ADOPTION RHETORICS: A LEXICON OF KINSHIP

A Dissertation

by

EMILY NICOLE BARTZ

Submitted to the Graduate and Professional School of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Chair of Committee,   Claudia Nelson
Committee Members,   Andrew Pilsch
                                    Anne Morey
                                    Tasha Dubriwny
Head of Department,   Maura Ives

August 2023

Major Subject: English

ABSTRACT

There exist myriad intimacies from friendship to allyship but kinship—biological

kinship—is still a dominating criterion by which all other intimacies are measured, even in

statements that express an association stronger than consanguinity. Consequently, modern

plenary adoption is construed as the Other to biological kinship, which is the rhetorical

touchstone for intimacy. Using Kenneth Burke's "Semantic and Poetic Meaning," this

dissertation examines the semantic and poetic meaning of adoption and the ways they intersect,

shift over time, and can produce greater understanding and usefulness through prescriptive

adoption languages, film, comics, and poetry. Prescriptive adoption languages are lexicons put

forth by interest groups to normalize adoption and those involved in adoption, resisting the

primacy of biology as a dominant signifier of kinship while also replicating the referents of

biological kinship, and thus reiterating adoption's position as an imitation of biological kinship.

The *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy (2008-2016), *Lion* (2016), *Superman: American Alien* by Max

Landis (2015-2016), *Loki: Agent of Asgard* by Al Ewing (2014-2016), and *The Adoption Papers*

by Jackie Kay (1991) are texts that use the language of their medium and the language of

adoption to convey the complex feelings around the apparatus of adoption. *Lion* and the *Kung Fu

Panda* trilogy explore the semantic and poetic meanings of adoption, search, and reunion

through Google Earth and the principle of *qi*, reflecting the emotional journeys those in the

adoption constellation partake in to understand their role as kin in community. The adoptee

comic book characters Superman and Loki are figures of belonging while at the same time

representatives of the oxymoronic position many transracial and intercountry adoptees find

themselves in as perpetual outsiders in a binary world with power that complicates the

established familial and biological formations of power and kinship. This dissertation closes with an examination of polyvocality as a means of building an imaginary polyphonic kinship in Jackie Kay's poetry collection/memoir *The Adoption Papers*. The texts examined reveal that far from causing a clean break, adoption creates a multiplicity of bonds between parties that exist both internally and externally, with continuous reassessment and reevaluation of those ties over time. The semantic and poetic meanings of adoption show how this modern international legal practice, plenary adoption, is both an anesthetic legal ceremony and an ongoing lived experience filled with an abundance of mixed feelings for adoptees and their kin.

DEDICATION

For Turing, my *world*.

For Baudrillard and Ada Lovelace, my *sun* and my *moon*.

For Alexandre, all my *stars*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to acknowledge some of the privileges that let me, and not others, finish this PhD: a household with two graduate instructor incomes instead of one, fully covered medical insurance that included vision, a public university with a robust library and dedicated librarians, access to *almost* affordable and safe housing and transportation, access to student loans (and deferments), access to at least half an income's worth of a summer job every summer of my program, access to additional resources as a citizen in the country I attended university in, access to free mental health care and counseling, and access to mentors and friends who encouraged me, listened to me, and gave excellent advice, (and much more.)

Thank you to all my teachers, friends, and mentors who guided and helped me and whose names could not fit here. Thank you to my doctors and my birth control for giving me the physical and mental stability I needed to complete this dissertation.

Thank you to Dr. Claudia Nelson for her patience and guidance. Thank you to my committee members for their patience and guidance, Dr. Andrew Pilsch, Dr. Anne Morey, and Dr. Tasha Dubriwny.

Thank you to my parents, Robert and Barbara Bartz, and my brother, Nathan Bartz, for being my family.

Thank you to my partner, Alexandre Yamamoto, for his infinite support and love. I would like to thank Doctor Turing, Lady Ada Lovelace, and Mister Baudrillard for their emotional support.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Mary Sue Johnston of Minnesota State University Mankato, who told me in 2008 I could do this. And patiently explained to me what a dissertation was.

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

Contributors

This work was supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of Professors Claudia Nelson, Professor Andrew Pilsch, and Professor Anne Morey of the Department of English, and Professor Tasha Dubriwny of the Department of Communications.

All work conducted for the dissertation was completed by the student independently.

Funding Sources

NOMENCLATURE

PAL	Positive Adoption Language
AAL	Accurate Adoption Language
HAL	Honest Adoption Language
OBC	Original Birth Certificate
PEAR	Parents for Ethical Adoption Reform
CUB	Concerned United Birthparents

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: FROM *ANA MĀRŪTIM*[1] TO FORM I-800A[2]

The Best Interests of the Child

      While the circulation of children within and without communities has existed for
thousands of years, with the earliest laws concerning adoption tracing back to lines 185-193 of
the Code of Hammurabi (1755-1750 BCE[3]), it may be a surprise to some that for many years,
adoption was not codified in many countries including the United States, and it has only been a
recognized, regulated, legal process in any part of the country since 1851 CE (Westbrook 139,
Kahan 53). Before that, adoption was an informal practice, with no legal foundation for
permanency in care, custody, or inheritance. The passage of "An Act to Provide for the Adoption
of Children in Massachusetts" in 1851 set forth four formative precedents: 1. "the best interests
of the child," 2. the evaluation of "potential adoptive parents" for "the ability to furnish suitable
nurture and education, appropriate to the child's nature," 3. "written consent of the birthparents
and [the dissolution of] all legal ties between them and their biological child," and 4. "court
approval for adoptions" at a state, not federal level (Kahan 53-54, Modell 23). This makes the

---

[1] From the earliest known adoption law: line 185 of the Code of Hammurabi, "*šumma awīlum ṣeḫram ina mêšu ana mārūtim ilqē-ma urtabbīšu, tarbītum šī ul ibbaqqar*/If a man adopted a baby at birth and has raised it, that offspring will not be reclaimed" (Huehnergard 129).

[2] Form I-800A is the current nine-page "Application for Determination of Suitability to Adopt a Child from a Hague Convention Country" with seven pages of supplement forms required by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services.

[3] For a thorough examination of adoption law and procedure laid out in the Code of Hammurabi, see Raymond Westbrook's "The Adoption Laws of Codex Hammurabi" in *Law from the Tigris to the Tiber: The Writings of Raymond Westbrook*.

United States's modern plenary adoption less than two hundred years old, which is less than eight generations, with government-approved transracial and intercountry adoption only being legal for about two or three generations (Kahan 66, 63).

With a new legal process came a lexicon—one that extended and solidified pre-existing kinship bond language around non-biological kinships. As adoption is something quite different from biological kinning, it has become entrapped by its own enrobing in the language of biological kinning, stuck in an entangling lexicon that finds those involved in adoption constantly explaining, proving, and demonstrating that adoption is as close as kin, since kin is the closest of ties that can be imagined or conjured in our lexicon. Michelle Kahan suggests in "'Put Up on Platforms: A History of Twentieth Century Adoption Policy in the United States" that this enrobing of adoption in the language of biological kinship traces to resistance from the eugenics movement of 1910 "as social workers… had to counter prejudice to convince potential adopters that doing so was not abnormal… Adopted children were said to have inherited 'mental defects' from their birthparents" (57). Enrobing adoption in the language of biological kinship moved adoptees linguistically away from their own biological kin and any negative connotations that could follow them while also developing the "blank slate" infant adoptee—an idea with origins in John Locke's 1689 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.[4] This dissertation examines that lexicon, specifically untangling the special relationship adoption has with language, examining the use of rhetoric, symbol-making and symbol-misusing, semantic and poetic meaning in prescriptive adoption languages, film, comics, and poetry.

---

[4] See Locke Book I. Chapter ii. 5.

In the discourse of adoption, there are many tensions at play; for the purposes of this dissertation, I distill them into time, voice, and imagination. First, some frame adoption as a momentary act in one's life, a legal action as singular as a wedding ceremony. However, some texts frame adoption more like a marriage, an ongoing state of being with legal and social consequences and effects. Second, there is a continuous negotiation and debate in adoption discourse about who gets to speak, when, and about what in adoption. Since adoption is a legal process inherently involving minors, a category often denied a voice in legal procedure, there can be a negotiation of voice over time. Some argue that adoptees, as the central figures of adoption, deserve a stronger, more active voice in adoption. The texts and lexicons examined in this dissertation demonstrate that as adoptees mature, their relationships, both internal and external, with their families may change, and so may their parents, siblings, and relatives' relationship with them. This can affect the oft imagined relationship adoptees and their families had in mind before reunion, as during that time of separation their image of their first family may be significantly different than what the reality of reunion reveals. Prescriptive adoption languages, as the name implies, are lexicons put forth by various interest groups and organizations in the hopes of normalizing adoption and those involved in adoption. The texts selected for the latter three mediums, the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy (2008-2016), *Lion* (2016), *Superman: American Alien* by Max Landis (2015-2016), *Loki: Agent of Asgard* by Al Ewing (2014-2016), and *The Adoption Papers* by Jackie Kay (1991), use the language of their medium and the language of adoption to convey the complex feelings around the apparatus of adoption.

My methodology is informed by the work of Kenneth Burke, whose work in rhetoric, like that of his contemporaries Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Chaim Perelman, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, refocused the study of rhetoric from simply examining persuasion itself to

examining persuasion's successes and failures through ambiguity, context, mediums, adjacent

language, and genres. In "Semantic and Poetic Meaning," Burke argues that vocabulary is not

neutral and can never really be due to the interlinking nature of language: "the ideal of a purely

'neutral' vocabulary, free of emotional weightings, attempts to make a totality out of a fragment"

(138). Burke instead loosely divides language into semantic meaning and poetic meaning. The

semantic or the "ideal" meaning is the seemingly anesthetic, reductive through process of

elimination, rigid, logically extreme definition, heavily reliant on truth and reality. Like a postal

address such as "1 WTC," it relies heavily on underlying truths (i.e., there must be pages and

pages of law on how a postal address is made to make that postal address true) and other rigid

semantic guidelines to be true and certain (Burke 139). For example, "adoption" has a rigid legal

definition that millions of adoptees and their families rely on when they sort through medical and

legal paperwork.

Meanwhile, the poetic meaning of adoption is defined by aesthetic, emotional, and

attitudinal degrees with both moral and ethical implications (Burke 139). A postal address is also

a place with potentially strong emotional attitudes surrounding it contextually and personally ("1

WTC" is more than just an address to many Americans due to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the

World Trade Center in 2001). Poetic meaning also can fall on a spectrum of truth and falsehood.

It invites drama and emotion, argument and expression, expansion rather than specificity and

reduction. For example, Judith Modell notes in "Natural Bonds, Legal Boundaries: Modes of

Persuasion in Adoption Rhetoric" that in the context of adoptee support groups, the term "real"

carries great emotional and rhetorical significance when used among adoptees seeking out

support from their fellow adoptees while also being contextually ambiguous, as some adoptees

see their "first" family as the "real" family, some see their adoptive family as their "real" family,

and some see them both as real or even both as fake (207). "Real" is highly inflammatory but also highly personal and requires strong contextualization to understand how it is being wielded in an adoptee context.

Burke also argues that semantic and poetic meanings do not necessarily have to be in opposition, with semantic being the anesthetic and poetic being the aesthetic, but that they become opposites under dialectical pressure. For Burke, they overlap heavily (146). Semantic meanings may only give the impression of having suppressed or denied attitudes and emotional facets to give the impression of neutrality or truth. For example, adoption as a legal process has its own lexicon, and social workers and educators interested in creating a space that accommodates adoptive families also have created their own prescriptive lexicon through the publication of charts that promote positive adoption language (PAL). PAL, with its suggestions of replacing "real mother" with "birth mother" and "adoptive mother" with "mother," creates the impression of an ideal or semantic meaning in adoption. However, while PAL seeks to be as truthful and as anesthetic as possible, its very existence as a prescriptive language put together by an adoption-related organization acknowledges that the neutral-sounding vocabulary recommendations are a result of a desire to accommodate emotions and attitudes elicited through language. Burke also notes that semantic and poetic meaning can change over time and that poetic meaning—while it may not be as truthful or accurate—can yield greater understanding and usefulness (146).

In adoption discourse, the poetic meanings and semantic meanings are in dialectical negotiation with each other, with simultaneity, the appearance of events and emotions overlapping or occurring simultaneously, serving as a conduit to express those conflicts and resolutions. In prescriptive adoption languages such as Positive Adoption Language, adoption is

5

a singular, momentary act in the past. In contrast, Honest Adoption Language reveals through its use of "adoptee" that being adopted is an ongoing experience, an identity that continues and a relationship that endures even in the absence of a relationship. Simultaneity in adoption texts such as *The Adoption Papers* reveals that even in absence, even in the imagination, that relationship continues and is being constantly renegotiated. Furthermore, in adoptee-led comic books, the continuous and occasionally interrupted production of a character's story or continuity mirrors the simultaneity of the adoption constellation in reassessment of each other, sometimes at odds, sometimes in concord, sometimes without any semblance of relationship at all. Yet the adoptee remains forever as an axis, a confluence of families. Fantasy, the ability to imagine adoption as an acceptable means of creating permanence of residence and status for a child without legal parental ties, is a fragile yet essential element of adoption and in adoption discourse, highly dependent on the agreement of the collective society. Returning to the first adoption laws established in 1851, the "best interests of the child" is an evolving fantasy. Intercountry adoption, transracial adoption, and open adoption were not considered in the best interests of the child until the twentieth century. Even today, people are not in agreement as to what is "in the best interests of the child."

Legal fictions such as modified birth certificates create a more comfortable situation for adoptive families. It makes logical sense to create a situation in which adoptive families imitate, as much as possible, an idealized biological kinship. However, legal fictions may simulate the appearance of full integration into an adoptive family, but these legal fictions rely heavily on those involved accepting them—in particular, the adoptees. If adoptees break with the legal fictions, they become ungrateful "Angry Adoptees" such as Loki in *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Saroo's brother Mantosh in *Lion*, and Tai-lung in *Kung Fu Panda*.

A Literature Review

Within adoption studies, a small but growing field is adoption rhetoric, the study of the cultural, social, historical, and legal discourse of adoption. Scholars such as Modell in the 2011 essay cited above and Jennifer Potter in the 2013 essay "A Burkean Cluster Analysis of Adoption Rhetoric" have examined adoption from a rhetorical perspective, using observation and content analysis to analyze the way adoptees talk among themselves and explore the commodification of adoption. This dissertation explores adoption along the axis of Burke's semantic and poetic meaning, across oppositions and overlaps, analyzing the use of language to construct and deconstruct adoptees' relationships within and without the adoption constellation.

There is a growing body of publications on the topic of rhetoric related to adoption, occurring within fields such as history, children's literature, sociology, and social work. Adoption historians such as E. Wayne Carp and projects such as The London Foundling Hospital's *Threads of Feeling* have, in their examinations of adoption history and adoption artifacts such as records, objects, and letters, noted historical changes in the language surrounding adoption, from advertisements soliciting adopters to narratives reframing adoption in different ways that shape or reflect contemporary attitudes about the limits of familial bonds and independence. In other words, there has always been analysis of how performing language and the presentation of objects persuade within adoption and adoption processes but not always while explicitly highlighting that a scholar is contributing to the growing field of adoption rhetoric.

An early use of "adoption rhetoric" is Modell's chapter (cited above) in Marianne Novy's collection *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture*, "Natural Bonds, Legal

Boundaries: Modes of Persuasion in Adoption Rhetoric." In the essay, Modell examines the unique rhetoric within a local adoptee support/rights group over a decade. The author notes, "Throughout this movement, vocabulary is significant, and words accumulate meanings in context" (207). For example, Modell notes that the words "bond" and "real" carried a "heavy rhetorical burden." Among the adoptees, "bond" carried three meanings and emotional tones: a "contract of adoption: the signatures on paper that create an adoption," "the trust and love that develop in an adoptive family—individuals are permanently bonded to one another," and "biological ties, the links formed by genealogical connections: blood is thicker than water." (217). In the discourses Modell participated in, she also noted that there was a tenuous balance between passion and reason, personal story, and logical legal arguments (210). Sharing personal stories with other adoptees was integral to the argument for adoptee rights because it demonstrates that the hardships of adoptees are unique and universal. Sharing personal stories and finding commonalities or patterns was a way to de-isolate the adoptees and create a community. In other words, adoptees built adoptee rights and adoptee history on a stack of many small, individualized collective narratives transformed into a construction of the status of "being adopted" (213).

