

## PREFACE

The initial impetus for this volume was the Transnational and Transracial Adoption in North American Culture Conference at Turku University, Finland, in August 2015, but from a wider perspective this volume reflects the increasing interest in the field of adoption studies, particularly over the last decade.

The work of Marianne Novy on literary and cultural approaches to adoption should first be acknowledged, the two volumes, *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture* (2004) and *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama* (2005), being the starting point for many in this field. Since her pioneering work, more recent work includes Mark C. Jerng's *Claiming Others: Transracial Adoption and National Belonging* (2010), David L. Eng's *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (2010), Cynthia Callahan's *Kin of Another Kind: Transracial Adoption in American Literature* (2011), and Margaret Homans's *The Imprint of Another Life: Adoption Narratives and Human Possibility* (2013). The most recent addition to the field is John McLeod's *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption* (2015).

This volume contributes to and builds upon the work of these predecessors. The focus is North America, primarily on account of the number of literary works and films that have appeared in recent years which deal with transnational, transracial and transcultural themes, reflecting the interconnections between the North American continent and the world at large. An example of this are the stories in Aimee Phan's *We Should*

*Never Meet* (2004), which have in the background “Operation Babylift,” the airlifting and adoption of 3,000 displaced children from wartime Vietnam (see Simal-González in this volume).

This collection of articles also enlarges the notion of transnational beyond the America-world paradigm by looking at the recent history of North America in terms of its internal adoption policies. “Transnational” here focuses on nations within the nation state, namely the Indigenous peoples of North America, who until relatively recently have been regarded as equivalent to “wards of the state.” Adoption and fostering procedures both in Canada and the USA were designed, particularly in the 1960s, to absorb what in Canada are known as “the First Nations” into one nation through forms of compulsory assimilation. The failure of such policies and the negative effects such official adoption procedures had on the Indigenous peoples of North America provide the theme for a number of the contributions to this volume.

The division of this book into Native North America, America and Asia, and America and Europe is designed to offer a real-world geographical perspective and context, but readers will soon recognize cross-connections between chapters which override geography. As many adoption study scholars (Jerng, McLeod, Callahan) have pointed out, where adoption arrangements seek to provide a solution to social problems, race and culture are always involved, as are inequalities and hierarchies of power. Moreover, far from the comfortable notion of what Marianne Novy has called the “happy adoption” archetype (the *Oliver Twist* story), adoption is frequently accompanied by anxiety and insecurity in all members of the adoption triad (birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees). But having said this, it would be just as short-sighted to frame adoption within motifs of disaster as it would be to be naively optimistic. The recent work by John McLeod acknowledges the inequalities and painful realities which often surround adoption, but at the same time seeks to uncover the positives that transcultural adoption can make possible. It is this tension that underlies many of the explorations of history, film and creative writing in this volume.

This collection of articles opens with a historical perspective. Roger Nichols looks at adoption policies for Native people in Canada and the USA over the last fifty years, tracing the changes in how transracial adoption programs were run from the infamous “Sixties Scoop” in Canada to the custody battle over Baby Veronica (a Cherokee girl adopted by a white family) in 2013 in the USA. The governmental policies concerning

Indigenous adoption in the two countries are shown to be widely different and highly similar. Assimilationist adoption programs in which Native babies were seized and placed in non-Native families were more vigorously carried out in Canada than in the USA during the Sixties, but in both countries such programs were largely halted by the 1980s. This is not to say that foster care issues and social welfare questions among the Indigenous people of North America have by any means been solved. A case in point is provided by Margaret D. Jacobs, who investigates the 1970s' case of three Métis children in Saskatchewan, who were removed from their foster parents and placed with a white adoptive couple in Michigan on the grounds that the children would then gain more "stimulation" and a stronger sense of "permanency." The case is highly illustrative of the unexamined class, racial and colonial biases that enabled authorities to intervene and undermine Indigenous families and communities. The child's "best interests" is still a watchword in current-day adoption, but it is a notion that requires intense scrutiny.

