therapy appears to have emerged in the process of creating and mounting the installation. Birthmothers told their stories and in so doing, a kind of symbolic exchange happened between the mothers, who explained their circumstances to a ‘daughter,’ Ann Fessler, who might have been just like theirs, and who might have questions about her own relinquishment about which these stories might provide insight. Many of the stories had never been uttered aloud before, let alone taped for public broadcast, a significant step in reclaiming voice. As well, as the long process of transcribing the tapes befell several art students working with Ann Fessler, one of them, emotionally drained by what she was listening to, made a significant discovery. She “would realize this generation of mothers who surrendered children for adoption embodies a cultural secret: these are women who were officially anonymous, their

existence merely implied by the lives of children considered ‘lucky’ enough never to have known them.”³²⁶

I also explore a variety of these labels and concepts of unwed motherhood in one of my first art pieces on the theme of adoption. I saw the image very clearly in my head before I crafted it.

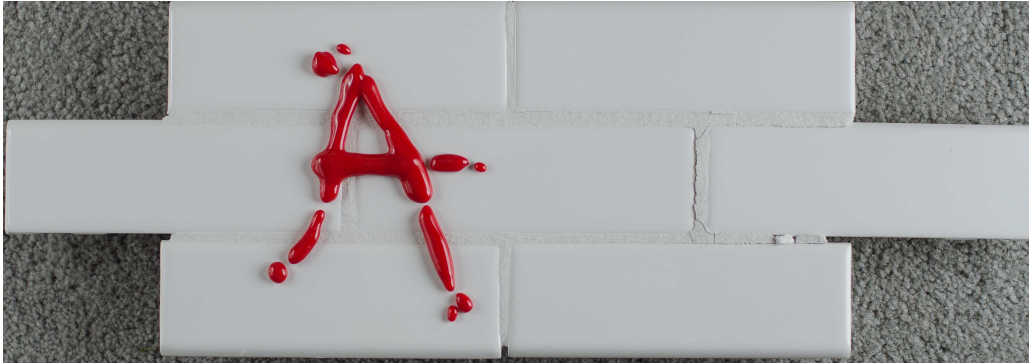


Image 20: The Other Scarlet Letter (Fused glass and subway tile), 2012, 9” x 18”

This work of Adoption Art alludes to the historic custom of painting a fallen adulterous woman with a red letter A in order to alert everyone to the knowledge of her sin. This piece evokes the ‘not so secret’ secret of the girls who were shunned, disowned, and gossiped about for a different kind of sin, but one that again invokes their sexuality and moral transgression. The loose dripping ‘A,’ in this case standing for ‘adoption,’ calls to mind graffiti and spray paint, and a kind of public branding. It is a constant reminder and a means of humiliation. Done anonymously, it provides an impossible target against which to fight back: anyone and everyone could have rendered the label. The subway tiles suggest a crowded place frequented regularly by many different people, thus maximizing the woman’s shame and inability to hide her secret.

In a vintage paper collage I call ‘Secret,’ I also contemplate the secrecy of the adoption plan, and how it hinges on recreating the societal norm of standard nuclear family. At the centre

is a young woman's face, tilted upward, dreaming of what her life will be like. The silver spoon suggests her privilege, a certain race and class, where life will unravel in a predictable and uncomplicated manner. She envisions herself serving a home cooked meal, made in her fashionable kitchen, for her husband, as evidence of her prowess. The future husband is pictured as successful, in a business suit, looking at the young woman adoringly. At the top of the page is a sequence of domestic images, with a baby figuring into the picture, a seemingly next logical step. The text however, and the large pink elephant disrupt the stability of the imaginary life created. The text could suggest the secret, the pregnancy that has yet to be revealed. If the couple is married and the child legitimate, then the secret is a normal and happy occasion. Yet why is there, literally, an elephant in the room? Perhaps instead, the secret of the pregnancy is occurring in the present, and will interrupt and dispel all the dreamt of security of home and husband: an illegitimate child will rewrite the script, and the secret may be un-ending.



Image 21: “Secret” (Vintage Paper collage), 2014

I also imagine this secret in a work of meditation, created several years earlier. I think about my birthmother, and how she might have reacted to her predicament. The pregnancy is such a deep and dark secret, that it cannot even be referred to by name:

The Thing She Carried

She carried it with her from the age of 35 until her death. Sometimes it was in the forefront, immediate and unignored, tugging at her composure. At other times, it was like a murmur, not quite articulated, but ready to be glimpsed if she would allow it. Like a reflection caught in a puddle of water or refracted from a window, there and not there, distorted and coloured, but not shapeless, not unrecognizable, waiting for acknowledgement. It might have called to her in quiet times, in the moments before sleep came, a dream that was not. It was part of her and yet separate, like a cancer she cut out but could not quite eradicate, nor would she want to, since it *was* her in elemental and ancient ways. It would have begun as either a slow dawning awareness or a sudden enveloping realization, either way in the apprehension that nothing afterward could ever be the same.

And she would carry this much, this part, deep inside her, where it would remain cradled long after the rest played out. It began in an act and ended in an act, but had not ended, not for her, not ever. It was pleasure and panic, grief and emptiness, inevitability and control. She carried it in different ways, according to the time and context: with shame, or fierce independence, or with a relinquishing of will to other more capable hands; with guilt, or defiance or regret, but always, always.

And she never shared it with others, her future husband, her siblings, her child, none, save for the stern matriarch who whisked her away, and in a deliberate parting from the other: for

it was ultimately hers alone to bear, that is, until just before the end. She had cocooned it, blessed it, made peace with it, unwrapping it carefully when it pleased her to do so, and then just as gently swaddling it in the layers of remembering and forgetfulness she faithfully chose as its attendants.

And had she not cried and spoken once, had a letter not been written, a bus ride taken, a call made, I might never have known that there was never a day goes by when she didn't think of that young woman.

She might have carried it with love, but I have no answer for that.

She carried it – that's all I can tell.

The conceptualization of adoption is not only about a child and its placement, but also about how we conceive of family, il/legitimacy, and motherhood. Adoption is partially about a tension between differing notions of mother, and the construction of 'good' and 'bad' mothers, perhaps made easier when the original cannot or will not provide for a child's upbringing, but made more precarious if through social institutions, laws and processes of systemic mistreatment, she is convinced or coerced into relinquishment, or if the adopting mother is similarly indoctrinated into the necessity of having children to complete a family. As an adopted daughter, which model of motherhood am I supposed to assimilate? All of these are (m)other.

Disparaging attitudes towards childlessness, infertility, adoption, and the 'domesticity ideal'³²⁷ are still present, perhaps more insidiously for their lack of investigation. Structures of inequality and economics, pressures of institutions of State and Church, and lingering patriarchal binaries of who can and should mother can also place any mother into a place of precarity. In "a more balanced understanding of adoption, mothering and kinship, feminists must take seriously the predicament of both birth and adoptive mothers."³²⁸ This then "opens up a much needed

critical space for thinking about the family and mothering in non-essentialist ways which challenge the dominant script of family and motherhood.”³²⁹ We need to expose and remove pro-natalist hierarchies of motherhood, normalizing conceptions of family, unwrite societal scripts that enact and perpetuate these agendas, to begin to truly listen to, and *hear*, more open, honest, and complicated narratives surrounding adoption.

CHAPTER 4: Between the Spaces of Knowing³³⁰

*If you want to keep a secret, you must also hide it from yourself.*³³¹

What happens when secrets are kept? When considering the effects of adoption policy/practice in the past and present, what actions can be taken for current and future ethical practice and social justice in the Digital Age?

Secrets kept and unkept figure highly as an underlying throughline in this dissertation, and the effects of related actions – revelation, disclosure, closed records and open searches – all pivot around if, how, when and why secrets were/are kept or broken.

My sister: I don't remember when – at some point in there mom said she would tell you that you were adopted, that it was never going to be a secret. But I don't know whether she told us that or whether one of us asked. I don't remember ever having an individual private conversation about this. It's like whatever was said, was said to the group...but I don't remember for sure.

I didn't talk to anybody else about it particularly. I told my friends that I had a new sister and she was adopted and she was home and they all said, "Oh that's fast," and it seemed to be that that was the end of that discussion. It was pretty matter of fact...

My birthmother, though, did not disclose her secret. Her husband and child did not know of the existence of another child until just before her passing. After I call the Adoption Disclosure Registry one day not long after the turn of the millennium, citing both my extraordinarily long wait, and the wish for medical information -- my adoptive mother having perished of breast cancer, my sister having survived surgery for abnormally large, thankfully benign, tumours in her abdomen, and my own then recent discovery of fibroid tumours possibly

requiring a hysterectomy, sympathy must have been elicited in the social worker: after years of fruitless waiting, it takes mere days for the return call, telling me that contact had been made.

I realize now two things: being a passive registry, my birthmother must not have been registered; and yet somehow, the information was easily obtainable. Or perhaps worse, when I later learn that she tried to find me twenty years ago: was she there all along?

The power of her secret still held sway. In the time between this call and her subsequent death, I learned she finally told her secret, for the first time, to her family. This would have been terrifying, an emotional journey that must have cost a great deal. I do not know how her husband reacted. I can only surmise that what many birthmothers fear is true of mine: that she suffered rejection, disapproval and blame from her family for past mistakes. I think the reaction of these key people in her life must have contributed to her hesitation or refusal of contact.

Her secret was anything but matter of fact.

Secrecy and confidentiality are two inter-related terms with different connotations that are central to many aspects of adoption: the secret of the pregnancy, perhaps the secret of who the ‘putative’ father was, the confidentiality promised by clinics, counselling services and adoption agencies, the revelation of the secret – whether of the pregnancy or of the adoption, the maintaining of the secret through collusion of relatives, the secreting away of the pregnant mother, perhaps in homes that promised confidentiality, the secret of infertility and alternate family forming, and the confidential agreements and records of the formal adoption, which, of course, are at the centre of the sealed records debate, and have been for the last half century.

‘Secrecy’ has a primarily negative connotation: the withholding of information, the wielding of power. It connotes destructive practice, inherently unhealthy, and worse, with the potential of being revealed in punitive and detrimental ways. Confidentiality, in contrast, has a

positive connotation, and is linked to privacy. Confidentiality suggests a mutual agreement between willing parties, an exchange that will benefit or protect. It appears a right, one that should be respected, and one that is increasingly regulated and worried about. Yet what is confidentiality or privacy to one party may be secrecy to another.

Adoption agreements are/were entered into without the knowledge or consent of the child; confidentiality then also becomes essentially a euphemism for secrecy, and the primacy of some rights over others. What may be seen as the rights of one to withhold information for protection may contravene the rights of another to access that same information. What might be helpful to one party might be harmful to another. Can the revocation of secrecy be applied retroactively when all parties of the time were promised anonymity in perpetuity? What will be unleashed when the status quo is undermined? And thus these questions form part of the ongoing contested spaces in adoption rights advocacy.

Yet secrecy and confidentiality in formal adoption record keeping are a relatively recent phenomenon, with the legal reinforcing the moral; perhaps rationalization or paternalism suggested that this approach would safeguard all members of the triangle, that the stigma of illegitimacy, the error of the fallen woman, corollary damage to the family, or the sting of infertility, could all be averted.

In Canada, Manitoba and Ontario began sealing records in the 1920's. Ontario passed its first Adoption Act in 1921 and in 1927 further restrictions were introduced; records were to be 'sealed' and kept in the care of the courts and the Registrar General. Once the adoption was finalized in the court, a new birth certificate was issued, eradicating the original ties with birth family. Based on recommendations from adoption practitioners and groups like the Child Welfare League these were seen as protective safeguards to allow for the safety and well-being

of the adopted child, preventing any interference from the original parents once the adoption had taken place.³³² Secrecy allowed for alleviation of social/moral reprobation, and confidentiality, assured by the practice of sealing records, cemented the connection.³³³ And while some intended effects of confidentiality might have been misguided, it also may have had some advantages for all members of the triad.

Confidentiality allowed adoptive parents security in feeling that the adopted child was now irrevocably theirs, with singular loyalty to them, and no chance of birthparents or birth relatives changing their minds in later years and coming to collect their offspring.³³⁴ Confidentiality meant they could raise the child ‘as if’ belonging only to their own nuclear family. They could maintain the real or imagined story that theirs was a superior family to that of the original parents, and no one could contravene that notion. Confidentiality also protected the offspring: from ‘bastardy,’ from knowledge of unsavoury conception circumstances or the moral degeneracy of (unmarried) birthparents, and from marginalization by others, by providing a new clean place in the social order. It allowed a simpler origin story. It protected a child from an unstable or dangerous birthparent who might try to intervene in their life, and any potential conflicts stemming from this relationship. It was in the ‘best interests of the child.’

For the birthmother, confidentiality provided a kind of closure. It offered security and anonymity for herself and her family. The mother could reclaim her place in society, perhaps re-join her education, work, or social circle without gossip or censure. She could rest assured that no one would ever have the power to disturb her over this issue again, that no one in her future would ever need to know of her past. It represented a kind of inviolable contract. Confidential adoptions supposedly allowed the birthmother to relinquish and then move past her grief and

shame. She could forget that she had given up her child, and not worry that she would have to see her child in close proximity raised by others.

In the tug between secrecy and confidentiality, however, lie problematic tensions for all. Take the birthmother dilemma: she is told that relinquishment is a solution to her problem, that she will be redeemed and rehabilitated; moreover, because she is an unfit parent, she is doing the right thing in giving up her child. No one need know of her transgression. And as for her own psyche, well, she will put this episode of her life behind her, and move on. She no longer exerts any social/legal/moral/parental claim and she must remain silent. In a very simple collage, I bely that notion: the words “you can forget” are very small, diminished by the eyes of a child looking out to a birthmother, holding her in their gaze forever.



Image 22: “Forget,” (Vintage paper collage), 2014

When confidentiality is viewed as secrecy, the problems of, and pressures on, triad members come to light. Secrecy fuels mistrust and misconception, the questioning of the motives of surrender, and fuels fantasy and myth. A birthmother might have been forced into secrecy against her wishes; knowing that her transgression was a secret might only reinforce her sense of shame and guilt. Because the act was a secret once, many birthmothers felt that it would always

have to be one, fearing rejection of family, and future/current spouses or children, friends, coworkers or any others who might rekindle the images of a transgressor who cannot be forgiven for past sins. Secrecy prevented a birthmother from knowing the fate of her child; she might not know who adopted the child, how it fared, if it was adopted at all, or even if it subsequently perished. Researchers have also noted that such lack of information inhibited birthmothers' grief resolution, and may contribute to relationship difficulties in her future, as well as prolonged feelings of loss and mourning, and attachment issues.³³⁵

For adopted parents, lack of knowledge about their child's background may provide barriers to their real or perceived effective parenting. Lack of access to medical information, for example, may prohibit them rendering proper treatment of serious illness, especially when such illness is hereditary. They may feel that without information about their child's predispositions and talents, that they will miss the chance to encourage these abilities in their offspring. It may also be frustrating or cause relationship damage if the child wishes information about their original parents that the adoptive parent is later unable to provide.

For the adoptee, the lack of information about self and history can run the gamut from annoying, frustrating, or embarrassing, to emotionally damaging or hazardous. Secrecy establishes them as other than normal, a different category of person. Questions about heritage, and blank spaces on medical forms all emphasize the empty places that secrecy has worn in the adoptee's life. Genetic screening, prevention/ monitoring for/ or treatment of, serious diseases such as cancer and diabetes, or against risks of stroke or heart disease, are dangerously complicated with no genetic or heredity baseline to check.

Every time I go for a medical check up, more frequently now as a result of my breast cancer, I am faced with the same questionnaire. While now I have a few more answers, overall I

don't have very many, and for the majority of my life I have been forced to repeat the process of the same empty page. I don't understand the need to replicate what must have been recorded in some master file. It feels humiliating, alienating, and an exercise in redundancy:

PATIENT'S FAMILY HISTORY,

Toronto Western Hospital

Name: _____ **Kathryn Greenway** _____

Father

Current age _____ **Unknown** _____

Father's general health is: excellent ___ good ___ fair ___ poor

_____ **Unknown** _____

Mother

Current age _____ **Deceased** _____

Mother's general health was: excellent ___ good ___ fair ___ poor

_____ **Unknown** _____

Siblings

Number of brothers _____

Number of sisters _____ 1 _____

Age range _____ 40 - 50 _____

Any health problems? Please explain. _____ **Unknown** _____

Have any of your BLOOD relatives had: yes no

1. Heart attack under age 50? _____ **Unknown**

2. Stroke under age 50? _____ **Unknown**

- | | |
|---|----------------|
| 3. High blood pressure? _____ | Unknown |
| 4. Elevated cholesterol? _____ | Unknown |
| 5. Diabetes? _____ | Unknown |
| 6. Asthma or hay fever? _____ | Unknown |
| 7. Heart operations? _____ | Unknown |
| 8. Obesity? _____ | Unknown |
| 9. Breast Cancer? _____ | Unknown |
| 10. Leukemia or cancer under age 60? ____ | Unknown |

Unknown Unknown Unknown Unknown Unknown

Secrecy or confidentiality: which is it? When an adoptee has no access to information that the majority take for granted, and was not party to the making of such confidential agreements about his/her own life, it seems that there are personal rights involved. It is difficult to oppose the advocacy for unsealing records and openness in adoption when we are well on the way to greater disclosure and less secrecy. Yet perhaps it is not so simple. With this comes the knowledge that this may place the right to know in direct opposition with the right to privacy, or the rights of the present contravening the rights of the past. What are the ethics of rescinding a past confidentiality agreement because of changing attitudes to openness currently? Conversely, are adoptees being held hostage by archaic laws that should hold no force in today's world?

The impact of secrecy on adoptees and birthmothers is a frequently told narrative. The novel *Tell Me My Name* wrestles with this dilemma, demonstrating the breach of contract of secrecy to birthmothers on one hand, but also the vacuum left by the inaccessibility of such information to the birthchildren. Daughter 'Alexandra,' a self-imposed pseudonym, knows all the

details of her birth, to which birthmother Emily questions, "How could you ever have found me? The records are supposed to be sealed. They sealed everything away, nobody can find anybody again, they seal us away."³³⁶ Both women struggle with the effects that secrecy or confidentiality, call it what you will, has imposed upon their lives. For Emily, Alexandra seems to represent a chance for forgiveness and atonement. For her part, Alexandra appears to want answers, but more than this, she wishes retribution for not being party to her own history, and some kind of ongoing apology from Emily for not being kept and not being acknowledged. Both sides of the coin are represented; both are indicative of my own struggle to come to terms with the 'correct' answer as to how to grapple effectively with the effects of secrecy.

Secrecy also persists into reunion scenarios. In a study of adults who contact birthmothers, about one-fifth of the participants cited secrecy as a factor that impeded their satisfaction with the relationship, and about one-tenth of the participants experienced the secrecy as stressful. Individual comments indicated that secrecy occurred in two forms. In some cases, the birthmother had kept the adoption a secret. In other cases, the birthmother was unwilling to supply any information about the birthfather.³³⁷

Secrecy could be a coping mechanism for a mother who told no one, because as long as she kept her secret, "she alone would have absolute control over it."³³⁸ Conversely 'telling' does not reverse years of secrets and lies, as B.J. Lifton argues, and the "sense that silences are damaging pervaded the narratives" at the adoption support groups attended by researchers and documented in *A Sealed and Secret Kinship*.³³⁹

In Ann Fessler's installation "Close to Home" (2001), and the accompanying film "Along the Pale Blue River," her search narrative to find her birthmother's hometown is expressed in terms of these secrets. It consists of image, sound and even smells of Ann Fessler's rural upbringing and according to curator George Ciscle "the secrets that adoption hides begin to reveal themselves within the corncrubs' enclosure,"³⁴⁰ those of the young pregnant woman who

leaves the farm to become invisible in the city and give birth, and the parallel journey along the same river Ann Fessler makes to find some connection to, and reverse the secrets of, her unknown mother.

Photo of Installation "Close to Home," Ann Fessler, 2001. Rights held by a third party and distribution is prohibited.

Artist Carol Flax expresses her feelings about such secret keeping and confidentiality in her own artist's statement:

For years I've been looking at the spaces between...particularly the border between knowledge and ignorance, and metaphorically.... between life and death. Not knowing is akin to a death. Being deprived of the very essential information of one's genetic code is to lack a piece of life. As an adoptee, I've spent most of my life without. And hence I've looked at what we know and don't know, how we slip between the spaces of knowing.³⁴¹

The (Un) Chosen Child: Secrets and Revelations

*There are certain things all of us here can take for granted. First, that adoption is a good thing, and very often successful. Second, that much trouble is saved if a child is told at an early age about being adopted and conversely that many troubles arise from delay in giving information.*³⁴²

Another problematic byproduct of secrecy has been the question of how and when a child should be told of his/her adoption. Most social workers, adoption practitioners, and psychologists began to believe in the twentieth century that, despite sealed and confidential records for protection of the 'facts,' which might be unsavoury, children should be told of their adoption. If

children are fed a constant stream of information in keeping with their cognitive development, adoption becomes an open and ongoing topic of discussion rather than a secret or revelation.

“Advocates of disclosure want[ed] to see the issue discussed openly so that there [was] no shame or secretiveness about the adoption... it is something of which to be proud and in which the child should rejoice; these parents feel the child will learn a little at a time by the frequent discussion of adoption with others in social network rather than a revelatory moment.”³⁴³

A practice emerging most visibly after the war, Sally Sales observes that this might have left the door open to further contact or the initiation of a relationship, ironically at the same time as the role of the birthparents and the ability to access them was severely reduced in law.³⁴⁴ Telling the child of their adoptive origin at this juncture mostly consisted of a verbal disclosure made by the adoptive parents, based on whatever scant information they had been provided, and might be willing to share. Sometimes written information supplemented this. It was thought best for the child’s emotional development to understand their origins, but telling involved sending some often conflicting messages, and was fundamentally a process of “the sustaining of two quite distinct positions regarding the adopted child’s birth family: the child should make a complete break with their original family and yet, s/he should be ‘told’ of the adoptive status.”³⁴⁵ David Kirk observed that many adoptive parents rejected his idea that the adoptive family was different from the biological family, yet by telling the child s/he was adopted, they are nonetheless acknowledging a difference.³⁴⁶ Author Marianne Novy also recalls being told of her adoption; with telling, she was supposed to understand that there was nothing wrong with this fact, yet by the silences imposed on further discussion of her adoption, she was to absorb a different conception: “I was given up so I could be better taken care of; I was chosen, but I shouldn’t tell others. Our family was different from others in how it was formed, and I was

different from other people, and if I wasn't allowed to talk about them, these couldn't really be good kinds of difference."³⁴⁷ Sally Sales concurs that "secrecy and disclosure work together within a field where original kinship has to be simultaneously accepted and refuted."³⁴⁸

She cites Margaret Kornitzer's 1952 study, which noted a substantial list of contradictory messages being delivered in 'telling': "the need to protect the birthmother's secret, to not blacken her name, to not to give reasons for adoption that would make children insecure, and ensure adopters were like natural parents to [the child]." Margaret Kornitzer then concluded, "It might be best if the child was told the mother was dead, as this would mean the child would not fantasize either about her return or about finding her later in life."³⁴⁹ As B. J. Lifton commented drily, it is amazing the number of adoptees whose natural parents were 'killed in car crashes.' By 1965 though, experts were suggesting, "The couple should reveal no hesitation in regard to telling the child about his adoption. A couple should be aware that the present agency prescription calls for some version of the 'chosen child' (although even this is on its way out). Telling the child his first parents are dead, formerly a favoured technique, is definitely out now."³⁵⁰

The most common method of telling was this 'chosen child' story, parents imparting a more or less reassuring fairy tale of the child's specialness and the parent's desire to possess that particular child over all others. Part of the distinction of the story was the difference in the idea of motherhood: "one is a mother because she had to be, one because she wants to be;"³⁵¹ choice is thus offered as comfort.

But there are fundamental problems with this story, which is just that, a story. In a private adoption of the 1950's or '60's for example, it was likely a chance opportunity that brought parents and child together, as in my case. My parents had little to no control, beyond accepting or

rejecting the offer to adopt me. Like most adoptions, if they involved choice at all, it was choice under some form of restrictive conditions.

The ‘chosen child’ story prevailed in more or less the same form for many years. A 1955 text on adoption reinforces the notion of ‘selection’ of children, in the cheerful pronouncement to would-be parents, “agencies as a rule notify parents they have a child for them to consider rather than saying ‘we have a baby for you.’ They have seen babies turn down parents as well as the other way around, and so if you know you are both completely sold on adopting but just don’t warm up to this particular baby, they are likely to understand and to look for another one that you will warm up to!”³⁵² Once ‘warmed up to’ then the child would/might at some point be informed of their status with the reassuring chosen child story.

There are many versions of this method of telling. *The Chosen Baby* (1939) stated its intended use was for parents to read to young children “who wish to make this first explanation of adoption a happy and easily understood experience.” This would be one of the first pieces of widely disseminated children’s literature to support both the idea of ‘telling’ rather keeping the adoption secret, and promoting the concept of the ‘chosen child.’ It reflects prevailing social norms: Mr. and Mrs. Brown decide, “Let us adopt a baby and bring him up as our very own,”³⁵³ the ‘as if’ approach to baby rearing. When in vogue, this meant ‘matching’ a baby to its potential parents was a key criterion, ranging from physical characteristics to religious and ethnic backgrounds, allowing parents, the child and society to ‘accept’ this virtual cloning arrangement without question, since the child would so closely be a replicate of his adoptive parents, and their family would appear normative.

In *The Chosen Baby* the Browns are asked by their social worker which gender they would prefer to adopt. When Mrs. Brown sees the child she declares, “This is our CHOSEN BABY. We

don't need to look any further,"³⁵⁴ reinforcing the idea that babies are shopped for like commodities or fruit; if bruised or damaged or found insufficiently engaging, they might be passed over in favour of another more perfect model. When a baby girl is later found however, the Browns feel they must include their adopted son in the choosing of his sibling and they only finalize their choice after son Peter "wanted her for his sister."³⁵⁵ Peter, the chosen child, now becomes the instrument who chooses in turn. The child reader/listener of the book is assured at the end of the story that "Peter and Mary like to hear the story of how they were adopted. And Mr. and Mrs. Brown and Peter and Mary are a very happy family."³⁵⁶ The story of adoption becomes an origin story, and a family story; the child to whom it is read is to absorb the message that they, too, are chosen and special. Secrets are dispelled and anxiety allayed.³⁵⁷

In another version of dispelling secrets, *The Family That Grew* (1951) was meant as a companion to the instruction manual on adoption written by psychologists Florence Rondell and Ruth Miceals. Reading this cheerful bedtime story may have substituted for an actual conversation, or may have at least provided a script or introductory point to the conversation, but was noted by critics as written "in a psychological vacuum."³⁵⁸ Other than a vague description of "growing inside a lady's stomach" and the explanation of the fact of adoption, this is really the last mention of natural parents. Instead there is concentration on how the new family works so well, as a result of choosing the perfect child.

The chosen child myth persists in more recent literature as well. In *The Snake-stone* Sammy is also told "[Mom] and dad had always wanted a boy and they'd chosen me. I was very special to them because they'd chosen me."³⁵⁹ Psychotherapist Nancy Verrier suggested an adopted child may feel an excessive need to be good, in order to remain the 'chosen' child, leading to extreme behaviours, hyper-anxiety and self-sabotage; they may have fears of rejection

and abandonment for a second time, may feel unworthy and become hyper-sensitive to criticism, and they may find it difficult to experience attachment in this or future relationships.³⁶⁰ Could my insecurities and similar issues of self-esteem stem from this subconscious anxiety? Even Rondell and Micheals themselves critique this method not many years later in the text *The Adopted Family*:

there are some expressions in popular usage which, on the whole, are better avoided. For instance, it was at one time accepted that the idea of a ‘chosen’ baby conveyed the important quality of the baby being ‘just right’ for this family. The intention was a valid one. However it has been found that for some children this can be a source of confusion – and sometimes frightening. What if his parents decide they chose wrong?³⁶¹

B. J. Lifton in *Lost and Found* phrases it more strongly: “all adoptees are survivors of a Holocaust of one kind - they get their first hint of this in the chosen baby story which has the implicit message – we saved you. To be saved from the perils of war or famine in a foreign land may sound more dramatic than being saved from an unnamed local disaster, but the psychological impact can be similar.”³⁶² Nancy Verrier adds that adoption is the only form of trauma where the ‘victim’ is supposed to feel grateful.³⁶³ I do not consider that I have been traumatized, but I cannot help but see the fallacies in the argument of choice subverting what my own parents hoped to instill as the best origin story they could manufacture: whose trepidations it soothed is still up for question.

My sister recalls a few conversations, with “mom explaining to me that she would tell you that you were adopted but that it wasn’t a discussion. And then on another occasion her saying to me that later you might decide to find out who your real parents were and that was okay. And it was, but that would be when you were older. She did say she was going to tell you that you were adopted and the difference was that she’d picked you out, the implication being she was stuck with us. No, I’m putting words in her mouth. She didn’t tell me that, but that

would be the logical extension of that sentence. But that she'd picked you out special and that's why you came home to us."

As Jackie Kay contends, "there is no point in denying that it is different growing up knowing that your mother is not actually your mother, and that your father is not actually your father. Those seeming opposites – how can someone be your mother and not be your mother? How can somebody be real and not real? – are just at the heart of what it means to be adopted; you have to contain both those supposed opposites together."³⁶⁴ The child in her poem fears after the revelation that "she [the mother] was gonnie melt/ or something or mibbe disappear"³⁶⁵ and repeats "but I love my mammy whether she's real or no." The repetition, however, undermines the assurance of statement: there is uncertainty lingering in the emphasis.

It should be noted that whatever the 'telling' conversation, a promise sometimes made as a provision of adoption for would-be adopters, it may have been difficult for many parents to have, and not all parents agreed with the wisdom of the experts. It was David Kirk's belief in the 1960's that "the parent tells the child because he knows he must tell him and then tacitly suggests that the subject be dropped, or at least that very important aspects of the subject not be raised; he tells and yet he does not tell."³⁶⁶ And as colleagues of D. W. Winnicott noted, "adoptive families are counselled that adoptees need positive identification with their origins, yet parents are rarely helped to work through their own feelings about infertility and their negative attitudes towards birth parents."³⁶⁷ Another troubling aspect of telling about the adoption secret is that the type of information transmitted is subject to omission and capricious distortions. Largely, telling in the 1950's to 1970's was verbal, based upon the scant details provided by the agency, Children's Aid or the doctor/lawyer of a private adoption. A birthmother might tell an agency or social worker a fabricated story about the conception and birth, or withhold vital

pieces of information such as the birthfather's name. Even if she is totally truthful in what she verbally discloses, she will be only the first of many to select, arrange and prioritize what information is passed on.

This information then is recorded somehow, but perhaps it is not captured in its entirety by someone transcribing it. The social worker or agency personnel might impose their own selection bias on the material. I know that as a member of the private adoption process the information recorded on my background was very scant, and, as I was informed, this was common in such adoptions; thus for me, access to information in recent years did not provide many answers. Adoption records in any case, if kept at all, may be lost or misfiled, or simply not held after a certain period of time. The information may also have been sanitized to protect children and adoptive parents from learning of details of conception or background deemed unsavoury, such as stories of rape or incest. Revealing details of a problematic background or medical history might also have thought to have been a deterrent to adoption: "adoptive parents have to promise to be honest and tell the child about adoption and birthparents yet adoptive parents are only told the positive facts because they aren't trusted to know the whole truth."³⁶⁸ Then, in turn, the adoptive parents, who may or may not want to have a full discussion with their child, also decide how much to tell or withhold, perhaps for the presumed protection of the child, or perhaps to ensure their primacy as parents in their child's mind. Florence Rondell and Beth Micheals' reassurances to parents in their 'modern thinking' of 1974's *New Dimensions in Adoption* admonish,

sometimes in the desire to make the adopted child 'their own child' adoptive parents may not be fully aware of their attempt to ignore the past. This attitude is frequently reinforced by the fact that little is known about the child's prior life. Details, while they may be helpful, are not the crucial factors. What is crucial is that parents and child know that the child does have a past, and that

both feel that his adoptive parents are now his only true parents and that he is now 'their own' child.³⁶⁹

Essentially adoptive parents in these cases give permission for omission and distortion to reinforce 'ownership.'