Meanwhile, Potter's essay in *Adoption Quarterly* uses cluster analysis to examine the semantic and poetic meaning of adoption in three newspapers and eleven magazines. She groups newspaper and magazine "adoption" references into five distinct thematic clusters: "the biologization of adoption, renaming adoption, emphasizing parents, and deemphasizing children, biology vs. adoption, and the commodification of adoption" (116). She then focuses on the commodification "cluster" and finds that adoption is discussed in three ways in that cluster, in "economic terms," as a "selection process," and as a discourse that potential parents can buy and

return adoptees (116). Potter finds that the commodification of adoption is "instructive in highlighting the way in which language constructs our reality" and that "in the status quo, popular media outlets through which public discourse is operationalized couch adoptees in a semantic field that constructs them quite literally as products" (122, 123). This dissertation responds to Potter's work by examining texts in the mediums of poetry, films, and comics, looking more closely into representations of adoptees in these texts as agents and into how they use the linguistic complexity of kinship to exercise agency in their adoption experience. In other words, if adoption can couch adoptees in a semantic field that constructs them as products, how do adoptees (real and fictional) construct a semantic field for themselves to escape product-hood?

There are additional references in texts that examine adoption rhetoric tangentially or in a way that is rhetorical. Cheryl L. Nixon's study of the earliest roots of modern adoption, *The Orphan in Eighteenth Century Law and Literature: Estate, Blood, and Body*, explores the role of orphans—some of whom are eventual adoptees—in literature and law. She finds that the semantic divides in law played a heavy role in determining orphans and adoptees' destinies. Nixon notes the interventions of Captain Thomas Coram, Jonas Hanway, and the London Foundling Hospital in attempting to refashion neglected orphans into *treasured orphans* by association with artwork and operas. Sympathetic artists and wealthy donors would adorn the walls of the Hospital with art, meant to edify the foundlings and persuade the visiting potential adoptive parents that the children there were treasured masterpieces that they could take home and raise as their own. In this case, eighteenth-century artwork of and in the Foundling Hospital was used to rebrand the children as valuable and the institution as a respectable charity. Nixon recognizes that the legal divides in early British adoption law (the Private Laws and Chancery

for wealthy orphans vs. Public Laws for poor orphans) created semantic divides that in turn, sympathetic donors attempted to remedy with poetic reframing in the Foundling Hospital. In other words, orphans', foundlings', and adoptees' value and their relationship to society was something to be negotiated, reframed, and argued, a phenomenon that continues to this day.

Meanwhile, in her 2004 essay collection *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture*, Marianne Novy examines adoption as a function of narrative that dramatizes cultural tensions about family and hereditary bonds. According to Novy, "Adoption can deconstruct compulsory reproductive heterosexuality at the basis of relationality" (284). Relationality is created through both legal and sentimental bonds—a point that I extend to semantic and poetic meanings of family and kinship.[5] Later, in *Reading Adoption: Family Difference in Fiction and Drama* (2007), Novy argues that "narratives clarifying genealogies are conditioned into our society" and that a fair share of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature concentrated on displaced children because there were more such children circulating in society (88-89). It is interesting that Novy uses "clarifying," since as Margaret Homans has found in *The Imprint of Another Life*, adoptions tend to not clarify but be generative, creating more meaning and more story. This dissertation argues that this generative aspect of adoption narrative occurs also at the rhetorical level through both semantic and poetic meanings. This project hopefully adds to the field of rhetorical theory by offering another lexicon, adoption, through which to explore the lenses of semantic and poetic meaning.

---

[5] The poetic does not simply equal sentimental; the relationship in language is much more complex. The poetic meanings of adoption have personal, situational, cultural, and socio-political meanings depending on the rhetorical situation. For example, when asked in a legal context whether one is adopted, one's feelings, the explanation given, and the lexicon used may be different from what they are if one is asked this question in the context of a medical exam, an inheritance reading, a genetic counseling session, a date, or a party. Adoption as a legal marker of belonging and being bound as kin can be difficult and complex since adoptees' subjectivity is bound up in their identity as adoptees.

In *The Imprint of Another Life*, Homans argues that searches for "roots" do not necessarily mean a search for family but for knowledge, a means of canon building for people deprived of standard parts of their narrative. She too notes how adoption questions genetic essentialism and even the possibility that "origins"—as we like to conventionally define this term—can ever truly be found, noting that "adoptive origin stories and origin stories are not discovered in the past so much as they are created in, and for, the present" (21, 114). This point fits in with Burke's argument about semantic and poetic meaning, in that adoption relies on stable and unstable meanings of relationality and kinship that can evolve over time, be written and unwritten, be signed, consigned, and struck down. By drawing on already established adoption theories about kinship and meaning-making and tying them closer to rhetorical approaches to kinship and meaning, this dissertation demonstrates that interesting rhetoric work has already been done in the field of adoption concerning the lexicons of kinships. I argue that by going more in-depth to examine the rhetorical aspects of adoption lexicons in texts, we can reach new insights about the creativity that goes into the construction of adoption and adoptee-centered narratives and about rhetorical tropes that may tie these narratives together, even across genres and formats.

In his 2016 monograph *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption*, John McLeod examines adoption, "the centrality of the notion of secrecy to the administration of adoption contracts… and the troubling ethical and political consequences when adoption is maintained as a matter of secrecy" (35). McLeod states that origin searches do not promise "complete personhood through the identification of biogenetic ancestry" and that adoptive beings are a "distinct and trans-figurative rendering of transcultural adoption's possibilities as it emerges across a range of texts" (36, 4). I posit that, like the search for a neutral vocabulary, the search

for certainty, across-the-board consensus on adoption and its lexicon is also looking to make a totality out of a fragment. Instead, it is more useful to look at adoptee-centered texts as explorations of the frontiers of human kinship and examine how adoptees construct identity and kinship around the limitations that culture and biological signifiers create. In Kay's *The Adoption Papers* the Daughter asks about halfway through the collection, "a few genes, blood, a birth. / All this bother, certificates, papers. / It's all so long ago, / Does it matter?" (Kay 20). And in the end, it really does all matter: that which makes biological kin and adoptive kin.

Cynthia Callahan's *Kin of Another Kind: Transracial Adoption in American Literature* examines pre- and post-WWII adoption, arguing that transracial adoption in America carries "great metaphorical significance in race relations and marking changing cultural attitudes to family and 'creating family'" and reveals "that perhaps all race is unknowable" (2, 60). Callahan notes in her reading of texts by Sherman Alexie, Barbara Kingsolver, Toni Morrison, and Pearl S. Buck that yet again, adoption is a tool in writing to highlight the often "paradoxical nature of American identity," and adoption "embodies some of our biggest individual and collective concerns about belonging" (158, 166). This point reflects much of what I have already found in examining transracial adoption: that more language is used to explain a complicated and queer interplay of kinship and sentiment.

While all relationships are built to a certain degree on rhetoric and the complex negotiations that emerge from culturally conditioned notions of kinship, modern plenary adoption and its accompanying practices are unique in their approach to kinship building and rhetoric. This dissertation draws on Burke's foundational theoretical work in texts such as *A Rhetoric of Motives*, *Language as Symbolic Action*, and *The Philosophy of Literary Form* because of his work on symbols, particularly his characterization of humans as "symbol-making

and symbol-misusing" people (41). This characterization of rhetoric frames humans as striking out and creating new symbols and deploying older symbols in an imperfect way. Burke's *The Philosophy of Literary Form* is particularly foundational to modern rhetorical theory, bridging the gap between rhetorical and literary study. His work has contributed to scholarly research in fields as disparate as linguistics, Shakespeare criticism, and political science. Meanwhile, adoption is a vibrant interdisciplinary field receiving input from literary scholars, historians, philosophers, legal scholars, social workers, sociologists, psychologists, non-academic activists, and more, but not significantly from rhetoricians, leaving much rhetorical work to be done. And yet the work of Burke and his colleagues such as Edward Said, Susan Sontag and her work on metaphor, and even Aristotle and his early ideas about persuasion,[6] hold important implications for adoption studies, particularly in the lexical construction of kinship bonds beyond biological referents, while adoption studies simultaneously furnishes a venue for applying Burkean work that rhetoricians should value because the formation of adoptive families is a rhetorical practice. Building kinship ties in the absence of blood ties, adoption persuades and is persuasion.

Meanwhile, in *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), Burke defined rhetoric as "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents," as rhetoric, synonymous with persuasion, uses symbolic action to call people to physical action. This definition ties in very well with seeing adoption as a rhetorical practice that operates and is defined on many levels (41). In *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966), Burke takes Marshall McLuhan's popular slogan "the medium is the message" and challenges its privileging of medium over message while also acknowledging the importance of the medium to the

---

[6] Aristotle was an orphan and may have married an adoptee.

deliverance of the message. This challenge is important to this dissertation as, while I have built my chapters around adoptee-centered texts that challenge language use, they are divided by medium and consider the importance of the medium while also discussing how lexicons evolve in and across mediums.

Positive, Accurate, and Honest: Contemporary Conflicts in the Lexicons of Kinship

This chapter examines the evolution of prescriptive adoption languages of the past fifty to seventy years, specifically Positive Adoption Language, put forth by Marietta Spencer, Accurate Adoption Language, put forth by an informal consortium of journalists/adoptive parents, and Honest Adoption Language, put forth by Origins Canada, an adoptee rights charity. I examine the pre-history of these lexicons, why these lexicons were made, their successes in influencing the public and the public's perception of adoptive kin. Prescriptive adoption languages demonstrate the constant renegotiation of social norms surrounding child welfare over time. In particular, I unpack how adoption is construed as the Other to biological kinship which I argue is the inescapable rhetorical touchstone for intimacy despite a move toward promotion and acceptance of adoptive families and their kin in the West and Western media. Thus, despite their project to normalize adoptive families, prescriptive adoption languages resist the primacy of biology as a dominant signifier of kinship while also replicating the referents of kinship.

The "Ghost Kingdom" in *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* Trilogy

      In this chapter, I examine the films *Lion* (2016) and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy (2008-

2016) in which the adoptee protagonists, Saroo and Po, find themselves haunted by memories

and emotions of their pre-adoptee lives. Betty Jean Lifton in "Ghosts in the Adopted Family,"

calls these "the ghost kingdom" of the adoptee which "spring from the unresolved grief, loss, and

trauma…the lost babies, the parents who lost them, and the parents who found them" (71). Lifton

continues, "The adoptee's Ghost Kingdom can also be seen as an alternate reality. It is the Land

of What Might Have Been" (72). In *Lion* and *The Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, the protagonists must

find their way "into the Ghost Kingdom and lure their ghosts into the bright light of the real

world, where they become flesh-and-blood people" (Lifton 73). In these films, Saroo and Po do

this by coming to terms with the semantic and poetic meanings of objects shown on screen: a

train station water tower, jalebis (an Indian street dessert), and a familiar sun symbol. They

investigate these beyond just their anesthetic objective meaning for these adoptee protagonists to

find their way home, find out their past, and learn who they are in relation to their kin and

community. The poetic emotional meaning of these objects elicits the same power as their

semantic meaning and the reason for their emotional reaction must be unpacked for them to

finally exit the Ghost Kingdom. At the same time, these films wrestle with the internal and

external stresses on the adoptee's psyche, from intrusive memories and thoughts and the collapse

of time and space through cinematic simultaneity that both simulates their mental anguish while

also serving to guide the adoptee to a revelation about their origins. In *Lion*, cinematic

simultaneity serves to demonstrate that continued connection across time and distance that Saroo

shares with his first family before he eventually tracks them down. However, the search for

family, found, adopted, biological, or otherwise, still uses family as its touchstone for intimacy, again, placing adoptees in a predicament.

"I Know What I Am and I'm Trying to Be Better Than That": Adoptees, Power, and the Adoptive Family in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* and *Superman: American Alien*

In this chapter I examine two well-known superhero comic book characters, DC Comics' Superman[7] and Marvel Comics' Loki[8] specifically in two short issue runs, Al Ewing's *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, a nineteen-issue run from 2014-2015, and Max Landis's *Superman: American Alien* but also taking into account their multi-decade print and screen history. Superman is a heroic figure, both in the comics and in our world, with his S-symbol signifying both American patriotism and universal human rights. Loki, on the other hand, is a villain—a beloved villain but nonetheless, a villain. In this chapter I examine how these comic book characters respond to the societal and discursive pressure to sublimate their power to their adoptive people's service, and to express their loyalty and allegiance to their adoptive people's values and culture through complete altruism unto death as a means of expressing that loyalty.

Through these characters, whose print history nicely align with the rise of intercountry and transracial adoption, one can see the complex evolution of the adoptee as a figure of belonging in a fantasy world where, like ours, biological kinship is a touchstone for intimacy. Both characters are under immense pressure to prove their loyalty or disloyalty to their adoptive

---

[7] Superman is also known as Clark Kent (his government name) and Kal-El (his Kryptonian birth name). I will primarily use Superman but refer to Clark Kent when appropriate.

[8] Loki's full name is Loki Laufeyson of Asgard. Despite being the adopted son of Odin, he still carries the vestigial remnants of his true parentage in his name and title while still being "of Asgard."

families and communities but furthermore, they are under immense pressure from the very institution of family itself to assimilate and integrate. And yet nothing they do is ever enough. While Superman sublimates his power to humanity and is intensely loyal to them, ending Max Landis' *Superman: American Alien* as their sworn protector, Loki in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* escapes. He excludes himself from the narrative of Ragnarok, a system of unending reincarnation in his adoptive culture that is dependent on Loki fulfilling his role as traitor. Instead, he chooses to escape the very comic book pages on which he is written. Using his preternaturally Agentur imaginative powers, Loki offers a third way—albeit a magical one—to navigate the vulnerable and dangerous position that adoptees can find themselves in.

Conclusion

This dissertation examines the language with which we are asked to discuss adoption. I ask who is being served and, through examining some films and comics, who is being asked to compromise and accept the status quo and how some rebel. Adoption discourse is highly negotiated across the axes of time, voice, and imagination. Despite the permanence of adoption in terms of custodial and legal negotiation, the relationships created in adoption are unstable and are in constant renegotiation and reconsideration. I conclude with an examination of polyphony, polyvocality, and fluidity in Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*. Through lexical, film, and comics analysis, this dissertation interrogates the ways adoptees and their constellation discuss adoption and its perceived placement as Other to biological kinship, how they navigate the

"psychic quandary embodied in the impossible question of the 'real'" and find a truth to their

kinship (Eng 132).

Works Cited

Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Vintage Books, 1957.

Callahan, Cynthia. *Kin of Another Kind: Transracial Adoption in American Literature*.
University of Michigan Press, 2011.

Carp, E. Wayne, Ed. *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives*. University of Michigan
Press, 2004.

Carp, E. Wayne. *Family Matters: Secrecy and Disclosure in the History of Adoption*. Harvard
University Press, 1998.

Eng, David L. *The Feeling of Kinship*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Ewing, Al. *Loki: Agent of Asgard: The Complete Collection*. Marvel Entertainment LLC, 2021.

Homans, Margaret. *The Imprint of Another Life; Adoption and Human Possibility*. University of
Michigan Press, 2013.

Huehnergard, John. *Key to a Grammar of Akkadian*. Eisenbrauns, 2013.

Kahan, Michelle. "'Put Up' On Platforms: A History of Twentieth Century Adoption Policy in
the United States." *The Journal of Sociology and Social Work*, vol. 33, issue 3, 2006, pp.
51-72.

Kay, Jackie. *The Adoption Papers*. Bloodaxe Books, 1991.

Landis, Max. *Superman: American Alien*. DC Entertainment, 2017.

Lifton, Betty Jean. "Ghosts in the Adopted Family." *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, vol. 30, no. 1, Jan.
2010, pp. 71–79. EBSCOhost, https://doi.org0.1080/07351690903200176.