Nichols' and Jacobs's studies provide a historical backdrop for Mark Shackleton's literary investigations of the adoption of Native children with intellectual disability. In the USA, the passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 aimed to counter the excesses of state adoption programs and to ensure that tribes can exercise their sovereign authority over child custody proceedings. Shackleton sees the spirit of the Child Welfare Act at work in two plays by Tomson Highway (Cree) and in the novel *Four Souls* by Ojibwe novelist Louise Erdrich. In these works, the tribal community takes care of its own, and even Native children suffering from fetal alcohol syndrome and intellectual disability are not "adopted out" or handed over to the authorities, but are brought up either by the birth mother or by the extended family of the tribe. They subsequently play a constructive role in the community at large. These works represent a form of resistance to the notion of "adopting out," question anxieties about disability, and challenge automatic enthusiasm for transracial and transnational adoption.

Pirjo Ahokas's chapter is also a literary analysis with a historical underpinning. In the USA, the Indian Adoption Project (IAP 1950–1967) promoted the transracial fostering and adoption of Native American children, especially by white American middle-class couples. Ahokas looks at *Solar Storms* by Linda Hogan (Chickasaw) and *Indian Killer* by Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene), whose protagonists suffer from the consequences of the IAP. Ahokas's article explores how individual

traumas need to be seen within the context of historical trauma, or in the trenchant words of Julia Chinyere Oparah, Sun Yung Shin and Jane Jeong Trenka, transcultural adoptions are “the intimate face of colonization, racism, militarism, imperialism, and globalization.”<sup>1</sup> As Shackleton’s article also points out, tribal homecoming is seen as a means of healing, although the “return to roots” motif so common in adoption narratives is not always efficacious. The protagonist of Hogan’s novel does return to her roots, but for Alexie’s protagonist there is no tribal homecoming, for the scars of cultural schizophrenia are too deep to heal.

Bo Pettersson’s chapter concludes the Native North American section with a study of the ways in which tropes of adoption can be utilized for dubious and self-seeking ends. Forrest Carter’s *The Education of Little Tree* (1976), the alleged autobiography of an Indian boy adopted by his Cherokee grandparents, has been a highly popular text among non-Native readers. The writer, however, is in fact the white supremacist Asa Earl Carter, and his adoption of an Indian identity and cynical manipulation of the “happy adoption” theme is a classic example of textual deception. Transracial fostering and adoption have not infrequently evoked notions of “compassionate benevolence” and “racial harmony,”<sup>2</sup> but Carter’s spurious autobiography, written for fame and fortune, shows how easy it is to sentimentalize adoption and sugarcoat prejudice.

The following section, entitled Asia and America contains studies by Lena Ahlin and Begoña Simal-González, which both address the work of Jane Jeong Trenka. Trenka’s works are key texts in transnational adoption literature as they question to what extent transcultural adoption has transfigurative potential, or what John McLeod has called “adoptive being.” Trenka was herself a Korean adoptee in the USA and subsequently repatriated to Korea, and her work ironizes the “rescue” motif, foregrounds the economic inequalities that underpin adoption, and yet (as both Ahlin and Simal-González argue) ultimately demonstrates the restorative potential of the transnational adoptee’s life narrative. Trenka’s work is also significant because it goes beyond the adoptive subject to the larger narratives of racialization and gendered exploitation, and speaks to the collective experience of Korean women. Once again, we see that transnational adoption literature is not a hermetically sealed box, but addresses broad issues of class, gender, ethnicity, and identity.