'Telling' is not only limited to the conversation between adoptive parent and adoptee: it can also involve other family members. While adoption may be an announcement of joy, it may also simultaneously be an announcement of failed fertility and not being able to fulfill the societal script of normative family forming. In the post war years, there may have been lingering trepidation and doubt of the wisdom of adoption on the part of relatives, where adoptees were regarded as risk factors without a known pedigree. Other children in the existing family might also have some of these prejudices be transmitted to them, or feel, as they might with the arrival of any new sibling, some feelings of displacement of their parents' affections, as they are 'told' of an impending arrival.

In the 'telling' of my adoption to my siblings my sister recalls, "I know we were told... as a group that they were planning to adopt, or wanting to before you were on the scene, because it had to explain why this person was going to be there. This could have gone on for ages and I wouldn't have been really aware of it, like between when they were initially talking about it and the time you arrived on the scene. I don't have any idea whether that was a month or six months or two years. It was just chitter chatter in the background. It wasn't a highly emotional kind of conversation, it was quite matter of fact: 'This is something were thinking about doing, stay tuned, we'll let you know,' that kind of approach rather than... well we wouldn't have sat down and had a big family discussion anyway right? It would have been an announcement or a 'this is how were going to handle it' which is what they did with everything else. Mom and dad were excited, so we weren't involved in worrying about it. Like it was positive energy, not fussy sort

of stuff, and mom liked having babies. So it was a good thing, it was a positive thing, it was an upbeat thing.

I don't remember reactions of any extended family members, like Uncle B___ and Aunt D___, other than them coming down to meet you and being all excited, what you'd expect. I don't remember there being a scene or an issue about it, anything at all." But my brother thinks, "Reactions from extended family members? No I don't remember any because, of course, mom had cut off all contact with them, so if they saw you at all it would have been on a formal visit."

My sister: "But that's all I could come up with. It was a happy event but it wasn't a big foofaraw, and it wasn't traumatizing for anybody. There was nothing to go, 'Oh my God, I remember when that happened. There was nothing really to be sorted out, it was just ...perfect.'" My brother concurred, "Everybody was really positive about it. They were all excited. I think it was a very positive kind of thing. We were a relatively big family at that point anyway. 'Another child? Oh great! Another member of the family' kind of thing. So no negativity at all, that I remember anyway."

I wonder if my siblings' unrelenting positivity is for my benefit. I accept that my adoption was a welcome and unhidden event in our family – I know it wasn't a problem, and I never felt as such. Yet being the 1960s, I'm not sure I think all reactions were as open, positive or non-judgmental as they present. Is adoption more of an issue for adoptees? Well, yes, of course. But this also stems from our place within the social world.

My sister: "I think we did have questions but I don't think there weren't any emotional questions. I think they were just sort of matter of fact -- 'What room is she staying in?' or, 'How will this work?' And if anything, it was like two questions. Again, this wasn't something that went on for two hours, working it through with the family. I don't think anyone would have been

traumatized. I wasn't at all concerned about how it would affect me, as long as I didn't have to share my room at the time. It was 'Will I have to move all my stuff? No? Okay fine.' But I think part of that is coming from four kids who were already part of a family. If I was an only child, I bet I would have had a different reaction." This triggers something in me: I think of my half-sister, the 'only' child of my birthmother. How did she feel affected?

My brother says, "No, never an issue." Then he reconsiders a moment. "Now that's interesting because your other two brothers must have been moved into a single bedroom, because I didn't share a bedroom. I wonder if they had any reaction to that – it would be interesting to ask them...whether they resented being moved into the same room. I think people who are adopted, it's more of an issue for them. For most people it's sort of 'adopted? Oh okay,' it's very casual, they don't make any fuss or distinction about it, so I don't remember anything negative in that regard."

This version of telling and its positivity will, of course, contrast greatly with the 'telling' later done by my birthmother to her husband and daughter, of her earlier illegitimate pregnancy and relinquishment, and the secret she kept from them. In this telling, adoption is anything but positive, other than being a method by which the mother had at least partially erased her mistake. In this telling, a re-working of the original family does not make room for another to enter. This telling may have undermined trust in a woman who essentially lied to the two most intimate people in her life, for as long as she had known them. This telling may have jeopardized her status as wife or mother, or as a 'moral' person. This telling may have bred resentment and unresolved conflicts. But this telling is untold to me.

Telling gave way to 'explaining' later in the 1970's and 1980's, with adoption workers reinforcing the belief that adoption should be a topic of ongoing conversation, returned to and

revisited frequently as the child matures, has questions, and seeks information. It also began to include more indicators of openness, in the sharing of past histories, birthparent biographies and other information about the adopted/relinquished child. “‘Explaining’ was predicated on honesty and openness, in marked contrast to the practice of telling...[with] distortions, omissions and untruths about the child’s background...and a more proactive role, whereas the earlier practice of telling was a more reactive role – responding, rather than initiating.”³⁷⁰

Some written documentary evidence may have been accessible and passed on in earlier periods, but now ‘storybooks’ were a more common practice, compiled by the birthparent or the social worker, and meant to provide some background, and give a sense of connection to a past history. In the 1980’s an additional practice of ‘life letters’ gained popularity, with the birthparent writing a letter to be opened upon reaching adulthood, or multiple letters intended to be put away for the adopted child, perhaps in a series of yearly ‘birthday’ letters, allowing for time, distance and maturity to help in the understanding of the birthmother’s choices.

‘Explaining’ might involve relaying biographical information about the birthparents and their personalities, and details beyond the scant ‘facts’ that might have been presented in the ‘telling’ of adoption, reassuring them that the choice was made for the right reasons, and that the adoptive parents would be the best people to raise them. It also involved a more realistic version of the truth. No longer were you the ‘chosen child’ of your parents. Instead, an agency, usually with the endorsement of the birthmother, selected the right parents for you, or the birthmother herself did, in an act of reverse choice, as is the case in many contemporary adoptions. Openness, not secrets, is now the new normal. “Whilst life story books appeared to be an inclusionary form of practice for birthparents however, they actually worked to exclude through imposing a

sanitized or edited version of the birth family's life"³⁷¹ and providing what Sally Sales terms "a ritualistic burial of natural families."³⁷²

While in the 1950's and 60's adoption was primarily a service for infertile couples and the placement of newborn babies, in the 1970's it became a service for older children, sibling groups, children with special needs, or children who had spent long periods in foster care, and for parents who could cope with a range of potential developmental difficulties; thus the rhetoric had to change. All of the children may or may not have been institutionalized for periods of time; all may or may not remember their birthparents and original home circumstances.³⁷³

There were two competing discourses at play here in terms of how an adopted child's welfare was understood. First, that adopted children needed protection from their early histories, and second, that adopted children needed to have those early histories preserved...[thus in practice] official adoption narratives worked to exclude and make marginal other stories that they simultaneously generated.³⁷⁴

Possessing the information necessary to achieve a sense of connection, to satisfy curiosity, to allay fears, to provide for intellectual and emotional yearnings may prove enough, such that the adoptee does not feel the need to search further, or to want to establish a relationship with birthparents. Or perhaps in his/her 'life story,' that chapter has been neatly closed. But the complications of pursuing an end to secrecy, on either the adoptee or adoptive mother or birthmother's part, are not straightforward.

I reflect on the duplicity that women had to resort to if they had conceived a child out of wedlock, and how or whether a birthmother might tell her story. I wonder how many times my birthmother might have wanted to confess to her husband or to her daughter. In the following collage I imagine a confrontation scene between a husband and wife regarding her possible illegitimate pregnancy, one perhaps she had secreted away from years before. While the couple seem happy, there is a sense of factors beyond their control in the large figure of the nurse almost

manipulating the family, a nurse who might have been privy to the birth of the illegitimate child, and who appears to be forcing the man to question the veracity of his wife's backstory. The wife might play the innocent virginal bride but yet there is a baby that has not been acknowledged in the picture. I think of the revelation of my own birthmother in her seventies, a secret long held, revealed at great cost to herself.



Image 23: "Confession," (Vintage paper collage), 2014.

Despite the move towards greater or complete openness, many adoptions and illegitimate births remain/ed secret, and might have only been revealed by accident, or by design at critical junctures such as prior to weddings or births. These 'late discovery' adoptees were then faced with further psychological upheaval, with the double knowledge that not only were they adopted and not the biological offspring they had assumed to be all their lives, but that this 'dirty little secret' had been perpetuated without their knowledge, sometimes with the collusion of other

family members and acquaintances. My brother tells me, “One of my friends, who shall remain nameless since I still hang around with him, was raised by his grandmother as his mother. He didn’t realize for a very long time that his sister was actually his mother.” He does not say how this news was received, or by what means his friend found out. I am grateful that I am not from a family who pursued total non-disclosure; I cannot imagine the psychic damage.

If adoptees were not told of their status, there was always a chance they would find out anyway, in a sudden, often unintended revelation, and this is one of the prevailing tropes in fictionalized adoption stories. This is not to lessen the trauma of finding out something so intimate about oneself that has been withheld, and yet it is this kind of revelatory moment that also forms part of the archetype of the adoption story in popular imagination, a kind of prurient indulgence on an observer’s part that they are somehow superior and unscathed by such dirty secrets. Or, in a variation, a birthmother’s long held secret comes to the fore, threatening her present day security and relationships: blaming and shaming are the next logical step.

For example in *Here’s a Penny*, in a predictable pattern, two little children have a fight and Penny’s friend blurts out the secret everyone knows: “I’m my mommy and daddy’s real little girl”³⁷⁵...but you’re not your mommy’s and daddy’s real little boy... You’re just ‘dopted.’³⁷⁶ Note the use of the word ‘just,’ establishing the hierarchal status of birth products. This is reminiscent of the long held and not yet dispelled taunt of childhood: ‘you were adopted.’ Penny is, of course, devastated, and his mother tries to soothe him by saying, “There is only one thing that makes a little boy ‘really truly’...his mother’s love for him.”³⁷⁷ The sentiment is warm and lovely, but then the conversation twists back to the chosen child myth and the idea of selecting just what you want in a child.

The increased numbers of adoptions that took place post WW2 to Roe versus Wade correspond to the more universal imposition of secrecy laws, thus there is a significant portion of adoptees who have restricted or partial access to information that their predecessors might have obtained freely. And although records in Ontario have been open now for seven years, this access is not universal in Canada, is subject to veto, nor may it actually allow for adoptees or birthmothers to acquire the information they seek. We are women in limbo.

These are not really revelations, as Katarina Wegar notes in her book *A Sealed and Secret Kinship*: “historically American adoption has operated under the principle that nurture conquers nature and that a child can thrive when transplanted to a new environment. How does that familiar notion fit with the outburst of searching, the spreading of petitions for access to unrevised birth certificates, and the calls for open adoption of the past twenty-five years? Today’s arguments [urge] proper nurture requires nature.”³⁷⁸ This is echoed in the novel *Tell Me My Name*. The voice of the author speaks to her reunited daughter:

You were telling us how you found me, traced me here – the search you had to make through all those bureaus and offices and records. You said you kept coming up against stonewalls, hostility, refusals, after you admitted you were adopted and were trying to find out who your natural parents were. It was incredible to us all...how attitudes toward adoption are still so confused and inhumane. It’s still hard for me to imagine how you were forced to lie and discretion simply to find out who you are. As if the information were so shameful and dangerous that nobody could be trusted with that knowledge – least of all yourself.³⁷⁹

I take these statements to heart, as I consider my own long-term struggle to dispel the secrets of my origin, and the damage that secrets have had over my own experience as adoptee.

The Ontario Adoption Disclosure Register was one step in trying to counter secrecy and address search needs by birthparents and adoptees, an avenue tried by many including myself, but it was plagued with problems. It opened in 1979, a passive registry allowing adoptees over 18, who needed the permission of their adoptive parents, and willing birthparents, to reunite.

David Kirk further criticizes passive registries such as Ontario's, pointing out that the mechanism stipulating that three parties must be in agreement in order to conduct a search or reunion "constitutes a means to hinder rather than to advance the program of institutional reform."³⁸⁰ In 1987 the law changed: adoptive parents' veto power was rescinded; if both searching parties registered, Children's Aid would facilitate the reunion, and if one party did not register, then no information was shared with the searching party. A 1988 editorial urged Ottawa for a national registry, yet in the same year Ontario Ombudsman Roberta Jamieson reported that the ministry was understaffed, and the Adoption Disclosure Registry contained more than 16,000 names, with the wait for a match more than seven years in most cases;³⁸¹ clearly information was not going to be transferred easily or readily, another indication of the problems in the system. MPP Marilyn Churley, herself a birthmother who was in charge of the registry at the time, and who championed open adoption bills after experiencing the difficulties of locating her own son, also pointed out its flaws; for example, the government's later admission "that in the understaffed agency a search could take four years to initiate was an understatement: the wait could be as long as a decade."³⁸² Through all this time, change of addresses or change of partners could lessen the chance of reunion, as could the fact that both parties had to register to be reunited, and that adoptive parents could withhold consent from their child to receive contact information.

Children's Aid Society, Records Disclosure, July 1991. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

MPP Norm Miller in 2001 claimed the Ministry for Community and Social Services, with the additional funding of 2.4 million dollars, had reduced the waiting time for an active search but these claims were refuted by the registrar of Parent Finders Canada, who spoke of people in her support group waiting up to twelve to fourteen years, if service was delivered at all; and according to author and birthfather Richard Wright's newspaper article, "the registry [later] reported that in 2004, of the 57,000 people on its rolls, only 887 achieved a reunion."³⁸³ Similar stories were told by readers who responded, such as a Mississauga women who wrote in "1963 [she] was disowned by [her] own parents, fired from [her] job for being unmarried and pregnant, denied help from social services and so was forced to put [her] child up for adoption... When [she] registered for 'unidentifying' information, it took nine years to be placed on the list and another ten years before [she] received what turned out to be only misinformation."³⁸⁴

It was under this agency that I registered. One month after my initial inquiry, I am told there will be a delay of 6 – 8 months to process my application. In late October I learn that no one from my birthfamily has registered, thus a match is not possible. I am informed that searches are now being performed for those who registered five years earlier. The backlog will only get worse. I do not know then that it will actually take over a decade. Eight *years* later, in March of 1999, I receive a form letter telling me to be patient, and wait for a counsellor to contact me, in their estimation, in nine months. I have now been assigned a file number, the only concrete progress I can see. In July 2000, once again I receive a form letter, warning me that there is likely very little information to be had, but even to receive this I must wait for 'further processing.'

Adoption Disclosure Application, August 1991. Document removed to maintain the privacy of those individuals involved.

Ministry of Community and Social Services. ADR Search, October 1991. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

Ministry of Community and Social Services. ADR Search, March 1999. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

Ministry of Community and Social Services/ ADR: no relative registered for search, July 2000. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

Sealed records serve “as a symbolic battleground for conflicting perceptions of the nature of kinship, identity and attachment” and the relative importance of blood ties and social elements in kinship.³⁸⁵ Canadian researcher Michelle McColm in 1993 noted the lack of access to information for adoptees suggesting that “today’s adoption legislation should recognize that bearing a child entails at least a minimal amount of responsibility to that child, even if the birth mother wants nothing further to do with the child.”³⁸⁶ It does strike me that so much is encompassed that I am denied.

Agitation for change in Ontario really began in 1984 – 85. Adoption advocacy groups’ pressure on the Ontario government led to the commissioned report of Dr. Ralph Garber, then Dean of Social Work at University of Toronto, who recommended that records be made available to adult adoptees based on the principle “that facts surrounding an individual’s adoption belong to that person, no matter where the information is stored.”³⁸⁷ In 1994 a private member’s bill granting adoptees access to their birth certificates was introduced; however, it

could not be brought to a vote. A change in the Child Welfare Act in 1995 allowed licensed search agencies to help adoptees and birthparents find each other, for a fee, although they had no access to the child's new surname.

Marilyn Churley, called the “mother of disclosure legislation” in Ontario, introduced bill after bill beginning in 1998, calling it a ‘human rights issue’ and that “fundamentally, what this bill is about is updating a ridiculous system that no longer works,”³⁸⁸ but all attempts were struck down. Individuals, and groups such as Bastard Nation, Parent Finders, and The Ontario Coalition for Open Records presented heartfelt testimony, such as that of Monica Byrne, then registrar of Parent Finders Canada: “I think over the years what has strengthened me to come and speak to groups and to join Parent Finders is the fact that I got sick of being spoken for. I was always being spoken for. Lawyers told me what I should think, social workers told me what I should think, society told me how I should feel, and I'm telling you how I feel. I feel that I should have had, and should still have, the right to reach my adult adopted child should I wish to meet her.”³⁸⁹

Marilyn Churley cites the “almost tearful display of emotion” by Ann Cavoukian, then Ontario Privacy Commissioner, on the introduction of Churley's fifth bill in 2003, as inciting negative media backlash and helping to defeat the bill. Ann Cavoukian “claim[ed] to represent the voiceless...describing sensational and controversial stories” of rape and incest, and the havoc opening records would cause during public hearings.³⁹⁰

The Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Ontario commissioned a report two years later by sociologist and adoption expert Anne-Marie Ambert to review the implications of the debate over Bill 183, the Adoption Information Disclosure Act 2005, aimed at providing adoptees and

birthparents access to each other's identifying records. In Ann Cavoukian's review of the findings, she states that

Ambert shows her concerns over what she calls media-promoted pop psychology suggesting all wish for reunions and to think otherwise is not normal and constitutes an undue invasion of personal privacy. Ambert suggests the main propulsion for search is access to health records and advocates for a Mediator's office that could provide such information for either party anonymously, with the option of a mediated meeting upon mutual consent if desired.³⁹¹

Further criticism in the paper is that the generally positive experience reported in reunion situations is full of the same methodological flaws observed in many adoption studies, and Ann Cavoukian decided "the main conclusion of the paper appears to be that there is no support for one approach over the other." The bill passed second reading in Ontario, only to be struck down by the Ontario Superior Court, with the aid of the Privacy Commissioner and civil rights lawyer Clayton Ruby, who cited fears of abuse, and violation of privacy.³⁹² Anne-Marie Ambert's summary seems to strike more truly at the heart of the dilemma: "in balancing competing interests one person's right to access information should not override another person's right to privacy."³⁹³ Here she sides with one party; I wrestle with both sides.

The legislation was amended to include a disclosure veto, which many felt was a mistake, as this could essentially criminalize the activity of looking for your birthparents. However it was in this form that the bill passed. After spring 2006, the Adoption Disclosure Unit and the Ministry of Community and Social Services no longer accepted new applications, as it professed this would facilitate the new processes of disclosure, and perhaps, more practically, save money, a move that did not please the adoption community. As the bill was phased in, in 2007, adult adoptees and birthparents could submit contact preferences, and 'no contact' notices. Information now available includes copies of the original and amended statements of live birth, and the adoption order. Birthfathers not named on the original statement of live birth cannot

apply for information; they can only register. As of 2008 people could add their names to the voluntary disclosure register, a passive registry where, if both parties register, contact information is exchanged. Active search is no longer made, and no provision for reunion or counselling is provided, but Ontario eventually could claim to be the fourth province in Canada, in June 2009, to 'open' records.³⁹⁴

'Til the Gossamer Thread You Fling, Catch Somewhere³⁹⁵

*Sometimes families' secrets are so deeply buried that they elude the conscious awareness even of those most closely involved...secrets inhabit the borderlands of memory.*³⁹⁶

Documents are a vital part of the known aspects of adoptive family forming, but are also indicative of the unknown: the missing information craved by adoptees to complete a sense of identity and family, needed to reconcile the present with the past, and key clues necessary if one decides to conduct a search for their birth relatives. The question of who searches and why, and whether s/he should be allowed access to all information held by documents or persons has been a focus of research, a locus of debate, a source of autobiographic confessional, and fuelled by media attention, for many years, and again raises questions about secrecy, identity and rights, and what the searcher hopes to gain.

Autobiographical accounts were an important galvanizing force in changing attitudes to search, and a major shift in societal attitude occurred during the time of my adoption and upbringing. One of the first was Jean Paton and her 1954 confessional *The Adopted Break Silence*, credited with some of the earliest advocacy in North America in giving adoptees a voice, although having little practical impact. In her book she interviewed adult adoptees about their experiences and wrote of their desires to find out about their heritage, no matter how happily

their adoption had played out. She later created 'Orphan Voyage' in 1968, the first adoption registry, a formal self-help group to assist and support adoptees in the search for original parents.³⁹⁷

David Kirk is credited with critiquing the assumption that confidential adoptions were beneficial, and introduced the 1964 theory of 'shared fate.' he proposed that adoptive parents, himself being one of them, must acknowledge the differences between parenting a biological child and parenting one by adoption. He suggested such communication would allow for open and healthy discussion about the differences in being an adopted family. In 1973 Florence Ladden Fisher published the story of her traumatic twenty-year search for her birth parents, *The Search for Anna Fisher*, where she recounted her attempt to overcome the confidentiality of birthmother and original self, as represented by the name she discovered accidentally on a birth certificate when she was seven years old. Her publication and activism as founder of Adoptees' Liberation Movement Association (ALMA), one of the largest original adoption search groups, is credited with the beginning of the Adoption Rights Movement. Historian Katarina Wegar notes a key factor in Florence Ladden Fisher's strategy was that she converted the issue of 'confidentiality' into an issue of 'secrecy' and 'individual rights,' giving it popular credibility in the public eye. In her/ALMA'S view, the birthmother has no right to privacy, as the adoptee was only an object transferred in legal custody, not a party to any contract. Her slogan: "The truth of his origin is the birthright of every man."³⁹⁸

If one does search, the personal/internal deterrents are not the only barriers faced. B. J. Lifton in her memoir *Twice Born* describes how adoption professionals dissuaded her in her search efforts in no uncertain terms, with a litany of pejoratives. Her encounter with the agency that arranged her adoption told her "your need to come here seems most unusual," "you should

seek therapy to try to understand why you want more material,” “your need to look for your mother is neurotic,” “you are rationalizing why you must know who your real parents are,” “it’s best to let things stay as they are,” “the biological mother is unimportant in a case like this,” “the only reason you want to find her is that you did not have a good relationship with your adoptive one,” and “no one has asked me if they should look up their natural parents before...I don’t think most adoptive people have this need.”³⁹⁹ B. J. Lifton does complete her search, and fights back against the way she was treated by those holding power in the adoption process and record keeping, and against those who questioned her psychological fitness, claiming instead,

the quest is healthy and necessary...It is the way that it is handled that distorts it. For identity is not any one thing but a configuration, and depends on one’s sense of relationship over the generations to one’s heritage – one’s biological and historical roots as well as one’s immediate life history. The one is insufficient without the other.⁴⁰⁰

Memoirs like hers and Florence Fisher’s initially helped to pave the way for greater acceptance of the need to search, but psychologists and adoption professionals remained sceptical, and attributed many explanations to this behaviour.

John Triseliotis conducted what is believed to be the first scholarly investigation on adoptee searches in Scotland in 1974. His work concluded that searchers constituted a minority and that their motivation was chiefly dissatisfaction with adoptive parents. Nonetheless, as a result of his study, in 1975 the Children Act retroactively opened birth certificates to adoptees in U.K., but required mandatory counselling before an adoptee would be given information. Adoption researchers Arthur Sorosky, Annette Baran, Reuben Pannor, in their 1974 investigation, concluded dismissively that some persons are perpetual searchers, always stopping short of a reunion: “it is the search itself, and the associated fantasies, which is the significant process that serves to hold these persons together. It would appear that these individuals would

almost prefer to live with their fantasies, a prolongation of the classic family romance theme, rather than face reality with a possible disillusioning reunion with the birth parent.”⁴⁰¹ They declared the urge to search somewhat odd, but predicted that there would be more searching in the future. A later article in 1978 revised their findings, and suggested searching helped with identity crises; by 1989 Paul Sachdev labelled searching an ‘existential need’ and reported primarily positive outcomes for searching.

Ulrich Muller explains the theories of researchers Julia Feast and David Howe in 1997, who, noting there was little theoretical consensus on why adoptees search, assigned the conflicting theories into three broader psychological models, which had much staying power. The first, following suit of previous researchers, attributes it to a deficiency, whether personal or in the adoptee’s relationship with adoptive parents, citing once again ‘genealogical bewilderment’ among other psychopathological causes. Their second model was to describe it as a normative developmental task, a ‘life-cycle’ approach that helps to solve identity conflicts and construct biological continuity.⁴⁰² The third explanation is a social-interactionist perspective, which locates the search in the context of socio-cultural norms and expectations, and notes that kinship defined only biologically points adoptees to stigmatization, which is exacerbated by sealed records.⁴⁰³ Proponents of the last theory also criticize the psychopathological approaches as perpetuating the stigma of adoptees as second-class or ‘other.’

Adoption Quarterly in 1998, a digest of more current findings, added these reasons for adoptees being more likely to search: if they had a stronger memory of their initial adoption revelation, had more early negative feelings about adoption, had more information about the adoption, were older at the time of adoption, had a health problem with a known or possible hereditary basis, or felt less freedom to discuss their adoption at home.⁴⁰⁴ R. S. Anderson posited

viewing search behaviour in two broad categories: the search as therapy, or the search as adventure, suggesting that some people are natural mystery solvers, and curiosity motivates them.⁴⁰⁵

Penny Callan Partridge takes researchers and their theories to task however in her poem “Adoption Research: A Poet’s Response.” She begins, “So I’m reading the *Adoption Quarterly*/ at the Center for the Study of Adoption/ when I come across this sentence.” She goes on to succinctly describe her frustrations with the ‘expert’ research that conflicts on so many adoption issues: not just tangentially, but diametrically. She cites several well-known studies on search and reunion, both of which I have used in my own research, one stating adoptees rarely want to meet their birthparents, the other that the majority do: both claim to be authoritative: “what an example of how slippery the/ truth is: how much depends on/ who’s asking whom and when/ and with what hopes for answers.”⁴⁰⁶ She also deplores the dishonest or lazy use of research, “quot[ing] old Scottish studies/ about only two per cent of us/ wanting to know our birthparents,”⁴⁰⁷ a direct hit against John Triselotis, a study still cited as reliable fifty years later, and yet itself flawed when undertaken, a study of a mere ten people. Her parting quip: “We hope you will be comfortable with our/ questions, researchers. If you answer them/ we are likely to keep being in your studies.”⁴⁰⁸ It is clear that she has little expectation of acknowledgment from the academic community, whose shortcomings she highlights.

Attempts to ‘explain’ the motivation of searchers and non-searchers is actually a form of reductionism. Those who search are not representative of anyone else but themselves, and ‘searchers’ as a group are not homogenous. Some of the best theorizing seems to come from Lee Campbell, Phyllis Silverman and Patricia Patti in their 1991 *Social Work* article:

The variety of motives for search as well as the fact that many adoptees do not search indicate that adoptees do not passively internalize social norms and

expectations but rather that they actively reflect on and negotiate often conflicting social norms and expectations... The decision to search, then, is the outcome of a more complex process involving the weighing of different expectations on the basis of a specific biographical situation.⁴⁰⁹

Canadian Karen March wrote extensively of search and reunion in *The Stranger Who Bore Me*.

She noted several other characteristics of searchers: for example, that once committed to a search, searchers are usually committed to completing it, and that the closer to completion, the more intense the desire to search becomes; further, that search tactics could become extreme, from interviewing old friends and neighbours of birthparents, to cold calls, subterfuge and quasi-legal or illegal acts.⁴¹⁰ Lee Campbell, Phyllis Silverman and Patricia Patti noted how emotionally charged all stages of the search were, and that it could become obsessive, and that periods of intense searching were interspersed with it being set aside.⁴¹¹

Another phenomenon of search, researchers noted, was that more women search than men, and that women activated their searches earlier than men.⁴¹² This has also been explained variously: Arthur Sorosky in 1974 suggested that pregnancy and childbirth heightens a woman's sense of continuity over time, while Karen March in 1995 suggested a greater sense of the importance of genetic heritage during pregnancy triggers search behaviour. Harold Grotevant's 1996 theory suggests through the socialization process women identify themselves primarily through relationships and motherhood and thus the search for a birthmother is a natural extension of this. Karen March's principle theory is that the prime motivation for reunion "lies in the searching adoptee's perception of their adoptive status and the centrality of obtaining information on their biological background to a satisfactory presentation of self."⁴¹³ Canadian Marlene Webber alternatively theorizes that "the search plays with our desire for origins by implying on the one hand, that something tangible has been lost and must be recovered, and by exposing, on the other, the fallacy of origins, the impossibility of true return."⁴¹⁴

Search behaviours are thought to be triggered by age as well. One British study declares that children may not show overt concern about origins until they become adolescents, and then in early adolescence they will begin searching for clues.⁴¹⁵ While not limited to a particular group, Ulrich Muller reports in a later study the largest demographic of searchers being twenty-five to thirty-five year olds.⁴¹⁶ He also suggests for middle age adults the concern of generativity and leaving something of the self behind becomes a motivating factor. The concern becomes more urgent as adoptees age due to the increasing likelihood of finding the death of the birthparent and the unavailability of any information.⁴¹⁷

Arthur Sorosky, Annette Baran and Reuben Pannor's work in the 1970's shifted the focus of explaining search behaviors from a right to a need. Their research suggested that an adoptee's wish to search for birth information was a psychological one, and a natural drive to feel connected to a genealogical past not limited to solely the adoptive population. Groups focussed on adoptee rights also began gaining momentum in the later 1970's and 80's, some of which concentrated on issues of search, and others that expanded in scope and mandate adoption reform issues, and the inclusivity of people experiencing adoption from different perspectives.⁴¹⁸ Concerned United Birthparents (CUB) for example, founded in 1976 as a support group for women forced to surrender children, and promoting the preservation of family, is credited with coining the term 'birthmother.'⁴¹⁹ More political and radical strategies and groups appeared in the 1990's⁴²⁰ such as 'Bastard Nation,' one of the most militant advocacy groups as indicated by their name, which supports unconditional open records. The deliberately provocative name is intended to reclaim the stigma of 'bastardy': "we see nothing shameful in having been born out of wedlock or in being adopted." They advocate for "the civil and human rights of adult citizens

who were adopted as children” and “campaign for the restoration of their right to access their records” as a ‘political issue’ of identity.^{421 422}

In both Canada and the U.S. there are presently hundreds of adoptive support groups with varying foci and clientele, all dedicated to their own vision of adoption, equity, justice and activism. On one hand, the plethora of groups makes it easier for those who wish help, education, support and advocacy; yet the sheer multitude of perspectives show how tricky it can be to navigate these waters in a way that represents fairness to all. Many of the U.S. based groups have chapters in Canada; as well, one is able to find home-grown groups.⁴²³ Parent Finders of Canada, founded in 1976, a branch of an international organization, was the largest support group in our nation for many years, providing counselling, search techniques, newsletters, meetings, emotional support and political activism. However with the opening of records and the relative ease of Internet and social media searches, their *raison d’etre* has been undermined, and their numbers are in severe decline. At the chapter I attended briefly, the contact list went from about twenty names to ten in under a decade, and last year they changed their meeting frequency from every two months to every three.⁴²⁴ I remember my first meeting, documented in my journal:

Early. I am in the parking lot of the funeral home where the Parent Finders meeting is to take place. I don’t want to have to make too much small talk with people I don’t know, never a strong suit of mine, and more awkward here. I pretend to check email messages on my phone until it is almost seven o’clock.