Lion. Directed by Garth Davis, performances by Dev Patel, Sunny Pawar, and Nicole Kidman,
The Weinstein Company, 2016.

Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding: Book I*. Ed. Jonathan Bennett, 2007.

Kung Fu Panda. Directed by Mark Osborne and John Stevenson, performances by Jack Black,
Ian McShane, Angelina Jolie, and Dustin Hoffman. DreamWorks Animation, 2008.

Kung Fu Panda 2. Directed by Jennifer Yuh Nelson, performances by Jack Black, Angelina,
Jolie, and Jackie Chan. DreamWorks Animation, 2011.

Kung Fu Panda 3. Directed by Jennifer Yuh Nelson and Alessandro Carloni, performances by
Jack Black, Dustin Hoffman, and Jackie Chan. DreamWorks Animation, 2016.

McLeod, John. *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption*. Bloomsbury Press, 2015.

Modell, Judith. "Natural Bonds, Legal Boundaries: Modes of Persuasion in Adoption Rhetoric."
Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture. University of Michigan Press,
2004, pp. 207-229.

Nixon, Cheryl L. *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature: Estate, Blood, and
Body*. Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011.

Novy, Marianne, Ed. *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture*. University of
Michigan Press, 2004.

Novy, Marianne. *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama*. University of
Michigan Press, 2005.

Potter, Jennifer E. "Adopting Commodities: A Burkean Cluster Analysis of Adoption Rhetoric."
Adoption Quarterly, vol. 16, 2013, pp. 108-127.

Styles, John. *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital's Textile Tokens, 1740-1770*.
Synergie Group, UK, 2010.

Westbrook, Raymond. "The Adoption Laws of Codex Hammurabi." *Law from the Tigris to the*

    Tiber: The Writings of Raymond Westbrook, edited by Bruce Wells and F. Rachel

    Magdalene, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009.

CHAPTER II

POSITIVE, ACCURATE, AND HONEST: CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS IN THE

LEXICONS OF KINSHIP

The Kinship Matrix

Kinship is the rhetorical touchstone for intimacy. Those who fight in the military together can become "a band of brothers." Fraternities and sororities emphasize the level of the intimacy created through acceptance and the paying of dues by calling each other "brother" and "sister." At Texas A&M University, the student body is the "Aggie Family" ("Aggie Culture"). In Black American culture (and many others), friends of one's parents are "aunts" or "uncles" even if they are not a parent's sibling. In fictional media, the moment a child calls a parental figure by a parental title ("Dad" or "Mom") for the first time is a dramatic emotional turn, marking the reciprocation of a desired intimacy (*Despicable Me*, *Instant Family*). The granting of kinship to another through even the most banal performance of honorifics and other signifying acts of affection[9] is still a measure by which we denote an *intimacy* that Lauren Berlant characterizes as "a public mode of identification and self-development... [that] involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way" (3-4, 1). Despite the existence of myriad intimacies, kinship—*biological*

---

[9] Not to the exclusion of marriage, romance, or sexual bonds, but that is not the focus of this dissertation. The focus of this dissertation is the rhetoric of the unmaking and making of kin in connection to child adoption.

kinship—is still a criterion by which all other intimacies are measured even in statements that express an association stronger than consanguinity. People can describe someone they met, trust, and confide in as "a cousin" or even "like a cousin" while being estranged from their biological cousins because across many cultures, kinship serves as a strong, if not the strongest, signifier of bond.[10]

Because kinship plays such an embedded role in languages and cultures, there is intense discourse pressure to cohere. It is difficult to elude kinship as a practice, metaphor, or measure of intimacy. I call this the *kinship matrix*. In Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, she draws from Monique Wittig's "heterosexual contract" and Adrienne Rich's notion of "compulsory heterosexuality" to create the *heterosexual matrix,* a "grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (151). In Butler's *heterosexual matrix*, heterosexuality is "a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility" upon which bodies are pressured to cohere and make sense through a "stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female)," and these expressions are "oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (151). Bodies that fall outside the stability of heterosexuality read as lesser than, deviant, or resistant. Meanwhile, in the *Adoption & Culture* article "Danish Milk," Mette A. E. Kim-Larsen adapts Butler's *heterosexual matrix* to a "'nutrition matrix' (*ernæringsmatrice*)" to highlight the role of lactose as a signifier of difference between Danes and their transracially adopted (mostly

---

[10] See Alasdair Pettinger's 2009 work in transatlantic studies on how African Americans and Africans create bonds of kinship during 20th-century encounters in "African Americans on Africa: Colleen J. McElroy and the Rhetoric of Kinship," as well as David Lancy's chapter "It Takes a Village" in the 2015 edition of *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings*, and Schneider's 1968 *American Kinship*, which studies American kinship etiquette.

Korean[11]) children (355, 357). In the nutrition matrix, food serves as a "performative…

hegemonic 'grid of cultural intelligibility' that constitutes subjects as either normal or deviant"

and "within the limits of this nutrition matrix, individuals are regulated and made recognizable…

as subjects holding specific identities related to the consumption of certain foods" (Kim-Larsen

355). She adapts the hegemonic gender aspects to her nutrition matrix through Lovise Haj

Brade's "'firstness' (*førstehed*), which insists on a strict majority focus by calling attention to the

otherwise imperceptible position of the normal and the neutral" (Kim-Larsen 355). The Danish

diet includes many foods with lactose. Many Korean adoptees' bodies suffer when eating such

food, while their Danish parents' do not. Thus, Danes pathologize Korean adoptees and their

lactose intolerance as the deviant Other, even as diseased, deficient, and inferior (Kim-Larsen

360, 357). Lactose intolerance serves as an embodied signifier of the limits of inclusion Korean

adoptees can have in Danish culture and in kinship with their Danish adoptive family.

I draw on Butler's *heterosexual matrix* and Kim-Larsen's *nutrition matrix* to postulate a

kinship matrix, a nebulous grid in which bodies, bonds, and desires are naturalized. In the *kinship

matrix*, it is natural to have kin, to desire kin, and to organize interactions in ways that resemble

kin. It is unnatural to be alone, to reject kin, and to organize one's interactions in ways that reject

kin. In the pattern of "firstness" or majority, biological kinship is the normal and the neutral.

Butler states in *Gender Trouble*, "The binary relation between culture and nature promotes a

relationship of hierarchy in which culture freely 'imposes' meaning on nature, and, hence,

renders it into an 'Other' to be appropriated to its own limitless uses, safeguarding the ideality of

the signifier and the structure of the signification on the model of domination" (37).

---

[11] Ninety percent of East Asians, including Koreans, are lactose intolerant ("Lactose Intolerance"). Ninety percent of Danes are lactose tolerant (Hildebrandt).

In the kinship matrix, if one discovers biological similarity, it is natural to seek biological kin out to claim them as kin. In the *Star Wars* film series, when Luke discovers Leia is his twin sister and Darth Vader is his father, he moves to claim them as kin. While Obi-Wan, after witnessing his turn to the Dark Side, rejected his metaphorical brother Anakin/Vader, Luke, in hopes Vader will return to the Light Side, embraces his biological father. Vader's redemption comes through his decision to reclaim his biological kin. In the afterlife, he is reunited and celebrates with his metaphorical brother, Obi-Wan. Vader's journey back to a metaphorical brotherhood with Obi-Wan comes through embracing biological fatherhood of Luke. To borrow some of Butler's language, the kinship matrix is a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of associative intelligibility within which bodies are pressured to cohere and make sense through stable biology expressed through a stable familial bond (biology expresses "kin" and non-biological expresses "not kin" or "resembling kin"), and these bonds are oppositionally and hierarchically defined through compulsory practice of biological kinning. And yet, biological kinship is regularly challenged and destabilized. Biological kinship is regularly challenged by alloparenting, [12] blended families, mixed families, single-parent households, surrogacy, in-vitro-fertilization, foster parenting, community parenting, and even institutionalization.

Adoption in its current Western practice, with its validation in domestic and international law, serves as a challenge and affirmation of the *kinship matrix* hegemonic model. Adoption cleaves a family in both meanings: it cuts and adheres. Because adoption removes a child and places him/her in another family deemed superior by some metric, adoption destabilizes the notion of a stable kinship expressed through a stable biology. A series of legal proceedings and

---

[12] A term used to name an individual other than the biological parent of an offspring who performs the functions of a parent.

forms can cleave and even conceal such bonds permanently. At the same time, adoption places a child in another family, with legal rights that vary by state, nation, and culture and the expectation that the child will be treated as if permanently cleaved to that adoptive family. There is no consideration for the potential of altering that dynamic later, beyond the options of rehoming. And yet, because adoption is a rejection of the kinship matrix's hegemonic model,[13] adoptive families are the subaltern and under pressure to be/appear stable, to cohere, and to make their kinship comprehensible. Linguistically, the kinship matrix places adoptive families in a subaltern state of intelligibility. This becomes a problem because, since World War Two, there has been growing visibility of adoption and adoptive families in the media, a growing body of research on families affected by adoption, and with these two phenomena, accompanying scrutiny of adoptive families, in particular those that adopt internationally and/or transracially, and adoptive families headed by LGBTQ people, a single parent, and/or cohabiting heterosexual couples (Wiley 991, 990, 989).

At the same time, adoption has become, to many, the best solution to the problem of un-parented children. Adoption has its own celebratory awareness month in the United States, announced by presidential proclamation every year since 1995 ("History of National Adoption Month"). People are anxious to protect adoption. Anxiety about foster youth "languishing" in foster care or aging out of foster care led to the near unanimous passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997 (Sprang 111). Anxiety over internationally adopted children being of uncertain citizenship led to the passage of the Child Citizenship Act—which still left 35,000

---

[13] Formally or informally adopting a relative already legally recognized as biological kin is known as "kinship adoption" and is a very common form of adoption today (Taymans et al. 25). However, adoption still needs a rejection of a naturalized hegemonic model of kinship by unmaking and making ties. For example, if an aunt adopts her niece, the bond between mother and child is legally unmade and the aunt is legally made mother.

adult adoptees stateless and at risk of deportation (Baldonado). A strong majority of American

legal, psychiatric, psychological, social care, and child development experts considers adoption

the superior solution to un-parented children, over institutionalization and foster care.[14] There is

strong political, legislative, cultural, and social pressure to normalize and naturalize adoptive

kinship while at the same time upholding the hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of

biological kinship.

One way participants in current Western adoption practice have tried to normalize and

naturalize adoption is through prescriptive adoption languages. *Prescriptive adoption languages*

are English[15] lexicons or limited vocabularies that suggest certain language to describe those in

the adoption constellation.[16] I name these languages *prescriptive* because, through paratext, they

create an authoritative voice on adoption and rely on publication, long-term acceptance, self-

policing, and the passage of time to set up their rightness or decorous use. They instruct their

audience to choose one word over another, such as *adoptee* for *adopted person*, and, in their

paratext, portray themselves as best practice, a norm, or a shibboleth in adoptive families or

among adoption professionals. An example of prescriptive adoption language would be the

rejection of the use of *real* to describe biological kin since it construes adoptive kin as un-real,

fake, or artificial and thus, subaltern.

This chapter examines three *prescriptive adoption languages* that arose in the 20th and

early 21st century, aligning neatly with various post-WWII domestic and intercountry adoption

---

[14] See the American Bar Association's 1999, 2003, and 2017 statements on adoption, the American Academy of Pediatrics' 2012 guide for supporting adopted children, the American Psychoanalytic Association's 2012 "Position Statement on Parenting," and the National Association of Social Workers' 2008 position statement on adoption.

[15] I am limiting this discussion to English, but there are some fascinating and vivid prescriptive lexicons in other languages, such as Tagalog and Swedish.

[16] Even the compound word *adoption constellation* is a prescriptive adoption language suggestion.

booms. The first, "Positive Adoption Language" (PAL), is a lexicon first formally presented in Marietta Spencer's 1979 professional perspective article "The Terminology of Adoption" in *Child Welfare*, a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal founded in 1921 (Spencer 451). The second, "Accurate Adoption Language" (AAL), is a lexicon presented in a 2001 open letter by three American journalists who were upset by the adoption-related reporting after Hollywood actors and transracial adoptive parents Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman divorced, requesting their guidance and suggestions be included as standards in the *Associated Press Stylebook* (Creedy 83). The third, "Honest Adoption Language" (HAL), is a 2003 lexicon put forth by Origins Canada, a local division of Origins International, an international non-profit organization "focused on helping and supporting people separated from children, parents, or other family members by adoption" ("Honest Adoption Language"). While PAL and AAL present themselves as insider knowledge, as the lexicon of adoption professionals and adoptive families now shared with the world for wider use, HAL presents itself as a lexicon that reveals that adoption is a system of transaction, the exchange of money for a child. It intentionally frames elements of adoption that it claims PAL and AAL ignore or avoid framing adoption as equivalent to biological kinship. HAL forces the issue of cleaving into the spotlight by offering a differing perspective on kin over time. I trace the development of and controversies surrounding these languages and argue that, while prescriptive adoption languages serve as tools to naturalize and normalize adoptive kinship, the insistence on modeling language on existing kinship lexicons still places adoptive kin in a subaltern position in the kinship matrix.

Kinship Metaphors

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson examine the systems of metaphors in language and their power at shaping culture. For example, in the West "time is money" is a powerful culturally based metaphor in which "we understand and experience time as the kind of thing that can be spent, wasted, budgeted, invested wisely or poorly, saved, or squandered" (8). Thus, we build systems of productivity and monitoring of time that directly correlate to money. Along similar lines, kinship serves as a powerful structural metaphor, "a metaphor created by conceptual system of the culture," for intimacy that should be immutable but is, in many narratives, difficult, fraught, and sometime irreparably damaged. At the emotional climax of *Star Wars: Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, Obi-Wan Kenobi despairs at his protégé, now turned to the Dark Side, saying, "You were my brother, Anakin!" Even though they were not brothers, Obi-Wan loved Anakin as a brother. They are now enemies. Embedded in this statement is the implication that people can be "un-brothered" if their actions lead them to fall out of a certain realm of acceptability. Thus, kin can be dependent on a certain adherence to morality. Even if one uses kinship as a metaphor of rejection ("He's my brother. You're my best friend"), embedded in such metaphor is an acknowledgment that kinship is a touchstone for intimacy.

Kinship is such a powerful metaphor that we act as if it is a touchstone of intimacy, to the point that we conceive of kinship and create systems of kinship that way. Family is often cited as the "bedrock of society." Kinship can lead to elevation or embarrassment by resemblance because we read kinship also as akin-ness even if there is no "family resemblance" or, as Lakoff and Johnson call it, "fixed core" among our associations (123). While many cultures prioritize

29

one's personal name, it is still difficult to work in most nation-states without a name that denotes some measure of kin membership. In Iceland, one's last name denotes one as son or daughter of someone. In many countries, one's family name denotes membership in a clan that can be traced back centuries. Even if individuals reject their kin and create a unique name for themselves, by creating such a name they still take part in a stipulated familial system that requires a kin-appearing name to participate. In the 2018 film *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, the titular character attempts to sign up for the military. "Who are your people?" the registrar asks. The usually confident and resourceful singularly named Han hangs his head: "I don't have people. I'm alone." The registrar thinks for a moment and then gives Han the last name "Solo." The newly minted Han Solo goes on to build a brotherly friendship with a seven-foot-tall Wookiee and build his own family (*Solo: A Star Wars Story*). His "people" name denotes his aloneness in the galaxy. Yet Han Solo creates his own family and passes on the name Solo to his child, like many foundlings, bastards, and orphans who were assigned familial names so they could work in cultures built on systems of kinship (*Star Wars: Episode VII: The Force Awakens*). A kinship with no one can become kin.