The final section, Europe and America, begins with Alan Shima’s analysis of Mona Friis Bertheussen’s documentary film *Twin Sisters*, which concerns Chinese identical twins who were separated at birth, one

living in Norway and the other in the United States. The film is shown to mythologize biogenetic attachment, the ties of blood, a common feature of sentimental adoption narratives. This emphasis has the effect of obscuring the economic, social, and legal contexts and materialities of transnational adoption. Shima's study contrasts nicely with Rosemarie Peña's chapter on the emerging socio-political histories of the post-World War II cohort of dual heritage German African American adoptees. Nearly 5,000 children were born between 1945 and 1955 to white German women and African American Occupational troops; many of them were adopted by African American couples in the United States. The emotional challenges these transnational adoptees faced had certain common features, including the trauma of displacement and experiences of racism, but the degree of resilience to these challenges varied from individual to individual. The childhoods of Black German children adopted by military couples were also very different from those of adoptees growing up in civilian families. Peña clarifies that no overarching or monolithic Black German American adoption experience can be posited. Christine Vogt-William's study of transracial adoption in contemporary South Asian diasporic women's fiction also emphasizes the range of potential experiences and reactions that can take place within the triad of birth mother, adoptive child and adoptive mother. Vogt-William's main texts are Bharti Kirchner's *Shiva Dancing* and Sharon Maas's *The Speech of Angels*, which address the fortunes of two young girls from different parts of India who are adopted by white parents in the USA and in Germany. On the evidence of these texts, transracial adoption further complicates the already complex situation of diasporic life with regard to questions of kinship systems, cultural heritages, and citizenship. The question raised is whether the transracial adoptee can ever find "home," or whether family alignments and ideas of kinship within transracial adoption should best be understood as a form of "painful unbelonging."

What constitutes "home," belonging, and identity for the transcultural adoptee is also the focus of Jane Weiss's study of Susan Warner's *The Wide Wide World* (1850). Warner's novel, a bestseller of its time, concerns the compromises and adaptations required of the young orphaned heroine when on the death of her parents she is uprooted from New York and is forced to live with wealthy kin in Scotland. Usually read as a pious *Bildungsroman* of Christian fortitude, Weiss rereads *The Wide Wide World* in the light of the notion of "adoptive being." The tropes of domestic fiction, a genre often dismissed as sentimental or simplistic,

in fact authorize Warner to complicate and problematize narrative conventions of “happy” or “disastrous” adoption and to subvert normative constructions of the family. In the multiple adoptions of the text, the heroine reinvents herself through a web of affiliations that comprise ancestry, spirituality, circumstances, and personal choice.

The closing chapter by John McLeod interrogates the Irish-US “adoption industry” through a close comparison of Martin Sixsmith’s *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* and Stephen Frears’s film adaptation *Philomena*. The role of the Catholic Church and the Irish State in the history of Irish-US adoptions has until relatively recently been shrouded in secrecy, and the cruel treatment of unwed mothers and the children they were compelled to relinquish has also been concealed. Sixsmith’s book in particular explores what McLeod calls the “cruel chronology” of this transatlantic adoption, strategically connecting past practices to present pain. Both Sixsmith’s and Frears’s works demand acknowledgement of this sorry transatlantic history of sundering.

It is to be hoped that this collection of articles will be of interest in the emerging field of adoption studies. It has aimed to be of value to literary scholars, historians, sociologists, and those working in cross-disciplinary cultural studies. The range of investigations covers Native North American writing, US–Korean writing, South Asian diaspora writing, the narratives of “war babies” who were adopted by American families after conflicts in both Europe and Viet Nam, and representations of transnational and transracial adoption through the medium of novels, short stories, memoirs, creative non-fiction, and film. The range and diversity of issues raised by adoption narratives involve but go beyond notions of family, kinship, and identity, to encompass issues of class, gender, ethnicity, and nationhood.

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## NOTES

1. Julia Chinyere Oparah, Sun Yung Shin and Jane Jeong Trenka, “Introduction,” in *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, ed. Jane Jeong Trenka et al. (Cambridge: South End Press, 2006), 7.
2. Margaret D. Jacobs, *A Generation Removed: The Fostering and Adoption of Indigenous Children in the Postwar World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), xxvii.

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