A funeral home seems an oddly gothic place to hold such a meeting – I wonder of the history of this decision. I walk into the air-conditioned cool after the heat of the humid evening, noting the hushed grey carpet and deliberately neutral palette of the corridor. The meeting room is up a flight of stairs, made more daunting by the recent after-effect of chemo #5 and 6. A

strange lethargy and ache in the calves making walking, even in the smallest increments, appear impossible, and swollen legs and ankles burn at the extra effort the stairs will incur.

Drifting voices coalesce into seven or eight people sitting on couches and chairs at the furthest edge of a kind of waiting room with a kitchen. The format seems established and shortly after ‘signing in’ on the sheet passed around, listing whom I am searching for and with whom I have had contact, the meeting proceeds. It appears that these are the regulars, every two months making the trek to discuss what they have done, who they have seen, advice being solicited or given without asking. I came because I was curious, not a real believer in self-help groups. What is it that they receive for this?

The participants are all women, all at least thirty and up. No men. One has letters exchanged with a birthmother who lives some distance and is not willing to meet her daughter, now in her sixties. This semi-contact seems to hurt; she sits deep into the couch cushions, wrapped in her arms. Another met her mother in a series of strange coincidences in a hospital through a third party nurse who noted the same last names. The next woman shows her progress in trying to track her origins through death notices and newspaper clippings. She wonders if her mother really is the one who died, and if she was raised by her birth relatives before relinquishment. Another has an address but also has a ‘no contact’ order on file from her birthmother. She ponders whether she can circumvent this somehow, as unwanted contact can lead to a hefty monetary fine. A discussion of legal approaches and subterfuge ensues. Another woman speaks of reunion with one sibling and not the other. She seems fairly upbeat until the convenor’s partner suggests she is hiding anger against this: the amateur psychoanalysis seemingly hits a chord, and the speaker begins to weep.

All the stories are convoluted; mine is no less so. I find when I try to explain what I know and what I have done, it seems like I have to backtrack. I try to streamline, thinking both that no one is that interested and that I don't need to tell everything, but realize that this leaves gaps. When questioned on some details I freeze, strangely. I can't remember the place where my half sister works. She works in the States, perhaps Georgia? I remember it's south. But her name? It suddenly escapes me. 'Carrie,' I blurt out, knowing this is not right, but my brain does not let me think further.

The convenor has related to me that this is one of the few groups of Parent Finders, a national Canadian adoption support group, still in existence. I remember when having been given a list in reply to my initial inquiry for resources on adoption I received a badly photocopied sheet of books and videos, most seemingly from the seventies to nineties: no websites, no recent works. Have these groups outlived their usefulness? Are meetings being replaced with blogs or Facebook groups? After the wave of adoptions from the post war period, have those adoptees, those birthmothers, come to terms with their experience? At this age many will be gone: my own birthmother would be in her eighties if she was alive.

Will I go back? I'm not sure. If I do, I'll hear about any adoption in the news stories, receive a newsletter with updates and minutes. Some sharing and sympathetic nods. I don't know that this is doing anything for me, but I haven't made any decisions quite yet. Maybe there is more to know.

Researchers found that searching often begins, if pursued at all, after a long process of internal struggle, and with the weighing of several factors: for birthmothers, fear of recrimination, guilt over relinquishment, fear of disrupting their present family life, and even fear of threats to their own personal security. For adoptees, barriers include feelings of guilt or

disloyalty to the adoptive parents, worry over intrusion into the life of the birthparent, fear of rejection by the birthparent, and the unforeseen problems that contact might bring.⁴²⁵ Karen March suggests further barriers, such as lack of knowledge about searching, and legal and normative sanctions.⁴²⁶ Of course, closed records are also a factor. I can attest to all of these.

The potential reaction of adoptive parents is one powerful deterrent to searching. Unfortunately, in *Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye*, the response of her parents upon finding out Natalie's desire to search for her heritage is one that adoptees fear. Her mother is "shaken" and she asks, "What does it matter? You've been our daughter since you were an infant. Your father and I never think about the fact that you were adopted. Have we done something wrong?"⁴²⁷ Her father similarly is "troubled:" "I think this search will be a terrible mistake on your part. What possible good could come out of it?"⁴²⁸ Natalie knows, as do many adoptees, "There was no way to explain something she really didn't understand herself. But the feeling was there: the need." Natalie replies, "I don't know. Except that the secrets would be gone."^{429 430}

Fear of another rejection is a powerful dissuader to search. Lee Campbell, Phyllis Silverman and Patricia Patti's study found about fifteen per cent of birthmothers initially reacted with denial or refusal to meet, and many adoptees have difficulty imagining such reception. Bridie in *Familiar Passions* is told, "Don't be hurt darling. I don't know what your plans are, but you must understand, she may not want to see you."⁴³¹ In *The Snake-stone* adoptee James ponders rejection as he nears his birthplace: "What on earth would I do when I found it? Knock on the door? Say, 'Hi, I'm your long-lost son!' and expect her to give me a hug and invite me in for a toasted teacake? Ask me to forgive her? Was that what I wanted? I think I just wanted to know what she looked like, that was all. Just so I could believe she was a real person."⁴³²

Another barrier to search or reunion is the potential unleashing of unknown and unexpected problems, a warning received by Hortense in the film *Secrets and Lies*. The social worker tells her to prepare for what might be traumatic journey. Her social worker urges her to think first about whether she wants to proceed, a standard tactic to encourage sober second thought, and Hortense is told to use their services to search if she does decide to go ahead.

Jeffrey and Jeffrey request for correction of birth certificate for Martha Anne ____, January, 1963. Document removed to maintain the privacy of those individuals involved.

In fact, when records were first opened in England due to the influence of the John Triseliotis study, counsellors routinely gave such serious warnings about possible negative consequences that they may have dissuaded many from continuing to search, and were also advised to seek the advice of the Registrar General if they had concerns about releasing certain information to certain individuals.⁴³³ Instead of being dissuaded though, Hortense does the search on her own, which is understandable, wanting to elicit some sense of control over her own story.

Boyfriend Paul in *Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye* argues against Natalie's search and its potential pitfalls with incredible bluntness: "It hasn't occurred to you that maybe they've never wondered at all?...And what if you found out [your birthmother] was a cheap whore working the Boston streets?"⁴³⁴ While he might be trying to prepare her for outcomes that do not live up to fantasy, he is also expressing on some level the kind of suspicion at the back of the minds of

many when they think of the type of women who might have had to cope with unplanned pregnancy. His more sage advice, albeit not taken, is “what a person is has nothing to do with where they come from, not with what body they come from.”⁴³⁵ With all the perils involved, search should be acknowledged for what it is: ultimately an act of courage.

Karen Rosenberg and Victor Groze found in their 1997 study that the majority of both searchers and non-searchers said they had thought about their family while growing up, or had daydreams and nightmares in childhood and adolescence about birth relatives; eighty-five per cent had wondered about their birth relatives, particularly what birth mother looked like and whether they looked like them; and sixty-six per cent wondered why they had been placed for adoption. For most these thoughts remained private: in part a wish not to worry their parents and in part because it was a subject intrinsically difficult and awkward.⁴³⁶

Reports show an increase currently in those desiring to search, suggesting changing public opinion about searches, and the cohort effects of those born later when adoption did not hold as a great a stigma.⁴³⁷ This is not to suggest, unlike general perceptions of adoptee search behaviour, that all adoptees or birthmothers wish to, will or have searched, or that searching will solve problems in the searcher’s life. Much perception of adoptee and birthmother search narratives has been informed by the media, fuelled by ‘real life’ missing persons detective spectacles and Oprah style reunion shows that “allow us to live the drama of another’s life.”⁴³⁸ A summary of a 1983 study by William Feigelman and Arnold Silverman reminds us that actual searching and contact with birth relatives remained relatively rare.⁴³⁹ “Unfortunately, large parts of the media and a few vocal adoptees have fallen victim to the assumption that all adopted persons must be deeply committed to serious searching. The assumption continues that those who are not now actively searching are just people who haven’t yet started or who have repressed the

desire.”⁴⁴⁰

The short story “The Third Person” provides one counter narrative to ‘all adoptees search’ by introducing the reader to Elle, her identity expressed only as the indefinite third person pronoun, already a clue to the detachment she feels navigating current relationships and bonding with her own baby. Elle is a late discovery adoptee. Her adoptive mother one day suddenly reveals, “Look there’s no easy way to tell you this... When you were born you were abandoned in an alley. When they found you, you were very cold and almost dead. And then you came to live with us,”⁴⁴¹ which leaves an indelible impression on Elle about the role, and even possibility, of functional motherhood. The difficulty her partner has understanding why Elle resists search and reunion as a panacea for her to lay to rest the demons of this origin story, “as though it were something curable,”⁴⁴² subscribes to the notion that all searches terminate in happy endings.

Such feelings of ambivalence can happen before, during and/or after a search, as Bridie in *Familiar Passions* experiences when faced with a setback in searching:

How silly this was she thought...It might be interesting to know who one’s parents and grandparents were, trace one’s biological link with the past, but it wasn’t important (it was important to Oedipus, but he was a special case!) Only geneticists and genealogists were concerned with human archaeology. Normal people (and she hoped she was normal!) did not care about their remote antecedents.⁴⁴³

It is interesting to hear in these words echoes of B. J. Lifton’s work, who used the myth of Oedipus and Jocasta throughout *Twice Born* as a scaffolding for the unfolding of her own search narrative, as well as Bridie internalizing some of the same responses to the idea of searching that were prevalent up to the 1970’s. I believe I, too, rationalized my own motivations, negated my setbacks or reasons for search, in order to tell myself a story that I could live with.

I am representative of multiple stances. At one point in my life, the idea of searching did

not even cross my mind; later, when invited to, I was disinterested. I began searching before middle age, but not due to a particular life crisis or catalyst. I believe I thought about obtaining merely non-identifying information, perhaps driven by curiosity at this point. Then I became passive, as I thought a search was being conducted for me, and felt I had no recourse but to wait. Later still, I became my own private investigator. But I wonder what assumptions others might have been made about my motivations, my changing desires, my timing.

When I finally do receive information about my own search, it is scant, disappointing. The private adoption is equally private in the recording of little data about my origins. Official channels have yielded little and much time has passed. I understand the frustration of other triad members who have faced similar roadblocks. But if you *are* able to obtain the necessary information to lead you to the person for whom you are seeking, how contact is initiated? One might cold call: an invasion of privacy, a shock to the other party, with a possible elicitation of anger or denial and exacerbation of feelings of rejection or guilt, the possibility that someone else will pick up the phone, the impossibility of leaving a message if there is no answer, the possibility that someone else is listening in on the conversation for whom this will be a shock, or resulting in the inhibition or changing of the conversation that might have been.

Ministry of Community and Social Services/ ADR: First response re non-identifying information, August, 2000. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

Alternatively, one could make a ‘fishing’ call to a neighbour, friend, relative or the party in question, just to establish the veracity of the contact information, and easing into the idea of

contact: however it is a one shot opportunity. It might also tip off the recipient to a secret they had not been party to, or allow time for adoptee or parent to change their mind or find a way to bar contact, perhaps through vetoes or lawyers.

Another tactic is the use of an intermediary: this might take the form of a sympathetic friend, a fellow adoptee, a member of a support group, a 'search angel,' a hired private investigator or search agency, a government agency, or a social worker, all of whom can assist, pave the way for contact or soften the blow of denial; however this also puts contact in the hands of another who then holds the power and control to varying degrees, as to how and whether contact will take place. Searchers may feel this frustrating, especially in cases where such intermediaries are mandated, seeming just another example of how they are denied access to their own personal life. They also might not know of a suitable intermediary or not wish to broadcast their search to others.

Instead, a letter might be written. The wait for a reply is longer, but the lack of immediacy might also feel more comfortable for some, especially if direct contact is traumatic. But where to send it? Home or Work? Vacation Home? What if someone else opens it? An office assistant, for example, who screens all mail? A partner who knew nothing of the scenario? What if the name or return address of the sender on the envelope triggers a warning bell for the receiver, who refuses to open it? The searcher will never know if their overture was rejected or if the letter simply went astray, or even if they had the correct address.

One could arrive at a doorstep, the most audacious approach of all, but subject to all the same difficulties and invasions of privacy; you might get a glimpse of the person you seek, but it may be your last. And each stage of search has been fraught with similar questions and decisions.

Contemplating the hows and ifs of contact, the interior struggles, the trepidations, are only part of what it means to engage in a search: there is also the bizarre *actuality* of searching, with all the necessary skill and effort of a historian or genealogist. What did it mean to search prior to open records in Ontario, and prior to the Digital Age? Because, as one conference attendee noted at the 2014 American Adoption Congress, those who are now easily able to input information into programs such as Ancestry.com to produce a ‘new leaf’ do so with the privilege of information many are not party to, and certainly were not party to when records were resealed. Women, adoptees and birthmothers of the era of which I am a part did not have the same resources that technology provides today. Searching meant a long process involving familiarity with primary research techniques, something “logistically time consuming” and “emotionally draining.”⁴⁴⁴

I seem to have had a burst of searching enthusiasm in the year 2000. I have many letters, documents and excursions dated from this year. I cannot think of any particular triggers; my adoptive mother died seven years prior; I married six years prior; my father is then still alive; there have been no serious illnesses, job changes or upheavals, no classic triggers for searching. I have not yet even thought about writing on the subject. Perhaps it is because at this point, there is still no word from the Adoption Disclosure Registry. Maybe I just got tired of being inactive, frustrated with waiting with no results:

I have some correspondence with a ‘search angel’ who searched for her own birthmother, and who provides some advice. She visits me at my father’s home; I do not remember how I came in contact with her. She gives me some books, some web addresses, the name of a woman who runs a new search group in the area called ‘Roots and Rights,’ the name of another woman who has city directories from the area for the past 60 years, a method of gleaning information

such as occupation, addresses, and family member names. She calls the Bethesda Home, run by the Salvation Army, who say they will do a search of the archives of the maternity home. She phones Children's Aid, who informed her that in cases of private adoption they did not do home visits, but that there would have had to be one from the Ministry of Social Services before the judge finalized the adoption order, thus records should be on file somewhere. She advises placing a letter in the 'Have Your Say' column of the *Toronto Star*, as she did, with a letter and a call to the editor to make sure it does not get lost in the shuffle. She is very clear in her advice to use my given first and middle name, my birthdate and the hospital and city where I was born, but to protect my birthmother at the same time I search for her, saying that there is nothing worse for a birthparent than to pick up a newspaper and find their full name published. She also suggests leaving out one known fact so that this can be used as confirmation should someone contact me, and to provide a third party contact address.

I begin to follow the advice of my search angel, contacting various support groups, agencies, newspapers and institutions. I write to the Salvation Army thinking my birthmother might have stayed in Bethesda Maternity Hospital in London, a centre for unwed mothers and their babies, before I knew more accurate details. I write to the attending obstetrician, who bestowed upon me when I left with my new parents a blue teddy bear I still possess, though now decrepit and worn, a kind of transition object from one potential destiny to another. I wonder if he's alive? He would be extremely elderly, and likely a man with a failing memory, if *compos mentis* at all.

November 13, 2000

Dear ____:

My name is Kate Greenway; I am Dr. ____ Greenway's daughter from ____ Ontario, and I understand you were a friend of my father's. I believe you worked together, were in the Royal Medical Society together, and he tells me your son lived with my brother at university. I am writing to ask your help in a matter very important to me, and I asked my father if he could possibly locate your address.

I am conducting a search for my birth parents, with the blessing of my father, and actually at the instigation of my mother, when she was alive. I am interested in finding out medical history, and clues as to my background and birth family history.

I started this process over 10 years ago. Since the opening of the adoptive records I have registered with appropriate agencies and made inquiries. Both the lawyers who handled my adoption, Children's Aid/Ministry of Social Services and the Adoption Disclosure Unit have given me all they help they can. Due to the fact that my adoption was private, however, there is very little information available on record.

I understand that you were the attending physician at my birth. My father tells me a cherished family story that you phoned my parents' house on the night they gave a Christmas party to say you had a little girl for them – and with my mother in a slinky party dress the guests were amazed the next day at the birth announcement!

I know that this was many years ago and that you may not have much to recall; however, I was hoping that since dad was a friend, some details of the circumstances of my birth might still remain with you.

I am enclosing all the manners through which you may get in touch with me, and upon reflection, I pray that you might tell me anything you remember.

I know my birth mother's name was _____, that she was unmarried, and that she resided in Toronto. She named me Martha Anne. I was left with baby things from Harrod's. That is the extent of the information I possess.

If you could reach back into your memory of the events surrounding my birth at Victoria Hospital in 1962, and my subsequent private adoption I would be very grateful. Even seemingly inconsequential details would be of great value to me. Small details like approximately how old was my mother, what she looked like, ethnic origin, her level of education, her religion, if you remember what she did for a living or any interests she had or her plans for the future, if she had a family, if she had any medical conditions, if she mentioned the father, whether I was named for someone – these are all pieces of information which I would prize.

Thank you for taking the time to think about anything you may remember.

Yours sincerely...

...There will be no reply.

I still have a search manual, dated 1997, given to me either by Parent Finders or by my search angel: it could be the date of my meeting, or maybe this was just the print date of the book. It is thick, filed with questionnaires, sample letters, and testimonies, and doling out much soothing, upbeat advice about doing the necessary homework and on emotional preparedness to handle the seven core issues of adoption, defined there, as elsewhere, as loss, abandonment/rejection, guilt and shame, grief, identity, intimacy and control. It is intriguing to note what I underlined, the tips I felt salient, but also, giving a sense now of the lengths to which one might have to go in order to obtain information in the not too distant past when information was not digital, records were sealed in Ontario, and the corresponding lack of regulations regarding privacy.

Search was, and is, daunting. And slow. The thought that there is always one more approach, one more clue to find, makes search a mammoth project, especially if records are sealed. The what if's of current ease of access to information haunt me – had this taken less time...?

I tried many avenues. I visited the cemetery where I learned my birthmother was buried. I wrote to Church groups, fraternities, and schools. I emailed and wrote to work associates, casting the net ever wider. I travelled to my birthplace and sifted through microfiche, looking for birth announcements on approximately the same day as my birthday to find my own, or possible contacts who delivered in a similar window and might provide more clues. I enlisted with many registries. I did searches of my mother's name in the U.S. and Canada, and then tried to ascertain if they might lead to a relative. I consulted two search groups, travelled to one university archives, then another. There was never enough information. Or time. It was consuming in a way that is hard to describe, and with only the merest gleanings of information as a result.

For example, I received very little communication in response to the article I placed December, 2000, in the *Toronto Star* and *London Free Press*. It was placed as close to my birthdate as possible, as I was told that this is the time when many birthmothers think of their children. I was coached to place a third party return address to preserve anonymity, a piece of advice Karen March echoed: by having an intermediary they could soften the blow of a possible rejection, and the searcher could avoid hearing haunting negative statements produced at the shock of being identified, and not be party to exact wording.⁴⁴⁵

In my case I received a reply that, upon ripping open the envelope, appeared empty.

Then I checked the flap: it read in handwritten block caps, "Get over it. I have a life, live in the now and leave me alone. c/o my ass." It is the only response I receive. Shaken, I kept the

letter, perhaps as evidence for the future in case things escalated. Was this my mother? Had I struck a chord with someone else in similar circumstances? Was this person mentally unstable? Why such vitriol?

I make one more attempt with the ADR. I plead the decade of waiting, the lack of progress, and some medical concerns. I deliberately make these vague, but pressing. Mere days later...

Contact

There is in the word 'mother,' the word 'other.' ⁴⁴⁶

Phone call, back office, five minutes prior to full staff meeting, no warning.

'Contact has been made with your birthmother.'

Reeling, I try not to hyperventilate. I feel pressure to make my appointment on time – there has been some major upheaval in the workplace and this meeting will be volatile, not one to stroll into casually late. Or maybe this is an excuse to collect myself and identify my emotions. The voice on the other end, my 'counsellor,' informs me that she will pass on some initial thoughts to my birthmother, the first step in mediated contact. What did I wish her to know?

As the clock ticked, with three minutes or less, with no preparation or forethought I blabber out a few facts. What would you say, if faced with speaking vicariously to a stranger-mother, this birth'other'?

When the promised call is made I hear back almost immediately. The swiftness of these encounters, in contrast to my extended search, is causing conflicting sensations of excitement, nervousness, distress and relief.

I take notes frantically.

She was overwhelmed with emotion. Not sure what to do. She asked for time to think.

She had no information on my adoptive circumstances and agreed to receive info. She is now in her seventies.

Medical history: Lumpectomy. Heart arrhythmia. Spot on lung (Smoker). Told birthfather regarding pregnancy and then didn't want to discuss it further. She had no direct contact since then, but indirect contact was maintained, therefore perhaps he is a member of her social circle.

She had no choices at the time.

She was comforted to hear that I had brothers and sisters.

“Two beagles – oh my.”

She cried.

She needed time to think about contact.

Not outright denial. Nor acceptance.

Ministry of Community and Social Services, first contact letter, March 2001. Document removed to protect the privacy of those individuals involved.

It is difficult to describe all the feelings I had. While I have recounted the meeting of more distant blood family, this was my first, and what turned out to be my only, brush with contact with my own mother. Try to imagine elation combined with trepidation, a simultaneous feeling of separation and closeness. The first real details about a person, no longer just a name or

an object. A glimpse into the life of the woman who bore me. The possibility of finally actually meeting her.

As per the ADR protocol, the counsellor functioned as mediator/gatekeeper/protector. She told me to write a letter to my birthmother as the next tiny step in moving toward contact: in this phase both parties have the opportunity to read the other's thoughts without censorship if they so choose. Placed in my file, my birthmother would be notified of it, and would have the option of whether or not to receive it. All steps carefully controlled and monitored.

How does one write such a letter? As one adult searcher mused in *Adoption Reunions*, "I wondered how much I could tell her about myself without revealing too much or too little. I finally attempted the impossible: painting a picture she'd love without knowing if her tastes were Cezanne or Warhol."⁴⁴⁷

I ask for advice from a friend of the friend, a birthmother who had been in reunion with her child for a few years. She received such a letter. She said she read and re-read over and over the letter her daughter wrote, and kept it in her purse all the time. It was a sacred document to her.

She replied with the following advice, words I took to heart. She advised to place this letter to my mother with the agency, including photos if I wanted. She noted that, just as in her own case, my counsellor was away for two weeks and not available for contact. She wondered if this was indeed true, or perhaps a standard tactic to help us adjust to the new reality and possibilities of reunion. The best advice she gave was what to include, as she told me from a birthmother's perspective what would be valuable. She advised frankness, telling my birthmother what motivated my search and what I thought the outcome of search might be. If I wanted a relationship with her, I should tell her this. She suggested it would be very important for a

birthmother to know that her child was okay, that she made the right choice. She also advised laying out a respect for whatever limitations she might place on the reunion, given her age, and the fact that she would have been influenced by archaic mores and taboos. Essentially, she said, be yourself, to just start writing, and to write it by hand as a personal touch. To make the letter the story of my life, and to never forget that every word you write will be treasured by a woman who has thought about you for years.

I sat down one long weekend by myself in the dining room, and composed a handwritten letter of ten double-sided pages. I thought handwritten would be more intimate, would reveal something of myself to her. I wrote of all those things my friend advised. I told of my upbringing, my personality, my likes and dislikes, my education and job, my relationships. I tried to be upbeat, hopeful that she would agree to contact, reassuring that I held no blame for her and that my life had turned out well. I included photos, of ‘ages and stages,’ trying to capture a sense of my life unfolding and including her in it, however vicariously. I sent a photo of my brothers and sisters and me when I was about one, lined up along the bannister, me being held on the newel post like a doll; of my second birthday where I precociously began to sneak tastes of the birthday cake in front of me; of my grade eight graduation, in the backyard with my floor length blue floral polyester dress with cap sleeves and puckered bodice; me at sixteen, in another floor length polyester dress, this one yellow, made for a bridesmaid at her brother’s wedding, holding a peach coloured bouquet; and one of my husband and I at our own wedding ceremony, the one neither mother got to see.

This last photo holds the *punctum* for me.

There may have been more. I may have written more. I don’t remember the words, only the painstaking act of writing.

I posted the letter. And waited. When I didn't hear back from the agency I contacted the social worker in late winter. She informed me that agency policy meant they did not make any contact attempts in December, so as not to be disruptive to anyone's lives over the holidays.

So I waited again, all the while revisiting my friend's words in my head – 'my birthmother *wants* a letter from me. That my words will bring her joy...' Feeling in my core one step closer to reunion, perhaps a phone call where I can hear her voice, or even a mediated meeting, inching closer, from fantasy to flesh.

While there is much attention on the romance of the search and meeting, if achieved, by media, pulp novels and even researchers, less study has been focussed on what happens after contact, the long-term effects of contact on either party, or the possible negative responses to search and reunion. Of course, what most wish, regardless of what they find, or how or if contact is maintained, is for some kind of closure or reconciliation, the sense of finding answers to questions about self and family, and a happy ending. But what defines a successful reunion?

The Stranger Who Bore Me, for example, comments that by "outlining the contribution of their birthparents to their development as human beings, reunion helps adoptees sort out...inconsistencies"⁴⁴⁸ and that "reunited adoptees report a deeper sense of personal cohesion and unity from the genealogical knowledge gained through contact with birth relatives...They describe themselves as more content with themselves, more self confident, more satisfied with their lives, more tolerant of other people, more mature in their outlook, more at peace and settled within themselves."⁴⁴⁹ In the book *Journeys After Adoption* definitions of a 'successful' reunion are broken down into three categories: emotional, social and informational. "Lower levels of blaming the birth mother for the relinquishment were associated with a more successful reunion"

and at the initial contact “75% of birth parents were warm and welcoming.”⁴⁵⁰ Paul Sachdev’s Ontario study measured ‘success’ by the “deeper sense of personal cohesion” and a sense of “completion of identity” whether or not the birthmother died prior to reunion.⁴⁵¹

Such hoped for completion of identity is apparent in the writings of poet Sandra McPherson, and there is a sense of the profound nature of finding a new set of intimate relations upon which she could model herself. In “Earthstars, Birthparents’ House” she writes of the wild mushrooms growing at the front door of her birthparents’ house, prompting the wistful meditation “Stranger feet/ Than mine/ All these years/ Outside your door.”⁴⁵² “Wings and Seeds” recalls a hike with her birthmother where they “twine hands,” and the mother “is not teaching / Me to read and write but to believe.”⁴⁵³ Sandra McPherson concludes with this amazing realization, a beautifully phrased acceptance revelling in her own situation: “I was a child of pleasure. / The strong pleasurable seeds of life/ Found each other. / And I was created by passion’s impatience/ For the long wait till our meeting.”⁴⁵⁴ The notion of ‘illegitimate’ child is rejected for another conception of creation, one without stigma, and the meeting is conceptualized as inevitable and deeply satisfying.

A possible negative outcome of search, however, is rejection by the found party, either prior to, or after contact. This can range from coldness, emotional distance or polite refusal to outrage, threats, and even legal action. Rejection can be an emotional impulse of denial or a well thought plan to maintain the status quo. For example, the birthmother whom Bridie finds in *Familiar Passions* tells her she does not want her current life interrupted: “I don’t mind you coming to see me. As long as you are not expecting affection or money.”⁴⁵⁵ She continues, “I don’t really want to know, d’you see? I haven’t got the interest to spare... I’m sorry if it sounds brutal.”⁴⁵⁶ This exchange subverts part of the reunion myth: because you have common

biological ties, that everything else – conversation, empathy, connection, ongoing interaction – will follow naturally. While clearly finding that ‘missing root’ is one of the goals of reunion, many adoptees who find less than hoped for relationship statuses might feel a second ‘failure’ in not realizing this idealistic norm.

A mother’s unconditional love might not be present as expected; both parties may be unprepared for what they find: a mother who is and is not, a baby who is now an adult. Neither conforms to idealization or fantasy. The denial of the birthfather, or refusal to name him, is not uncommon, and speaks of the wounds inflicted by the illegitimate pregnancy, with parallels to my own experience. If the telling of the pregnancy, or process of relinquishment involved rejection or denial from her partner, a birthmother may not want to relive this hurt and distress. If her child resembles the birthfather, this may reopen old wounds, and especially if the conception was a product of rape, incest, coercion or trauma, the child’s face or voice might be more than she is able to bear. Lee Campbell, Phyllis Silverman and Patricia Patti’s study of reunion corroborates this tendency: they found that an incredible eighty per cent of biological mothers did not wish to discuss the biological father.⁴⁵⁷ These women may have worked very carefully to put this past behind them, or to reconstruct a new self, only to have their equilibrium thrown by an encounter with someone who will conceivably turn their reinvented life into a lie. No wonder contact is so traumatic, and why the ‘long term’ may not come to pass.

It is the birthmother who terminates the interview in the novel example, and has this to say about further contact: “It’s up to you. I can hardly prevent you. But if you want my opinion, I think this has been the most interesting conversation we are ever likely to have. If we tried to follow it up, I fear we would find we had very little to say to each other.”⁴⁵⁸ This statement might represent my own fears, then and now, on a most elemental level: if I had made contact, would it

have resulted in only this?⁴⁵⁹ Ambivalence with regards to reunion is also shown in *The Adoption Papers*, Chapter 10, “The Meeting Dream.” The meeting is awkward: birthmother and daughter avoid physical contact or “big questions”: “one dream cuts another open like a gutted fish/ nothing is what it was; / she is too many imaginings to be flesh and blood. / There is nothing left to say. / Neither of us mentions meeting again.”⁴⁶⁰ Here the rejection is visceral, but perhaps also mutual. I realize that many who search do find ways to negotiate the undefined relationships of reunion successfully, but this outcome is often idealized beyond credulity. One has to be prepared for the potentially brutalizing other eventualities.

The more complicated portrayals of reunion concur with the study results of researchers like Karen Rosenberg and Victor Groze, who remind us that the past cannot be reconstructed or lived over again. Even in the most positive of reunion stories, finding, defining, negotiating and maintaining these new relationships is tricky. Adults in reunion speak of how difficult it is to re-engage with a birth family in adulthood, how shared genes make you feel at home while a lack of shared history makes you feel like an outsider.⁴⁶¹ And some long-term issues regarding relationships in reunion may never be resolved. In reunion “one or a few meetings might be enough...facts are obtained, curiosity is satisfied” and the birthmother is no longer ‘mother’ but ‘friend or acquaintance.’⁴⁶² “An adoptee may to some degree continue to feel angry she was denied the right to know her birth mother as she grew up. A birth mother may never recover from the pain of separation and the loss of enjoying her child’s infancy and youth even though she met them in adulthood.”⁴⁶³

Karen March and Judith Modell, among others, tell of the difficulty in establishing a long-term relationship with a birthmother, as the first meeting only represents one part of the interaction: “This process is rather complex because there are no social guidelines, scripts, or

norms for the development of a relationship between adults who were adopted and their birthmother...[they] must negotiate a mutual comfort zone and make accommodations to each other's lives in order for a relationship to develop."⁴⁶⁴ Secrecy, pain, and anger may remain inhibitors to success, no matter how invested each party might be. And the term 'reunion' implies a kind of mutual tie or bond previously established, when in practical terms, the two parties are strangers to each other, proving "the thinness of a purely biological relationship,"⁴⁶⁵ even if having 'met' *in utero*. Merry Bloch Jones writes that even reunions that appear successful at first may temporarily or permanently peter out, once the need for answers has been fulfilled, and participants find that there is little actually holding them together.⁴⁶⁶ Such was my experience with my most recent contact and reunion scenario with my cousins, a distance and silence I am resigned to believe has re-established as permanent. And for the wished-for reunion of my past, there is one even more devastating possibility for outcome...