Kinship Meaning

PAL, AAL, and HAL, in their paratext, give the impression of professional authority and experience and a rhetorical awareness of a larger discourse about alloparenting constructions that, upon closer look, appear to be presumptuous in their focus and goals. In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Kenneth Burke argues that words have semantic and poetic meanings: concrete

and controllable meanings and generative and uncontrollable meanings. Catherine A. Salmon notes in "The Evocative Nature of Kin Terminology in Political Rhetoric" that

> As children learn to speak, their first words are often those used to describe people with whom they share an emotional bond—relatives who care for them. Those words take on an emotional significance that is independent of belief. In other words, the emotions associated with close kin ties can be summoned by language. (51)

In adoption lexicons, creators, such as adoption professional Spencer and adoptee rights organization Origins Canada, look to shape participants' and observers' views and feelings of adoption through prescriptive lexicons. However, these lexicons eventually break down. Issues such as the harassment and deportation of intercountry adoptees without citizenship and the sealing of original birth certificates are all problems created by our social and governmental systems' inability to contain the breadth of kinships that current Western adoption practice creates. These adoption lexicons, published and republished in peer-reviewed journals, taught in medical courses,[17] lobbying papers, and online etiquette guides, carry the rhetorical intent to correct the connotational ambiguities or negative interpretations of adoption inadvertently created by a previous lexicon while claiming to be more accurate, less inflammatory, more respectful, or neutral. Instead, as I will demonstrate, far from correcting the public's view on adoption, prescriptive adoption languages continue the objectification of adoptees, encourage the

---

[17] In Martha Henry, Daniel Pollack, and Aaron Lazare's "Teaching Medical Students About Adoption and Foster Care," they state that in the first week of their elective training course on adoption, "a significant feature of the first session is instruction on appropriate and sensitive language for adoption and foster care" (51). They go on to elaborate that "students are encouraged to avoid terms that construe adoption or foster care in a negative light (e.g., commonplace references to birth mothers as 'girls')" and that "students are offered appropriate alternatives to common terms (e.g., 'birth parents' instead of 'real parent') and given explanations as to why the alternatives are preferred." The module leaders are transparent in their rhetorical intent to "engage students to reflect on their beliefs and the common myths or stereotypes often perpetuated about adoption and foster care" through language, especially when handling sensitive medical information such as family medical history collection (Henry et al. 51).

formation of micro communities in a larger macro community based on taboo and policed language, and break down communication.

When Accurate Adoption Language appears in the National Council for Adoption's *Consider the Possibilities: Adoption Specialist Handbook*, the author claims that by using AAL, one is choosing "emotionally 'correct' words over emotionally laden words" (17). However, the handbook does not go into depth about how the writer concluded that this lexicon shapes a more accurate view of adoption simply by urging the use of "born to unmarried parents" over "illegitimate" or "was adopted" over "is adopted" (17). While "The Terminology of Adoption" first appeared as an article, PAL, like AAL and HAL, mostly appears as a table chart (see Appendix). The display of these lexicons in table form, giving "use this, not this" suggestions— often pitting the lexicons against their abstract opposites (positive vs. negative, accurate vs. less accurate, honest vs. industry terminology)—gives these lexicons a pseudo-scientific authority that also does not invite investigation into their challenge to the kinship matrix's hegemonic model. Instead, it conjures up a vision of stability in adoption as a legal act that occurs once and never needs to be returned to for reassessment.

The closest one gets to peer-review would be Spencer's 1979 article "The Terminology of Adoption"—endorsed by the editors of the journal but appearing in a section of the publication reserved for adoption professionals to speak their mind with greater freedom. Her suggested lexicon was professional advice, which, while informed, was not interrogated. "The Terminology of Adoption," despite being in a peer-reviewed journal, did not face the same academic scrutiny as other articles published in its volume. AAL was a letter to the Associated Press by three adoptive parents with careers in journalism seeking to shape the conversation about their lives. Honest Adoption Language was co-written by members of a nonprofit

advocacy organization with a very clear and very strong perspective on adoption as a practice. It is a strange and massive oversight that in a community, industry, and culture so reliant on information and records, these lexicons have been embraced as gatekeeping mechanisms and etiquette guides. All three prescriptive adoption languages come with paratext that demonstrate their awareness that chosen words have a strong rhetorical effect and importance in framing the conversation. Again, as Lakoff states in *Don't Think of an Elephant!*, "Framing is about getting language that fits your worldview. It is not just language. The ideas are primary—and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas" (4). Prescriptive adoption languages evoke ideas about adoption that psychologically raise it to the level of biological kinship while also assuming that to be emotionally healthy and normal, adoptive kin need external and internal validation that their kinships bonds are on the level of biological kinship to be emotionally healthy and normal.

A History of Adoption Language

Adoption as a practice is nothing new. Virtually every society has some formal or informal system for circulating children within itself or among other societies either permanently or temporarily, whether that be warding; fostering; trading; enslaving; transporting children around a village, tribe, or community as labor is needed; placing children in orphanages, in care, or group homes; and so on. David Lancy states in *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, and Changelings*, "Adoption is quite common in the ethnographic record, and… practices in antiquity that facilitated the transfer of unwanted infants to others who'd be willing

to rear them" are well documented. There are vast regions of the world, such as Oceania and West Africa, where a "significant portion of all children are given in adoption" (59). Alongside every society's system for circulating children is a specific language of child transference that can reveal how a culture conceptualizes adoption; "for example, on Vanatinai Island, 'the verb 'to adopt' literally means, 'to feed'," so that in this instance adoption, as a concept, becomes an act of nourishment (58-59).

Because understandings of adoption differ from culture to culture, the rise of intercountry adoption, specifically that of white Western adoptive parents adopting children of color from other countries, has led to problems of linguistic and cultural translation. In a current American colony, the Republic of the Marshall Islands,[18] the Marshallese view adoption as the creation of "a link between two families" (Roby et al. 10). At the turn of the 21st century, the adoption of children out of the Marshall Islands or of Marshallese children in the continental United States has skyrocketed.[19] Many Marshallese have said that they did not understand that handing over their children to adoption brokers meant their children would be permanently removed to the mainland and that they would never regain legal authority over their children's welfare. They see all adoptions as inherently "open," with their children eventually returning to them.

---

[18] The Republic of the Marshall Islands is not signed on to the Hague Convention as of 2022. Thus, many of the protections that would elsewhere regulate intercountry adoption still are not in place. There has been a ban on international adoption from the Marshall Islands since 2000. The adoption of Marshallese children on the mainland continues.

[19] Before RMI instituted an international adoption ban in 2000, from 1996-1999, "over 500 children were adopted from the Marshall Islands by Americans," making the island of only 75,000 "within the top twenty source nations for international adoption" (Walsh; "The Republic of the Marshall Islands"). Back on the mainland, between 12,000 and 15,000 Marshallese people live in Northwest Arkansas. More than 4,000 private adoptions occurred in Benton County, where many Marshallese live. A Washington County Circuit Judge, Doug Martin, stated that ninety percent of adoption consent cases that came before his bench involved Marshallese children (Froelich).

Miscommunication and the exploitation of a distinct cultural understanding of adoption has led to unexpected damage of Marshallese families.

Communication problems within English, and even within the comparatively homogenous system of the fifty United States, led to attempts to prescribe a lexicon for the adoption discourse. Prescriptive adoption languages appear to arise out of a dual need to solidify a common baseline understanding of adoption and to promote adoption as a reasonable alternative to other practices that deal with the custody and care of un-parented children, such as exile or institutionalization. While PAL, AAL, and HAL are relative newcomers on the adoption scene, the idea of actively influencing the public's vision of people who are orphans or classified as "foundlings" to promote their acceptance and integration into communities and families through the expansion of or flipping of words and definitions dates back centuries. In the 18th century, Jonas Hanway, a social reformer at Thomas Coram's newly minted London Foundling Hospital, expanded the institutional definition of "orphan" and "foundling" to include illegitimate children that people wanted to surrender to the institution (Nixon 14). Before this shift in meaning, the Foundling turned away illegitimate children. A few years later, a man signing himself W. Hutton sent an impassioned letter to *Town & Country Magazine*, in which he looked to rebrand the inmates of the London Foundling Hospital from pitiable "neglected fruits of unlawful love" to "founders of families" dependent on their "own merit." Hutton first cast the foundlings in a familiar metaphor of "neglected fruits": waste pruned from the legitimate family tree (708). Hutton then moved away from that familiar metaphor by envisioning the foundlings instead as fertile seeds and saplings that embody the values of independent secular humanism in action. This rhetorical shift transformed foundlings from pruned ends of the family tree to a new harvest of potential. Foundlings became individuals wanted in a home, on an estate, in

employment. Rebranding foundlings in imaginative ways was crucial to their long-term success and survival beyond their childhood in an institutional setting.

Prescriptive adoption languages appear, like the rhetorical work of Hanway and Hutton, to rise from a desire to normalize adoptive kinship and demystify the non-biological kinship ties created in some[20] adoptive families. Kinship has "traditionally been based on blood or biological relationships among individuals… conceptualized as indissoluble and as mystical in nature, transcending legal and other kinship arrangements" (Miall et al. 8). Adoption, since an authoritative government body (or the cooperation of several) sanctions it at every stage, troubles traditional ideas of kinship, blood, belonging, and biology. In a 2003 survey, Charlene E. Miall and Karen March found that while the biological families accepted adoptive families, certain aspects of the adoption process discomfited respondents as "going against nature" (34). Respondents recognized that, while they mostly accepted adoption in the abstract and the adoptive families they knew, adoption troubled their assumptions about kinship and family, with its ability to sever a bedrock of biology with a combination of emotional and legal performance reified by authoritative acknowledgement. Prescriptive adoption languages look to appease anxieties that adoption goes "against nature" by controlling the discourse at a lexical level, promising that if only society embrace them, such anxieties and divisions will vanish because they will share not only speech but also attitudes.

---

[20] Some adoptive families do have biological ties between family members, as is the case with Olympic gymnast Simone Biles's situation of *kinship adoption*.

Legal Challenges of the Kinship Matrix

In Butler's heterosexual matrix, feminine/female are sublimated and, as in Simone de

Beauvoir's and Luce Irigaray's analyses of the female body, "marked within masculinist

discourse, whereby the masculine body, in its conflation with the universal, remains unmarked"

and "parading in the mode of otherness" (Butler 12). In the same way, adoption parades in the

mode of otherness, creating legal challenges to a society built on systems of kinship. In *Like Our*

Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood, Julie Berebitsky argues that

adoption in the 20th century challenged and subverted the nuclear biological family by

streamlining the legal means to sever biological bonds while still upholding the model of the

nuclear biological family as the gold standard. After World War Two, adoptive mothers

"challenged and occasionally supported dominant views of motherhood," recognizing the ideal

of the nuclear family model by seeking to conform to it through adoption but also through

adoption, turning motherhood into a spiritual performance of kinship acceptance rather than a

biological experience (Berebitsky 9, 178). However, despite spiritualizing a biological

experience, adoption still asks participants and spectators to use signifiers of kin and hold two

contradictory notions: that family is at once separable and inseparable.

What makes adoption as a deviant practice in the kinship matrix different from

homosexuality in Butler's heterosexual matrix is that, in its current Western practice, it needs the

consent of the government (or governments). Adoption is deviant but sanctioned deviance. We

want children to be in *a* family in which kin feel like kin as much as possible. For example, in

the Virginia Supreme Court 2005 case of *Davenport v. Little-Bowser*, the Commonwealth of

Virginia refused to issue revised birth certificates for Virginia-born children approved for

adoption by same-sex couples in other states. Virginia, a state that banned same-sex marriage, claimed that allowing such documents would violate the state's rules against "birth certificate revision" and the policy of "complete and accurate information." However, in domestic adoption in the United States,[21] when a child is adopted by a heterosexual couple or single parent, all states—including Virginia—issue a revised birth certificate with the adopting parents' names replacing the birth parents' name/s, and the child's "original birth certificate" (OBC) is filed away, discarded, or sealed. In *Davenport v. Little-Bowser*, the LGBT rights organization Lambda Legal sent a friend-of-the-court brief arguing that in order for the birth certificate to comply with the state's rules of "complete and accurate information," the state would have to abandon the accepted practice of revising birth certificates to acknowledge that the adoptive parents were the parents. In this case, adoption assumes legal primacy over biology.

After the verdict, Lambda Legal characterized their contribution as "ensur[ing] that all children born in Virginia and adopted into families in other states have access to *accurate birth certificates* reflecting their relationships to their legal parents" (emphasis my own), an ironic statement considering that adoptees' revised *birth* certificates do not accurately reflect their relationship to their adoptive parents. These are, as Joan Heifetz Hollinger states in a 2005 analysis of the case, "legal fictions"—but essential fictions in a system where a child may be denied access to "passports, social security numbers, health care, insurance, admission to school, or driver's licenses" without a revised birth certificate with the adoptive parents' names on it (74). It also highlights the delicate nature of adoption: when people are unwilling to play games with the legal fictions of adoption, the whole fiction breaks down.

---

[21] Since adoption's legal codification in Massachusetts in 1851.

The inverse examples of this point are cases revolving around sexual relationships with close biological or adoptive kin, some with tragic ends. In 2018, local news in North Carolina reported that a twenty-year-old woman legally adopted out of state as an infant reunited with her biological family after she turned eighteen and afterwards, started a sexual relationship with her biological father. Shortly thereafter, he divorced her birth mother. After the adopted woman gave birth to a child by her biological father, her biological mother reported them to the police, and they were arrested and charged with "incest with adult, adultery, and contributing to delinquency" (Bowerman). In this case[22] and others like it, where reunited biological family members assume romantic relationships,[23] the criminality of the relationship hinges on the belief that a biological kinship link endures even though the state no longer recognizes the couple as related. The hegemonic power of biology supersedes the "legal fictions" that uphold adoption. The incest is prosecutable by the legal system that previously established that they were not kin. It is "legal incest." A further challenge to the power of the courts to dictate biological bonds occurs in cases of adoptive siblings or people who are not biologically related growing up together and then legally marrying. One well-known case is that of Hollywood actress Lindsay Price's parents. Her mother was a Korean War orphan adopted by an American family who eventually married their biological son (Cruz). [24] The kinship matrix does not acknowledge adoptive kin as incestuous because biology is the naturalized standard that is defied in incest.

---

[22] This case ended tragically. In April 2018, the biological father murdered his infant son, the baby's mother, her adoptive father, and later himself (Howland).

[23] In the adoptee community, this is called "genetic sexual attraction" or GSA and was postulated by Barbara Gonyo of Truth Seekers in Adoption, a Chicago-based adoptee support group. However, there is no psychological research basis for this, only first-hand anecdotes and shared stories from adoptees who were in contact with their biological relatives and reported that they felt GSA (Kirsta).

[24] Another example, also from Hollywood, would be Woody Allen's relationship with the daughter of his former partner Mia Farrow, Soon-Yi Previn. While they shared no official state-sanctioned adoptive relationship, Soon-Yi's age and status as a transracial adoptee was a part of the rhetoric of "scandal" surrounding their relationship.

They are adoptive siblings but are not biologically related, and thus their marriage, though

unusual and by their own daughter's admission "scandalous," is legal and not considered "legal

incest."

Through these legal cases and examples, we can see that adoption, as sanctioned

deviance in the kinship matrix, still upholds biology as the normalized standard. The hegemony,

the government of the United States, is willing to construct the "legal fictions" of adoption, such

as revised birth certificates, up until the point that such fictions create taboo situations that

challenge biological kinship standards such as incest. Prescriptive adoption languages by their

nature serve as an integral part of building "legal fictions" beyond official documents by

concealing or, as in the case of HAL, defiantly highlighting the sheen of adoption.

Positive Adoption Language

Several linguistic changes to the lexicon of the adoption discourse occurred in the 20th

century. The first prescriptive adoption language, Positive Adoption Language, carried with it

the project of normalizing adoption and its deviant signifiers by making biological kin

linguistically deviant, normalizing adoptive kin through the erasure and concealment of

biological and in the case of transracial adoption, racial difference. One effect of Positive

Adoption Language on the adoptive family is that it silences adoptees' voices and denies their

agency.

The project of making biological kin linguistically deviant began with the controversial

change of the term *natural mother*[25]—which was already linguistically deviant by putting

"natural" in front of "mother"—for *birth mother*. Some trace the origin of *birth mother* to Pearl

S. Buck's 1956 article in *Woman's Home Companion* "We Can Free the Children," citing it as

the first use of "positive adoption language," as using "birth mother/father/parent" is one of the

most prolific and well-known aspects of "positive adoption language." However, upon reviewing

Buck's work from 1955 and 1956—and 1972—I conclude that it does not appear to be a strong

candidate for the origins of *birth mother* or demonstrative of a strong linguistic shift in adoption

discourse. Buck does open her 1956 article "We Can Free the Children" with "We all agree, it

seems, that all children need the love of permanent parents and family" (38). However, in

context, it appears ambiguous whom she refers to as "permanent parents" since she also alludes

to predatory adoption practices that remove children from acceptable homes. In the sentence that

appears to be a possible origin of the "Buck invented *birth mother*" narrative, Buck writes, "Let

us remember that the child is and must be the first consideration—not *the parents either by birth*

or adoption, not the fear of their becoming a charge of a state or county, not the property sense

of an organization" (38, emphasis my own). In several sections of the article Buck does refer to a

"natural family" or "natural mother" (71). But to cite Buck's work in the late 1950s as the origins

of *birth mother* when it does not even use the phrase in that order seems very thin.

---

[25] Birth certificates, original or revised, still use *mother,* and assume biological relation. For example, on my American birth certificate, my adoptive mother is listed as "mother" even though she was nowhere near the island of my birth when I was born. However, she is my mother, despite not *birthing* me in a biological sense. This "legal fiction" stems from the complication that, in international adoption law and practice, motherhood (and parenthood in general) is both—and neither—an important biological and legal relationship that needs recognition and verification in order for someone to function as a citizen. A minor adoptee's access to public education, financial assistance, international travel documents, identification, and jobs can be dependent on parents' ability to prove that they are the guardian of the minor, and a birth certificate, even if it does not accurately capture its certification of a live birth, is a fairly easy to start a paper trail that will, down the years, create consistent legal fictions upon which a life is built.

However, in Buck's 1972 article in *Today's Health*, "I Am a Better Woman for Having My Two Black Children," she does, when discussing her children's family history, reference her daughter's "birth mother" (21). Buck was a prolific writer, and other sources from that time may exist that demonstrate the likely slow adaptation but never permanent shift from *natural mother* to *birth mother*, but the context in which Buck uses "birth mother" in the 1972 article and "the parents either by birth or adoption" in her 1956 article makes it more likely that Buck did not coin *birth mother*. It is more likely that Buck was a follower of linguistic trends rather than setting them.

In 1979, Spencer, the program director for Postlegal Adoption Services, the Children's Home Society of St. Paul, Minnesota, and the co-director of the Adoption Builds Families Project, published "The Terminology of Adoption" in the Practice Forum section of the peer-reviewed journal *Child Welfare*. While she did not call it Positive Adoption Language—that came later—the lexical suggestions and paratext included in her article are the first time PAL's project to cohere adoptive kinship to biological kinship norms through language use were laid out and codified as professional advice. "The Terminology of Adoption" was not circulated for peer-review, nor was its counsel the conclusions of qualitative research based on corresponding with adoptees and their families. The Practice Forum is a space set aside in *Child Welfare* for child welfare practitioners to comment on issues related to child welfare. While the section is not as rigorously peer reviewed as other sections of *Child Welfare*, it is still subject to editorial approval, and the work presented in that section is based on the opinions of professional child welfare practitioners. "The Terminology of Adoption" was deemed controversial yet important enough at the time that the editorial staff at the time foregrounded it with a strong message of support: "The author's clarification of the language of adoption strikes us as, in the main, correct,

sensitive, and beneficial. We strongly second her comments in the concluding paragraph of the article" (451). This strong authoritative academic support from the editorial team may have contributed to the acceptance of PAL.

While it is impossible to find the full effect of "The Terminology of Adoption" on the adoption professional community, articles, books, and Spencer's own obituary published many years later highlight it as Spencer's crowning achievement in the field of adoption. When Spencer passed away in 2017, her obituary in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* proclaimed, "While controversial at the time, Spencer's vocabulary has been credited with helping adoption gain broader acceptance worldwide" (Serres). In the Children's Home Society and Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota's obituary for her on their website, her co-workers declare her "an active advocate for the use of accurate and positive language surrounding adoption" through her insistence that "birth parents don't 'give up' their children; they make a loving plan… There are no 'real parents,' but rather 'birth parents' and 'adoptive parents'" ("A Tribute to Marietta Spencer"). These obituaries highlight that Spencer's work achieved its project to reframe adoption by taking an early, active, and micro-level control of the discourse around adoption.

PAL was effective because it had a clear distribution model and a keen sense of the power of rhetorical framing in controlling the discourse of adoption. In *Don't Think of an Elephant!*, a text on framing, Lakoff asserts,

> Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions. In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. Reframing is social change… the words draw you into their worldview. (xv, 4)

43

Lakoff gives the example of Republicans using *tax relief* to frame the conversation around taxes in a way that pathologizes taxation as an "affliction" and "the person who takes it away [as] the hero" (3-4). Republicans used the term repeatedly in White House and State of the Union addresses. When Democrats began using it in rebuttals, their use drew them into the Republicans' frame (4-5). They became inescapably entangled in the "conceptual frame" of *tax relief* (4-5, xv). Spencer makes clear her intention in the opening paragraph of "The Terminology of Adoption," which echoes much of Lakoff's foreword on framing, with the statement, "The words we use are a vital part of educating people about adoption. Words do more than convey facts, they evoke feelings. A word or phrase intended to create a positive impression may have the opposite effect. We have to be aware of the emotional weight of the words used and choose language with care" (451). Spencer goes on to argue that it is important that adoption professional model lexical accuracy to prospective parents to encourage adoption and make them comfortable with the process and their adopted child. She argues that a consistent vocabulary of adoption modeled by adoption professionals "shape[s] service content and reflect[s]… the quality of service" (451).

Spencer does not shy away from adoption's messier aspects. She reminds adoption professionals of the capitalist origins of current Western adoption practice, such as the origins of the phrase "put up for adoption" in the 19th century orphan trains, in which children were removed from their parents or surrendered by or in some cases removed from situations with no parents in evidence and, in the towns they were to be adopted by locals, "placed up high, so they could be easily seen" (Spencer 453). Spencer acknowledges this history and then advises the use of other language that she has deemed "emotionally 'correct' words" in "adoption transactions" in order to "validate and strengthen the cognitive process by which parenthood becomes a

reality" and "the emotional reality of parenthood" (451-452). It is interesting that Spencer uses "emotionally 'correct' words," since this term is reminiscent of Joan Heifetz Hollinger's "legal fictions." However, "emotionally 'correct' words"—complete with scare quotes—serve to uphold the emotional health of the prospective adoptive parents going through the adoption process by removing the shadow of historical injustices, the commodification of the child, and the pressures of the hegemonic model of kinship that normalizes biological kinship to the detriment of adoption. "Legal fictions" exist to ensure that the adoptee, as much as possible, is not denied access to legal privileges that would otherwise be unquestioned without adoption (Hollinger 74). For brevity and comparison's sake, I will focus on PAL's naming of the child ("my child"), the parents ("birth/biological parents"), and prospective parents ("parents") involved and Spencer's description of adoption ("to parent" or "to make an adoption plan").

Much of Spencer's lexicon concerns itself with smoothing out the adoption process so that it appears to be the linear, orderly, and irreversible transfer of children and their familial rights to another party as sanctioned by the state. There is little mental space for even the possibility of continued contact, eventual reunion, or openness in Positive Adoption Language. Once the transfer is complete, the adoptive family is expected to move forward in the project to cohere as much biological kinship norms. Thus, Spencer recommends using "my child" at all stages in the adoption process in order to indicate "a tie of responsibility… 'my child' shares a place to live, a family name, and family love, presumably permanently" (452). Spencer only allows for qualifiers such as "birth son" or "adopted" if clarification is in question. Even in cases of transracial adoption, Spencer states that with children of a different race "with two White parents" the "genetic diversity" should not require verbal clarification because it should be apparent to others how the child joined the family (452). Instead, "emotional and social

belonging" should trump the desire to clarify since "any adoptive parent will declare emphatically that the adopted child is the family's very own child, even if not biologically" (452). In this situation, the adoptive parents' committed and consistent performance of affection through acts of "emotional and social belonging" at the adoptee, who is passive but also expected to reciprocate, serves to draw them within the model of the kinship matrix. They perform naturalized acts that demonstrate their desire for kin and organize their relationship with children who resemble biological kin, stubbornly erasing and concealing difference.

People who never went through the process of Western adoption would simply have their parents be their *parents* without foregrounded clarification terms such as birth, biological, or genetic. By insisting that an adoptee's parents have their kinship label foregrounded with clarification terms such as "biological," Spencer makes deviant the privileged position of biological kinship and normalizes adoptive parents through *parents*. Spencer claims that any foregrounding of "parent" with "adoptive" "implies a conditional parenthood, a qualification of allegiance, a suggestion that the family relationship is tentative and temporary" (458). While biology is merely a "genetic endowment," it is "through adoption [that] children can receive full family (kinship) status in families into which they were not born" (458). In PAL, the adoption process becomes a signifier of kinship. The adoptive parents claim their desire for the child through the declaration that the latter is "my child," and through that possessive display, the child becomes kin.

Spencer makes biological kinship for mothers even more deviant when discussing their desire to parent or claim their children as their own, arguing that "genetic mothers" cannot say, "this child is all my own" because "half of the genetic descent comes from the biological father's

side."[26] Spencer reduces the mother to a "vehicle through which the child's genetic endowment from a long line of ancestors has passed" (452). Biological primacy is usurped by the full transition into a "full family" and the erasure of existence pre-adoption. Spencer is forward-looking and adoptive family focused. "Birth/biological parents" and the circumstances of relinquishment exist in a foggy background haze. There are no spaces or words in Spencer's lexicon for the messy, classist, racist, and sexist ways a child comes to be drawn in to make a "full family." While Spencer does push back against language that portrays parents in a "callous" and "uncaring" way, such as the use of "abandoned" and "surrendered," her focus is on the effects of these words on the reputation of adoption professionals, afraid these words imply "that children were torn out of the arms of their mothers by an unfeeling state or social agency." She also worries that such words encourage in children "fantas[ies] about being reunited with their biological parents" (454). Instead, Spencer suggests "arranging," "making a placement plan," or "delegating an agency to find permanent parents for a child" (454).

When discussing "reunion" Spencer rejects the term as "fairy tale" fantasy, arguing that "the desire to establish contact often reflects no more than the wish of many adopted persons to take a look at their biological ancestors." For Spencer, to be desirous of kin, an element of the kinship matrix, is both a fantasy and reality. The adoptive parents and their affection signify a reality of kinship. The "birth/biological parents" remain in a fog that must remain unexplored lest it undo Spencer's linguistic project to normalize adoption by merely taking "a look at their biological ancestors" (455). While the project of PAL is ambitious, it is, by the author's own admission, also very fragile. After one becomes "full kin" to one's adoptive family, biological

---

[26] In "The Terminology of Adoption" the father is implied to be absent, uninterested in parenting, or uninformed of his fatherhood and thus irrelevant.

bonds continue to be an existential threat to the adoptive family. The adoptive family must be continuously affirmed and signified as stronger than biological bonds through language. There is no space for unconventionality or disagreement with this model from the adoptees or their families. Spencer cites no adopted persons, nor does she give any examples of adopted persons who pursued "reunion" out of a desire "to take a look at their biological ancestors" and found it to be like a fantasy or fairy tale.

Spencer followed up "The Terminology of Adoption" ten years later in 1988 in *Infertility and Adoption: A Guide for Social Work Practice*. In her chapter "Post-Legal Adoption Services: A Lifelong Commitment," one can see how social attitudes to adoption and systemic changes to the process of adoption led the coiner of PAL to expand her lexicon further to meet industry demands for a less rigid form of child transfer. Spencer's 1979 adoption lexicon assumed complete closedness in adoption; was committed to the emotional wellbeing of adoptive families and to the erasure, concealment, and construction of biology as deviant; and framed adoption as a linear regimented transfer of child from family to family. In 1988, she notes, "Over the past few years adoption placement practice has explored innovative ways of providing clients with optional avenues through which to fill their need for information about one another." Spencer's hostility to direct contact between adoptive and biological families simmers under the text. Most of the examples of post-legal adoption services appear to involve no direct contact. Communication between parties goes exclusively through the adoption agency (158).

Nevertheless, she does note the rise of "*outreach*" as "a recently coined term used in lieu of the old word 'searches'" and gives the example of an adoptee finding his birth parents, discovering they are married, and learning he has nine siblings (Spencer, *Infertility* 158-159). The adoptee meets his biological kin and "filled a void in their lives" despite knowing that he

would "never 'rejoin' their own family unit as the 10th child but is wholly tied in with his parents and the family who adopted him 35 years ago" (159). Thus, Spencer acknowledges that adoptees can and will seek out their birth families and when they find them, the reunion will "fill a void." Nonetheless, she is careful to establish that her linear model of adoption still is preserved. Spencer notes that situations where "identifying facts are shared, are referred to as *fully-disclosed meetings*," a strangely corporate term, and could be debated as less "emotionally" correct (164). In 1988, biological kin are still an existential threat to adoptive kin. Spencer tells the story of adoptive parents who "told of the initial bewilderment they felt when their daughter Sandy voiced an interest in knowing more about her genetic ancestry" but who reported that through "post-legal adoption counseling" that anxiety was mollified (160). Spencer promotes the importance of sharing accurate medical history, the importance of adoption agencies facilitating "outreach" in a controlled manner that creates reasonable expectations.

The Legacy of PAL

As the project of PAL was to flip—in an abbreviated manner—the hegemonic kinship model for adoptive families, by normalizing adoption up to and beyond biological kin, it was important for PAL to enter the mainstream in some way. One way PAL entered the mainstream after 1979 was through mass media adoption advice literature. Lois Ruskai Melina's popular adoption manual *Raising Adopted Children: A Manual for Adoptive Parents* was originally published by Harper & Row in 1986 and promoted on the back cover in bright white letters as "The First Child Care Manual for Adoptive Parents," with blurbs from adoption scholars such as

Betty Jean Lifton and Dr. H. David Kirk. *Raising Adopted Children* was a venue in which PAL could reach a wider audience than adoption professionals. As a tribute to the manual's popularity, it was republished in 1998 by HarperCollins to include more information on international adoption (which was at the height of its boom), by which time the jacket copy was describing Melina as the "Dr. Spock for adoptive parents." By promoting Melina's manual as the adoption equivalent of Dr. Spock, author of one of the best-selling books of the 20th century—which also happens to be an influential and reassuring text on childcare—Harper & Row frames *Raising Adopted Children* as a significant, authoritative, and reassuring text on adoption.

  Raising Adopted Children serves as an interesting representation of PAL's persistence and change. In the 1986 manual, the author dedicates a whole chapter to "Talking About Adoption"; in it, she relies on Spencer's earlier work in recommending terms that promote adoption. Melina recommends "Positive Adoption Language," echoing many of Spencer's thoughts in her introduction. For example, she notes that "the words parents choose to discuss adoptive and biological relationships with their children are not only descriptive, but they also convey attitudes" and acknowledges that words can be "emotionally loaded… in a discussion of a sensitive issue such as adoption" (60). By reprinting/reproducing many of Spencer's ideas about the importance of language in framing adoption in a positive manner, Melina's manual gives adoptive parents access to information held in specialized professional venues.

  However, in Melina's take on PAL, some modifications appear. Melina's manual uses "birthparents" and "adoptive parents," an interesting distinction. Both are compound words, but while "birthparents" is a closed form compound word (two words joined together to make a single word), "adoptive parents" is open form (two words meant to be read together, the reader understanding it as compound and not an adjective + noun from context and experience). When

discussing the adoption process, Melina repeats much of what Spencer laid out in 1979; however, she presents Spencer's work less as the professional opinion of one well-meaning and expert adoption specialist than as the product of a (non-existent) survey, incorporating phrases such as "Adoptive parents prefer to call the other set of parents the 'birthparents' or 'biological parent'" (61). This is a problem. When advice for a minority population is presented and framed as emerging from and with the validation of that minority population and this frame is inaccurate, even if that information or advice creates some semblance of harmony, it is, like the "legal fictions" of revised birth certificates and the "emotionally 'correct' words" of PAL, still a fiction. Furthermore, in the case of PAL it creates inaccurate visions and places pressure on adoptees and their families to cohere to criteria that may not capture their individual reality. If parts of one's existence remain intelligible, one will struggle to give it voice.