Goodbye before Hello

*Will I regret that, standing before her name, in the cemetery? Maybe, maybe not.
I'll go put flowers on her grave knowing almost nothing of the woman I called
Mom.*⁴⁶⁷

I receive a phone call in late January from my 'adoption counsellor'. She tells me that she received a phone call on January 21st. That my birthmother passed away recently.

She does not know the cause of death. The person on the phone was going to get back to her. It occurs to me now that the call must have been from either her husband, or her daughter. I wonder why this phone call: what was the motivation for this notification to the Adoption Disclosure Unit. Was this a firm shutting of a door? Or faint hope that the person would call back, continue contact in my birthmother's absence? I am asked if I have any questions, but what is there to

ask? In any case, it is not really an invitation for comfort, but more a signalling of the call's termination. The counsellor informs me I can apply to the Registrar General's office, with a registered letter, to request a death certificate. It could take six months.

Instead, after sinking down quietly on the hallway floor, breathing shallowly, I Google obituaries.

Obituary, Toronto Star, January 2002. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

There is no further exchange between the agency and myself. They do not offer, I do not seek. It is three years later that I receive back the letter I wrote to my birthmother. Unopened.

I put it away, deep in the back of the closet, with my adoptive mother's note of thanks. It is too profoundly painful to even think about. I will never open the letter again. I don't even possess it anymore, given away to a stranger who was the closest I could come to 'mother.'

Ministry of Community and Social Services, notification of birthmother's death, August 2004. Document removed to maintain the privacy of those individuals involved.

Yet it occurs to me now, perhaps since I revisit the sequence of sent and received documents, I have told myself a story of timing that is incorrect. Not consciously, and maybe not immediately. The letter I wrote to my mother, at the dining room table, with sun streaming in, on a holiday. It took me all day. I was alone. But it wasn't in November break or at

Thanksgiving, which would have rendered the window for receiving the letter and thinking about a response small and tight – and acceptable. It was written at Easter. It would have occurred shortly after the contact call and the advice of how to write a letter. Either way, two things: first, my birthmother had time. She had time and did not accept. At least six months to receive a letter. Was she informed? Is this due to the intermediary, the calls of incompetence, overwork or manipulation of agency workers? Or do I know that she knew, and refused?

And second, I did nothing. I wrote and I waited. Again. The balance between inaction and action tipped. I am too polite. Too afraid. Willing to wait. Assuming contact would happen after the summertime as people vacation and travel, after the flurry of re-establishing fall routines, after Thanksgiving holidays. Wanting to give my birthmother the space and time she needed, without pressure. My passivity is apparently not uncommon. Claire Marcus noted in her book on *Adoption Reunions* that it was “amazing how easily adult searchers accept two to four year waiting periods for even the most meagre info because of feelings it wasn’t acceptable to search or ask for information... when told they must wait additional months or years, most are resigned...burying and denying their needs for information about their origins has become second nature.”⁴⁶⁸

I waited for over a decade. And then I waited more. “The idea of my mother dead cuts in front of me like a knife.”⁴⁶⁹ I come up against more loss.

Several studies posit differing reactions to an adoptee search ending in the discovery of death. Paul Sachdev’s 1992 work speculates that a sense of identity completion is still possible, and that adoptees had feelings of disappointment, but that contact with other birth relatives might ease the pain of wondering. Karen March is less optimistic. Her observations were that in coming up against a deceased birthmother, that adoptees would go through the classic stages of

grief, regardless of the fact that they were essentially mourning a stranger. She reports feelings of shock, distress by the missed opportunity, feelings of being cheated and deprived of the ability for direct contact, and that they could not experience the closure of their search. Some visited the grave, obtained the death certificate, investigated the cause and circumstances of death, and found former contacts such as neighbours, “symbolic contact gestures to establish the existence of a real person.”⁴⁷⁰ Muller adds the figure of eight per cent of all cases of search ended in finding out about a birthparent death, which brought on sadness, but also “anger at themselves for postponing the search, and anger at the closed records system.”⁴⁷¹ Jayne Schooler and Betsie Norris found “incredible sadness” for a search ending in death, and then a long difficult process of grieving more complex than might appear “because they are grieving an abstract, someone they have no memory of seeing or touching.”⁴⁷² I, too, try to make sense of my loss.

November: Remembrance Day. A day to pay tribute, to pause, to consider losses, to mourn those absent. This is fitting. Sunlight does not dispel the chill of approaching winter, and I am dressed for a city lunch not a walk outdoors, yet, on a whim, I park. The tiny cemetery office is open, and from the attendant I receive a detailed, hand-drawn map of the numbered rows. In yellow highlighter she indicates the path I need to take to find the plot I’m seeking.

Map, Mount Pleasant cemetery grave plots. Document removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

‘And there may be a poppy wreath. Oh no, that was a while ago,’ she says. The computer does not indicate whether there is an upright marker or not.

‘You’re welcome.’

I narrow the search to a quadrant under an almost bare tree heaved from the earth by descending roots; framed on one side by the cemetery’s edge where the gravestones peter out to a low rumble of traffic. The map shows I have gone too far. I try again. Not far enough. Wrong row. This row? Back again. Leaves obscure the flat, mottled white stones and darker veined granite.

‘In 2009 special care was last purchased,’ the attendant had said.

‘By the family?’ I ask.

She offers a woman’s name that means nothing to me. A friend perhaps.

‘Extra weeding and watering.’

Thus strengthens the grass that relentlessly, greedily, creeps, obscuring names, dates. My hands begin to numb in the chill. I sweep aside stacks of golden leaves with the toe of my boot; the name I am searching for is not revealed. I brush a wet pile off a marker that reveals only a fraction of the chiselled message once left, a single word.

Mother.

But not mine.

Even in death I cannot find her.

Are You My Mother?

*There’s no consolation. They die as they lived, mothers do. And beside them in silence, their daughters hold their hand.*⁴⁷³

Years later, I feel strong enough to attempt a different kind of search, not in hopes of contact or reunion, which is now an impossible outcome, but simply of revelation. I believe somehow that closure will not occur until I try to learn what I can about her, and through her, something more of myself.

What does it mean to search? In noun form, it is, at its simplest, the investigation of a question.

I write to the church she attended, where her funeral service was held.

The more I look at the word however, the more it divulges, and the more closely it describes the nuances of what I am doing. “Examination or scrutiny for the purpose of finding a person or thing:” for me, a mother. Motherhood. Family. Identity.

I live with both the presence and absence of my birthmother and father, yin and yang. They exist(ed), but are hidden, lost, unknown. They were present to others, forever absent for me. One is not even named; the other named but unidentified, a blurry outline only.

“To penetrate the secrets of; to reveal the nature of.”

I have a photo of her as a young child, perhaps two years old, provided to me at the reunion of cousins. The photo is in black and white, undated. What was she like? Am I like her?

Photo of my birthmother, c. 1930. Removed to maintain privacy of those individuals involved.

Is there more than a passing resemblance, as I compare a rare photo of myself at approximately the same age?

Will I ever solve the mystery of my paternity? It is highly unlikely. To whom would I turn for answers to even a single question?

To search: perhaps, more accurately, the verb forms pinpoint the actions I perform: “to explore; in quest of some object concealed or lost. To ascertain the presence or absence of, a person or thing.”

I write to the fraternity she belonged to, all those years ago.

I know from my trip to the university archives that there is one author in particular she edited, a name familiar to me: Farley Mowat. Might he remember her, or her friends or colleagues? Might he be able to unravel any of the clues to my father, if they travelled in the same circles? Might she have confided anything to him as they worked together, attended meetings and parties and book launches? I muse over this, wondering how to approach this, how to ask a stranger, who is also a Canadian icon, such intimate questions. How could I contact him, without going through intermediaries, agents, more gatekeepers, who might not pass on my request? With a reputation for keen intelligence but highly cantankerous and temperamental, what would he think of such boldness? Knowing he resides in retirement in a community not far from where I live, surprisingly, with a few descriptors and keystrokes, an address is easily found on the Internet. Is it ethical to pry, or to use this information? And yet, why is it that I feel tentative at accessing what should be a birthright? One day I decide make the effort in earnest, knowing an elderly man does not leave much time for hesitation before the opportunity is lost.

And so I begin... and Pandora's box is reopened.

August 14, 2011

Dear Mr. Mowat:

Please forgive this intrusion into your privacy. I am wondering if you might possibly be able to help me, and while it is an unorthodox question, I felt if anyone might appreciate that, it would be you; and I wouldn't like to waste the chance, however remote, that you might reply, so I worked up the courage to write.

I understand that you worked with _____. In her files there are references to *Grey Seas Under* and *The Desperate People* from 1958 - 59. She worked a long time at the company, established the book promotions department and later worked up to being an editor. It appears she was in charge of many social events there. She came from a prominent family and lived in Toronto with her mother and father until her marriage to a fellow employee.

She was my birthmother. I was born in 1962. She died before I had the chance to meet her. I searched for over ten years. Contact was made but sadly we missed each other by barely six months. Because mine was a private adoption there are virtually no background details in any file. I have a single photograph of her as a university graduate. I also do not know anything of my birthfather's identity, other than he played a lot of tennis and had a bad arm, and was in her social circle. She kept my birth a secret.

I realize that it is a very long time ago but I hoped that if you could remember anything about her, professionally, socially or personally, however insignificant or disjointed, you might be willing to share these snippets with me. It would mean very much.

Respectfully,

And to my surprise, almost by return mail...

Letter from Claire Mowat, August 2011. Document removed. Personal consent not obtained.

I receive a typewritten response from Claire and Farley Mowat. I am told he had a good relationship with her as a book editor, that she was a 'charming' person. She suggests getting in touch with a university professor who wrote a book about the publishing company, and who might have interviewed her. She gives me the address. She writes again a month later, telling me she has been in contact with the professor, and includes a copy of his letter back to her. She wishes me good luck and promises that if any relevant information comes up she will contact me again.

Letter from university professor and author, August 2011. Document removed. Personal consent not obtained.

He indicates in the letter that he knew of her baby. He suggests a few other contact names at other publishing houses who may have worked with my birthmother.

Sept 17, 2011

Dear Claire:

Thank you very much for your reply. I had intended to write you a thank you note and before I could do so, I received your second letter.

You have been very kind, and I want you to know how much I appreciate your reply, and as well your further overtures to _____. I will post this to you and then write him at the email

address you provided. I know that a stranger writing out of the blue, with an even stranger request, is not the kind of correspondence one receives every day.

I am a high school teacher, and thus the opening few weeks of September have been completely absorbed into start up activities; thus my personal quest has been put slightly on hold. However I am hoping that I might be able to invest more time again now that routines have been established and courses are underway.

I have actually been to the archives as ____ suggests, which is how I found out about the ties to Farley. However I will speak to him further, as there may be another archival section of which I am unaware.

He mentions one thing in his letter I am curious about. He says, "I do remember asking you about ____ baby;" I was under the impression that no one knew of her pregnancy, and that she travelled with her mother away to London to deliver before this was evident. Did you indeed know she was expecting? Did she speak of it?

Again, my sincerest thanks for your interest and thoughtfulness.

Kind Regards and best to Farley,

Letter from Claire Mowat, late September, 2011. Document removed. Personal consent not obtained.

I receive another response, in which she tells me that they were told in confidence of the pregnancy by the head of the publishing firm, a good friend of theirs, and that they did not tell anyone else. She thought other senior staff at the firm may have known why she was taking a leave of absence. I had asked how the professor knew of the pregnancy, as he had asked the

about it a dozen years ago during an interview, and had also asked if they knew who the father was. They did not.

In September I write to the professor, trying to glean further advice – about contacts, about the archives, about how he came to his own knowledge of events. I also write to some of the names listed as colleagues or editorial clients in the fonds. At first it appears that the inquiry will not yield fruit, as the first contacts do not remember her. But gradually I receive several other replies, despite the extremely personal nature of my questions, the high profile of some of the authors, and the time elapsed, since most of her contemporaries would be in their eighties. A few scant details of job proficiency, attitude, likes and aptitude emerge, some conflicting, some corroborating, mostly anecdotal. But each reply gives me something to grasp onto, however small.

Email correspondence 2011 - 2012. Documents removed. Personal consent not obtained.

One suggested contact does not recall my birthmother, but provides another co-worker who might. The co-worker does not, but checks the company archives. She also writes to five colleagues worked at the publishing firm around the time of my birthmother. One of them writes she does not recall either, but has further emailed two men who might remember her, and will put me in touch.

And then it happens. I receive an email from one of gentlemen who tells me my birthmother was his editor. He remembers her courtship at the office, and wonders if this might

have been my birthfather (but as I know it is the man she later married, not my birthfather). He tells me he will attempt to find the publicity manager who worked there at the time, who might have many more memories.

Through the chain of email referrals I receive another lengthy missive, and for the first time I hear many details of my birthmother – her appearance, her personality, what she liked to wear, her work habits, her marriage and family. I am told she was “really nice” and “well mannered,” had a good sense of humour, that he and his wife visited them at home a few times. He tells me she was a key figure in the publishing house’s history where she was very good at a demanding job, one where she had to use all of her social skills and tact when dealing with high profile authors who were often difficult to please. He tells me she was an exceptional person, that I can be proud. He seems to have a deep understanding not only of her, but her social situation (although he did not know of her pregnancy) and is sympathetic to my need to search, and to find out all I can, when I can. He gives me yet another contact, a fellow author whom my birthmother edited, and leaves the door open for further contact. In turn, I receive a lengthy note from this author, who tells me the letter I wrote to him is “moving and finely written.” He has some ‘impressions,’ ones that are more direct. He was impressed with her as an editor, thought she got along well with everyone, being agreeable, friendly and well-liked. He also observed her job required her to be more of a ‘party girl,’ that she had no illusions about life or work, and that her odd mannish nickname seemed to suit her. His wife thought she looked just like Lana Turner. He filled in details of her office romance, the personality of her husband to be, their collective intelligences. The note he pens seems written like the description of a fictional character. And indeed, he writes again to recommend I read Richard Wright’s *Clara Callan*, citing no specific parallels between life and fiction, but suggesting the central situation as one of interest.

One of the work colleagues writes as well about my birthmother's appearance, her work, her marriage, and her habits, that people seemed to think she was special. She provides yet more possible contacts: sales managers, fellow editors, writers, and promises to try to track down others. One of these does indeed pan out, and she writes with a few more tidbits: about her sophistication, her mentoring skills, and her abilities, and the opinions of some of those who worked with her, including Farley Mowat and Pierre Berton, who respected her as an editor.

As a result of these correspondences, I have an even more three dimensional concept of who this person named 'mother' might be, albeit all second hand, all anecdotal, and all recalled through the haze of many years. Each nugget, each ephemeral impression, contributes to an image. In wrestling with these thoughts, I try to compose a portrait of a woman I never knew. Who was she? What was she? What is she to me?

One approach is to consider the words used to describe my birthmother, a woman composed of small pieces of text curated by strangers. Thus text is at the centre of two small hanging glass pieces I create in response. Both use small strips of glass overlaid with scraps of information culled from the correspondence I had. Few of my mother's colleagues or friends are now alive. All who did reply, are relying on memories of a woman they knew fifty years ago, perhaps well, perhaps only briefly and tangentially. The memories might be accurate, or not. They may be meant to soothe, knowing my request was to know something about her. Some are more candid than others. Phrases describe, praise, support and contradict the construction of a woman's appearance, demeanour, capabilities and personality. But through all, it is only through words that I can build some kind of sense of this woman. It is the physical body of the paper and the marks upon it that link me to her, that lead back through the past. The words themselves

become the substance, more real than the figure of the woman. Thus they are woven and physically overlap.

In the work called “Baby Blanket” I select soft grey and yellow, the colours of the pure wool baby blanket that I was left with, purchased I now know because my mother and grandmother did not know my gender prior to birth. This object connects me to a family and heritage I was never sure of. I wondered at the Harrod’s label, if this was an indication of my cultural links and family background. When I teach overseas I find an excuse to visit Harrod’s, yet when I arrive I do not know what department to visit: am I seriously searching for evidence of the same blanket, the same baby clothes, as if seeing the tangible objects forty years later will provide a link to a young woman’s single gesture to her daughter?



Image 24: Layette and Baby blanket from Harrod’s, England.

Just as I was once wrapped in this blanket, I am still wrapped in this mystery, and what I want from it. Atonement? Absolution? I can only respond by weaving together descriptors and observations from her colleagues in a more fragile glass blanket of text. Yet through it all, I wish for her words, not theirs.



Image 25: Untitled (Fused glass), 2015, 6” x 8”



Image 26: “Baby Blanket” detail (Fused glass), 2015, 6” x 6”

In the second “Untitled” piece rays of similar information radiate as if from an elemental source, literally illuminating in their content.

Text is also part of a glass on glass mosaic I create in which I try to evoke the sense of genealogy, of the expectation that one is able to account for his/her history, of digging for and though the past, looking for buried scraps of information with which to piece together a life one never encountered, knowing I have lost, but not knowing what. Akin to a Freudian archaeological dig, I picture the work of reconstructing fragments, uncovering buried objects both literal and metaphoric, working and reworking memories of the same experience or desires, consciously or unconsciously.

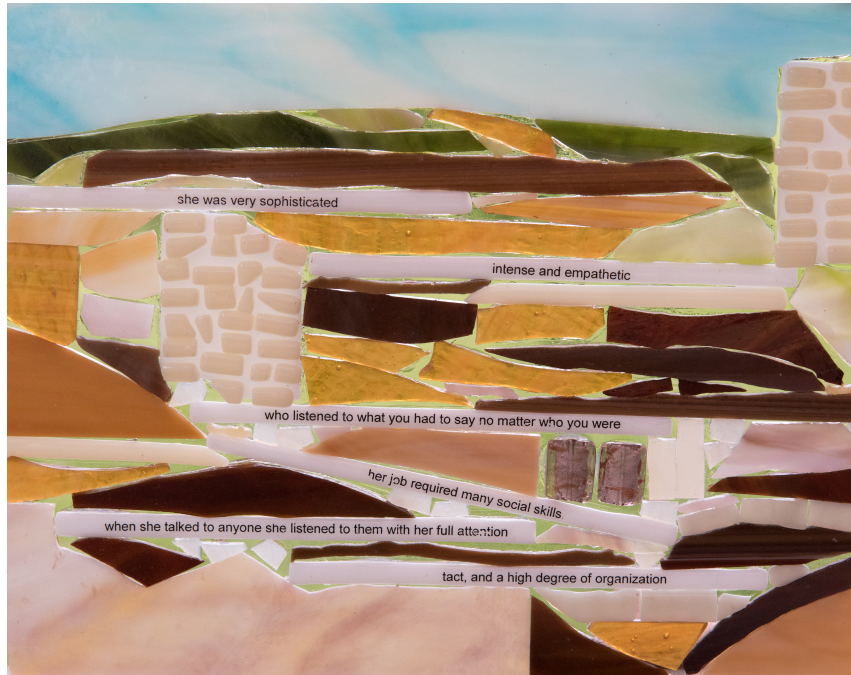


Image 27: “Genealogy” (Glass on glass mosaic), 2015, 9” x 12”

In another piece I play with collaging the physical and verbal evidence of my birthmother’s personality, constructing a fantasy of who she was through others’ eyes. Included are the high school yearbook photo and description from which I extracted some information about her personality, and the quote from one of her publishing colleagues who recalled his wife meeting my birthmother for the first time and later remarking to him that “she looks just like Lana Turner.”

While some images are literal, or artefactual, some are meant to suggest the nature of ephemera itself, its transitory nature. Passing moments are captured only fleetingly, such as the ephemeral contact I had with my birthmother, as represented in the mayfly wings, or the ocean wave as evoked by the shells. The shells, and the sea green colour of the glass background, also connect with my birthmother’s supposed love of the sea, and the spiral or mandala shape evokes cycles of time and life, and a kind of spiritual journey. I craft it around a bubble, which was a

forced air mistake in the firing of the piece, but the ‘happy accident’ becomes the perfect three-dimensional shape to evoke the shell.



Image 28: “She” (Fused glass, phototransfer, enamel) 2013, 8” x 12”

This is one of two pieces I will later bring to the American Adoption Congress, and the one that receives the most comment. When I speak of the work to a colleague and she requests to see it, I unwrap it from its bubble wrap packaging from the return flight from San Francisco. The overbooked flight had forced me to place the carry-on bag of art in the hold; the delicate bubble shell is smashed. My colleague suggests it is a furthering of the metaphors I have created, but not to me: it is now simply something that cannot be repaired. Or perhaps *that* is the metaphor.

Whether secrecy has been imposed punitively or paternally, those who lived through the era of closed records may continue to find it difficult to come to terms with a past they can never fully uncover. The prevailing popular imagination believes such stigmas no longer affect those in the adoption triad, or simplifies the potential scenarios that may play out in a later search and

reunion. The media merely filters some parts of experience out in favour of stories that comfort or sensationalize. It is then in art we can more readily find the tools to construct meaning and make sense of the adoptee experience. But one has to dig quite a bit deeper to find artists and authors who expose other complications, who problematize the depiction of issues surrounding adoption, who recognize the damage of secrets kept.

I have used art, the finding, critiquing and creating of it, as a vehicle for synthesizing knowledge and interpreting embodied understandings. Through reflective critical inquiry, I have opened up new possibilities and conceptions that present non-binary choices in relation to discourse. In including and describing my own very personal experiences, in all their subjectivity, incompleteness and ephemeral flashes of perception as part of the data, I nonetheless contribute to adoptive studies in a way that becomes generalizable. The consideration of the aesthetic invites complexity and generates new insights, and reaches beyond to other fields of inquiry, where trauma and reparation are also negotiated. In the sharing of memory and life story, and the calling attention to gaps and ambiguities and secrets that I have inherited, I have invoked more holistic emotional, embodied responses that move beyond the strictly analytic, and offer more divergent thinking about adoption and its portrayals in art and culture, a dialectic invitation and exchange of both affect and intellect, hopefully helping to erase the prevailing cultures of silence.

Too often we use language to declare
and assert and prove and argue and convince
and proclaim notions of 'truth.'
...I want an evocation, a rendering,
a performative space
where stories can be conjured
out of memory imagination heart.⁴⁷⁴

Chapter 5: Coda: Endings and Beginnings

*The human potential movement has made birthparents and adult adopted children conscious of the kinship connections they have lost in the process of adoption, and has spawned support groups... [and] society has experienced a general movement towards less secrecy and greater disclosure.*⁴⁷⁵

In setting out this inquiry I asked several fundamental questions to determine what, if anything, has changed in the perception and depiction of adoption, and in adoption studies, over the last half century: What narratives are being told about adoption, by whom and for whom, and what consequences they have? How is adoptive identity constructed, and how is it mediated by others? How do we contextualize adoption and il/legitimacy? What is being asked of, and how do we institutionalize, certain kinship relationships and notions of child, family, and especially, motherhood? What happens when secrets are kept? (When considering the effects of adoption policy/practice in the past and present). The conclusion functions as a kind of coda in light of what has become apparent with the four key questions: **What actions can be taken for current and future ethical practice and social justice in the Digital Age?**

In the 1970's David Kirk constructed the following flow chart of causality in the relationship between adoption as experienced by individuals, and adoption policy and perceptions:

in the macro system of the state-citizen relationship it is posited: the definition of adoptive kinship as equivalent of consanguineous kinship is false and misleading, probably making for a low degree of public understanding of, or sympathy with, the actual position of the adopted, especially among professionals responsible for the definition; probably making for sealed records of birth and adoption, contractual anonymity for birthparents, and unreliable statistical information because the whole of adoption has been officially obscured as a social fact; probably making for lowered faith of the adopted in the political institutions of their society, seeing that as a class they are defined as beneficiaries while they are also victimized by the institutional arrangements created to serve them.⁴⁷⁶

His theory neatly encapsulates the lingering effects of adoption policy and practice on participants, including myself, despite new understandings and more recent openness. Change is

happening however, bringing with it examinations of adoption which more fully represent adoption in its complexity and fullness, resisting stereotype, simplification and othering, but which also present new challenges.

The 1990 German study entitled *The Adopted Child* suggested “concepts derived from the field of adoption could also prove useful for the analysis of social processes outside the familial context...the interpretation of the relationship between one’s own differentness and the normal case is a problem confronting a host of discredited individuals...[and] the strategies of ‘as if’ normalization and own type normalization probably also exist in other fields.”⁴⁷⁷

I posit that the questions and complexities of adoption, as thought about in multidisciplinary ways, have resonance for many researchers. Just as the study of literature has opened up new thinking in trauma studies, so the examination of the cultural representations of adoption and subsequent implications move beyond the narrowness of the standard quantitative socio/psychological profile. Mental health professionals and those who specialize in trauma or wellness studies may find points of comparison in their work with individuals, families and communities who have survived natural and man-made disasters, political or individual violence, or related suffering, who wish to attempt to redress past grievances, engender community discussion and promote justice, reconciliation and healing. Any individual or population separated from family or history - indigenous peoples in residential schools, the diaspora scattered from homelands, migrant workers and refugees, Holocaust survivors and the ‘disappeared’ of Central and South America or the Balkans to name just a few – may have mutual difficulties in coming to terms with the unresolved absences in their lives, the loss of connection to family, to records, and to answers. Those working with oral history, historiography, memoir, narrative inquiry, and memory studies may see parallels in the

privileging of the stories of individuals who have been silenced or overlooked, to understand more deeply the multiplicity of voices, viewpoints and histories declaring their own truths, and in the overlapping, conflicting and dynamic nature of the memories upon which such stories are based. In a multidisciplinary, multilayered, arts-based approach to investigation might be found new ways of representing subjective experience, to encourage empathy and critical reflection. The use of ephemera, object and archive is aligned with the studies of cultural memory, and the question of what makes an object worthy of study or representative of a culture, or cultural event: often it is the specific materiality of an artefact that unlocks a greater cultural understanding. Human rights activists, reproductive rights advocates and women's studies specialists can no doubt see connections to other feminist concerns of social justice, and the potential catalyst for new ways to acknowledge the effect of past events through the attention to testimony. Thus researchers can look at adoption studies as a model from which to question other normative forces upon a diverse community of individuals.

In *Adoption: Opposing Viewpoints* (1995) it was also suggested "adoption can stimulate new thinking about family and community. Adopted families are linked not by blood but by intended parenting and a social commitment that crosses bloodlines."⁴⁷⁸ *Handbook of Adoption: Implications for Researchers, Practitioners, and Families* (2007), recognized several recent notable changes emerging in the field of adoption studies:

First, research has become much more theory-driven than in the past. This change reflects the desire not only to document adjustment patterns in adoption but also to understand them more fully. Genetic theory, neurobiological risk theory, attachment theory, stress and coping theory, social role theory, family systems theory, cognitive-developmental theory, and communication theory, among others, have all been used by different investigators to explain various aspects of adoption adjustment.⁴⁷⁹

More recently, the Digital Age has accelerated the rate of change and the accessibility of information, but also exacerbates some of the tensions of search and privacy. Several such influences are portrayed in *Juno* and *The Mothers*. Trying to recover power perhaps lost in a ‘seller’s market’ of adoption today *Juno* is cited in a *Globe and Mail* article run in 2008, about the newer trend that Jennifer Gilmore later writes of: would-be adopters creating web sites and blogs, aided by professional designers, to fashion the perfect portrait of themselves as parents, hoping to connect with pregnant women who might select them. “If Juno can find her adoptive couple in the Pennysaver, why not on Craigslist?”⁴⁸⁰ Several companies in Canada, such as AdoptionProfiles.ca, AdoptionConnections.ca or CanadaAdopts.com, began offering a ‘parent profile writing service’ for five hundred dollars, to help prospective parents stand out, who are eager to “just do what [they]’re told. [They] love ponies and puppies and bunnies and unicorns.”⁴⁸¹ They market perfect constructs of themselves by whatever means necessary.

Not all Canadian provinces allow people to advertise for children, but Ontario is one of them. The sense of control for both parties was cited as a draw, but lack of actual matches, the competitiveness, and the prevalence of scams were also noted in this approach to matching parents to children. Jennifer Gilmore reported her involvement in the commercialized world of adoption in a National Public Radio Interview: “I don't want to scare people away," she said. "We actually ended up with a happy ending... I also think that there are laws for the birth mothers, as there should be. There are laws for the child, as there should be. But there are no laws to protect these prospective adoptive parents, some of whom lose so much money, so much of their emotional reserves...I want people to be aware how dangerous it is for you.”⁴⁸²

'Canada's Waiting Kids' is a photolisting website begun in 1997 and maintained by the Adoption Council Canada, a kind of 21st century matchmaking service. Madelyn Freundlich in her review of such websites noted that such a site "expands the reach of information about children in care waiting for adoption across boundaries and borders, enhances their visibility, reaches more potential parents, yet also violates the child's privacy and perhaps overburdens caseworkers with more casual or inappropriate inquiries."⁴⁸³ There are also ethical concerns: anyone can claim they are an adoption agency, inquiring about or 'listing' a child, but may not have a license. There are scams, there are groups with large budgets placing themselves at the top of Internet engine searches, and those who are reaching out aggressively to pregnant women in order to secure babies for adoption, in a biased counselling attempt reminiscent of groups such as "BirthRight" who advertise counselling for those "Pregnant and Alone," yet who only counsel carrying a baby to term.

Perils and problems also lie within the ease of access to information. With a click I can send a message across the ether, post a query on Facebook, find a "leaf" in Ancestry.com, or gain access to previously private documents. What are the ethical implications of this? While I have considered the damaging effects of secrecy, I also wonder about the other extreme. A birthmother could send a message to a child without the adoptive parents' consent, a child who may not even know of their adoptive state. A child could send a Facebook message to a birthparent, perhaps 'outing' them, or not realizing the implications of the action. In this age, nothing is temporary or retractable: once sent, words, questions, accusations, pictures, remain retrievable indefinitely. As one adoptee with a failed reunion lamented, in thinking of re-establishing ties with her birthmother, "In cyberspace, the ease with which I can ignite that tinderbox of secrets still scares me...In this digital age, my birth mother must rely solely on my

trust, my compassion and my willpower to keep her story safe, because the easy access of the Internet will always keep her tantalizingly close.”⁴⁸⁴

The act of searching is also certainly different. The Adoption Disclosure Registry was once the only avenue available to begin a search in Ontario. I registered, reasoning being adopted is passive; looking for birthparents is a choice. Now the Web is where most turn for answers to questions. I know that I am presently teaching the last generation of students whose parents did not grow up with the Internet. But what of speed? Many adoptees and birthmothers are connecting for the first time via Facebook, and popular culture abounds with happy reunion stories, such as that published in the “Good News” section of a major newspaper, of the woman who found her birthmother on Facebook in mere hours.⁴⁸⁵ I wonder about this, about sober second thought. Does one not need some time to assimilate new knowledge, contemplate the methodology and approach of search, or deal emotionally with finding a new relationship? ‘Easier’ does not necessarily mean less painful. Nor does it guarantee success. There will still be disappointment. Without vetting, the morass of information on the Internet may also be misleading or even false; conversely, the access to information does not necessarily ethically grant one the right to use it: whose story is it to tell? Where does one draw the line?