Like Spencer, Melina continues the project of adoptive family normalization through erasure and concealment, believing that "words used to describe the child who has been adopted should be positive and imply a sense of belonging to her adoptive family" (Melina 60). She notes a social shift away from "refer[ring] to children born out-of-wedlock as 'bastards,'" but does note that "'illegitimate' is still heard" (60-61). She also imitates Spencer's 1979 article's arrangement by dividing her instructions on Positive Adoption Language into four sections: "The Adoptee," "The Adoption Process," "Genetic Relatives," and "Adoptive Family" (60-62). The manual's reproduction of Positive Adoption Language is demonstrative of the influence of Spencer's work beyond adoption professionals and an example of the power of a single article published in a non-research peer-reviewed section of a professional journal when it is taken and reproduced as near gospel in a mass media publication. *Raising Adopted Children* was a manual published—and reprinted—during a period of several domestic and international adoption

booms, when many prospective adoptive parents and adoptive parents were looking for advice on how to raise their children. The amount of space and the presentation of Positive Adoption Language in a "manual" of adoption surely helped it influence those looking for advice while also molding etiquette standards around adoption conversation.

Spencer's "The Terminology of Adoption" was not just a one-off in 1979 and 1988; she continued to confront those in the community about the issue of language. Filmmaker and adult adoptee Jennifer Arndt-Johns tells the story of an encounter with Spencer after a showing of her documentary *Crossing Chasms*. According to Chris Serres,

> After a showing of the film [in 1998], Spencer came up and, with a stern look, insisted on correcting a statement made by Arndt-Johns in the film.
>
> In the documentary, Arndt-Johns said she had been "abandoned on the doorsteps of a police station" in South Korea. "Marietta literally took my hand and said, 'I want to let you know that you were not abandoned, but you were placed upon that doorstep to be found.'"
>
> "I remember tears filling my eyes. With that single sentence, she changed my whole concept of myself… It was a reminder of the powerful resonance that words have."

In this encounter, one can see how Spencer reframes Arndt-Johns's adoption narrative with language that flips the situation from one of careless or thoughtless dispossession to one of careful and intentional relinquishment. Lakoff calls frames "mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions" (xv). Spencer reshaped the way Arndt-Johns saw her adoption narrative and by extension, the way Arndt-Johns saw herself as a baby on the doorstep of a police station.

Spencer's lexical suggestions from "The Terminology of Adoption" endure in table form on websites such as Adoptive Families.com, Adoption.com, and Parents.com. If one looks for "adoption language" on the top three popular search engines, it is the first lexicon suggested. PAL appears on the State of Texas's Texas Adoption Resource Exchange, a promotional division of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. It also appears, along with the National Council for Adoption's "Accurate Adoption Language" (covered later in this chapter), on the official website of Holt International, one of the largest Christian international adoption agencies, which dates back to 1955/1956. PAL is often presented as the only adoption lexicon around, and, through its inclusion on an official State of Texas site, the lexicon has the reinforcement of the state, repeated in mass media publications, along with its first strong historical support from the editorial team at *Child Welfare*.

The project of PAL was, through reframing and controlling the discourse of adoption at the micro-level, to normalize adoption's deviation from the kinship matrix's hegemonic privileging of biological kin by making an adoptee's biological kin linguistically deviant ("birth family") and normalizing adoptive kin ("family") through the linguistic erasure and/or concealment of biological and, in the case of transracial adoption, racial difference. Academics such as the editorial team of *Child Welfare* reinforced its project through their endorsement in 1972, writers such as Melina republished her work in mass media manuals for adoptive parents, and it received state support through its publication on government sites. PAL's legacy reminds us that, as Lakoff reminds us in *Don't Think of an Elephant!* of the negative and positive power of framing and controlling the discourse: "Reframing is changing the way the public sees the world. It is changing what counts as common sense. Because language activates frames, new language is required for new frames. Thinking differently requires speaking differently" (xv). It

is important in adoption to interrogate adjustments to our discourse. Positive Adoption

Language, for better or worse, shows a sincere and enduring attempt to shape adoption through

language. However, it reinforced a linear model of adoption that had little space for the voice of

any dissent, particularly that of the adoptee, who has no say in the transaction and is to be kinned

into compliance and reciprocation into imitating the model of hegemonic biological kinship.

Later in this chapter, I will discuss Honest Adoption Language, a lexicon whose project is

explicitly in opposition to PAL.

Accurate Adoption Language

Accurate Adoption Language is like PAL in project and lexical suggestions. Spencer

states in "The Terminology of Adoption" that she hoped through "gentle education," without

"sitting in judgment of others," her lexicon would lead to a world in which "language of

adoption is loving communication among members of a family created by social contract... and

supported by an informed society that validates the integrity of the family" (459). AAL's project

is also to normalize adoption and its deviant signifiers by suggesting lexical signifiers that make

biological kin linguistically deviant and normalize adoptive kin through the erasure and

concealment of biological and in the case of transracial adoption, racial difference. Spencer's

lexicon circulated—after her own daily use among her adoption-professional peers—first in an

academic journal, and then eventually into mass media adoption manuals and credible and

authoritative spaces on the internet. AAL comes from a 2002 letter by adoptive parents and

journalists to the Associated Press Stylebook (Creedy 84-85). The aim of the letter was to create

an adoption "stylebook" or guide to be permanently included in the *Associated Press Stylebook*, something modeled after the notices the Asian American Journalists Association regularly send out concerning coverage of Asian American topics and issues. This lexicon was framed around the issue of respect and sensitivity when covering vulnerable or marginalized people. While PAL's project initially and mostly confined itself to the discourse of adoption professionals and adoptive families, being dispersed only later to a more general audience, AAL pushed from the outset for a large audience: control of the discourse through validation in the leading reference guide for most news media, corporate public relations, and marketing, the Associated Press Stylebook (Creedy 84). Like PAL, AAL presents itself as sharing etiquette knowledge from a niche culture with a wider, less informed community, saying, "We knew most reporters used the AP Stylebook… so it would be much easier to make a stylebook change rather than try to convince every reporter" (Creedy 84). AAL is perplexing in that, despite its similarities to PAL, it does not acknowledge PAL as its source material. Perhaps PAL slowly drifted into the adoption community unaccredited.

In Kathryn B. Creedy's telling of the story in *Adoption Quarterly*, three journalists who were also adoptive parents, Mike Feazel, Rachel Adelson, and Alan Bresnick, consulted "various adoption listservs" and issued a "simple letter" to "the stylebook editor of the Associated Press, [who at the time was Norman Goldstein,] publishers of the most influential writing guide." Their request was that "editors include an entry under adoption [in the AP Style Guide], which would help journalists avoid the pitfalls that drive the adoption community crazy" (Creedy 84). It is uncertain who is included in "the adoption community" or how many in the "adoption community" and what part of the adoption constellation they consulted through "various adoption listservs" before sending in the letter.

Feazel, Adelson, and Bresnick's letter highlights specifically the problem of "word choices." As Lakoff states in *Don't Think of an Elephant!*, "Framing is about getting language that fits your worldview. It is not just language. The ideas are primary and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas" (4). Their letter reads,

> Through their word choices, even well-meaning journalists can and have inadvertently conveyed the misconception that adoptive families are somehow less genuine and permanent and that people who are adopted–and their role in the family–remain somehow different. The reality is that adoption is as valid a way of joining a family as birth… [and] adoptive families are just like any other, both in law and in loving relationships. (85)

It is not clear from the letter how the press acknowledging that that a person's children are adopted diminishes them as family members. The desire of adoptive parents who are journalists to erase adoption from a familial relationship repeats Spencer's anxieties that repeatedly acknowledging adoption as the process by which kin became kin would make those relationships appear diminished in comparison to biological kinship. Thus, by erasing adoption from a relationship, one elevates such kinship to the level of biological kinship. The problem is that by erasing adoption, one construes adoption as a kinship bond that is lesser in the kinship matrix, even something shameful or embarrassing. It need not be. This treats adoptees like Schrödinger's cat: are they kin by biology or adoption? One suspects they are kin by adoption by the unwillingness to open the box and reveal what they really are. Avoiding adoption as an element of a kinship bond does not put it on par with biological kin. Rather, avoiding adoption as an element of a kinship bond can confuse the audience, make the audience think the speaker is uncomfortable or ashamed of adoption, or obscure adoption and adoptive kin to the point of erasure as a means of kinship.

Creedy notes that, much like PAL, the letter on "Accurate Adoption Reporting" framed adoption as a "one-time event" instead of a "state of being." Thus, Feazel, Adelson, and Bresnick felt that mentioning the Cruise children's adopted status was unnecessary and singled out the family, at a challenging time, as exceptionally dysfunctional—perhaps because of a perceived weakness of adoptive kinship ties—while a biological family would not have their biological kinship highlighted. This contrasts with journalist Adam Pertman's opinion that "adoption is a life-long effort to address loss and grief" (Creedy 85). Creedy agrees that the letter also lacked an awareness of or a willingness to cover the negative aspects of adoptions, in that it failed to "address loss, nor did it use the term 'triad,'" a term commonly used to describe the three groups linked through adoption: the family the adoptee was born into, the adopting family, and the adoptee (85). She argues that this may be because of the letter writers' sense of urgency to address the "basic issues concerning language" and the issue of the Othering of adoptive families. It could have also stemmed from a desire to use the language that journalists use. The "adoption triad"[27] is a specialized (and now outdated) term used by adoption professionals and scholars (85). However, the limits of their letter may have been motivated—like PAL's project— by their desire to shape language through creating a lexicon that normalized adoptive families to the point of insignificance.

---

[27] The triangle imagery of adoption lives on in adoption themed jewelry. The popular symbol of adoption for charm bracelets and jewelry is a triangle intertwined with a heart. The Gladney Center for Adoption sells adoption triad themed jewelry for $40-$120 ("Give the Gift of Love: Adoption Triad Jewelry"). Actress Jane Seymour had a line of adoption-themed jewelry with Kay Jewelers using waves to imitate "open hearts" ("Open Hearts by Jane Seymour"). Some first mothers on Etsy sell crushed and stabbed heart-shaped pieces of metal as adoption charms to raise money and to artistically render their perception of the realities of adoption, complete with the ability to select a birthstone that matches your child and, if one is feeling extra fancy, your birthstone as well, with prices intentionally set to be competitive with Kay Jewelers and The Gladney Center ("Premium 10kt & 14kt Yellow Gold Broken Heart Adoption Pendant—Your choice of stone").

In 2020, the Associated Press granted Feazel, Adelson, and Bresnick's wish to have their Accurate Adoption Reporting included in the AP Stylebook. Under "adoption" in the 55th edition of the AP Stylebook the entry now reads,

> The adoptive status of children or their parents should be mentioned only when its relevance is made clear in the story.

> If relevant, use the term biological or birth parents/mother/father. Do not use real or first parents/mother/father.

Adoptive relationships continue to be highlighted in print and visual news media. In 2018, television host Hoda Kotb's "love for her adopted daughter" was worthy of profiling across multiple media outlets, and a school shooter's adopted status was worth mentioning three times in a single report (Moniuszko; Wallman et al.). While it took many years for Feazel, Adelson, and Bresnick to accomplish their aim of getting their vision for an adoption lexicon included in the AP Stylebook, they did find early success in having AAL included in other publications. AAL appears in the 2007 publication of the National Council for Adoption,[28] *Consider the Possibilities: Adoption Specialist Handbook*, and *The Diversity Style Guide*, an online resource project for journalists hosted by the Journalism Department at San Francisco State University. It is listed alongside the better-known *GLAAD Media Reference Guide*, the *AAJA Handbook to Covering Asian Americans*, and the *Style Guide: Reporting on Mental Health* (often used when reporting the death by suicide of famous people). *The Diversity Style Guide* vaguely acknowledges the efforts of the journalists' open letter in the introduction, calling them "the Accurate Adoption Reporting Group." The letter also appears on the website of

---

[28] The National Council for Adoption is an adoption lobby group affiliated with several domestic and intercountry adoption agencies such as The Gladney Center for Adoption in Dallas, Texas.

AdoptiveFamilies.com and on Holt International's website along with Positive Adoption Language, tying them together as both being acceptable lexicons.

AAL repeats much of PAL's lexical suggestions, using "my child" and recommending people-first type language,[29] urging that the person be foregrounded before his or her adoptee status in a phrase such as a "person/individual who was adopted." AAL argues that "adopted child," the possessive "own child," and "adoptee" are "less accurate language." Like PAL, AAL insists journalists use "birthparent/biological parent" and call "adoptive parents" simply "parents." Like PAL, it puts adoption firmly in the past tense as an event in adoptees' lives and assumes that their birthparents had a certain level of agency in relinquishing them, an assumption contained in the suggested use of "make an adoption plan." Because of the repetition of most of the vocabulary of PAL in AAL, it seems likely that Feazel, Adelson, and Bresnick may have relied on PAL to devise their own lexicon. By the time they wrote their letter in 2002, then, PAL may have reached the point of being accepted on "various adoption listservs" as the standard of etiquette within a wider participating adoption community, moving into the 21st century without being explicitly called "Positive Adoption Language." Feazel, Adelson, and Bresnick may have simply adopted and renamed PAL because they thought "positive" was a biased framing of discourse of adoption. PAL contrasts itself with "Negative Adoption Language," whereas AAL contrasts itself with "Less Accurate Language"; journalism desires accuracy. The Associated Press's mission statement asserts that "We have a long-standing role setting the industry standard

---

[29] *People first* or *Person first language* emerges from the work of people with disabilities as a means of reminding the audience of people's humanity before their disability and to steer away from objectifying slurs such as "cripple" (Folkins) For example, in a 1992 letter to the editor in *Business Week* supporting a bill to aid elderly and disabled persons, a citizen requested that "All references to 'handicapped individuals' in the Act must be changed to 'people with disabilities' ... We join with many of our fellow advocacy organizations in emphasizing the importance of using 'people first' language throughout the Act" (Ehlin 8).

for ethics in journalism. It is our job — more than ever before — to report the news accurately and honestly" ("About Us"). The Stylebook proclaims that it is "published and updated annually to reflect changes in writing style and new guidelines... [and] provides fundamental guidelines for spelling, language, punctuation, usage, and journalistic style. It is the definitive resource for journalists" ("What Is the AP Stylebook?"). Thus, the stylebook must select and justify its guidelines in a manner that reflects its journalistic and editorial values to the many people who use its work as a guide. After all, when journalists consult a stylebook for guidance on how to report on a school shooter who was adopted, they do not want to be using "positive" language, as that may communicate bias. "Accurate," like suggesting that one label parents as "birth/biological parents" and adoptive parents as "parents," frames the discourse around the pursuit of emotional and legal truth about kinship while also elevating adoptive kin to the perceived level of biological kin in the hegemonic model of kinship through linguistic erasure and/or concealment of biological and, in the case of transracial adoption, racial difference. The Associated Press's initial rejection of AAL—without explanation—followed by eventual acceptance and promotion on their affiliated Facebook page shows the limits to which those with power to control discourse are willing to go to accommodate the legal fictions and emotionally "correct" description of adoption that some in the adoption community desire (*Facebook*). Conversely, AAL's inclusion in a handbook for adoption specialists published by one of the largest adoption lobbying conglomerates and an online journalism resource by one of the top journalism schools in the United States shows that in certain areas, AAL has found acceptance and use.

Honest Adoption Language

The final prescriptive adoption language presented in this chapter is "Honest Adoption Language" (HAL), a lexicon published in 2003 by the organization Origins Canada: Supporting People Separated by Adoption. Origins Canada is an adoptee- and first mother-led advocacy group in Canada with strong ties to United States-based organizations such as Bastard Nation, Parents for Ethical Adoption Reform (PEAR), and Concerned United Birthparents (CUB). Origins Canada's aim is to "support those separated by adoption" through search assistance, adoption education, counselor training, and cataloging support services for families considering relinquishment. Origins Canada is part of the larger organization Origins International,[30] which has seven branches and is affiliated with the Alliance for Forgotten Australians, the Baby Scoop Research Initiative, and the Stolen Generations Alliance. They have a long history of advocating for the rights of adoptees and first mothers to view their own documents and contact their relatives. They also fund research into the Baby Scoop Era and the Stolen Generations in Australia and Canada.

HAL's project is to push back against PAL's project by highlighting adoption and adoptive kin as deviant, normalizing biological kin through the erasure and concealment of differences that exist from growing up among kin different from oneself. Origins Canada claims that "[PAL] does not respect … the experience of the adoptive parents who realize that their child has another mother and father as well" and "denies any respect for the family members who were separated from one-another by adoption." The purpose of HAL is not to make freaks

---

[30] No relation to the popular boutique skincare brand.

of adoptees and their families by highlighting deviance but to display adoption as a process that creates a situation in which certain members of the adoption constellation become subaltern— specifically, adoptees and their biological kin. Origins Canada argues that PAL sugar-coats adoption in a patina of normality that it does not deserve and that it erases the trauma of relinquishment and separation. The traumas of relinquishment and separation are sanitized in PAL and AAL as a pre-adoption matter and thus, less or even entirely irrelevant to the adoptee's present state, since any previous kin or concern is meant to be swept aside by the power of being granted legal adoptive kin. HAL identifies all participants of the adoption constellation as deviant; highlights certain participants as subaltern and certain participants as privileged; uses capitalist language that objectifies adoptees to demonstrate their subaltern status in the adoption process; uses the language of loss to highlight the role of unfair policies and systems such as poverty, sexism, and racism in leading to the relinquishment or removal of children from their biological kin; and does all this to promote its vision of social justice for adoptees and first families. Embedded in HAL is a desire to make explicit that adoption works in a complex system of class, race, reproductive, and social injustices that must be righted through the pursuit of class, race, and reproductive and social justice.

HAL invites reflection on adoption, not in creating emotionally "correct" words or legal fictions. In place of Positive Adoption Language's "parents" HAL uses "adoptive parents," "adopters," and "people who have adopted," and for "birthparents" it uses "natural parents" or "parents" to emphasize that an adoptee has "at least four parents" (if the adoptive parents are not single parents). Users of Honest Adoption Language argue, "'birth-terms' dehumanize mothers" as "walking incubators"—a reminder that Spencer in 1979 reduced the birth mother to a "vehicle through which the child's genetic endowment from a long line of ancestors has passed" (452).

They also recommend, instead of "placed" or "relinquished," using "surrendered," "lost to adoption," or "taken for adoption." This diction is interesting because this form places the legal process of adoption as the subject taking a child away: not the adoptive parents, but the process. This construction releases both sets of parents from blame in the "surrender of," "taking of," or "loss" of a child. Finally, while "adopted person" places adoption as something that happened to a person in the past, HAL-users repeatedly use "adoptee" to acknowledge that adoption is not a moment but something that stays with and affects people who are adopted for the rest of their lives.

While PAL, with its origins in a peer-reviewed journal and decades of use in adoption communities through repetition and republication, has become a gold standard, and AAL has found success in controlling the discourse in journalistic spaces, HAL was first published online to a response that variously praised its subversion or marked it as offensive. In a 2014 article on Adoption.com, a pro-adoption and pro-life website, Staff Storyteller Sarah M. Baker states,

> Positive Adoption Language is just one side of the story. There are people who find adoption to be a barbaric practice. They feel that by creating this new vocabulary, we are actually trying to sell adoption more by putting a positive spin on things instead of trying to respect the members of the triad. People who use Positive Adoption Language are sometimes met with anger from these protesters, who often combat it by using another type of wording that can be referred to as Honest Adoption Language.

Baker goes on to note, "Some adoptive parents are greatly offended by the use of Honest Adoption Language." But while some are "greatly offended," HAL has been embraced in certain

circles as the proper etiquette standard. In four of the largest private Facebook groups[31] for

adoptees, HAL is the preferred lexicon for discussing adoption. Not using HAL and insisting on

using PAL- or AAL-type language can also lead to callouts and expulsion—especially if the

online users identify themselves as adoptive parents. Indeed, the most common reason that a

member is expelled from those groups is for deliberately and repeatedly refusing to use HAL to

describe adoption.[32] On Twitter, many adult adoptees identify themselves in their biography with

the HAL-embraced term "#adoptee." In circles discussing adoptee rights issues such as the

application of the Indian Child Welfare Act or the Adoptee Citizenship Act, sometimes using

HAL can be a shibboleth, a means of knowing whether someone is aware of the less than savory

history of Native American adoption and international adoption. Some use HAL to demonstrate

that they are "out of the fog"—a term used to describe adoptees who have awoken from a belief

that adoption is an exclusively win-win situation in which all participants get what they want to a

realization that they were commodified in a system of exchange without their consent. Swapping

over from PAL/AAL to HAL becomes a sign of "wokeness" in the positive sense. The embrace

of HAL by significant portions of the online adoption community by adoptees and first families

shows a strong disconnect between parts of adoption constellation: in discussing their

perspective on adoption, they may not even speak the same language. HAL has not succeeded in

its mission to right the injustices of adoption by taking control of the discourse, but it has given

some in the online adoption community a vocabulary with which to tell their adoption narrative

---

[31] Transracial Adoption Perspectives, Transracial Adoption (which dropped under 5k after an "adoptive parent takeover and adoptee purge" in January 2018), Adoption Truth and Transparency Worldwide Network, and Not Just Hair: The Intersection of Hair/Skincare and Transracial Adoption. While these groups identify themselves as concerned with "transracial adoption," many participants are same-race adoptees.

[32] That is, they are adoptive parents and do not want to use commodifying language to describe the situation of the children they adopted—although rarely, an adoptee refuses to use HAL since they believe their situation improved through adoption.

without the use of lexicons created from the anxieties of adoption professionals (PAL) and adoptive parents (AAL). HAL provides a vocabulary for those who feel pressured or shamed to make an adoption narrative cohere to the kinship matrix's discursive/epistemic model and do not want to pursue normalization or want to resist language that makes them appear to be ashamed or uncomfortable with adoption.

Conclusion

The construction of or expansion of the English language in formal and informal spheres to accommodate a variety of kinship bonds is not a new or unique phenomenon, and neither is adoption. However, adoption in the last fifty to seventy years—and even the last twenty—has changed dramatically, experiencing both normalization and acceptance and harsh criticism and a growing demand for reform and the righting of past wrongs. Despite a move toward promotion and acceptance of adoptive families and their kin in the West and Western media, several domestic and international adoption booms in the mid and late 20th century, and legislative moves to right historical wrongs (Indian Child Welfare Act, Child Citizenship Act) and promote a faster route from fostering to adoption (Adoption and Safe Families Act), there still exist anxieties in Western culture about the implications of adoption for kinship. Prescriptive adoption languages, by their projects either to normalize or to make deviant adoption, highlight that adoption does pose a unique challenge to the primacy of biology in the hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of kinship. Adoption occupies a unique psychic no one/everyone's land in legal and linguistic thought where the hegemony supports and dictates legal fictions that

support adoptive kinship bonds up until they cross taboo lines crucial to upholding biology's primacy, such as incest. It is these arguments of lexicon that characterize adoption rhetoric as profoundly conflicted in terms of agency, time, and imagination. At even the lexical level there can be disagreement as to who gets a voice and when and what they are allowed to imagine as kinship, enduring or new. Adoption resists the primacy of biology as a dominant signifier of kinship while also replicating the referents of kinship. The ways adoption resists the kinship matrix confirm the hegemony of that matrix by continuing to use it as an unfixed core of biological language.

Works Cited

"AAP Guidance for Supporting Adopted Children." *American Academy of Pediatrics*, 24

      September 2012, https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/Pages/AAP-

      Guidance-for-Supporting-Adopted-Children.aspx. Accessed 11 January 2019.

"Accurate Adoption Language." *Consider the Possibilities: Adoption Specialist Handbook*,

      National Council for Adoption, 2007, pp. 17.

"Adoption." *The Diversity Style Guide*, https://www.diversitystyleguide.com/glossary/adoption/.

      Accessed 12 January 2019.

"Adoption of Children." *American Bar Association*, 16 November 2017,

      https://www.americanbar.org/groups/child_law/resources/attorneys/adoption_of_children

      /. Accessed 11 January 2019.

"Aggie Culture." Aggie Traditions. *Texas A&M University*,

      https://www.tamu.edu/traditions/aggie-culture/. Accessed 10 January 2019.

Associated Press. "The adoptive status of children or their parents should be mentioned only

      when its relevance is made clear in the story. If relevant, use the term biological or birth

      parents/mother/father. Do not use real or first parents/mother/father." *Facebook*, Meta, 22

      June 2020,

      https://www.facebook.com/apstylebook/photos/a.118833031473125/3327450250611371/?t

      ype=3. Accessed 10 February 2022.

"A Tribute to Marietta Spencer." *Children's Home Society of Minnesota and Lutheran Social*

      Services, 12 April 2018, https://chlss.org/blog/tribute-marietta-spencer/. Accessed 12

      January 2019.

Baker, Sarah M. "Positive vs. Honest Adoption Language." *Adoption.com*, 14 July 2014,

      https://adoption.com/positive-vs-honest-adoption-language. Accessed 12 January 2019.

Baldonado, Kim. "Thousands of Adults Adopted from Other Countries as Children Living in

      Fear of Deportation." *NBC Los Angeles*,

      https://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Thousands-of-Adults-Adopted-From-Other-

      Countries-as-Children-Living-in-Fear-of-Deportation-412495603.html. Accessed 10

      January 2019.

Berebitsky, Julie. *Like Our Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood,*

      1851-1950. University Press of Kansas, 2001.

Berlant, Lauren. *Intimacy*. The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Bowerman, Mary. "North Carolina father and biological daughter charged with incest after

      having baby." *USA Today*, 5 February 2018, https://www.wcnc.com/article/news/nation-

      now/north-carolina-father-and-biological-daughter-charged-with-incest-after-having-

      baby/465-ed0179cb-ace2-4b5d-9fab-85a033bdd094. Accessed 11 January 2019.

Buck, Pearl S. "We Can Free the Children." *Woman's Home Companion*, June 1956, vol. 83, pp.

      38-39, 62-64, 71, 73.

_____. "I Am a Better Woman for Having My Two Black Children." *Today's Health*, 1972, pp.

      21-22, 64.

Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Vintage Books, 1957.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990.

"Changes in the 2018 Stylebook." The Associated Press Store, *Associated Press*,

      https://store.stylebooks.com/2018-ap-stylebook-print-edition.html. Accessed 12 January

      2019.

Cooper, Terra. "Positive Adoption Language Guide." *Adoption*, 29 May 2014.

> https://adoption.com/positive-adoption-language-guide. Accessed 12 January 2019.

Creedy, Kathryn B. "Journalists Tackle Accuracy in Adoption Reporting." *Adoption Quarterly*,

> 2001, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 83-89.

Cruz, Clarissa. "Soap Books Derby." *Entertainment Weekly*, 11 September 1998,

> https://ew.com/article/1998/09/11/soap-books-derby/. Accessed 11 January 2019.

"Davenport v. Little-Bowser." *Lambda Legal*, 2005, https://www.lambdalegal.org/in-

> court/cases/davenport-v-little-bowser. Accessed 11 January 2019.

Despicable Me. Directed by Pierre Coffin and Chris Renaud, performances by Steve Carrell,

> Jason Segel, Russell Brand, and Julie Andrews, Universal Pictures, Illumination

> Entertainment, 2010.

Ehlin, Laura. "Letter to Editor." *Business Week*. MacGraw-Hill, issue 3059-3062, 1988, pp. 8.

Folkins, John. "Resource on Person-First Language: The Language Used to Describe Individuals

> with Disabilities." *American Speech-Language-Hearing Association*, December 1992,

> http://www.asha.org/publications/journals/submissions/person_first.htm. Accessed 12

> January 2019.

Froelich, Jacqueline. "Surge of Marshallese Adoptions in Northwest Arkansas Leads to Calls for

> Reform." *Arkansas Public Media*, 14 October 2018,

> https://www.arkansaspublicmedia.org/post/surge-marshallese-adoptions-northwest-

> arkansas-leads-calls-reform. Accessed 11 January 2019.

"Give the Gift of Love: Adoption Triad Jewelry." I Am Gladney, *The Gladney Center for*

> *Adoption,* https://iamgladney.org/jewelry. Accessed 12 January 2019.

Henry, Martha, Daniel Pollack, and Aaron Lazares. "Teaching Medical Students About

  Adoption and Foster Care." *Adoption Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2006, pp. 45.61.

Hildebrandt, Sybille. "Mælk giver større chance for overlevelse." *Videnskab*,

  https://videnskab.dk/krop-sundhed/maelk-giver-storre-chance-overlevelse. Accessed 10

  January 2019.

"History of National Adoption Month." *Child Welfare Information Gateway*,

  https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/nam/about/history/. Accessed 15 January

  2019.

Hollinger, Joan Heifetz. "Resisting Challenges to the Rule of Full Faith and Credit for Adoption

  Judgements." *Adoption Quarterly*, 2005, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 73-85.

"Honest Adoption Language." *Origins Canada*, 2003, https://www.originscanada.org/adoption-

  practices/adoption-language/honest-adoption-language/. Accessed 12 January 2019.

Howland, Jack. "Police: 4 people found dead, including father and daughter charged with incest,

  their baby." *Poughkeepsie Journal*, 12 April 2018,

  https://www.wcnc.com/article/news/nation-now/police-4-people-found-dead-including-

  father-and-daughter-charged-with-incest-their-baby/465-96d12f21-377f-4aec-8fea-

  ea5515d9425e. Accessed 12 January 2019.

Hutton, W. "Thoughts on the Foundling Hospital." *Town & Country Magazine or, Universal

  Repository of Knowledge, Instruction & Entertainment*, 2 December 1785, pp. 708.

Instant Family. Directed by Sean Anders, performances by Mark Wahlberg, Rose Byrne, and

  Isabela Moner, Paramount Pictures, 2018.

Kim-Larsen, Mette A. E. "Danish Milk." *Adoption & Culture*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2018, pp. 353-363.

Kirsta, Alix. "Genetic sexual attraction." *Guardian Online*, 16 May 2003,

    https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2003/may/17/weekend7.weekend2. Accessed

    12 January 2019.

"Lactose Intolerance." U.S. Library of Medicine, *National Institutes of Health*,

    https://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/condition/lactose-intolerance#statistics. Accessed 10 January

    2019.

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. The University of Chicago Press,

    2003.

Lakoff, George. *Don't Think of an Elephant!* Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004.

Lancy, David F. *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, and Changelings*. Second

    Edition, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Larimore, Rachael. "Why Does NBC's Al Trautwig Refuse to Call Simone Biles' Adoptive

    Parents Her Parents?" *Slate*, 8 August 2016,

    http://www.slate.com/blogs/five_ring_circus/2016/08/08/ron_and_nellie_biles_are_simo

    ne_biles_parents_why_does_nbc_refuse_to_call.html.

Melina, Lois Ruskai. *Raising Adopted Children: A Manual for Adoptive Parents*. Harper & Row,

    1986.

Miall, Charlene E. and Karen March. "A Comparison of Biological and Adoptive Mothers and

    Fathers." *Adoption Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 7-39.

Moniuszko, Sara M. "How Hoda Kotb's love for her adopted daughter inspired her first book."

    USA Today, 6 March 2018, https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/books/2018/03/06/how-

    hoda-kotbs-love-her-adopted-daughter-inspired-her-first-childrens-book/389284002/.

    Accessed 12 January 2019.

"NASW Statement on Foster Care and Adoptions." Social Work Blog, *National Association of Social Workers*, 2008, http://www.socialworkblog.org/advocacy/2008/06/nasw-statement-on-foster-care-and-adoptions/. Accessed 11 January 2019.

"News Values and Principles." *The Associated Press*, https://www.ap.org/about/news-values-and-principles/. Accessed 12 January 2019.