The shift in community reactions to adoption, and the internal and external factors that influence the individual’s ability to cope with adoption-related issues are also part of societal changes, which some of the novels included in this study also reveal explicitly or implicitly. To birthmother Emily’s surprise in *Tell Me My Name*, for example, her forthrightness about her past illegitimate pregnancy, relinquishment, and eventual reunion with the daughter she gave up, however late come to, is deemed admirable by her community. The message is “to remember we have to trust each other with our own truths, or we’ll have to live alone with

secrets all our lives.”⁴⁸⁶ This is just one illustration of developmental and life cycle tasks that are unique to adoption, such as “the adoption revelation process, the meaning of being adopted to the child, identification with two sets of parents, coping with adoption-related loss, contact with birth family members, etc.”⁴⁸⁷

This is a shift that is also reflected in contemporary adoption studies, “from looking primarily at the relative risk associated with adoption status to examining individual, family, and systemic processes accounting for the variability in adoption adjustment throughout the developing years.”⁴⁸⁸ Marianne Novy notes that there are “dominant paradigms through which our culture has tried to imagine adoption.”⁴⁸⁹ I have tried to find those examples which not only adhere to these stereotypes and dominant plots but those that deviate from them, and, as in her examples, find other texts that look at dominant plots “obliquely, examine their cost, follow their characters after their supposed end, or play off a reader’s expectations, explicitly dramatizing deviation from them...[to show] how much variety is possible,”⁴⁹⁰ and to be “self-critical of fantasies.”⁴⁹¹

When I came to think about adoption in more general terms, beyond my own experience, while finding a variety of material expressed in literary or filmic formats, I was particularly struck by the ‘absent presence’ in fine art. I wondered why no one was depicting these stories, and why there was such a dearth of adoption art, in a field with such potential for making visible an experience largely misunderstood by the general public, for expanding dialogue surrounding adoption, family and motherhood, and for theorizing new approaches to adoption studies. Thus I began my own research into what I believe is a new field of inquiry, searching for art about adoptive families, adoptees, birthmothers and adoptive mothers: art that helps to unsilence the previously silenced.

New Directions

On a triangle all three sides are necessary to achieve balance. Each side has to accept, respect and rely on the others or there can't be any stability.⁴⁹²

I think back to the conversation I had a year ago, where I was so flatly, even vociferously, told by members of the small Parent Finders group I briefly attended, of the impossibility of adoption art. I do not use this adjective to self-aggrandize, only to note how far-fetched the concept of finding ways to represent their own lived experience seemed to them. Perhaps they felt the inexpressibility of their condition. Perhaps, in not understanding themselves and their place in family or community, in the complexity of negotiating their own kinship ties and their own identity crises, they could not fathom how any of these issues could be transmitted to others, especially artistically.

Spurred on to achieve some expression of my own circumstance in art, as well as discovering a few examples of artists already working with such concepts, was a first step in helping to find, not only my own voice, but to join with those of others. Finding only the few artists discussed earlier in this paper shows the difficulty of accessing such works, the importance of them being produced and shared, and simultaneously the gap that calls out to be filled.

What distinguishes work like that of Carol Flax and Ann Fessler as significant Adoption Art is not only artistic merit and technical skill, or the quality and attention to historical detail in the amassing of footage, image and interviews, but also the intent and effect: it is art meant as an agent of social change, not merely the expression of an emotion or demonstration of technical proficiency. It advances our culture, through engaging with voices until now overlooked and unheard, and asking its audience to be more than passive observers, but thinking and involved citizens, who, by understanding a past, can also look to revising the present and future. And it is

especially the work of Ann Fessler that I believe is making a discernible impact, which, while scholarly, crosses so many media and boundaries, disseminated extensively beyond university galleries, into mainstream screenings, conferences and publications, reaching a wide-ranging audience of adoption triangle members *and* the general public who might not have thought about adoption or the impact of its policies upon friends, mothers and relatives before encountering her works.

This is an intimidating standard to engage with. I cannot profess to be an artist of this calibre, and yet the artistic spirit within called me to the endeavor of portraying my own lived experience, and that of my birthmother and adoptive mother, rendered less invisible though artistic means. I add to a limited canon of Adoption Art, thus not only through research, but artistic practice, I enlarge the scope of discussion, and create an unique *gestalt* through which to present ‘adoption.’

My project is ongoing, and I will continue both my own personal investigations and reflections on the secrecy that once surrounded adoption, and the resultant trauma, as well as trying to contextualize it for others, to bring an understanding of the ways the adoptive policies of the recent past and present have silenced voices, continue to oppress women in particular, stifle diversity, and privilege some models of kinship over others. Thinking about adoption, and finding ways of presenting a wider and more realistic experiential response to it in works of art and literature can stimulate new thinking, work to greater openness, and maybe facilitate better coping mechanisms for adoption-related stress. It can allow us to think about how we can make reparations, increase empathy and caring, and consider new directions and policies in the field of adoption, and beyond.

And now, as one first step, I write of a collection of artists, including myself, who were brought together specifically for the very purpose of displaying adoption-themed artwork. For only the second time art was considered as a part of the annual conference of one of the largest adoption rights advocacy groups in the United States, the umbrella organization of the American Adoption Congress. Part of the conference has always included a space called a ‘quiet room,’ a place to go and talk and sit. Liking the idea, but finding the rooms sterile and uncomfortable “like a detention hall,” artist Beth Jaffe began a movement to transform the space into an art process room. Beth explains,

Before this, I had used art therapy in my own healing from adoption trauma. I am a birthmother and many of us suffer/suffered from PTSD. I was diagnosed with PTSD, but surprisingly, I was not allowed to say the adoption was the cause. Nobody recognized that as legitimate in 1990. I used abstract art to help my broken mind, heart, and soul. It was a process of dealing with the hurt and the anger for being such a victim (being ostracized by my family, having no money, no support, and falling prey to deceptive adoption practices) but being blamed as the villain - abandoning my child.

The American Adoption Congress president endorsed the idea of an art process/healing room, but also asked that this be combined with hosting an art show. The first year the show was promoted on the AAC Facebook page and e-newsletter only, and the committee selected their favourite art from the submissions. Beth Jaffe supported the philosophy that all artists should be accepted based on her understanding of the conference as a place for healing. The resulting show was a mix of styles and skill levels.

Last year, adding a second chair, a working artist and art professor, balanced the submission process. She advocated for current works and a smaller show, and their general submission guidelines were designed for higher calibre artists, sought from a more publicly sourced base. In the resulting juried competition, nine artists working in an array of mediums

were brought together to comment on, advocate for, and provide gateways to understanding of their adoption experience.

The artists all were members of the adoption triad, several on multiple points both personal and professional, with a range of perspective and artistic intention. My own glass works “She” and “Family Tree” were selected by the jury for their “literal and metaphoric weight.” In that year’s art show there was not the sameness of method or mediums noticed in the year previous, but rather a diversity of approaches and materials used as vehicles for catharsis, advocacy, education or political action.

Two of the artists adhered more to the conventions of adoption art discovered thus far in my research: reliance on multi-media, photography and digital projections. April Topfer, adoptee and in reunion with a birth father, as well as a psychologist who works with a post-adoption research and education centre in the United States, states that her works are “descriptive of her healing adoption experiences.”

Like Carol Flax she uses new technologies to explore her perception of adoption. Carol Flax explains how this medium for her speaks to some of the inherent difficulties of understanding and expressing adoptive experience symbolically:

In using technology as the tools of my work, I've looked at the metaphors with what I do and how I do it. The in-between spaces as we enter the virtual realm, the realm without embodiment, a realm that might look like death. And a realm that mirrors my own experience of being without genesis, being without kin, being without knowledge. These spaces exist everywhere we tread. They are between the virtual and the real, the known and the unknown, between life and death. And as we penetrate the spaces in-between, as we perceive the shadows, as we listen to the unsaid, even read between the lines, we begin to understand.⁴⁹³

“Family Impressions,” Digital Projection, April Topfer, 2014. Image removed. Personal consent not obtained.

In her digital projections, April Topfer uses the only picture she has of her birthmother, and present-day reunion and family photos, together with photos of unwed mothers' homes, and surrounds them with a fog representative of secrecy, silence and denial. The scant archival evidence reappears in her work as a precious relic, one to be interrogated fully, although the pieces do not seem to hold together as a coherent work of art, lacking a compositional focus and clear aesthetic. Nonetheless, they are somehow evocative, and are part of the psychic repair necessary for her to come to terms with a birthmother found, but one who denies her role and her child.

“Bridge of Fantasy to Reality,” Inkjet, Katrina Ketring, 2013. Image removed. Personal consent not obtained.

The second artist, Katrina Ketring, an adoptee in reunion with her birthmother, works less literally. In her piece she uses a colour filter to enhance the landscape of fall colours, taking on fuchsia, rich purple and cerulean tones not found in nature, an impossible landscape, alluding to similar brilliant and overblown fantasies birthparents and adoptees might harbour about each other, and who, during the process of crossing over to reality in reunion, must change their perceptions and expectations.

Martha Gelarden, second chair and the most overtly political of the group, asks viewers to advocate for reform. Her collaborative project with her newly found adult son “Legacy in Limbo,” which archives the unanswered questions of those separated by closed adoption, has

been presented internationally. In her work, as a play on words, “LPs serve as stand-ins for original sealed birth records locked under court order, when an adoption is finalized.

“Found in a Syracuse Basement,” Charcoal, Martha Gelardon, 2013; “We Need to Know,” Charcoal, ink, graphite, 2013. Images removed. Personal consent not obtained.

Parallel narratives, mother and child, are frozen in time, can never meet, yet they are forever connected.” She works in charcoal and graphite, mediums that in their literal tendency to smudge, mask, or make less distinct what is on the page, are apt metaphor. Her pieces show similarity in their iconography; one is overlaid with overt questions, while the other, seems merely to allude to something of value that has been overlooked, hidden away or neglected. Her works insists that “identity is a civil right,” and this activism is continued in her open birth records protest poster series.

Beth Jaffe brought forth the interactive Adoption Mandala Project, which she hopes to launch soon on the Internet, as a place for community art.

“Study for Adoption Mandala II,” Prismacolor, Beth Jaffe, 2013. Image removed. Personal consent not obtained.

She explains the imagery as follows:

Starting in the center, the inner circle is the fertilized egg in the cross-hairs of a gun - the dangerous hunted embryo. The cross-hairs are lines of three, the first

family, the adopted individual, and the adoptive family. Protecting the embryo is a traditional birth symbol - the diamond with the crooked lines. The crooked lines are arms and legs of the woman giving birth. In this case, we are birthing a healing and a reform. We'd like to see adoption be the most benevolent situation possible. Breaking families and causing trauma must end. We use the birth symbol like a steering wheel and we take hold to turn the wheel of fate. The outer circle is the circle of life uniting us all. Those four quadrant circles are representative of various levels of adoption experience. They can mean the four kinds of adoption (kindred, foster care, infant, assisted reproduction) or the four levels of human experience affected by adoption (spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical) or they can be the people in the story (those hurt by adoption, those ignorant of adoption issues, those who do the hurting, those who can change the situation - the law/policy makers).

Launched at the conference in workshop form and as an interactive space adjacent to the gallery show, she invited attendees to a “creative Sanctuary where you can find a comfortable place to express yourself and participate in an open expressive arts workshop. Using a specific form of art therapy centered in self-realization and radiating mature relationship with all in the big picture of life, everyone in the adoption constellation is welcome to watch or create.” Printable versions of the mandala were for individuals to use in their own healing. Beth hopes that the process of choosing colors, filling in the lines and embellishing the basic design would help facilitate a deeper understanding of their own adoption experience. She then envisions discussing the design with others as a way to help educate people about adoption experience, another opportunity to heal. She believes this will help de-personalize the adoption story, or conversely personalize it, and calls it “my gift to the adoption world.”

In almost diametrical contrast, Candace Conklin reverberates anger. She is a ‘late discovery adoptee,’ one who did not find out about her adoptive status until well into adulthood. The result had a profound impact on her. Her art product was a large quilt consisting of sepia coloured photographs of her childhood, relatives and parents, what she thought was her normal family upbringing. The center square is text only, containing the first poem she wrote in response

to learning of her secret, an emotional outpouring of representative of feelings of betrayal and bewilderment not uncommon, especially for those whose lived experience is suddenly shifted. Surrounding each of the pictorial squares are further lines of text, purposefully small and difficult to read, emulating the difficulty she experienced in unravelling the truth of her situation.

Personal Adoption History, Quilt, Candace Conklin, 2013. Image removed. Personal consent not obtained.

The object of the quilt, with associations of comfort, warmth, an heirloom passed down through family, a female craft shared by mothers and daughters and through generations, contrasts with the piercing lines of text of the betrayed adult.

Two artists chose oils, and the depiction of individual experience from more of a psychological perspective. C. AnnEula Montgomery seeks to capture the constantly shifting emotions of an adoptee struggling to understand a feeling of being loved, on one hand, by adoptive parents, and feeling unwanted and abandoned, by birthparents. She writes of this as a painful dichotomy, and a rip in her spiritual tether, by one who believes “life is based singularly in emotional experience.”

“The Interrupted Soul,” Oil on canvas, C. AnnEula Montgomery, 2013. Image removed. Personal consent not obtained.

Louise Zervas' painting, the only one centering on an adoptive mothering, imagines her own adoptive mother, and the complexities of this identity. While the feeling of secrecy, of being watched and judged by a figure overhead is present, as the woman waits to carve some kind of message into the forest tree, the piece itself does not fulfill its promise as well as the other oil, and one wonders if it was included only due to the lack of representation of the adoptive mother experience.

"The Owl," Oil on wood, Louise Zervas, 2014. Image Removed. Personal consent not obtained.

The work of most interest and nuance is that of Marianne O'Brien, who is both an adoptee herself, and a birthmother, a dual standpoint not shared by many. She works in mixed media, claiming, "I create to make sense of my monsters and to express realities dismissed by society. These sculptures are about the feeling of isolation, disconnection and confusion caused by my adoption, and the visceral, unending longing for my son, a connection to my biological heritage and to myself."

In "Untitled," a rib cage made of newsprint text becomes the lampshade, held in place by fragments of children's toys. The assemblage is mounted on a richly coloured warm wooden box that might be a jewelry box, a keepsake box of precious mementoes, or Pandora's box. In this case, the box is locked up tight: nothing hidden will be revealed, nothing precious brought to light, and no illumination will be forthcoming for one who seeks answers.

In the very thought-provoking “Odd Flock,” a birdcage is stuffed full of tiny artefacts and images, photos of family, bits and pieces of memorabilia, all assiduously collected, and guarded by the keeper, in this case as represented by the magpie captured with a bright blood-red ribbon in its mouth. The bird could be a reminder of how jealously small snippets or artefacts of family origin are gazed upon by those who have none; this might also be the treasure trove of the searcher, one who is trying to connect with a family they neither know nor understand; or perhaps this is the vast cache of potential information that is secreted away by governments, files, and laws that deny access to birth origin and adoptee fate.

“Odd Flock,” Mixed media sculpture, 2014; “Untitled,” Mixed media sculpture, Marienne O’Brien, 2014. Images removed. Personal consent not obtained.

While as a collection the exhibition as a whole might not comprise the highest artistry, nor yet have a pervasive reach, it nonetheless represents a trend virtually heretofore denied: the interrogation of adoption from multiple, overlapping and intersecting experiences. It had the power to move participants, show other sides to the story, allowing them to share, to grieve, to work out pain, to rally, to question and to heal. The art show will now be an ongoing part of this major annual conference, hopefully a growing and inclusive one. The next step will be to bring this grassroots artistic expression to a more open forum, to a public who might not have involvement with, or thought much about, adoptive rights, adoptive experiences, and inherent issues of race, class, identity, law, civil rights, discrimination and secrecy.

Advocate/ Legislate

*While I advocate open records and the right to search...I critically analyze myths in fictional treatments of search and discovery...to point out erasures of adoptive parents, and fantasies of mirroring between adoptee and birthparents.*⁴⁹⁴

Advocacy, for greater openness in adoption, for political action and for changes in policy, is the continuing work of many individuals, support groups, and adoption rights organizations.

Adoption advocacy groups have lobbied successfully for the opening of records in many states and provinces; while there are many places where records remain restricted, recent changes such as the move towards openness of New Jersey governor Chris Christie points to progress.

In another call to action Sally Sales, in writing about reproductive rights and the rise of the ‘business’ of adoption, challenges policymakers and feminists to interrogate the practices surrounding pregnancy, illegitimacy and adoption. She writes that a truly “inclusive reproductive rights feminism would reject continuing debate about which reproductive choice is worse for the country – out of wedlock pregnancy and childbearing, or abortion. It would also reject, or subject to very careful scrutiny, the domestic and international redistribution of children from resourceless women to middle class Americans, a practice we call adoption.”⁴⁹⁵

In what has been labelled ‘the Philomena effect’ many churches and organizations, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the United Church of Canada who operated maternity homes and facilitated adoptions with questionable practices surrounding relinquishment, have begun ethical reviews of their past practices. *The National Post* ran a series of articles on the calls for investigations into forced adoption practices in Canada in 2012. The Salvation Army then announced that they were “currently conducting an internal review of the operation of these centers 40 to 50 years ago, including the treatment of our clients.”⁴⁹⁶ Monique Taylor, the Ontario NDP’s critic for children and youth services, urged the Dalton McGuinty government

“to look at launching an inquiry into the province’s historic adoption practices in the wake of accusations from women who say they were coerced by social agencies, medical workers and churches into giving up their children.”⁴⁹⁷ Calls for similar inquiries came from PEI and British Columbia; a class action lawsuit “accusing the province of abduction, fraud, and coercion in connection with adoptions among unmarried women from the 1940s until the early 1990s” was also launched in B.C. and Ontario.⁴⁹⁸ No matter the result, the calls for action, formal inquiry, investigation and possible reparation are significant first steps.

David Brodzinsky writes of the shift “from a psychopathological perspective on adoption to one that focuses on issues of resilience. The stereotype of adoption as inherently associated with a range of psychological problems has given way to a more balanced perspective in which adoption is also viewed as a potential benefit for children whose early histories are replete with biological and/or social adversity.”⁴⁹⁹ This welcome shift allows for a healthier, more inclusive stance, and hopefully is an attitude that will trickle down to those who lived under more oppressive and punitive stances.

Educate

*Adoption...could be represented positively within the framework of the modern family with emphasis on educated parenthood and choice and planning.*⁵⁰⁰

In another recent development, there is a movement to open an Adoption Museum, the first permanent public institution that looks at adoption, despite adoption’s impact on so many people.⁵⁰¹ The project’s stated goal is to “catalyze conversations about adoption that support positive social change.” They also envision extending the physical space into an Internet presence and online workshops.

The project was founded just in February of 2013 by an adoptee supported by a team of individuals with a wide range of backgrounds as writers, artists, and in arts administration, arts-based education, museum education and administration at such respected sites as the Ashmolean in Oxford and the Guggenheim in New York. Their approach is to “explore collaborative partnerships in physical and online space before the brick and mortar museum exists.” Smaller projects are currently being mounted, as the team builds their vision and draws on feedback from participants and viewers, such as 2013’s “Our Place at the Table: Honoring Birthmother Stories.”

“Our Place at the Table: Honoring Birthmother Stories,” Installation, On Your Feet Foundation, San Francisco, 2013. Rights held by a third party. Distribution is prohibited.

Held appropriately on Mother’s Day weekend, the intention of the installation was to honour birthmothers, interrogate societal impressions, and allow an open forum for expression and education, because “despite our society’s reverence for mothers and more openness in adoption, birthmothers continue to be hidden, stereotyped and stigmatized.”⁵⁰² Birthmothers contributed intimate personal objects such as a dress, a journal, photos and legal documents, that allowed insight into some aspect of their experience. They themselves labeled the objects, and all included the birthdate of their child inscribed on the object card as a way to honour and remember them, placed on a communal dining table, a place where family stories are often shared. Viewers were invited to pull up chairs, and to add their own message in honour of the stories told there, and to those birthmothers who were not present or remain unknown.

Response was wide-ranging and contentious. There were disagreements about terminology - ‘birthmother’ being not representative of the views of all - and some aspects of the exhibition, but the emotionally charged and diverse reaction evolved into a discussion about reproductive justice, poverty, and family. Thus it appeared to provoke exactly the kind of passionate and invested conversation needed to begin to institute social change.

In 2014 the museum partnered with two West Coast cultural institutions to create original projects to “explore three dimensions of adoption: lived experience, policy and practice, and larger themes such as identity, race, and civil rights. These ideas will be considered through many forms of expression including exhibitions, oral histories, objects, art and educational programs.”⁵⁰³ Perhaps here will be housed a space for artists to participate in the ongoing discussion and education, advocacy and exploration of adoptive experience.

Education is also part of Marianne Novy’s mission. In *Reading Adoption* she writes “adoption practices have changed in many ways since my childhood, but there are still many people uncomfortable about the adoption in their life story.”⁵⁰⁴ This is an important statement to re-iterate. It is the lingering effects of restrictive and punitive treatments, silences and omissions of inclusive voices, as well as the sensationalizing, stereotyping or fantasizing about the adoptive experience, that makes adoption alien and ‘other.’ In Marianne Novy’s work on portrayals of adoption she hopes to diminish these fears and perceptions “by analyzing some of the literature that has transmitted it...to help adoptees, adoptive parents and birthparents to understand their lives...and present literary examples as equipment for thinking about adoptive family construction and adoptee identity in a way that could be useful to people considering any kind of family construction.”⁵⁰⁵

In my own teaching practice I have tried to provide spaces for children who are adoptees to feel comfortable about sharing their viewpoints, discussing their concerns, and celebrating their differences. I share my own perceptions with them, as appropriate, and provide pathways for them to do the same. I want those in my classroom who are not part of this circle to also consider adoption, what its challenges might be, and how it affects a wide range of people living in varying circumstances, just as they consider other many different and diverse ways of being in the world. And, as inevitably happens when one provides spaces for engagement, a few of the class also began to speak of their own brushes with adoption, and began vocalizing some of their own questions. My class also provided a vehicle for them not only to continue the conversation, but gave them permission and the courage to more honestly and openly explore some of their own intimate life experiences in writing and discussion, knowing that they would be treated with equal respect and honour.

However I also know I fall short in many respects. Marianne Novy admonishes “if more teachers...made a point of locating the silences in their treatment of adoption, the alternative plots theoretically possible...more people in our culture might get over the idea that it is a threat to the adoptive family if adoptees meet, or even know something about their birth parents.”⁵⁰⁶ In the teaching of literature, I am guilty of the sin of omission. I know I have never deliberately taken up the adoptive stance of any literary personage who might be included in the texts I have taught. This has made me more aware of the potential opportunities I have previously overlooked. Clearly there are many opportunities here for discussion, an omission I must correct, or I, too, contribute to the silences.

Yet I believe the trust I exhibited with my writing students extends outward. In my graduating advanced drama class, I set a task every year to “Perform a one person show about

your life in five to ten minutes.” Students must find a metaphor or a frame for their presentation. It must be personal, theatrical and meaningful, to enable each individual to tell their own story, and to be heard. Three years ago, one of my students was an adoptee from China; the daughter of Caucasian parents, her difference was obvious. It is clear that the student I’ll call ‘Clara’ had been told of my efforts to bring adoption to consideration and I think this gave her the ‘permission’ she needed, as for the first time, one of these ‘autodrama’ performances was on the topic on adoption.

For her performance, Clara stood beside a large mirror, and began, “I look into this mirror wishing I could see my past.” As she delivered an opening monologue on what it was like not to know about her heritage, she held an album in her hands as she spoke:

I remember as a young child, all my friends would talk about where they were born, what time they arrived, how excited their parents were to have them in their lives, but for me, my first eight months of being alive are completely blank. And I know there are so many questions that will be forever unanswered.

People always ask me, ‘Do you ever think about your biological parents?’ and I always answer, ‘No not really. I am happy with my life and I don’t need to focus on something I can never change.’ But really, I do think about the two people who made me and brought me into the world.

What did they look like? Did my mother sing or dance? Is my father athletic? Were they really smart? And are they happy? Do they love each other? When I was younger they were always blank faces and I didn’t care about them. I didn’t know them. But now I want to know. Why did you give me up? Why couldn’t you keep me and love me?

Some people think it is really silly to think about something I really don’t know much about, and being taken away from my family didn’t hurt me as an infant, so why does it matter now?

Well, it’s like having a book, but with its first few chapters missing and only having a faint idea of what really happened. I know that I have been blessed with a family who loves me and has been able to give me more opportunities than I could have ever imagined. But there is a little part inside me that will always be missing, hoping that one day it might be filled.

Referring to the book in her hand, she let it fall, scattering pages and pictures about her life. And then she was silent for the rest of the performance, as she expressed her feelings about

adoption and the direction her life was taking in a breath-taking lyrical dance she choreographed herself, returning at the end to sit cross-legged on the floor and leaf through the scraps of her life on the floor.

I wept. And as I looked around at her peers in the audience, I saw I was not alone.

In her final post feedback reflection Clara wrote,

every single one of the pieces that I chose to incorporate into my performance are things I have said, felt, or written down before. The letter to my mom and the adoption piece are all from journals. They were very much the truth and are aspects of my life I don't share on a regular basis. I love the fact that I am adopted but there are so many questions that I wish could be answered. After hearing myself actually say it out loud, the words have a much stronger meaning than they did sitting on the pages of a journal...Through the process of putting together my performance I noticed more and more how I actually see myself and the world around me.

In making these opportunities for students I hope I have taken up, and even extended Marianne Novy's hope, that "if teachers in grade school, high school, and college can teach literature with more sensitivity to literary adoptee's situation, their students living in variant family structures may have more tools for thinking about their own lives."⁵⁰⁷

Artistic works contribute to our way of understanding the world and ourselves, and are cultural influences that affect our very perceptions of reality. Yet those without representation are relegated to the margins of social consciousness. It is important that those who have experienced adoption, and shifting conceptions of normative and il/legitimate family, see themselves reflected; younger generations may also need help in confronting their own issues about adoption, as illustrated by Clara's presentation. And the few examples discovered of Adoption Art begin to unsilence the silenced, bring more into the open depictions of a different kind of family building, and of societal injustices historically wrought by those in power over women who had dared to be sexual beings. They invite the viewer to interrogate some of the

prevalent discourses surrounding adoption: the assumed bio-essentialism of motherhood, the pathologizing of the participants in the process, the romanticization of reunion, and also the potential lasting psycho-social effects of non-disclosure practices now discontinued.

The artistic works I have used in this dissertation are a critical representation of ‘Adoption Art.’ They have been consciously placed to illustrate the affective side of adoption experience that cannot be wholly explained through ‘data.’ The visual and the poetic access the emotional and non-rational, communicating through symbol and story, allusion and juxtaposition, the impact that adoption has had and continues to have on so many, but whose stories have not been predominantly portrayed in all their complexity. I argue that such representations are necessary to allow adoptees and non-adoptees to identify on a subjective level, which aids in communicating understanding of this subject on the objective level, part of the educational groundwork of this investigation.

Adoption Art belongs in public institutions and deserves to be considered as an important category of human experience worthy of contemplation and as one more vehicle for social change. Placing such work in the proposed Adoption Museum would be a beginning, where all members of the adoption triad can go, to be figures in the ground of adoption.

A Personal Adoption Mandala

*In creating a mandala, one becomes involved in the process to the extent that it is difficult to determine whether the artist or the process itself is in control...*⁵⁰⁸

On my way to the Adoption Conference and art show in San Francisco last spring, I had several conversations with Beth Jaffe about the intended sand art adoption mandala workshop with Andres Amador at Sutro Heights Park. The ephemeral nature of sand art seemed to fit perfectly with my own investigation, my own use of ephemera to explore personal and public

attitudes towards adoption, the potential and real erasures that occur in adoptive circumstances and in searching for truth, and the sense of shifting, of groundlessness, when trying to form impressions of my own life and the lives of people I had never met upon partial and shaky information. That the art itself would physically reflect a community whose voices have been silenced and buried, yet at the same time might bring together a community trying to change this, was appropriate. And for me, the elemental nature of the endeavour, the closeness to the sea and action of the waves also seemed to merge with the affinity for water and nature that both myself and my birthmother might have shared.

In the plane on the way down, after unexpectedly finding *Philomena* on the inflight entertainment list, I was primed to continue thinking about what I might carve, rake or etch into the sand. I began to doodle. Images and symbols began to repeat themselves. Intertwined lines, suggesting the combining and separation of individual lives, their coming together and moving apart, morphed into several iterations. These lines, with parallel lines inserted, could be strands of DNA. With the addition of circles within them, they became eyes, those watching and those looking: with similar shapes lain vertically the eyes began to weep, tears of any of the women of my story. That same shape turned sideways became suggestive of sperm swimming up the birth canal. Softened semi-circular lines on either side suggested this solution of fertilization, and also the undulating waves of the nearby shore. Small curled shapes evoked seashells, the embryo, and the mandala itself. And lastly, there were triangles, small, standing in lines, every other one inverted, becoming less individualized and more representative of a band or continuum.

These pictographs began to remind me of primitive cave art. When repeated, and layered on top of one another, they also became suggestive of an archaeological dig, revealing layers of sediment, compression, and silt, stratified deposits of history, information, treasure, knowledge

and understanding waiting to be discovered. The sand art installation did not come to pass. But nonetheless I kept the doodles, and it is here that I shall end the story of my journey. I work to one last creation, using these images in a mandala of my own.

And so, I begin the end. For one last time, for now, I transfer my etchings onto glass. I choose to break up some of the recurring chains of images and piece them back together. In many Eastern religions and native traditions, to make a mandala is a healing process, one taken up by psychoanalyst Carl Jung. Although criticized for adopting such ‘mystic’ practices, he studied mandalas and used them as a vehicle for his patients’ self-expression of inner psyche and recognition of their own symbolic representations; he believed them to be expressive of the integration of the unconscious and conscious minds, a union of opposites. In Hinduism the mandala is characteristic of the universe, of our connection to ourselves and the world around us. It sings of wholeness, of individuality within a unifying structure, and of harmony. A mandala “serves the creative purpose of giving expression and form to something that does not yet exist, something new and unique...The process is that of the ascending spiral, which grows upward while simultaneously returning again and again to the same point.”⁵⁰⁹

I choose to make my mandala a mosaic, but one in which the light shines through. Yellow, suggestive of light, the sun, and energy, united with blue cathedral glass, suggestive of the calming element of water, placed over clear glass, allows for such light. I once again engage with the symbol of the adoption triangle, and use this as my outline shape. Yet combined with this is a sense of movement and unity, as the individual lines spiral towards the centre and merge. It represents all the elements of which I am a part, and some of the emotional repercussions of this pieced together history and identity.

I learn that the etymology of the word ‘trauma’ is from the Greek for ‘wound’ long after I began to write of my wound and the experience of loss that also accompanies trauma, in trying to understand my relationship to it. Cathy Caruth writes that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.”⁵¹⁰ Further summaries press the connection closer: it is “a strange sort of an event because once it is understood as a belated consequence of a ‘missed encounter,’ [thus] trauma itself must be understood in terms of ‘absence’—the absence of something that failed to become located in time or place.”⁵¹¹ Are these not some of the difficulties and complications that I have endeavoured to express? And in finding the parallels of definition, I also see those of reaction, for in neither case can we fully understand it or overcome it, yet there is a necessity to bear witness to it, and give testimony.



Image : Personal Adoption Mandala (Glass on glass mosaic), 2015, 16” x 19”

I have been witness to my own adoption and all that entails physically, emotionally, historically and contextually. The questions I consider allow an investigation of the social impact of adoption practices and portrayals, a form of truth-seeking, with an underlying longing for reconciliation. Perhaps this dissertation could be considered a form of mandala: my own healing, a reaching outward and a reaching inward, a public research journey but also a private one, at times difficult to write, but necessary. In the telling of my narrative I have made a parallel journey, one that is travelled by many adoptees and birth/adoptive mothers but remains unknown to the majority. It has allowed me to begin to make informed decisions about the past, to consider how I might reconcile and accept my adoptive experience, while also showing me a vision of a different future. It has contained “a story and several other things,”⁵¹² hopefully bringing the ‘slashes’ and ‘blobs’ of adoption experience into the light, giving them form and shape and substance, placing a figure in ground, and allowing us all to truly
Look.

Endnotes

¹ Pullman, *Lyra's Oxford*.

² This will be the first in a long series of 'bookmarks' indicating the severing and removing of various graphics, photographs, documents and correspondence from the original dissertation. While some are strictly for copyright purposes, others are for privacy and permissions reasons. As I will later discuss throughout this paper, the lines as to where privacy, secrecy, or confidentiality fall are problematic. While this is a story of myself, and my mothers, and necessitates a degree of personal revelation and auto-ethnography as I search for ways to understand my experiences, and theirs, I am not allowed to talk about my family in any identifying way, nor display any photographs of my family – adoptive or birth - even if taken by myself or a family member, and lie in my possession. I continue to wonder about whose stories are allowed to be told, and to what degree our stories are our own. Where does my identity begin or end? How do we negotiate the overlap, and whose rights are being preserved or prevented. Perhaps the removal/censoring of the documents and images serves as a furthering of the metaphor of the silences surrounding stories of adoption.

The aesthetic qualities of the original document have also been altered, as all borders, fonts, word art, layout, placement, spacing and formatting selected to enhance and support this arts-based research project were removed in order to fit within the confines of the formatting of text-based, standardized dissertations of the academic institution.

³ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 33.

⁴ Grimbert and McLean, *Memory/Un Secret*.

⁵ Ulin, "Family Secrets."

⁶ Garman, "Brother's Keeper."

⁷ Smith and Logan, *After Adoption*, 20.

⁸ Foucault and Lotringer, "The Concern for Truth."

⁹ Arendt in Buss, *Repossessing the World*, 2.

¹⁰ Smith, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance," 108.

¹¹ Ibid., Part II Subjectivities.

¹² Leggo in Schwarz, "About Wishes and Invitations," 19.

¹³ Dunlop, "Beyond Dualism," 59.

¹⁴ Leggo in Schwarz, "About Wishes and Invitations," 2.

¹⁵ Fish in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 12.

¹⁶ Leggo in Schwarz, "About Wishes and Invitations," 2.

¹⁷ Gish, "Adoption, Identity, Voice," 80.

¹⁸ Felman and Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing*, 5.

¹⁹ Pryer, "Imagining Educational Research?," 4.

²⁰ Hampl, "The Dark Art of Description."

²¹ Novy, *Imagining Adoption*, 7.

²² Leggo, "Writing Lives Is More Than Writing Lines."

²³ "Emerging from the productive fusions and tensions among qualitative inquiry and the fine arts, arts-informed research infuses elements, processes and forms of the arts with expansive possibilities of scholarly work. Exploring the language and genres of fiction, poetry, theatre/drama and visual arts, including installation, film and video, as ways of advancing knowledge, arts-informed research is more than a method, an approach, a procedure; arts-

informed inquiry is a means to redefine form and representation and recreate new understandings of process, spirit, purpose, subjectivities, emotion, responsiveness, and the ethical dimensions of inquiry” (Cole, *Provoked by Art*, 2:272).

²⁴ Smith and Dean, *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts*, 3.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Sinner et al., “Arts-Based Educational Research Dissertations.”

²⁷ Jacobs, “In My Own Backyard,” *The Authentic Dissertation*, 230.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Dunlop, Ibid., 63–4.

³⁰ Ibid., 52.

³¹ Barone, “How Arts Based Research Can Change Minds,” 39.

³² Vaughan, “Mariposa: The Story of a Work of Research/Creation,” 170.

³³ Eisner, “Persistent Tensions in Arts-Based Research.”

³⁴ Social Sciences Humanities and Research Council, *Definition of Terms*.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 146.

³⁷ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 75.

³⁸ Zatzman, “The Monologue Project,” 36.

³⁹ Marlene Kadar, “Wounding Events and the Limits of Autobiography.”

⁴⁰ Evans, *Missing Persons*, 9.

⁴¹ Maurice Rickards, *This Is Ephemera*, 13.

⁴² Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Chapter 1.

⁴³ See G. Augustine Lynas, Christo and Jeanne Claude, Jan Fabre, Andy Goldsworthy, Jessica Witte and Julian Beaver among others

⁴⁴ Metcalfe, “A Resplendent History,” 1, 58.

⁴⁵ Dewey, *Art as Experience*.

⁴⁶ Grotevant, “Coming to Terms with Adoption.”

⁴⁷ Prendergast, Leggo, and Sameshima, *Poetic Inquiry*, 2.

⁴⁸ Novy, *Reading Adoption*, 28.

⁴⁹ Scott in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 37.

⁵⁰ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 25.

⁵¹ Estrin, Barbara, “Book Review. Marianne Novy. *Reading Adoption*,” 217.

⁵² Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 81.

⁵³ Ibid., 152–53.

⁵⁴ Some are more useful: *How I was Adopted* (1995) creates the young protagonist Samantha who talks directly to the unseen child reader, assumed also to be adopted, reaching out and inviting the child into the story with questions like “Do you know the story of how you were adopted?” The most striking is the section on “Adoption and Love” where Joanna Cole writes, “the story in this book is a happy one...it conveys the sense that adoption is one way of making up a family, that love in an adoptive family is the same as is any family. Unlike some other books you may have read, this is not a ‘problem’ book...It shows that being a family is about ‘love and spirit,’ not about blood ties” (Cole and Chambliss).

⁵⁵ Lindenauer, *I Could Not Call Her Mother*, 123.

⁵⁶ In 1973 “Sex Education Films: A Content Analysis” was published in *The Family Co-Ordinator*, containing an examination of the manifest and latent content in films in use in a cross

section of American schools, and acknowledging that unspoken approval of traditional mores was prevalent, and that coital relationships were avoided in the discussion of human reproduction, which seems a gymnastic feat.

⁵⁷ Polley, *Stories We Tell*.

⁵⁸ All interview subjects have signed waivers allowing the quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing of all words and actions.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Zatzman, "Fifty-One Suitcases," 30.

⁶¹ Cole and Knowles, *Lives In Context*, 119.

⁶² Kuhn, 2.

⁶³ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁵ Pamela J. Downe, "Stepping on Maternal Ground," 232.

⁶⁶ Flax, *Some (M)other Stories*.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Fisher, *Fighting for Nothing*.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Kay, *The Adoption Papers*.

⁷² Roberts, *The Unwed Mother*, 35.

⁷³ Sales, *Adoption, Family and the Paradox of Origins*, 7.

⁷⁴ Berebitsky, *Like Our Very Own*, 3.

⁷⁵ *Adoption and Mothering*, 61.

⁷⁶ Novy, *Imagining Adoption*, 2.

⁷⁷ Sales, *Adoption, Family and the Paradox of Origins*, 195.

⁷⁸ Novy in Clark, "From Carlotta to the Outposts of the Empire: Troping Adoption," 101.

⁷⁹ Many artists try to express how difficult this pull is. In the documentary film "O Mother Where Art Thou" (Canada, 2007) the adopted protagonist is at a holiday family gathering when a cousin asks, "What do you think your real family are doing?" The film does not resolve the question of which is 'real'; instead it opens the door for the narrator to discover for himself the relative importance of both families in his life. Artist Joanna Fisher's negotiation of family is similarly unresolved. Her college thesis entitled "Familiar Strangers" presents a collection of black and white photos of 'family.' She cannot quite place herself in her present without knowing of the other family to which she belongs and yet has no access.

⁸⁰ Carol Flax, "Artist's Statement."

⁸¹ "The artist[s] wonder at a society that contradictorily bandies about such loaded terms as 'out of wedlock' and 'illegitimate,' while it simultaneously leaves women and children the victims of poverty and neglect, sensationalizes the discussion of adoption on tabloid television and attempts to criminalize abortion" (Ibid).

⁸² Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*, 4.5.43–4.

⁸³ Haugaard, Schustack, and Dorman, "Birth Mothers Who Voluntarily Relinquish Infants for Adoption," 92.

⁸⁴ The parents' reconsideration of allowing her to search for her birthmother begins with a note of parental consent. A box of documents accompanies this permission slip, withheld from Natalie originally perhaps in order to cement the adoptive parents' primacy. Personal accounts,

written in letters or diaries, and a conveniently saved exchange of letters between mother and daughter in 1960 prior to the adoption, are all significant.

⁸⁵ Kay, *The Adoption Papers*.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Flax, *Some M(other) Stories*.

⁸⁹ Gasco, Elyse, "The Spider of Bumba," 180.

⁹⁰ Berebitsky, *Like Our Very Own*, 28.

⁹¹ In *Someone to Love* (1998) the adopted protagonist notes, "there are plenty of people who are prejudiced against adopted kids, partly because the media loves to do stories about the tiny minority of adoptees who grow up to become rapists and mass murderers...[and] the mistaken belief that adopted kids will inherit all sorts of bad traits from their birthparents" (71).

The adoptive parents in the book also present a window into the perceived importance of genetic heritage and matching. They 'shop' for Jamie/Alexandra/Sara: "You can't believe the hassle trying to find a baby to adopt. It took us years just to find Jamie. We wanted a girl, and we wanted her with dark eyes like Helen's, and intelligent, from intelligent type people, maybe a college girl with a good background...we didn't specify a redhead, but it was like an extra bonus" (221). Without the appropriate pedigree and potential for mirroring, the child was not acceptable.

⁹² In *Familiar Passions* Bridie's abandoning husband comments that the birth of their child "was something of a gamble. Since you were an adopted child I mean. I think it is fairly well established now that genetic factors are more important than environmental ones. I've never told you, but when you were pregnant I did have certain grave anxieties about how your offspring might turn out. I kept them from you, naturally" (Bawden, 12).

⁹³ Bawden, *Familiar Passions*, 244.

⁹⁴ Doherty, *The Snake-Stone*, 164.

⁹⁵ Artist Carol Flax also addressed the role of genetics versus environment and notions of home and family through a video installation "2 Mothers, 2 Daughters, 2 Sisters, 2 Brothers, 1 Father (2002) where she assembled an adoptee's biological and adoptive family members and filmed an extreme close up of their lips moving, reading of selections from a book then just published by psychologist David S. Moore called *The Dependent Gene*. In this work he tries to eradicate binary views on genetic determinism, postulating that both nature and nurture contribute in equal unknowing measure, in an ongoing series of complex interactions, to the process of identity. In Carol Flax's installation she symbolically represents the complex interactions of which David Moore writes, and which the adoptee experiences.

⁹⁶ Dupre, Louise, *Just Like Her (Tout Comme Elle)*, 56.

⁹⁷ Lifton, *Twice Born*, 237.

⁹⁸ Shakespeare noted this affinity in *All's Well That End's Well*: the countess takes in an adopted daughter and assures her, "'tis often seen/ That adoption strives with nature, and choice breeds/ A native slip to us from foreign seeds/ You ne'er oppressed me with a mother's groan/ Yet I express to you a mother's care" (1.3.147-53); the diction used emphasizes the horticultural imagery, a graft onto the living organism of the family. The wound of the inserted stock will heal over and perhaps become invisible to the eye.

⁹⁹ Novy, *Imagining Adoption*, 198.

¹⁰⁰ Lifton, *Twice Born*, 237.

¹⁰¹ Schooler and Norris, *Journeys after Adoption*, 44.

- ¹⁰² Griffith, *The Right to Know Who You Are*.
- ¹⁰³ McColm, *Adoption Reunions*, 175.
- ¹⁰⁴ Schooler and Norris, *Journeys after Adoption*, 144.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 151.
- ¹⁰⁶ Lifton, *Lost and Found*, 100.
- ¹⁰⁷ Eliot and Hardy, *Daniel Deronda*, 1.
- ¹⁰⁸ Douglas and Philpot, *Adoption: Changing Families, Changing Times*, 8.
- ¹⁰⁹ Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 82.
- ¹¹⁰ Gross, *Fictional "Mothers" Reveal Facts Of A Painful Adoption Process*.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid., 133.
- ¹¹² a method developed in the 17th century to create faux lace, which involves the burning away of natural fibres through the use of caustic chemicals to create images or leave patterns, again contributing to the feeling of age, delicacy and impermanence.
- ¹¹³ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*.
- ¹¹⁴ Carter, *Tell Me My Name*, 60.
- ¹¹⁵ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 60.
- ¹¹⁶ Gish, "Adoption, Identity, Voice," 172.
- ¹¹⁷ Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.
- ¹¹⁸ McColm, *Adoption Reunions*, 24.
- ¹¹⁹ Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away*, 139.
- ¹²⁰ Ibid.
- ¹²¹ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 33.
- ¹²² Nussbaum, "The Politics of Subjectivity," 162.
- ¹²³ Ibid., 22.
- ¹²⁴ Soto, "Genealogy Revised in Secrets and Lies," 204.
- ¹²⁵ Harnack, *Adoption: Opposing Viewpoints*, 256.
- ¹²⁶ Trollope, *Brother and Sister*, 39.
- ¹²⁷ Leps and Higgins, "'Passport Please'," 111, 125.
- ¹²⁸ Gish, "Adoption, Identity, Voice," 172.
- ¹²⁹ Fenwick, "Lady Inc: Women Learning, Negotiating Subjectivity in Entrepreneurial Discourses," 163.
- ¹³⁰ Ibid., 174.
- ¹³¹ Gish, "Adoption, Identity, Voice," 171.
- ¹³² Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig, *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*.
- ¹³³ Clothier, "Some Aspects of the Problem of Adoption."
- ¹³⁴ which he classified as those with a mother of low intelligence, according to then standards of measurement of IQ, the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test, a father doing low skilled labour, or both.
- ¹³⁵ Skeels and Harms, "Children with Inferior Social Histories," 294.
- ¹³⁶ Sants, "Genealogical Bewilderment in Children with Substitute Parents," 67.
- ¹³⁷ Ibid., 74.
- ¹³⁸ Schechter, "Observations on Adopted Children. Excerpt."
- ¹³⁹ His study was based on a small sample of clinical case studies in the 1940's and 1950's, and was contested by other researchers. Theorists such as David Brodzinsky (1993) then alternatively suggested that, while the numbers of adoptees undergoing therapy are higher than non-adoptees,

this may be an economic rather than psychic indicator, as adoptive parents selected by the State were required to be of some financial means, and could afford therapy, and might also have brought in their children thinking erroneously that adoption was the root cause of other behaviors. David Kirk suggested the reported psychological traumas suffered by adoptive children were more due to the stigma placed on the child by society rather than innate (Kirk in Baldassi, "The Quest to Open Closed Adoption Files in Canada," 237). However further research indicates that despite Schechter's inaccurate study methods, he was essentially correct in identifying attachment and loss as key issues in adoptive experience.

¹⁴⁰ Baldassi, "Quest to Access Closed Adoption Files in Canada: Understanding Social Context and Legal Resistance to Change," 100.

¹⁴¹ Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor, "The Reunion of Adoptees and Birth Relatives," 205.

¹⁴² Mackie, "Families of Adopted Adolescents," 173.

¹⁴³ Boei, *Technology Gives Birth to New Worry*.

¹⁴⁴ Hertz, "In Pursuit of Authenticity," 103.

¹⁴⁵ Bawden, *Familiar Passions*, 59.

¹⁴⁶ Smith, "The Adopted Child Syndrome," 492.

¹⁴⁷ Kirshner, "Understanding Adoptees Who Kill," 325.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 332.

¹⁴⁹ Kirshner, although stating most adoptees were not disturbed and this was merely a clinical sub-group, continued to promote the term in his writings, including the inflammatory "Understanding Adoptees Who Kill" in 1992. In his 2006 book *Adoption: Uncharted Waters* he wrote, "adoption is a critical factor in the psychopathology of many adopted killers" (323). Adoptees had "an impairment of the development the superego, failure to develop a coherent sense of self, and a predisposition to dissociation" (*Understanding Adoptees who Kill* 326), and he attributed opposition to his theory to those who are members of the adoption triangle, those who profit from adoption, and those without qualifications -- presumably his (Schwartz, Book Review 64). Adopted child syndrome syndrome has never appeared in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and yet aggression, pathological lying, drug and alcohol abuse, violence, vandalism, rule breaking, defiance of authority, fire-setting, lack of impulse control, learning problems, over-representation in psychiatric care, and other transgressions were attributed to the adoptee's inability to form a clear identity, a pattern continuing into the 1990's (Smith, "The Adopted Child Syndrome" 491).

¹⁵⁰ Lifton, *Lost and Found*, 4.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵² If not pathologized, adoptees have often felt or been marginalized. Marginalization for the daughter in the poems of *The Adoption Papers* comes not only through her adoptive status, but also because of her bloodlines, a child with coloured skin in a predominately white culture. As a growing young adult she muses in chapter eight, "I have no nose or mouth or eyes /to match, no spitting image or dead cert, / my face watches itself in the glass." She struggles to find role models who might mirror her ethnicity and hybridity back to her ("I can see my skin is that colour/ but most of the time I forget"), while also trying to avoid racial stereotypes. The exhortation that blood is somehow a key to her identity, but in a negative ways, haunts the child at night.

Penny Callan Partridge notes in her poem "Oregon" how clues to identity have been withheld from adoptees. In it the poet celebrates "the new law in Oregon" (Oregon Ballot

Measure 58, 2000) legitimizing access to original birth certificates. She cites a woman who berated her for not knowing how to pronounce the name of the state correctly ("imagine not knowing") and then directly begins to equate that with another kind of 'not knowing': "imagine not knowing/ how to say the name/ of the woman/ you were born to...it's *little* enough to learn/ it's little *enough* to learn."

¹⁵³ Weir, *Coming out of the Adoptive Closet*, 14.

¹⁵⁴ Grotevant, "Coming to Terms with Adoption," 9.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹⁵⁶ Baldassi, "Quest to Access Closed Adoption Files in Canada: Understanding Social Context and Legal Resistance to Change," 239.

¹⁵⁷ Fictional accounts of discovery often portray the trauma of conflicted identity, made worse with late discovery. Clearly Sara in *Tell Me My Name*, for example, struggles with her identity and her relationship with her adoptive parents: "They said it's the people who love me and raised me as their own who are my real parents. But how could they love me if I was just somebody who got born by mistake, some bastard made by two people who didn't love each other?" (Carter, *Tell Me My Name*, 108). Similarly, in Sandra McPherson's poem "Studies In the Imaginary" there are suggestions of a struggle of identity, of longing for a past she does not know, and of a dualism in phrases like "like living on the road/ that goes to someone else's house," "being among strangers," "being among the imaginary" and "me suggesting you as one dove/suggesting/ another in another town" (McPherson, *The Year of Our Birth*).

Artist Joanna Fisher acknowledges she tried to commit suicide at a young age as a result of her inner turmoil over her adoptive identity. She returns over and over to the phrase "own child," (Fisher, "Fighting for Nothing") internalizing the idea that being adopted is second best. It appears she is haunted by Max Frisk's hereditary ghosts. Correspondingly in the YA novel *Requiem for a Princess*, when young Willow is left to recover from the actual physical shock of discovering she is adopted, her caregiver remarks, "I can see it must have been a blow...a blow more to your pride perhaps than anything?" yet Willow insists, "It throws a different light on everything" (88). She toils to learn "to accept the fact of [her] adoption, till [she] could make [herself] face up to the situation and begin to build [her] life on firm ground again" (50).

¹⁵⁸ Gilmore, *The Mothers*, 32.

¹⁵⁹ Parr, *It's Okay to Be Different*.

¹⁶⁰ Arthur, *Requiem for a Princess*, 179.

¹⁶¹ Partridge, Penny Callan.

¹⁶² Soto, "Genealogy Revised in Secrets and Lies," 194.

¹⁶³ Bakan, "Some Reflections About Narrative Research and Hurt and Harm," 53.

¹⁶⁴ Flax, *Some M(other) Stories*.

¹⁶⁵ Verrier, *The Primal Wound*, 12.

¹⁶⁶ Douglas and Philpot, *Adoption: Changing Families, Changing Times*, 66.

¹⁶⁷ Davis, "Illegitimacy and the Social Structure," 215.

¹⁶⁸ E. James Lieberman, "Adoption and Identity," 1-2.

¹⁶⁹ McDade, *International Adoption in Canada*, 91.B.1:15.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ In Nova Scotia, for example, a child who speaks Mi'kmaq must be placed with parents who speak the language, and who will support cultural activities suitable to the development of the child in understanding their heritage.

¹⁷² Raymond and Dywasuk, *Adoption and After*, 4.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 221.

¹⁷⁴ Isaac, *Adopting a Child Today*, 223.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., xvi.

¹⁷⁶ Ferguson, Evelyn B. and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, "The Real Cabbage Patch Kids: An Examination of the Canadian Private Adoption System," 3.

¹⁷⁷ Winnicott, "Pitfalls in Adoption 1954," 129.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 128.

¹⁷⁹ Isaac, *Adopting a Child Today*, 116.

¹⁸⁰ Raymond and Dywasuk, *Adoption and After*, 49.

¹⁸¹ In 1992, the *Globe and Mail* ran an in-depth series on the increases of private adoptions over public ones in Ontario. At the time of the series Quebec and Newfoundland banned private adoption, the rest of the provinces had little or no controls, with Ontario being the only province to require licensing. University of Guelph professors Kerry Daly and Michael Sobol, who were also undertaking the first national study of adoption since 1987 for Health and Welfare Canada, noted the shift from approximately 80% of children being adopted through agencies in the early 1980's to merely 41% in 1990. They found private agencies "often have access to physicians who let them know about prospective adoptable children...and can trim waiting periods by four years" (versus now typical six), or, depending on circumstance, the private adoption might have only taken several months (McColm, *Adoption Reunions* 55).

The then Adoption Council of Ontario founder was 'horrified' to learn of the practice, and worried about the degree to which babies were changing hands for 'donations or fees.' The Guelph professors also found similar concerns expressed in their survey, as private institutions, whose income depends on completing adoptions, may put more pressure on vulnerable birthmothers. Lack of, or flawed home studies were also cited as a concern, as was the lack of training in counselling services in private agencies, something agency workers themselves recognized, urging higher standards upon themselves. Additionally, realizations were made that private agencies who close, will then also seal off records that will then be inaccessible to adoptees and birthparents alike.

¹⁸² Isaac, *Adopting a Child Today*.

¹⁸³ According to Philip Hepworth's later inquiry in 1960's and 1970's, 43% of American adoptions were arranged privately whereas the Canadian proportion was smaller, at about 10% in Quebec and Ontario.

¹⁸⁴ Goodacre, *Adoption Policy and Practice*, 122.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 122.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 124.

¹⁸⁷ Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor, *The Adoption Triangle*, 34.

¹⁸⁸ Ferguson, Evelyn B. and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, *The Real Cabbage Patch Kids*, 3.

¹⁸⁹ Ferguson, Evelyn B. and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, *The Real Cabbage Patch Kids*, 12.

¹⁹⁰ Solinger, *Wake up Little Susie*, 170.

¹⁹¹ McColm, *Adoption Reunions*, 55.

¹⁹² Solinger, *Wake up Little Susie*, 177.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁹⁴ Single parents and lesbian/gay parents have the same rights as heterosexual couples by law in Canada, although many countries and jurisdictions do not permit international adoption by gay/lesbian parents, thus limiting options for certain societal population segments.

¹⁹⁵ All three main forms of adoption entail the same basic principles, and there are similar processes in place across the country. After contacting the qualified practitioner or licensed agency, a SAFE home study is undertaken, evaluating capability as potential parents relative to the needs of the perspective child, and including medical, police and child welfare checks, and details of financial circumstances, experience with children, and motivation for adoption. Character references and a home safety check are also required. This involves a waiting period, but according to Marlene Webber in *As If Kids Mattered* (1998) you could jump the queue and ‘purchase’ a home study from private agencies for \$2000 - \$5000 (26). All prospective adoptive parents in Ontario now are also required to complete a twenty-seven hour PRIDE curriculum (Parents Resources for Information and Development and Education) that includes aspects of child psychology involving attachment and loss, understanding the importance of connections to the child’s birth family, and cultural/racial awareness.

¹⁹⁶ The federal government in Canada offers a tax credit in the year the adoption is finalized, for adoption-related costs for a child less than eighteen years. The National Bank of Canada offers a variable rate personal loan and a reduced rate line of credit in some cases, and some provinces also offer tax credits to help with the substantial financial burden.

¹⁹⁷ Ferguson, Evelyn B. and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, *The Real Cabbage Patch Kids*, 12.

¹⁹⁸ In Manitoba only forty-eight hours after birth is required; in PEI the consent is signed after a child is fourteen days old.

¹⁹⁹ In PEI fourteen days is the cut off for revoking of consent.

²⁰⁰ In B.C. one notable inclusion is that a social worker will meet with a child between the ages of seven and twelve to discuss their feelings about adoption. Any child over twelve years of age must consent to the adoption and any name change.

²⁰¹ Smith and Logan, *After Adoption*, Opening.

²⁰² McColm, *Adoption Reunions*, 24.

²⁰³ Webber, *As If Kids Mattered*, 17.

²⁰⁴ Solinger, *Wake up Little Susie*, xiii.

²⁰⁵ Raymond and Dywasuk, *Adoption and After*, 5.

²⁰⁶ Isaac, *Adopting a Child Today*, xvi.

²⁰⁷ Smith and Logan, *After Adoption*, 218.

²⁰⁸ Goodacre, *Adoption Policy and Practice*, 30.

²⁰⁹ Adoption is rare in Islamic communities, at least officially, likely because there is a Koranic injunction against it, and the prophet Mohammed forbade the institution (Griffith, *The Right to Know Who You Are* 9-1). A child is viewed as illegitimate not only in cases of out of wedlock pregnancy, but in those where married parents admit to pre-marital sex. Ultra conservative Muslims viewed unwed mothers as nothing different than prostitutes, even if the pregnancy was the result of rape, leading to infanticide and honour killings; thus it is not difficult to see that even religious moderates might not wish to assist a woman in such circumstances or provide institutionalized care. Hebrews in Biblical times also did not practice formal adoption due to their strong belief in ancestral blood ties, where continuation of a family relied on having

children of the bloodline, as per the Talmudic instruction in Genesis 1:22 “be fruitful and multiply.” There are examples of informal adoption, such as the rescue and rearing of Moses by the Pharaoh’s daughter or Mordechai’s foster fathering of orphan Esther: “these, however, were not legal adoptions, because the institution was unrecognized by halakhah [Jewish law]. In fact, there was no word for ‘adoption’ in biblical Hebrew” (Roseberg, *Adoption and The Jewish Family* 2).

Certainly this does not imply that Jewish women did not have illegitimate children, but sources and statistics conflict. Shirley Sagin, a former director of adoption for Jewish Family and Child Services in Philadelphia comments that most children prior to Roe versus Wade who were placed for adoption by Jewish agencies with Jewish families were born Jewish (Ibid 3). A 1996 Canadian article, however, points to the rarity of agency involvement, stating “Toronto’s JF&CS places just eight children a year, three-quarters of whom are Jewish,” (Ibid 2-3), suggesting a low rate of adoption. Yet with Jewish couples often marrying later, thus having increased chances of infertility, combined with the pre-eminence of family in Jewish culture, some claim adoption rates are actually higher in the Jewish community (Bleich, *Attitudes of Jewish Clergy Towards Adoption Issues* 16).

While on one hand there are passages of the Talmud which assert that it is the people who raise a child, and teach them Torah who are the true parents, nonetheless in Jewish law the child never loses his/her personal history, and must be proven to have been born Jewish or undergo a conversion ceremony in order to be considered Jewish. This injunction, particularly in Orthodox circumstances, can prove prohibitive to adoptees who must try to find ‘evidence’ of their Judaism, or of the marital status of their birthmother or birthparents.

²¹⁰ UNITED CHURCH MATERNITY FACILITIES: *Review of Historical Adoption Policies and Practices*, 33.

²¹¹ Such practices were portrayed in the story of Philomena Lee. Repeatedly however, in her book and film, she defends the Catholic Church and the nuns who ran its affiliated maternity home, who placed her baby boy precipitously and secretly, and kept her from the knowledge of his whereabouts thereafter. She invokes her own responsibility, saying, “I was not coerced: I signed of my own free will because I believed I had committed a terrible sin” (Frears, *Philomena*). When it is revealed that the nuns repeatedly lied to both her and her son, she yet pronounces her forgiveness. One wonders how internalized her sense of culpability is, how socially and religiously indoctrinated she might have been, yet also if forgiveness is her only remaining method of survival.

²¹² Carlson, “Coerced Adoption: Salvation Army Launches Review of Maternity Homes That Housed Unwed Mothers.”

²¹³ UNITED CHURCH MATERNITY FACILITIES: *Review of Historical Adoption Policies and Practices*, 5.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 8.

²¹⁸ Elyse Gasco, “A Well Imagined Life,” 3.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 20.

²²⁰ There were certainly operations that crossed ethical lines in very clear ways. One such infamous Canadian home was the Ideal Maternity Home in Chester, Nova Scotia. Run privately

by Lila and William Young in the 1930's, these unscrupulous maternity home owners overcharged young women for their keep, who then had to work to pay off their debt; a home that operated in unsanitary and increasingly corrupt conditions, and sold babies to childless couples, especially to Jewish couples from New York when adopting across religious lines was illegal. The owners starved to death or allowed to languish amidst sickness any infant who didn't meet marketable criteria: no illness, no imperfections, no dark skin.

Bette Cahill, a local investigative reporter, began looking into the home years later: "when former employees began revealing knowledge of starvation practices and a former handyman admitted he buried many of the babies who died there, the media hype was unstoppable. When the scandal broke open, those who had been tricked and manipulated by the Youngs hoped to find out the truth of their origins, or the babies they left behind: unfortunately entitlement to information does not always lead to truth" (Cahill, *Butterbox Babies* 220). The home was eventually shut down and the site languished, until a local entered it and "found papers and files strewn everywhere. He thought the papers were personal, probably adoption records none should see, so he lit a fire and burned them – on that day most of the records from the Young's adoption business were lost forever" (Cahill, *Butterbox Babies* 173) and a generation of mothers and babies have no connection to their past, or each other.

²²¹ Slingerland, *Child-Placing in Families*, 1.

²²² Balcom, *The Traffic in Babies*, 29.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 31.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

²²⁶ Herman in *Ibid.*, 33.

²²⁷ Solinger, *Wake up Little Susie*, 157.

²²⁸ Roberts, *The Unwed Mother*, 167.

²²⁹ Balcom, *The Traffic in Babies*, 16.

²³⁰ McColm, *Adoption Reunions*, 62.

²³¹ Winnicott, "Two Adopted Children 1953," 115.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor, *The Adoption Triangle*, 36.

²³⁴ In Mia Pringle's *Adoption Facts and Fallacies* she notes that in the early 1960's "no study has seriously attempted to evaluate the resources and the success of placement agencies but there is suggestion of limited resources" (15). She cited a 1964 British study of nineteen agencies, who found one third had no social worker on staff, and a 1963 study of Mexican children referred to a paediatric department with the belief that in approximately half their cases there was inadequate placement and supervision. Mia Pringle advocated that the "next stage in adoption practice might lie in giving more intensive and more long-term casework support to those adopting parents who wish to have it before and after placement. It might also be worth considering whether social work support should be widened to include rejected applicants and the natural parents who have given up their child" (*Ibid* 29).

²³⁵ Goodacre, *Adoption Policy and Practice*, 38.

²³⁶ Solinger, *Wake up Little Susie*, 28.

²³⁷ Criticism of the process of relinquishment, and who wields the ultimate power in such circumstances has been more vocal in recent years, as the needs of one party are juggled against the 'best interests' of another. Inefficiencies, overloaded caseworkers, lack of support,

unnecessary delays, the need for better training or more critical self judgement of social workers' own biases and shortcomings have all been cited as problematic. *An Adopter's Advocate* in 1984 examined troubles in the system and brought up the topic of caseworker burnout, as part of the problem.

Jeffrey Haugaard found in 1991 that social workers focussed on making sure the relinquishment was voluntary and done with informed consent (Haugaard, "Birth Mothers Who Voluntarily Relinquish" 90) yet practitioners in 1995 admitted that the supposed freedom of choice of unwed mothers was undermined by the prevailing assumption in the institution as practised that adoption was always the best choice (Harnack, *Adoption: Opposing Viewpoints*, 254). There was also reflection on the lack of support services and intervention following a placement. "In the past we believed (as agencies) our work was done when an adoption was legally consummated. Further involvement would interfere with an adoptive families' effective integration... We believed adoption was a perfect solution... and myths that infertile couples had a right to experience parenting and that adoption agencies existed to accommodate them... [and] participants should know as little about each other as possible" (271). Historians such as Canadian Veronica Strong-Boag also remind us that social workers often lacked the resources they needed to provide the necessary support for the families and women they were managing (Balcom, *The Traffic in Babies* 12).

A study done by Valerie Andrews, Executive Director of Origins Canada, drawing from StatsCan records "on illegitimate births from 1945 to 1973 and the rough rate of adoption among unmarried women at the time, offers what seems to be an astronomical estimate: that 350,000 unmarried Canadian mothers were persuaded, coerced or forced into adoption" (Andrews in Carlson, *The Globe and Mail*, "Curtain Lifts on Decades of Forced Adoption"). Her estimate is refuted by others, who claim the girls were well treated, and homes effectively and efficiently run.

Condemnation of social workers is not universal. In response to an article on pending adoption disclosure laws by Richard Wright in 2009, many wrote in support of the care they received from social workers, whom they thought did their best to try to help. "I'm grateful to the Regional Supervisor of the Adoption & Child Care Services in New Brunswick who took the time to relate as many details as she was legally allowed to in the 70's" (*The Globe and Mail*, "Adoption: Other Sides, Other Stories") wrote one woman. Another reader praised a social worker "who did what she could in secret so she wouldn't lose her job" (Ibid).

²³⁸ Bernstein in Roberts, *The Unwed Mother*, 106.

²³⁹ Ibid., 113.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 115.

²⁴¹ Solinger, *Wake up Little Susie*, 38.

²⁴² Ibid., 17.

²⁴³ Rickie Solinger also notes that the converse opinion of unmarried black women was true: rather than being producers of valuable 'goods,' the populace at large believed them to be an economic burden, since these babies were either kept by the mother in greater numbers than white babies, or, if relinquished, had much less likelihood of being adopted, and thus having to be placed in care, at a cost to the state.

Dominant narratives also suggested that these communities had different cultural values, and a system of relations to support an unwed mother and her child. They propagated the idea that African-Americans and people of colour had a looser notion of family, community and

morality that rendered the unwed black mother supposedly less stigmatized. As the ‘product’ a black woman produced was unmarketable and undesirable in the adoption business, thus policy makers were relieved of moral responsibility for programs or interventions for these women and children, who would be supposedly provided for and accepted by their own. When social assistance began to be granted to unwed mothers, while white women were viewed as worthy recipients of help, black women became ‘welfare queens’ purportedly producing child after illegitimate child in order to scam the system.

²⁴⁴ Some former professionals recall their own practice within the context of the times, to their own chagrin. Sam Sussman, a former Children’s Aid worker in Winnipeg confessed, “I regret being part of the system. I bought into the philosophy of my peers and the people I looked up to.... I apologize” (Carlson, “These Women Didn’t Know their Options.”) Despite obtaining a Masters Degree of Social Work from the University of Manitoba in 1965, Mr. Sussman said he was unaware at the time of a woman’s right to revoke her consent for putting her child up for adoption if she changed her mind, nor of the option for putting her baby into temporary wardship if she wanted to buy time and find work or a place to live” (Ibid). Baldwin Reichwein, a social worker and former acting director of what was once the Alberta Public Welfare Department, questioned the validity of some adoption orders of the baby scoop era, which were signed as little as five days following birth. He cites a Royal Commission Report to the Alberta Dept. of Public Welfare in 1947 stating an unmarried woman’s punishment should be “immediate and grievous” and that “the state ought to do whatever it can to remove the damage of illegitimate birth from the child” (Ibid).

²⁴⁵ Hilliard, Dr. Marion (then chief of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Women's College Hospital), in Howarth "Mothers Not all Unhappy."

²⁴⁶ O'Reilly, *Rocking the Cradle*, 37.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Berebitsky, *Like Our Very Own*, 9.

²⁴⁹ Eastman, *Are You My Mother?*.

²⁵⁰ Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, 52.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 54–6.

²⁵² Karen Lynn, "Mothers Without Their Children".

²⁵³ Isaac, *Adopting a Child Today*, 44.

²⁵⁴ Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*, 5.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 33.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 40.

²⁵⁷ The difference race makes in the perception of, and assistance given to, unwed mothers, Rickie Solinger believes, also reveals “the race-specific public and private response to single pregnancy between 1945 and 1965 [which] has “profoundly influenced the race-rent politics of female fertility into our own time” (19) and she notes, “race had a special salience for these women...[it was] the most accurate predictor of an unmarried mother’s parents’ response to her pregnancy, of society’s reaction to her plight, of where and how she would spend the months of her pregnancy, and most important, what she would do with the fatherless child she bore” (18).

²⁵⁸ Gasco, “Mother: Not a True Story,” *Can You Wave Bye Bye, Baby?*, 196.

²⁵⁹ Latchford, “Reckless Abandon,” 75.

²⁶⁰ Bawden, *Familiar Passions*, 86.

²⁶¹ Grossman, John, “Definition of Ephemera.”

²⁶² O'Rourke, "The Unfolding: Anne Carson's *Nox*."

²⁶³ Rowe, Sam, "Fantasies of Contact."

²⁶⁴ Jones, *Birthmothers: Women Who Have Relinquished Babies for Adoption Tell Their Stories*.

²⁶⁵ Weir, *Coming out of the Adoptive Closet*, 154.

²⁶⁶ Schooler and Norris, *Journeys after Adoption*, 219.

²⁶⁷ Fessler, Ann, *A Girl Like Her*.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Carter, *Tell Me My Name*, 167.

²⁷¹ cummings, [i carry your heart with me(i carry it in]

²⁷² Simmonds, "Adoption Is about People."

²⁷³ Haugaard, Schustack, and Dorman, "Birth Mothers Who Voluntarily Relinquish Infants for Adoption," 90.

²⁷⁴ Brodzinsky in Haugaard, 90.

²⁷⁵ Carter, *Tell Me My Name*, 47.

²⁷⁶ Kay, *The Adoption Papers*.

²⁷⁷ Ellis, *Out of the Blue*, 39.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 116–7.

²⁷⁹ Conflicted birthmother experience is also part of Sarah Saffian's prose poem excerpt "Origin." The birthmother denies the reality of the foetus; thus it reacts physically and emotionally: "I bend my arms and legs until they are folded in half, to take up as little room as possible. I feel guilty, sensing Hannah's unease in the tightness of the womb, the coldness of the fluid, and knowing it is because of me."²⁷⁹ The final paragraph describes the detachment and relinquishment in tactile terms, using descriptors such as "antiseptic," "chilly," "raw," and "rough" to name her existence now, and notes how she is "motherless, nameless. Alone."

²⁸⁰ Bathmaker and Harnett, *Exploring Learning, Identity, and Power through Life History and Narrative Research*, 2.

²⁸¹ Alton, *The Passionate Eye: 40 Year Secret*.

²⁸² The memoir *Without a Map* relates similar experiences of parental control: "my father and mother had decided immediately that 'we' would give the baby up for adoption. I didn't fight; I understood with absolute clarity that I would have no one helping me" (xxii). Following a difficult birth, the mother advises, "This is a time to regroup...to get back on track...you need to forget these difficult months and make a new start" (xxiv). I surmise that variations of these same platitudes were repeated for my birthmother.

Relinquishment was also enforced through circumstances of societal inequity. We empathize with the birthmother, Cora, in *Brother and Sister* not only because we are allowed into her interior perspective, but because we recognize her as a victim, not only of the general birthmother story: "what they meant was that it was wicked to be poor and working class and fertile" (Trollope, *Brother and Sister* 240). The pejorative language of accusation comes to her as she further contemplates her relinquishment experience: "she remembered them all talking at her, social workers, the adoption people, her parents, using words like 'selfish,' 'immature,' and 'unfit mother.'" If she kept the baby, then she was 'deviant,' and 'destructive' to even consider keeping the child, and "if she wanted to repair the damage she had done to an innocent baby she should let it go" (172).

²⁸³ Harnack, *Adoption: Opposing Viewpoints*, 170.

²⁸⁴ Fessler, Ann, *A Girl Like Her*.

- 285 Lifton, *Lost and Found*, 218.
- 286 Fessler, Ann, *A Girl Like Her*.
- 287 Evans, *Missing Persons*, 59.
- 288 Gasco, "You Have a Baby," *Can You Wave Bye Bye, Baby?*, 26.
- 289 Ibid., 32.
- 290 McPherson and University, "Last Week of Winter," *Patron Happiness*.
- 291 Winnicott, "Adopted Children in Adolescence" 1955, 141.
- 292 Gish, "Adoption, Identity, Voice," 171.
- 293 Imaginary positionings are a feature of the young adult novel *Out of the Blue*. Just as the birthchild fantasizes about the unknown birthparent, so too, the birthmother fantasizes over the child, which becomes more complicated when her now adult daughter returns: "Over the years I created this make-believe person... anyway, when the real Natalie turned up, one of the thing that happened was that I had to say goodbye to the out of the blue child who disappeared. And I missed her. Silly, eh, missing someone who never existed?" (Ellis, 118-19).
- 294 Gasco, "Elements," 74.
- 295 Berebitsky, *Like Our Very Own*, 9.
- 296 Berebitsky, "Redefining Real Motherhood," 85.
- 297 Brakman and Scholz, "Adoption, ART, and a Re-Conception of the Maternal Body," 57.
- 298 Hollingsworth, "Who Seeks to Adopt a Child?," 4.
- 299 Berebitsky, "Redefining Real Motherhood," 86.
- 300 Carter, *Tell Me My Name*, 213.
- 301 Gilmore, *The Mothers*, 1-11.
- 302 Muller and Perry, "Adopted Persons' Search for and Contact with Their Birth Parents I," 29.
- 303 Gasco, "Mother: Not a True Story," 216.
- 304 Ibid., 224.
- 305 Cornell, "Adoption and Family Law," 208.
- 306 Gale, "Adoption," 290.
- 307 Ibid., 285.
- 308 Gilmore, *The Mothers*, 2-47.
- 309 Ibid., 7-7.
- 310 Rickards, *Collecting Printed Ephemera*, 14.
- 311 Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away*, 29.
- 312 Note the current furor over the revised Ontario Public Elementary Sex Ed. Curriculum.
- 313 Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away*, 37.
- 314 Ibid., 41.
- 315 Kay, *The Adoption Papers*.
- 316 Ibid.
- 317 Ibid.
- 318 Ibid.
- 319 Ibid.
- 320 Ibid.
- 321 *Female Rights in Ancient Egypt*.
- 322 Hampl, "The Dark Art of Description," 81.
- 323 Montford, "Revealing Untold Stories, 4."
- 324 Hultberg, "Decades of Silence."

- ³²⁵ Ibid.
- ³²⁶ Smith, "Reconceiving the Bad Girls," 13.
- ³²⁷ Wagar, Katarina, "In Search of Bad Mothers," 80.
- ³²⁸ Ibid., 84.
- ³²⁹ Cuthbert, Denise, Kate Murphy and Marian Quartley, "Adoption and Feminism," 412.
- ³³⁰ Carol Flax, "Artist's Statement."
- ³³¹ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 281.
- ³³² The earliest adoption law in North America, "The Massachusetts Adoption Act of 1851," is often cited as a benchmark, enacting in law a permanent and legal break between birthparent and birth child, with emphasis on confidentiality, but without restriction to triad members. In 1917, Minnesota revised its mandates, providing a confidentiality clause barring the public but still allowing access to 'parties in interest.' By the 1950's most states in the United States had enacted legislation sealing adoption records. The wish to keep the transaction confidential in the era before the prevalence of transnational, transracial adoption, where the secret of adoption was not desired nor possible to keep, adoptions subscribed to the policies of 'matching' to minimize difference between adoptive parents and children and reduce questions. However agency records and court documents were still available in various states to adult adoptees in the early 1960's and adoption agencies were still releasing information to enable a search for birthparents in the early 1970's (Carp, *Adoption: Blood, Kinship, Stigma*, 441).
- ³³³ It should be noted that 'confidential' did not always mean 'sealed;' many laws protected records from the prying eyes of the public, but were available to those parties directly involved upon request.
- ³³⁴ In fact, they were cautioned against being too specific in birth announcements in newspapers, if they were placed at all, lest this information provide a way for original relatives to find them and potentially take away the child.
- ³³⁵ Grotevant and McRoy, *Openness in Adoption*, 7, 13.
- ³³⁶ Carter, *Tell Me My Name*, 42.
- ³³⁷ Feast and Howe, "Adopted Adults Who Search for Background Information and Contact with Birth Relatives," 23.
- ³³⁸ Schooler and Norris, *Journeys after Adoption*, 8.
- ³³⁹ Lifton in Modell, *A Sealed and Secret Kinship*, 3:34.
- ³⁴⁰ Fessler, *Close to Home*.
- ³⁴¹ Carol Flax, "Artist's Statement."
- ³⁴² Winnicott, "Adopted Children in Adolescence 1955," 136.
- ³⁴³ Isaac, *Adopting a Child Today*, 154.
- ³⁴⁴ Sales, *Adoption, Family and the Paradox of Origins*, 77.
- ³⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁴⁶ Isaac, *Adopting a Child Today*, 187.
- ³⁴⁷ Novy, *Reading Adoption*, 3.
- ³⁴⁸ Sales, *Adoption, Family and the Paradox of Origins*, 192.
- ³⁴⁹ Kornitzer in Ibid., 78.
- ³⁵⁰ Isaac, *Adopting a Child Today*, 13.
- ³⁵¹ Berebitsky, *Like Our Very Own*, 87.
- ³⁵² Raymond and Dywasuk, *Adoption and After*, 59.
- ³⁵³ Wasson, *The Chosen Baby*, 8.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 20.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 38.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 46.

³⁵⁷ In *Here's a Penny* (1944) the chosen child myth is particularly strong, and it appears as if the parents go shopping for a child: "his mother and daddy decided that more than anything else in the world they wanted a little boy... 'A little red-haired boy...with freckles on his nose'" (Haywood 4). The adults go to a hospital to review their 'choices': "they looked at the babies, one by one"...because "[they] had to be sure" (4). Penny, the child, has absorbed the message of the importance of 'choosing' and emulates this behaviour by wanting a very specific kitten "black with a white nose and white paws" (8). His best friend Patsy advises him, "Well, you can't always get kittens just the way you want 'em... You have to take 'em the way they come" (8), perhaps an apologia for the parent's behaviour, but one is not entirely sure.

³⁵⁸ Lifton, *Lost and Found*, 21.

³⁵⁹ Doherty, *The Snake-Stone*, 5.

³⁶⁰ Verrier, *The Primal Wound*, 59–103.

³⁶¹ Rondell and Michaels, *The Adopted Family*, 27.

³⁶² Lifton, *Lost and Found*, 39.

³⁶³ Verrier, *The Primal Wound*., 80.

³⁶⁴ Gish, "Adoption, Identity, Voice," 173.

³⁶⁵ Kay, *The Adoption Papers*.

³⁶⁶ Isaac, *Adopting a Child Today*, 175.

³⁶⁷ Harnack, *Adoption: Opposing Viewpoints*, 254.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Rondell and Murray, *New Dimensions in Adoption*, 19.

³⁷⁰ Sales, *Adoption, Family and the Paradox of Origins*, 105.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 102.

³⁷² Ibid., 103.

³⁷³ Interestingly, the transfer of children from one circumstance to another was not thought to be problematic by psychologists in earlier eras. Consider a text on adoption written in 1955 (revised in 1974 but still containing the following pronouncement): "many many adopted babies have had to be removed first from the birth mother and then from the foster mother. Of course it is possible that an adopted baby may suffer some emotional setback from the separation from his birth mother, but this seems doubtful, and one would suppose recovery from it to be rather rapid" (Raymond and Dywasuk, *Adoption and After*, 111).

³⁷⁴ Sales, *Adoption, Family and the Paradox of Origins*, 82.

³⁷⁵ Haywood, *Here's a Penny*, 11.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 12.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 17.

³⁷⁸ Modell, *A Sealed and Secret Kinship*, 3:186.

³⁷⁹ Carter, *Tell Me My Name*, 232.

³⁸⁰ Kirk, *Adoptive Kinship*, 136.

³⁸¹ Government, *Bill 77, Adoption Disclosure Statute Law Amendment Act, 2001*.

³⁸² Wright, "After 40 Years, a Father Can Tug on the Ties That Bind."

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ "Adoption: Other Sides, Stories."

³⁸⁵ Wegar in Muller and Perry, "Adopted Persons' Search for and Contact with Their Birth Parents I."

³⁸⁶ McColm, *Adoption Reunions*, 247.

³⁸⁷ Ralph Garber, *Disclosure of Adoption Information*, 26.

³⁸⁸ Government, *Bill 77, Adoption Disclosure Statute Law Amendment Act, 2001*.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Churley in Brennan, *Labours of Love*.

³⁹¹ Cavoukian, *A Review of the Literature on Adoption-Related Research*.

³⁹² Wright, "After 40 Years, a Father Can Tug on the Ties That Bind."

³⁹³ Cavoukian, *A Review of the Literature on Adoption-Related Research*.

³⁹⁴ Current Canadian legislation surrounding disclosure of identifying and non-identifying information is provincial and piecemeal. Adoptee and birthparent access to information is not available without consent of both parties in Manitoba, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, PEI or Quebec; access to information is limited to adoptions finalized after April 1, 1997 in Saskatchewan, and November 1, 1998 in N.W.T.. British Columbia was the first province to allow full access to records in 1996 to birthparents and adopted adults, from both original and amended birth registries; Newfoundland was second in 2003; Alberta began allowing access to identifying information in 2004. There are passive registries in all provinces and territories. Government searches are available only for severe medical needs in Ontario, only on behalf of adopted adults in PEI, and not at all in Alberta. All provinces have varying rules for contact and disclosure vetoes.

³⁹⁵ Whitman, Walt, "A Noiseless Patient Spider," 208.

³⁹⁶ Kuhn, *Family Secrets*, 1-2.

³⁹⁷ Historian Wayne Carp credits 1960's 'identity politics' for the rise in adoptive rights activism, suggesting the formulation of the thrust of adoption reform ideology -- liberation and rights -- as coinciding with two seminal cultural events of the 1970's: the Watergate scandal and records tampering, and Alex Haley's personal narrative of search and identity *Roots* (Carp, *Adoption: Blood, Kinship, Stigma*, 442).

³⁹⁸ Fisher in Wegar, *Adoption, Identity and Kinship*, 84.

³⁹⁹ Lifton, *Twice Born*, 106-110.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 237.

⁴⁰¹ Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor, "The Reunion of Adoptees and Birth Relatives."

⁴⁰² Sorosky (1975), Brodzinsky (1998).

⁴⁰³ March (1995), Wegar (1997), Modell (1997).

⁴⁰⁴ Haugaard, Schustack, and Dorman, "Searching for Birth Parents by Adult Adoptees," 79.

⁴⁰⁵ Andersen, "The Nature of Adoptee Search," quoted in Muller 28.

⁴⁰⁶ Partridge, Penny Callan.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Campbell, Silverman, and Patti, "Reunions between Adoptees and Birthparents," 27.

⁴¹⁰ March, *The Stranger Who Bore Me*, 71.

⁴¹¹ Campbell, Silverman, and Patti, "Reunions between Adoptees and Birthparents," 42.

⁴¹² Feast and Howe (1997).

⁴¹³ March, *The Stranger Who Bore Me*, 13.

⁴¹⁴ Webber, *As If Kids Mattered*, 285.

⁴¹⁵ Adoption and Agencies, *Child Adoption, a Selection of Articles on Adoption Theory and Practice*.

⁴¹⁶ Muller and Perry, "Adopted Persons' Search for and Contact with Their Birth Parents I," 11.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 212, 218.

⁴¹⁸ Jane Nast (later American Adoption Congress president) and Carol Gustavson founded in 1980 New Jersey Adoptive Parents for Open Records. Joe Soll (later founder of Adoption Crossroads, an international umbrella group) and Jon Ryan created National Organization for Birthfathers and Adoption Reform (NOBAR), advocating for the protection and expansion of the rights of birthfathers. Kate Burke (AAC President 1988-94), self described "ex-Berkeley radical" (American Adoption Congress) and Ken Watson were notable members of the American Adoption Congress, an umbrella organization founded in 1978 (whose first president was Penny Callan Partridge), as a vehicle for "increasing public awareness, changing public policies, enacting legislation in all states that guarantees access to identifying information, and facilitating birth family reunification." The organization's leadership and activism has however, come into question, as the reform they promised has not come to light, and many groups within the organization are sometimes at odds over language and policy.

⁴¹⁹ Although its primary interests still lie there, and it has been criticised as 'anti-adoption,' the group has expanded its mandate and has also cooperated with other groups in the reform movement.

⁴²⁰ Sandra Musser from Florida, a birthmother, founder of several adoption organizations, and working to 'reunite birth families,' was the first person to go to prison for committing civil disobedience against adoption laws. She was found guilty of fraud in 1993 while trying to access confidential Social Security and medical records for her clients wishing to reunite. She was championed by some, but her actions were worrisome to other activists such as Kate Burke who feared this incident would lessen the credibility of adoption rights advocacy.

⁴²¹ "Bastard Nation: The Adoptee Rights Organization. Mission Statement and Goals."

⁴²² They have had some success, most notably when they challenged Oregon's 1957 sealed records law. Their approach was to lobby voters and in 1998 'Oregon Ballot Measure 58' received a majority vote in the election: subsequently thousands filed for their original birth certificates. This was delayed by a lawsuit raised by a group of birthmothers who challenged the constitutionality of revoking the original privacy agreement; however, the overturning prevailed, and as of 2000 Oregon's records have been open. The most recent win for open records advocates is the law signed by New Jersey governor Chris Christie in May 2014, after thirty years of lobbying by groups such as the AAC and the Coalition for Adoption Reform and Education. In it is a compromise position allowing birthparents to opt for non-contact, yet who are still encouraged to provide health information on an ongoing basis.

⁴²³ A small sample includes the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) founded in Montreal in 1974 by adoptive parents "committed to meeting the needs of waiting children and the families who adopt them," especially those children who are or have been in foster care, or those with special needs (North American Council on Adoptable Children). The Adoption Council of Canada, founded in 1989, is a national umbrella organization to facilitate the finding of permanent families for children in foster care, and to promote post adoption support (and who also position themselves as opposed to closed records). The Canadian Council of Natural Mothers, founded in 2000, "provides a united voice for mothers who have lost their children to adoption" (Canadian Council of Natural Mothers). Origins Canada, founded 2002, is

a branch of an international organization from Australia, dedicated to “helping those separated by adoption,” and their mission states they provide “support, education, assistance in reunion, redress, research and reform”: in their case reforms that “support the mother-child bond and the preservation of natural families” (Origins Canada ‘Mission’).

⁴²⁴ Local chapters in Montreal, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Kawartha, Cornwall, Brockville, Kinston, Quinte, Durham, Niagara, St Catharine’s, Markham – and the list goes on - are posted as closed.

⁴²⁵ Gonyo and Watson 1988, March 1995.

⁴²⁶ March, *The Stranger Who Bore Me*, 48.

⁴²⁷ Lowry, *Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye*, 13.

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁴³⁰ Barriers to search are also displayed in *Familiar Passions* when Bridie must ask permission of her father before searching, telling him, “I want to know who my parents were Dadda. You told me I was an orphan. I suppose that’s all you know. Would you mind if I tried to find out? It’s possible now. I can make an application to the Registrar General” (Bawden, 59). She also feels she must apologize to her father for her intentions. In *The Snake-stone* teenager James decides to try to trace his birthmother and creates tension when inquiring about his baby clothes asking, “Did [his] real mother knit them?” which causes his mother to “[clear] her throat slightly. ‘Please call her your birth mother,’ she corrected [him]. Because she gave birth to you. Or your natural mother. That’s what’s we call her” (Doherty, 10). In *Brother and Sister* the adoptive mother does not wish her daughter to search, feeling that this shows her failure as mother, and may harm the children: “It’s just such a risk, it just opens up so much that I thought was healed over” (Trollope 110).

⁴³¹ Bawden, *Familiar Passions*, 77.

⁴³² Doherty, *The Snake-Stone*, 74.

⁴³³ Cavoukian, *A Review of the Literature on Adoption-Related Research*.

⁴³⁴ Lowry, *Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye*, 16,15.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁴³⁶ Weir, *Coming out of the Adoptive Closet*, 170.

⁴³⁷ Muller and Perry, “Adopted Persons’ Search for and Contact with Their Birth Parents I,” 13.

⁴³⁸ Waggenspack, “The Symbolic Crises of Adoption,” 77.

⁴³⁹ Feigelman and Silverman, *Chosen Children*, 224.

⁴⁴⁰ Waggenspack, “The Symbolic Crises of Adoption,” 78.

⁴⁴¹ Elyse Gasco, “The Third Person,” 79–80.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 96.

⁴⁴³ Bawden, *Familiar Passions*, 109.

⁴⁴⁴ Marcus, *Adopted?: A Canadian Guide for Adopted Adults in Search of Their Origins*, 108.

⁴⁴⁵ March, *The Stranger Who Bore Me*, 85.

⁴⁴⁶ Elyse Gasco, “A Well Imagined Life,” 15.

⁴⁴⁷ McColm, *Adoption Reunions*, 135.

⁴⁴⁸ March, *The Stranger Who Bore Me*, 6.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁵⁰ Schooler and Norris, *Journeys after Adoption*, 81.

⁴⁵¹ Sachdev in March, *The Stranger Who Bore Me*.

- ⁴⁵² McPherson and University, "Earthstars, Birthparents' House," *Patron Happiness*.
⁴⁵³ "Wings and Seeds," Ibid.
⁴⁵⁴ "Wings and Seeds," Ibid.
⁴⁵⁵ Bawden, *Familiar Passions*, 119.
⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 129.
⁴⁵⁷ Campbell, Silverman, and Patti, "Reunions between Adoptees and Birthparents," 8.
⁴⁵⁸ Bawden, *Familiar Passions*, 131.
⁴⁵⁹ A similar disorienting birthmother and child meeting occurs for Natalie in *Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye*. There is no sense of sentiment or connection between mother and child, nor a sense that a relationship could ever be brokered. In an interesting and telling choice, the author does not even write a goodbye scene: the birthmother simply disappears once more, from the story and from Natalie's life. When her adoptive mother asks, "You mean you really found your mother Natalie?" she replies, "That wasn't what I said. I said I found the woman who gave birth to me. You're my mother" (Lowry, 549).
⁴⁶⁰ Kay, *The Adoption Papers*.
⁴⁶¹ Weir, *Coming out of the Adoptive Closet*, 153.
⁴⁶² Ibid., 79.
⁴⁶³ McColm, *Adoption Reunions*, 200.
⁴⁶⁴ Muller, Gibbs, and Ariely, "Adults Who Were Adopted Contacting Their Birthmothers," 9.
⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 164.
⁴⁶⁶ Jones, *Birthmothers: Women Who Have Relinquished Babies for Adoption Tell Their Stories*, 211.
⁴⁶⁷ Dupre, Louise, *Just Like Her (Tout Comme Elle)*, 19.
⁴⁶⁸ Marcus, *Adopted?: A Canadian Guide for Adopted Adults in Search of Their Origins*, 108.
⁴⁶⁹ Dupre, Louise, *Just Like Her (Tout Comme Elle)*, 21.
⁴⁷⁰ March, *The Stranger Who Bore Me*, 90.
⁴⁷¹ Muller and Perry, "Adopted Persons' Search for and Contact with Their Birth Parents II," 44.
⁴⁷² Schooler and Norris, *Journeys after Adoption*, 181.
⁴⁷³ Dupre, Louise, *Just Like Her (Tout Comme Elle)*, 22.
⁴⁷⁴ Leggo, "Writing Lives Is More Than Writing Lines."
⁴⁷⁵ Grotevant and McRoy, *Openness in Adoption*, 196.
⁴⁷⁶ Kirk, *Adoptive Kinship*, 158.
⁴⁷⁷ Hoffman-Riem, *The Adopted Child*, 252.
⁴⁷⁸ Harnack, *Adoption: Opposing Viewpoints*, 56.
⁴⁷⁹ Javier, *Handbook of Adoption*, xiv.
⁴⁸⁰ Mick, *Adoption: Desperately Seeking Baby*.
⁴⁸¹ Gilmore, *The Mothers*, 12–25.
⁴⁸² Gross, Terry, "Fictional 'Mothers' Reveal Facts of a Painful Adoption Process."
⁴⁸³ Freundlich, Madelyn, Gerstenzang, S. & Holtan, M., "Websites Featuring Children Waiting for Adoption," 6.
⁴⁸⁴ Kerry Herlihy, "Dear Birth Mother, Please Hit 'Reply.'"
⁴⁸⁵ "Elizabeth Boys, Adopted as a Baby, Uses Facebook to Find Birth Family in Just 36 Hours."
⁴⁸⁶ Carter, *Tell Me My Name*, 183.
⁴⁸⁷ Javier, *Handbook of Adoption*, xiv.
⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

- ⁴⁸⁹ Novy, *Reading Adoption*, 7.
- ⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 28.
- ⁴⁹² Jones, *Birthmothers: Women Who Have Relinquished Babies for Adoption Tell Their Stories*, 256.
- ⁴⁹³ “Elizabeth Boys, Adopted as a Baby, Uses Facebook to Find Birth Family in Just 36 Hours.”
- ⁴⁹⁴ Novy, *Reading Adoption*, 13.
- ⁴⁹⁵ Sales, *Adoption, Family and the Paradox of Origins*, 246.
- ⁴⁹⁶ Carlson, “The Fathers Had No Say: Men Tell Another Side of Coerced Adoption Story.”
- ⁴⁹⁷ Carlson, ““These Women Didn’t Know Their Options: Ontario Urged to Consider Inquiry into Coerced Adoptions.”
- ⁴⁹⁸ Carlson, “B.C. Government Hit with Class-Action Lawsuit over Coerced Adoption Claims.”
- ⁴⁹⁹ Javier, *Handbook of Adoption*, xiv.
- ⁵⁰⁰ Berebitsky, *Like Our Very Own*, 86.
- ⁵⁰¹ The Adoption Museum project estimates 60% of the North American population is somehow touched by adoption.
- ⁵⁰² *Our Place at the Table: Honoring Birthmother Stories*.
- ⁵⁰³ *Adoption Museum Project Vision*.
- ⁵⁰⁴ Novy, *Reading Adoption*, 3.
- ⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 29.
- ⁵⁰⁷ Novy, *Reading Adoption*, 28.
- ⁵⁰⁸ Slegelis, “A Study of Jung’s Mandala and Its Relationship to Art Psychotherapy,” 304.
- ⁵⁰⁹ Franz, “The Process of Individuation,” 225.
- ⁵¹⁰ Caruth, Cathy, “Introduction,” 4.
- ⁵¹¹ Marder, Elissa, “Some ‘Enabling Questions,’” 2.
- ⁵¹² Pullman, *Lyra’s Oxford*, Preface.

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Appendix A: Representations of Adoption

An overview of source material under consideration for examinations of representation of adoption, both in this paper, and for further study, in fiction (children's, young adult, and adult), poetry, fine art and film.

Literature

*She has never asked, never asked, never asked. No fantasy had ever been so obvious, and yet she persisted in the fantasy rather than risk an unpalatable truth...*⁵¹²

Since it is impossible to review all literary offerings, I came to settle on several methods to select my sources. First, I wondered what was available in the education library at York University for children and those who work with them. I presumed I would find in their central holdings a cross sampling of materials teachers might provide for students in their classrooms, believing an academic institution might have culled the possibilities into selections of some literary merit. Second, I sourced many items from recommended lists of reading from adoption support groups such as Parent Finders, ComeUnity and Origins Canada, locally and nationally, who target an admittedly receptive clientele. Since these groups would have had experience in the subject matter themselves, and would likely have been in some kind of counselling or advisory position, they might have the most up to date and relevant sources.

In adult fiction, the most contemporary piece read was *The Mothers* (2013) written from the perspective of a prospective adoptive mother. It tries to answer the question 'what is a mother?' in taking into account both adoptive and birthmother narratives, but really centres on a review of the difficult processes by which adoptive parents try to adopt a child today; it is also the 'birth story' of the adopted child. The protagonist, nearing her forties, has endured failed IVF

treatments, and has been dissuaded by the restrictions on international adoption, and thus turns to open adoption. The book blurs the line between fiction and memoir, as the characters are based on author Jennifer Gilmore's own experiences, and contains actual sections of personal essays originally written for the *New York Times* and *Vogue*, which reviewer Molly Ringwald reads as an 'obsessive' need for the writer to "decipher her experience."⁵¹²

The memoir *Without a Map* written in 2007, not fiction but part of the prevalent 'confessional' series of approaches to speaking about adoption, was highly touted on one of the adoption support websites. The book is more realistically, however, a whole life memoir of a woman who became pregnant out of wedlock in the 1960's that happens to contain adoption issues that figure heavily in the opening section and then are abandoned until near the end, re-emerging not really as a culmination of the life story but as an addendum.

Brother and Sister, written in 2000, centres on a brother and sister, both adopted, who start a search for their respective birthmothers: the quest tears apart their families and work lives to varying degrees. It is an account that also includes the feelings of the adoptive mother who fears being replaced in the quest for reunion, one of the more common fears of adoptees who wish to search but do not wish to jeopardize the relationship with the adoptive parents. The writing is honest in portrayal of emotional complexity yet the device of having a character writing a psychological treatise on "identity, personal identity, where we come from, how we define ourselves"⁵¹² wears thin, and the whole book becomes a kind of transparent thesis cramming in as many theories on adoption and search issues as possible.

Perhaps the best work encountered for adults specifically on adoption is a collection of short stories written in 1999, *Can You Wave Bye Bye Baby*. The stories focus on motherhood and adoption but without sentiment or preaching. They explore the complexity and unresolved

feelings about many forms of parental relationships. One looks at the experience of a teen in a home for unwed mothers; another plays with the romanticized language surrounding and defining mothering – “Your friends tell you that there is no greater gift than the gift of life...thinking about this gift, you wonder if a card wouldn’t be just as nice, or maybe cash.”⁵¹² Some of the stories turn the accepted wisdom and discourse of adoption on its head unflinchingly. The stories feature the experience of birthmothers primarily, are dark, painful and written in a mostly stream of consciousness fashion. In these cases adoption is not the pretty solution or social salvation of much academic literature.

Familiar Passions (1979) proved to be essentially a bodice ripper, and explores the ‘family secrets’ trope, as does the subsequent novel examined, *The Glass Mountain*, written by a graduate student thirty years ago in 1985, just after I would have graduated university and just prior to my active search. Thus it would have been contemporary fiction for me when I was beginning my thoughts about my own origins. The two popular revelation methods in fiction, and to some degree reality, is the adoptee finding documents — their original birth certificate, adoption papers, legal documents or letter from birthparent – or the deliberate or accidental oral revelation of relatives, friends or professionals of the adoption, never before discussed. The novel replays this ‘hidden family secret’ trope, with everyone in on the deception except the adoptee, who is the last to know, and who finds out accidentally.

Sharon Sparling published this Master’s thesis subsequently as her first novel, which then perhaps can explain the lack of maturity in her writing, and which *The Ottawa Citizen* called “an adult fairy tale” and dismissed it with “some readers who grew up on fairy tales, Anne of Green Gables, Harlequin romances, sexual escapism for women, and feminist fiction may enjoy such a wallow.”⁵¹² Despite the misogynist overtones in this statement, I have to agree that the book is

closer to pulp romance than literature. The book is strangely summarized in an interview by the novelist's mentor as "a book about a runaway girl," with no reference to the fact that the reason the girl ran away was because she discovered her adoption papers. Sharon Sparling's thesis abstract reports that "Chloe's primary struggle is with her lack of identity. Adopted and an only child, she had a sterile relationship with her parents. As a woman, she cannot sustain emotional commitments, and she cannot even love her own son unreservedly."⁵¹² Thus it appears she wishes to have adoption as the catalyst for the protagonist's emotional stunting, isolation, insecurity and sexual dysfunction: melodramatic to be sure, but at least with the observation that perhaps adoption is of some relevance to a child's emotional development and an adult's perception of self.

Published slightly earlier, in 1975, is Mary Carter's *Tell Me My Name*, a much more satisfactory literary work dealing with the complexities of secrets and lies, the desire for a sense of wholeness, and the conscious and unconscious attitudes surrounding pregnancy out of wedlock, social mores, and adoption. It is one that contained many points of similarity, in either event or feeling, to the conflicts I have experienced. The title alludes to a central question of identity, when adoptees desire the knowledge of an origin to which they were never privilege.

There is a large gap in the literary findings prior to this period that were accessible; not much is listed earlier than the 1970's in the York catalogue, MLA International Bibliography, or the Library of Congress. Some that are, are out of print. Thus for the period from the 1940's to 1960's I turned to women's magazines, media, and 'dime' romance novels as popular confessional and propaganda that might have permeated the daily life of both of my mothers. The earliest work for adults was found in a collection of short stories from 1909 written by Zona Gale, a woman who herself later adopted two children as a single mother, called simply

“Adoption.” Her story addresses the hierarchical perceptions of natural children versus adopted ones, biological versus adoptive mother, and of the strength of the bond between these different types of mothers and their children, no doubt quite radical for its time.

Someone to Love, in the category of Young Adult fiction (YA), written by Frances Lantz in 1997, deals with issues surrounding open adoption. The book’s protagonist is an only child: that the crisis that sets the story in motion is that an adoption is about to take place does not seem to feature at all. Is that positive in that adoption is seen as a non-issue, or problematic, if a subject either not worthy, or taboo to discuss?

The Snake-stone, of the same decade, 1995, is a search story written from two perspectives: the naive, inner consciousness of the birthmother, and the perspective of her son, who wonders, “Did my mother want me?”⁵¹² a key question for most adoptees. Bertie Doherty might have drawn on her training as a social worker and teacher to create *The Snake-stone*, but there is no indication of whether she had any more experience with adoption than with Aids, runaways, child trafficking, or any other ‘issue’ novels she produced. *Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye* (1978) by Lois Lowry is another search and reunion story, while *Requiem for a Princess* (1967) by Ruth M. Arthur, has the revelation story at its heart, one so devastating to the heroine that her health fails and she must recuperate for a term away from school as she comes to terms with her new conception of self.

Out of the Blue (1994) is for a slightly younger audience, recounting the effects relinquishment and subsequent reunion can have on family. Sarah Ellis does not have direct adoption experience; instead her work is one of imaginative speculation: “I was listening to the radio one day and there was a programme on adoption. They talked to kids who had been

adopted, parents who had adopted children, and mothers who had given up babies for adoption. It was fascinating but nobody mentioned brother and sisters. I got to wondering...”⁵¹²

The children’s book market seems a bit more prolific in its delivery of adoption materials, particularly in its contemporary production. Different issues and subject matter appear to be at the forefront of this body of work than that of adult or YA narratives. Many are variations of self-esteem books, encouraging children to embrace their differences, whether of race, culture, physical characteristics, or the fact they were adopted. Some children’s books seem only a step away from self-published personal tributes, written by adoptive parents who wish to share their ‘joyous moment’ of family building, and to keep a record for the adoptive child that marks this occasion. These works seem almost akin to a vicarious birth, perhaps adoptive mothers suffering the pangs of publishing rather than those of childbirth. *Over the Moon: An Adoption Tale*, intended for very young children and written and illustrated by a woman who adopted a child internationally, in this instance from Central America, is one such affirming story. Fewer in number appear to be books that are able to maintain a kind of balanced approach, both in the presentation of ideas, and in their appeal or usefulness to both parent and child. One example is *How I was Adopted*, written in 1995. It creates the young protagonist Samantha, who talks directly to the unseen child reader, assumed to also be adopted, an ongoing question and answer dialogue on adoption issues for young children.

Most frequently appearing is the concern with international adoption, Asian in particular with the influence of China’s ‘one child’ policy, as well as other geographic locations from where, currently, babies are sought. These works acknowledge the difference the adopted child might feel, and often focus on embracing a dual cultural heritage, such as *Allison* (1997), which tries to over-ride the concept of needing to look like one’s parents genetically in order to feel

belonging. *An Mei's Strange and Wondrous Journey* (1998), is in some ways more honest, and certainly more comprehensive. It includes an ending appendix where the adoptive parent/author discusses some of the reasons parents might put children up for adoption, and the special circumstances in China that cause this, combining fiction and non-fiction in a resource for both parent and child. *Is That Your Sister?* was written in 1976 by a woman on the staff of the then New York Council on Adoptable Children, a citizen's group she and other adoptive parents organized. The photo journal of Sherry Bunin's family creation looks at her journey of adopting a black child into her white family. The book is ostensibly written from the point of view of this child, and chronicles her struggle to explain to others what adopted means.

Here's a Penny (1944) by Carolyn Haywood, a beginning chapter book for children, reflects the norms of the day with stay at home moms and the pressure to produce children in order to complete a prescribed life mission, and with little girls who can't play catch, wish to be housekeepers, and dress up kittens to pretend they are babies. In this case none of the worry or shame of infertility is present for the mother; the book opens with sole reference to the adoptee's previous incarnation: "before Penny [the adoptee] came to live with this daddy and mommy"⁵¹² - going on to explain how this new family is created in a special way.

The oldest children's book examined, *The Chosen Baby* (1939, revised 1950) was written by a female adoptive mother with the title of 'doctor;' it is explained in the forward that she told this story to her own adopted son when he was four years old, and that it was revised due to the changes over the least decade in "methods of child care."

Poetry

*Once would be enough,
just to listen to her voice*

*watch the way she moves her hands
when she talks.*⁵¹²

In her compilation “Poetic Reflections and Other Creative Processes from Adoptees” Alina Camacho-Gingerich brings together a short collection of pieces of varying quality and import: some merely emotive, but all invested with experience. There are several by Penny Callan Partridge, an adoptee growing up in the 1940’s, a speaker and author who has published her own book of poetry on adoption entitled *The People They Brought Me: Poems in the Adoption Community*, consisting of nineteen poems, most of which have accompanying explanations of the circumstances surrounding the creation of each poem, the people it is connected to, and the results or impact of writing the piece. Sarah Saffian, a journalist and writing teacher at NYU, wrote a book called *Ithika: A Daughter’s Memoir of Being Found* which chronicled her struggle to come to terms with being found by her birthmother unexpectedly, receiving a phone call which changed her world. Sandra McPherson, another poet who was adopted, wrote her collections *Radiation* and *Year of Our Birth* pre-reunion, and *Patron Happiness* post. Looking at her works reveals her changing knowledge of her origins, and her coming to terms with her feelings about meeting birthparents and a sister she did not know she possessed. Her poetry invokes her fascination with nature, the unknown, absence, the family, loss, and the imaginary, playing out in different forms pre and post reunion.

Jackie Kay, a Scottish poet born of a white mother and black father, wrote the novel length collection *The Adoption Papers*, an account drawing heavily on her biographical experience. It was written while she was pregnant with her own son, and beginning to think about wanting to meet her birthmother, but whom she never did. Jackie Kay takes on different voices, alluding to her own experience and also imagining what might have been those of

birthmother and adoptive mother, in the adoption of a mixed race black child by white Scottish parents in Glasgow of the early 1960's. The viewpoints of all triad members are intertwined; speakers shift identity through space, with each voice even distinguished typographically, and also through time, as the poem is divided into three parts spanning 1961 – 1990, covering birth, childhood and the search for birthmother. The voices blend and counterpoint, augmenting, interrupting or alluding to the voice of the speaker before. Positioned as Scottish person subject to British rule, an adopted person subject to the norms of the biological family, and a black minority figure growing up with white parents, Jackie Kay is able to comment on marginalization from many perspectives.

Visual Arts

*With no genetic history I had no preconceived notions of who I should be so I was free to invent and re-invent myself.*⁵¹²

There are some limited representations of adoption in art, old masters paintings of Biblical subjects such as Poussin's 1638 'Pharaoh's Daughter Finds Baby Moses' and later painting 'Baby Moses Saved From the River,' or 'Moses Found' by Rembrandt; these, however, focus on the event of being found, the reproduction of Biblical scripture, and the predictions of future greatness and glory, not the subject of adoption itself. Oedipus Rex is another famous adoptee, nonetheless extant images are of his interactions with the Sphinx, the plague, the sins committed with Jocasta, or his subsequent exile: it is not the fact of the adoption that is at the centre of his mythology or artistic representations. Further, one must somehow know that these subjects, real, mythic or literary, are adopted in the first place in order to search out their depictions.

Searching through Google Scholar or artistic research databases return only hits on keywords such as 'mothers and art,' or 'maternity in art'; 'adoption and art' returns articles on

assisted reproductive technologies. When this question is posed to the art research librarian at York, she also tries unsuccessfully to retrieve anything of value. She then puts it out to Art Societies of North America listserv, but only a few responses trickle in.

What is returned online if at all, are sites with posters for sale. Many have 'Wordle' art, words and phrases gushing 'blessed,' 'miracle,' or 'connected,' often dotted with hearts, rainbows or butterflies. Others rely on photographs, often sepia tinted, perhaps of small feet or hands, and biblical quotations. More disturbing is how quickly hits of 'adoption' images turn to the adoption of animals: the thirteenth hit of 133,000,000 results is of a puppy proclaiming, "adoption is fun." Further stretching of the term is also easily identified: the Duomo in Milan is asking patrons to help in its restoration by offering up its gargoyles for 'adoption.' People can 'adopt' a portion of a road or 'adopt' a cause, all with equal aplomb, co-opting and cheapening a term used to define the basics of a system of family building.

One site, apparently now defunct though representative of the type and quality, is through an illustrator named Stephanie Wise. She adopted a child from China, and could not find any art she considered appropriate, so she created digital print posters, available for sale, but arguably these are craft and commerce, not fine art or social statement.

Many children's books use anthropomorphized mixed animal families as visual text: "Rosie is a little dog who doesn't look like its parents; she is a beagle who was adopted by schnauzers," (*Rosie's Family: An Adoption Story*); or the story of a kitten adopted by geese (*Zachary's New Home*); or an abandoned bird who is adopted by a bear, and whose other children are also adopted: an alligator, a hippo, a pig (*A Mother for Choco*). Other books focus on family building, welcoming an adopted child into a new home or culture, explaining why a child looks different from their parents, or building a forum for questioning about origins at age-

appropriate times. There is again a range of approaches, quality and primacy: soft watercolour, wispy charcoal to bright primary colours, and cartoon to virtual photo-realism. While many of the pictures are quite beautiful and technically competent, they are clearly secondary to the textual message, true ‘illustrations’ and not meant or able to be separated from the storyline.

If we turn to cover art for themed journals and small press, and move into more adult fare, here we begin to see the quality and thoughtfulness of illustrative depictions begin to strengthen, for example, the image of a child on the cover of a collection of essays entitled *Somebody’s Child: Essays About Adoption* (2011).⁵¹² It is a rendering in crayon, a blurry, not ‘coloured within the lines’ child’s body walking away, browns, grays and greens muted against a bright yellow, non-specific background, with suggestions only of objects in the distance that may be trees or vegetation. The child is holding the hands of two adults, one on each side of her, and she is looking up at the unseen figures, who are only present through their undefined hands and arms. The feeling that this handclasp is one of safekeeping is enhanced by the child’s legs, which suggest she is either jumping or hopping, and she is relying on the support of the adults. This image for me began to depict some of the complexity of the adoptive family; the child appears secure but there are also many questions left, many things unseen or out of the picture, and this along with the indefinite swathes of colour and unfinished lines seem to add to this impression.

The journal *Adoption Constellation*, also defunct, has several interesting pieces of cover art, but they do not particularly address adoption unless one knows that they are associated with this magazine content: an image of a bridge, for example, or a maternal figure. A few other quality photographs on journal covers of adoptive families, particularly where the racial or colour difference between parent and child is clear, make up the majority of the rest of offerings;

yet this is more documentary, a declaration of inclusiveness, but perhaps not really artistic statement. What would be considered ‘Adoption Art’ then? This gap is one of my research foci.

One art series on adoption comes from Joanna Fisher, a graduate of the Philadelphia Institute of Art and professional freelance photographer who does the usual wedding and portrait trade but also specializes in children’s photography. Joana was herself adopted and finds the trauma of that knowledge very close to the forefront of her psyche.

Limited edition artist’s books provide some even greater consideration of the topic, although they are perhaps more local, more obscure, and harder to access. Many are held only in university special collections rooms, and combined with their small print run, means a few academics and artists will encounter them, but likely not a mainstream audience. For example, printed accordion style on cloth-covered boards, textile artist Sandra Turley produced a fourteen-page book in 2001 called *This Original Self*. As an adult she learned of her adoption and this book is an exploration of this new identity.

Interestingly the sole male work I have encountered is that of David Schulz in “Non-Identifying Social, Genetic Report” (1998). He received such a report from his mother at age 26, which prompted a search for his birthparents that ultimately failed. He produced a large wall installation later published as an artist’s book in 1999. Carol Flax created an artist’s book called *Some (M)other Stories: A Parent(hetica)al Tale* in 1995. Flax was adopted at three months, and this slim volume tells of her sudden contact at age forty by her birthparents. The artwork is a combination of photography and text that, according to the curator Alison Devine, “offers a personal consideration of the relationship between photography, knowledge and memory.” She continues explorations in a related print work “My Mother’s Eyes” (1998), through another video installation, where she centres on the story of an adoptee now in her fifties, called “2

Mothers, 2 Daughters, 2 Sisters, 2 Brothers, 1 Father” in 2002, through the animated net art piece entitled “Home is Not What You Imagine It to Be,” where feelings about illegitimacy are explored, and through co-exhibitions with artist Ann Fessler such as the 1997 collaboration “Ex/Changing Families: Two Stories of Adoption,” which examined psychological aspects of adoption.

The work of Ann Fessler, photographer, scholar and artist, author of *The Girls Who Went Away*, and most recently the film *A Girl Like Her*, has always centered on feminist perspectives on women’s issues. Fessler is a third generation adoptee: neither her mother nor grandmother conceived a child. As her biography explains, adoption became a central feature in her own work when she was approached by a woman who thought Ms. Fessler might have been the daughter she gave up for adoption forty years previous. She was not, but the strength of this encounter, one Fessler says she actually dreamt about the night previous, prompted a new direction in her work. “Close to Home” (2001) consists of image, sound and even smells of Fessler’s upbringing in the rural Midwest and her eventual journey to find her birthmother’s hometown. ‘Everlasting’ (2003) is an audio composition of oral history which collates clips from interviews with birthmothers in the Baltimore area who gave newborn children up for adoption between World War Two and Roe versus Wade, and combines them with looped archival video footage, in an act of reclaiming voice.

Film

*If adoption is second best, why is this child so wonderful?*⁵¹²

Many films or television specials use adoption in a peripheral manner, portrayed with humour and a light touch especially when targeted for children, such as the child placed with the

wrong parents, substitute parents, or seeking the perfect adoptive family: consider *Harry Potter*, *Stuart Little* or *Despicable Me* as only a few more current examples, with *Anne of Green Gables* and *L'il Orphan Annie* providing some historic ones, featuring the plucky orphan whose happy ending includes the passive receipt of care and legitimizing through adoption. Films targeted to adults may use the adoption device as added character depth or plot twist. Those that center on the political and social issues are fewer, and vary in their orientation and message.

In choosing films to examine I went to Origins Canada and ParentFinders recommended lists, as well as drawing from current releases, in addition to trying to find specifically Canadian examples. I considered the intent of the filmic content, the ways in which cultural tensions, definitions of family and the politics of power are investigated or trivialized, the intended audience, and the potential socio-cultural impact. While the list of recommended films by the adoption advocacy groups is quite plentiful for releases in the 1990's and new millennium, the offerings are slim for films pre-dating this. For example, Origins Canada suggestions list *Stolen Babies*, a 1993 made for TV movie starring Mary Tyler Moore, followed sequentially by its only other suggestion, from 1938, a seemingly huge gap. Further searching on adoption blogs, movie sites, and academic footnotes, produces predictable sensationalist dramas for the intervening period.

The oldest film examined was *Delinquent Parents* (1938): the print quality is poor, often bogging down during play, the story is overtly melodramatic (although maybe indicative of its release date and the style in vogue at the time), and it seems to run to the worst clichés. I can only surmise that some of the pressures exhibited by disapproving, or even supportive parents on their offspring, when it comes to public propriety, might be the reason for recommendation: this

part of the melodrama was unfortunately not that far-fetched, and may help to broker an understanding of a particular milieu that is hard to imagine today.

The 1940's and 1950's, with post war patriotism, a desire to return to domesticity, marriage and normalcy, the devastation of the Second World War, the Korean war and other conflicts in public consciousness, leads to a predominance of rescue narratives and family building through adoption. Several films use the adoption device as a vehicle for the star actor or actress, whose 'selfless' act, a societally applauded maternal instinct or legitimizing urge, is really the focus of the movie, such as Cary Grant's 1952 *Room for One More*. Other variations are those of lovely, though infertile couples, who adopt, perhaps even finding themselves pregnant after the adoption has been completed, so that they had the best of both worlds. One such film, Gene Kelly's 1950 comic farce *Tunnel of Love*, shows an affluent suburban couple at the five year marriage mark, who are trying to obtain a child by any means necessary, thus pursuing adoption. They are contrasted with their neighbours, the apparently fertile couple next door. When Isolde and husband Augie tell them the news, they are clearly taken aback, "reemphasizing the idea that ideally, adoption would not have to be the method to which they are acquiring a child." As noted in the book *Like Our Very Own* "an unspoken hierarchy existed within the ideological system of motherhood. The apex of motherhood depended on successful passage through the perils of childbirth. Adoptive mothers were placed on the edges of this ideal – their maternity was based on nurture."⁵¹²

A similar film of the period, the musical comedy *My Blue Heaven* which also romanticizes the notion that all women wish to become pregnant, and a woman's destiny must be child-rearing, is synopsised thusly by Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times*: "A husband-wife television couple goes through the most distressing times in first trying to have a child, then

adopt one, until suddenly they succeed at both.”⁵¹² While “films like these celebrated adoption” as Leslie Lindenauer notes in her book *I Could Not Call her Mother: The Stepmother in American Popular Culture*, “it cannot have been lost on the audience, that worth it though adoption might be, there was no substitute for the real thing.”⁵¹²

Some soap operas in the 1950’s and 60’s further the condemnation of illegitimacy, offering the ‘bait and switch’ child: at some point in a child’s/teen’s/adult’s life s/he finds out that – horror of horrors - s/he was adopted, leading to acrimony, or the search for natural mother. An example is that of *Our Very Own*, a 1950 melodrama critically panned thusly: “What is there so disturbing about the knowledge of being an adopted child? This picture doesn't tell you. All that it arbitrarily does is assume that the knowledge would be upsetting and then proceeds from there.”⁵¹² The reviewer also notes that keeping secret the fact of adoption from the eighteen year old daughter flies in the face of then current adoption practice, and labeled the film sentimental and superficial. Penny Callan Partridge notes how such adoption secrets are a variation of “the Pandora story [which] dramatizes fear of the unknown, guarding of the unknown, and opening to the unknown, all central to adoption experience.”⁵¹² *Bundle of Joy* (1956) offers a different spin on secrets, depicting an unmarried salesgirl who finds a ‘foundling’ abandoned on the steps of an orphanage, and takes care of the abandoned child, as everyone believes she is the mother, but apparently the film is played for laughs, with the songs being more important than the baby, the issue of child abandonment, single parenting, or the pressure to conform to societal expectations.

The American Catholic Sociological Review printed a filmography in 1957 entitled “Audio-Visual Aids on Marriage for Catholic Schools” so that “an instructor will have the satisfaction of having done his part in the effort to attain greater stability in future marriages.”⁵¹² The article lists over thirty ‘approved’ films on dating and marriage, with only a few devoted to

sexuality - “Social Sex Attitudes In Adolescents” and “A Christian Attitude about Sex” - and all films having a stated criteria of “developing insight, morale, emotional response and attributes that will make future adjustments in marriage less difficult.”⁵¹² “Sex Education Films: A Content Analysis” notes that some of the films offered sex education as a guide for family life, and noted two films that focused on the ‘consequences’ of illicit sex: first *Phoebe*, a film about a teenager who finds herself pregnant. The mother is an ineffectual and lonely middle class wife, while father appears to be a tyrant whom the girl fears. By inference “the viewer could conclude that Phoebe’s pregnancy would not have occurred in a more loving, stable home.”⁵¹² The second documentary style film, *Sex: A Moral Dilemma for Teenagers*, portrayed inept parents as a force in propelling teens into premarital sex. In neither film is there any indication of alternatives or next steps for the adolescents who find themselves in such situations: “unwed pregnancies... get only superficial treatment as social problems.”⁵¹²

The 1970’s through to more contemporary films began to develop more realistic and complex portrayals of unwed motherhood and adoption, however many films still considered adoption in a negative light. Consider just one example, the 2009 horror release *Orphan*, featuring an adopted child from Eastern Europe as homicidal maniac, which generated protests from many groups, the National Council of Adoption among them, not only for its violence and the implications that adopting can ruin the adopter’s life, which protestors worried might influence those initiating or considering adoption, but for its ominous and condemnatory trailer voiceover, later amended, “It must be difficult to love an adopted child as much as your own.”

The greater proliferation of documentary and exposé type films in the last thirty years suggests one shift in the portrayal of the adoption story, that of hearing the voices of those who actually have experienced an aspect of adoption or relinquishment in their lives. *Finding Christa*

(1991) Camille Billops' autobiographical documentary, features the 'mother as artist' using interview and old home video to confront the daughter she gave up for adoption twenty-five years prior in 1961 in order to pursue her dreams of being a successful artist and sculptor.

Camille Billops "emphasizes the distance she keeps between herself and her subject while Christa expresses a longing to connect as a daughter and artist as well."⁵¹² *The Passionate Eye – 40 Year Secret* (2010), a well-made Canadian documentary, is written from a birthparent point of view. This film shows the difficulties experienced by birthmothers who were part of the sexual revolution in the 1960's in spirit, but who were trapped by the lack of availability of birth control (unless they were married or over 18), unavailability of abortion, and prevailing social mores. *A Girl Like Her* (2011) is from celebrated artist Ann Fessler, who continues to offer screenings at select conferences across North America, but which is not available except through purchase online to the general public, who might not even be aware of its existence. Using archival footage from HBO, NFB and other sources, she allows the black and white images of what a 'normal' young woman of the early 1960's should do juxtapose with the voiceover of women in the present who had children they gave up for adoption.

Butterbox Babies (Canada, 1995), a fictionalized narrative, is nonetheless based on the story of a true Canadian scandal, in the running of The Ideal Maternity Home for unwed mothers, which became a baby farming business. "The Young's adoption business hired lawyers from the States [who] developed sophisticated networking to get babies out of Nova Scotia."⁵¹² The central question seems to be: at what point has the line been crossed, from unorthodoxy, to immorality and criminality?

Even within the genres of comedy and drama, there appear to be some attempts to come to terms with real problems in the adoption story, some with greater success than others. *Mighty*

Aphrodite (1995), for example, invokes the commodification of children as puzzle pieces in this multiple search and reunion story, which some have viewed as Woody Allen's attempt at spin-doctoring his own troubled relationships with wife and adopted daughter. As Jill Deans notes in her dissertation *Divide the Living Child in Two: Adoption and the rhetoric of legitimacy in twentieth-century American literature*, "[the adoptee's] background is worth knowing, not because Max is viewed as a fully realized person with a right to know his origins, but because he is a puzzle for Lenny to solve at a time when Lenny's own life is in crisis."⁵¹² Max is neglected not only as a screen presence but as an adoptee. *Losing Isaiah* (1995) invokes questions about trans-racial adoption, post-colonialism, and the right to mother, and whose mothering claim should supersede the other, as well as the further complication of ethnic identity and political correctness. It seems the adults involved are trying to serve 'the child's best interests,' but this appears questionable when child is wrenched from one mother to live with a biological stranger. The film falls into melodrama and manipulation with a tidy compromise 'joint' mothering solution that seems will serve all and solve nothing, and which angered most critics of the day, including Roger Ebert who wrote, "the movie has been carefully written so as not to offend the opinions of anyone in the audience. No matter what side you are on, you will find your viewpoint expressed. The filmmakers apparently have no firm ideas of their own about the rightness and wrongness of the alternatives."⁵¹² Yet another reviewer notes the impossibility of a viable ending to this story: "the film's whole point is that there's no decent way out of this dilemma, and the fake compromise it constructs is sure to leave part of the audience angry."⁵¹² *Secrets and Lies* (1996), an independent British film about a birthmother and daughter separated by economics and ethnicity, was quite good at not sugar coating the complexities of relationship building and search and reunion, and I found several points of comparison to my own

experience. For instance, Hortense does the search on her own, which is understandable, wanting to elicit some sense of control over her own story; however I was shocked at her approach: once she had access to her records she began cold calling people by her mother's name and address, an invasive gesture showing a complete lack of concern for privacy, secrecy or the potential emotional anguish and trauma that could be unleashed.

Contemporary *Juno* is more a story about adolescence, teen pregnancy, or even empowered female sexuality, than about adoption, however it does not shy away from several dilemmas, including an embedded contemplation of motherhood. Pictured (and marketed) as in control of herself, her body and her options, the paths Juno chooses are remarkably conformist, and the ideals she holds, despite her 'rebellious' ways, are in many ways traditional. In deciding on adoption, Juno maintains she is not really selling the baby, yet in essence she is, and to a fantasy of what white, affluent nuclear families ought to be, and especially of the 'good mother,' perhaps a figure Juno feels she lacks. *Philomena* (2013) seems to straddle the line between fiction and reality in the most meaningful way of many of the films. It shifts the attention to the unwed mother pressured to give up her child, and focuses on the effect of having to keep such a secret for fifty years, with a touching conclusion that allows a grieving mother only a glimpse of the son she never knew, but a glimpse precious and important, and similar to my own 'once removed' encounter.