Nixon, Cheryl L. *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature: Estate, Blood, and Body*. Routledge, 2011.

"Open Hearts by Jane Seymour." *Kay Jewelers*, https://www.kay.com/en/kaystore/cms/kay-open-hearts-collection. Accessed 12 January 2019.

"Orphans." *UNICEF*, https://www.unicef.org/media/orphans. Accessed 14 January 2019.

Pettinger, Alasdair. "African Americans on Africa: Colleen J. McElroy and the Rhetoric of Kinship." *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3, September 2009, pp. 317-328.

"Position Statement on Parenting." *American Psychoanalytic Association*, June 2012, http://www.apsa.org/sites/default/files/2012%20%20Position%20Statement%20on%20Parenting.pdf. Accessed 11 January 2019.

"Positive Adoption Language." *Adoptive Families*, https://www.adoptivefamilies.com/talking-about-adoption/positive-adoption-language/. Accessed 12 January 2019.

"Positive Adoption Language." *Parents.com*, https://www.parents.com/parenting/adoption/parenting/positive-adoption-language/. Accessed 12 January 2019.

"Positive Adoption Language and Terminology." Holt International Press Center, *Holt International*, https://www.holtinternational.org/media/language.shtml. Accessed 12 January 2019.

"Positive Adoption Language." *Texas Adoption Resource Exchange*, State of Texas Department

    of Family and Protective Services,

    https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Adoption_and_Foster_Care/About_TARE/Adoption/positive

    _language.asp. Accessed 12 January 2019.

"Premium 10kt & 14kt Yellow Gold Broken Heart Adoption Pendant- Your choice of stone."

    TracysGemShop, *Etsy*, https://www.etsy.com/listing/238209773/premium-10kt-14kt-

    yellow-gold-

    broken?gpla=1&gao=1&&utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=sho

    pping_us_a-jewelry-necklaces-pendants&utm_custom1=eaa680ac-c631-4f07-975d-

    50bcda2e6f9a&utm_content=go_270950435_21143561675_69017214635_pla-

    106550431715_c__238209773&gclid=Cj0KCQiAvebhBRD5ARIsAIQUmnl94c8E99eb

    uY2KtkDTofj_5wqxHWMHDWxBP8TWf8I0yVFcLcfOv3AaApHIEALw_wcB.

    Accessed 12 January 2019.

"Report to the House of Delegates." *American Bar Association*, 1999,

    https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/directories/policy/1999_my_109b.authche

    ckdam.pdf. Accessed 11 January 2019.

"Republic of the Marshall Islands." CIA Factbook, *CIA.gov*. 8 January 2019,

    https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rm.html. Accessed 11

    January 2019.

"Resolution on Adoption." *American Bar Association*, 11-12 August 2003,

    https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/directories/policy/2003_am_112.authchec

    kdam.pdf. Accessed 11 January 2019.

Roby, Jini L. and Stephanie Matsumura. "If I Give You My Child, Aren't We Family?"

>Adoption Quarterly, vol. 5, no. 4, 2002, pp. 7-31.

Salmon, Catherine A. "The Evocative Nature of Kin Terminology in Political Rhetoric." *Politics

>and the Life Sciences*, vol. 17, no. 1, March 1998, pp. 51-57.

Schneider, David M. *American Kinship*. Prentice Hall, 1968.

Serres, Chris. "Obituary: Marietta E. Spencer worked to change adoption in U.S." *Star Tribune*,

>24 April 2017, http://www.startribune.com/marietta-e-spencer-adoption-

>advocate/420289223/. Accessed 12 January 2019.

Solo: A Star Wars Story. Directed by Ron Howard, performances by Alden Ehrenreich, Woody

>Harrelson, and Emilia Clarke, Lucasfilm, Walt Disney Pictures, 2018.

Sprang, Ginny. "Analysis of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 and the Justice

>Challenge of Balancing the Rights of Parents and Children in a Culture of Inequality."

>*Child Welfare*, vol. 93, no. 3, 2015, pp. 111-134.

Spencer, Marietta. "Post-Legal Adoption Services: A Lifelong Commitment." *Infertility &

>Adoption: A Guide for Social Work Practice*, 1988, pp. 155-167.

_____. "The Terminology of Adoption." *Child Welfare*, vol. 58, no. 7, 1979, pp. 451-459.

Star Wars: Episode III: The Revenge of the Sith. Directed by George Lucas, performances by

>Hayden Christensen, Natalie Portman, Ewan McGregor, Lucasfilm, 2005.

Star Wars: Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back. Directed by Irvin Kershner, performances by

>Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, and Carrie Fisher, Lucasfilm, 1980.

Star Wars; Episode VI: The Return of the Jedi. Directed by Richard Marquand, performances by

>Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, and Carrie Fisher, Lucasfilm, 1983.

Star Wars: Episode VII: The Force Awakens. Directed by J. J. Abrams, performances by Daisy

      Ridley, John Boyega, and Oscar Isaac, Lucasfilm, Walt Disney Pictures, 2015.

Taymans, Juliana M, et al. "Adoption as a Diversity Issue in Professional Preparation:

      Perceptions of Preservice Education Professionals." *Adoption Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 1,

      2008, pp. 24-44.

The 55th Associated Press AP Stylebook: 2020 – 2022. Associated Press, 2020.

Thompson, Notesong Srisopark. "Hague is Enough? A Call for More Protective, Uniform Law

      Guiding International Adoption." *Wisconsin International Law Journal*, vol. 22, no. 2,

      2004, pp 441-469.

Wallman, Brittany and Paula McMahon, Megan O'Matz, and Susannah Bryan. "School shooter

      Nikolas Cruz: A lost and lonely killer." *Sun Sentinel*, 24 February 2018, https://www.sun-

      sentinel.com/local/broward/parkland/florida-school-shooting/fl-florida-school-shooting-

      nikolas-cruz-life-20180220-story.html. Accessed 12 January 2019.

Walsh, Julianne M. "Adoption and Agency: American Adoptions of Marshallese Children." *Out

      of Oceania: Diaspora, Community, and Identity*, 22 October 1999, The Center for Pacific

      Island Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

Wiley, Mary O'Leary. "Adoption Research, Practice, and Societal Trends: Ten Years of

      Progress." *American Psychologist*, vol. 72, no. 9, 2017, pp. 985-995.

"What is the AP Stylebook?" *The Associated Press Stylebook*,

      https://www.apstylebook.com/help#/28361-getting-started/210938-what-is-the-ap-

      stylebook. Accessed 12 January 2019.

CHAPTER III

THE "GHOST KINGDOM" IN *LION* AND THE *KUNG FU PANDA* TRILOGY

The Ghost Kingdom on Film

In the preceding chapter, "Positive, Accurate, and Honest: Contemporary Conflicts in the Lexicons of Kinship," I discussed the variety of prescriptive languages created to describe members of the adoption constellation ("adoption constellation" being one of them). Certain suggested phrases by prescriptive adoption languages trap family members in amber, such as "birth parent," which implies a static single momentary contribution to an adoptee's life even though the time spent with a "first" family member is anything from hours to years. Certain unfavored phrases such as "real parent" imply an "un-realness" in other forms of parenting. Meanwhile, adoptees in collective action such as Origins Canada have created their own prescriptive languages to assert an adoptee-centered discourse that suggests the fluidity, discontinuity, and constancy of familial bonds with limited success in turning the public and instead created a shibboleth for the online adoptee-centered civil rights social media community. All in the end fall to the discourse pressure that biological kinship is the rhetorical touchstone for intimacy.

In film, the fluidity, discontinuity, and constancy of kinship in adoptees' lives is created through careful cinematic editing choices such as *simultaneity,* which networks the adoptee into imperfect connections among disparate people, geographies, and cultures. Simultaneity serves to

convey both a continued relationship between people separated through adoption and that the

relationship they may continue to "share" in the imagination is not static but may evolve and

need recontextualization at reunion. In *Lion* (2016) and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy (2008-2016)

the filmmakers mine the semantic and poetic meanings of objects seen on screen: a train station

water tower, jalebis, and a familiar sun symbol. In "Semantic and Poetic Meaning," Kenneth

Burke argues that language has an interlinking nature and that "the ideal of a purely 'neutral'

vocabulary, free of emotional weightings, tries to make a totality out of a fragment" (138).

Instead, there is semantic meaning and poetic meaning, and they overlap heavily (146). The

semantic or the "ideal" meaning is the anesthetic, reductive through process of elimination, rigid,

logically extreme definition, heavily reliant on truth and reality (139). In these films, these

objects are lingered on and are more than just their anesthetic objective meaning for these

adoptee protagonists. To find their way home, find out about their past, and learn who they are in

relation to their kin and community, these adoptees must discover or rediscover why these

objects elicit such a strong emotional reaction out of them. They must find the poetic meaning:

the aesthetic and emotional meaning (Burke 139). By understanding what these objects and

symbols mean, they are able to escape the Liftonian "Ghost Kingdom," "the Land of What Might

Have Been," and find their biological kin in the present and, in the case of Po, build community

and defeat the enemy (72).

  In *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, the protagonists are under immense discursive

and social pressure to affirm the importance of their adoptive kin in their lives, while the

dramatic tension comes from reifying that biological kinship stays meaningful and ongoing in

their lives despite their biological kin being absent, dead, or unknown. Saroo and Po close their

narrative arcs by invoking and solving the mysteries of their origins, and, while doing so, voicing

their own feelings about whom they count as kin. In "Ghosts in the Adopted Family," Betty Jean

Lifton calls this phenomenon "the ghost kingdom" of the adoptee, which "spring[s] from the

unresolved grief, loss, and trauma… the lost babies, the parents who lost them, and the parents

who found them" (71). Lifton states, "The adoptee's Ghost Kingdom can also be seen as an

alternate reality. It is the Land of What Might Have Been" (72); that is, she explicitly ties the

concept to the imagination and expresses the letter's potency. In *Lion*, Adult Saroo walks on a

beach in Australia while his older brother, who died the same night Saroo became lost as a child,

trails him (*Lion*). Meanwhile, Po is "haunted" by the memory of his mother to the point of being

unable to defend himself when he faces her killer (*Kung Fu Panda 2*). In *Lion* and the *Kung Fu*

Panda trilogy, the protagonists are haunted, and it is only through The Search that they can

"literally cross over into the Ghost Kingdom and lure their ghosts into the bright light of the real

world, where they become flesh-and-blood people" (Lifton 73).

In *Lion's* Ghost Kingdom, the semantic meaning of objects such as the train station water

tower serve as anesthetic referents to seek out while using the satellite imaging software Google

Earth to find the emotional aesthetic goal: Saroo's home and thus, his first family. Saroo and Po

additionally require the acceptance of their kin to feel safe and whole again. Leaving the Ghost

Kingdom, finding resolve, comes not through full assimilation into an adopted culture but

through the emerging maturity of seeing all, from Po's fathers to Saroo's Australian and Indian

family, as people with whom they share an intimate connection and accepting the

discontinuity—and constancy—of that bond. The solace comes in knowledge and expansion of

kinship bonds, not ignorance. It is quite different from Marietta Spencer's corporate vision of

"outreach" in her 1988 *Infertility and Adoption: A Guide for Social Work Practice,* where she

promoted adoption agencies facilitating "outreach" in a controlled manner that creates

reasonable expectations. Saroo and Po, while considering advice from their family, mentors, and community, do search on their own in an independent and uncontrolled manner and at the end, integrate their kin (159).

In these films, the adoptive family is important, but the search for the first family is also integral to the main characters' sense of completion and actualization. This psychological insight on the films' part is true to life, as many adoptees, rather than compartmentalizing the adoptive family and the first family, loudly and clearly assert the importance of all their families throughout their lives. Adoptee-directed documentaries such as *First-Person Plural*, *Closure*, and *Abandoned, Adopted Here* all muse on the continued presence of the first family and the influence of the adoptive family in their lives, whether that be in recognizing facial characteristics, mannerisms, health, or hobbies. In *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, family members run parallel to, haunt, and follow the adoptee, collapsing time through simultaneity, "psychological guidance… constructed from the simultaneous rapid development of two actions, in which the outcome of one depends on the outcome of the other" (Pudovkin 125). In *Lion*, flashes of Saroo's obsessive late night Google Earth searching from above in the present contrast with his own memories of running through those same streets as a child. The semantic and poetic significance of those combine to lead him home.

In *Lion*, the use of long tracking shots with drones emphasizes the immensity of space that can separate family, the diminutiveness of family, and the fragility of human bodies in an unforgiving and hostile landscape. This emphasis also shows the challenge of conducting the kind of search Saroo undertook. Without the new satellite imaging software Google Earth, he would not have had access to a means of tracking miles of Indian rail lines back to the singular train station water tower of his memory. Conversely, intimate personal scenes are captured

through handheld Steadicam close ups that emphasize the emotional and mental isolation of the adoptee as he navigates the Liftonian "Ghost Kingdom." Finding Ganesh Talai is not just about finding a specific water tower; rather, by finding it, confirming it was real, and tracking the road home, he can escape the Ghost Kingdom of his imagination and make his long-lost family "flesh-and-blood people" again in the light of day (Lifton 73).

In the *Kung Fu Panda* film trilogy, Po's status as an adoptee with a mysterious past is introduced slowly. The first film establishes him as a large body out of place in the Valley of Peace with low angle shots, and his father is conspicuously a goose, not a panda. As the film features anthropomorphic animals in a fantasy realm, this serves to trick the audience but also adds to the drama that he is, as a transspecies adoptee, quite alone in his struggle to integrate into his community, and now he must lead them as the Dragon Warrior. By accepting himself for who he is, and his community accepting him in return, he defeats their enemy and becomes the Dragon Warrior. In the second film, Po navigates the Ghost Kingdom when he meets a henchman of Lord Shen and sees a sun symbol that sparks the memory of his mother. At first, he is frozen by these memories and must seek out advice from his father, who discloses he is a foundling adoptee, and his friends, who offer encouragement and guidance. By taking a spiritual journey where he learns what happened to him to lead him to the Valley of Peace, Po escapes the Ghost Kingdom and defeats Lord Shen. In the third film, the large body out of place shots are reversed. When he finally meets his panda relations, low angle shots of his panda father Li and the other pandas again show Po as a body out of place with their panda-exclusive society, demonstrating how he has adapted to life as a large panda among the diminutive residents of the Valley of Peace. Through compromise and understanding, Po integrates his panda family with his Valley of Peace community, saving them both and in turn being saved by them gifting them

their qi. He makes a "flesh-and-blood [panda]" of his first father (73). He is additionally able to

bring his panda community, formerly hidden away in the cloudy mountains, into the light of day,

returning them all to the Valley of Peace (Lifton 73).

In *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, the definition of family is debated by other

characters, but in the end, the adoptee protagonist is the final authority on *his* family, and his

definition is the most inclusive, often branching out to include community beyond biological,

familial, or adoptive kin. Saroo sets up a foundation to help the people of Ganesh Talai even

though he left decades previously and brings his adoptive mother to meet his first mother. Po

integrates the Furious Five, the pandas in exile, and the animal citizens of the Valley of Peace

into one diverse community. These films, while not necessarily made with strong adoptee input,

serve as examples of adoptee-centered modern cinema that acknowledges the discourse pressure

placed on adoptees to cohere to social standards of kinship that may be too limiting for them,

considers the importance of the adoptee's agency in the adoption constellation, and the

importance of navigating and emerging from the "Ghost Kingdom." Notably in *Kung Fu Panda*,

Po finding his voice and agency as an adoptee is a secondary plot concern until the final act of

the third film, where it becomes crucial that he express his feelings about both the Valley of

Peace and the pandas to bring them all together for survival. They then reciprocate his act of

bravery to save both communities with an exchange of power that gives him resurrection. At the

same time, by making the overall dramatic arc of adoptee the search for biological kin, biological

kinship remains the touchstone of intimacy as it is something valued that must be sought out if

lost.

Lion

The 2016 film *Lion* tells the true story[33] of Saroo Brierley, an Indian-Australian adoptee who, as a child in India, mistakenly boarded an empty night train car in his town of Ganesh Talai that took him 1600 kilometers away to Kolkata before he was able to disembark. He left behind a widowed mother, Kamla; an elder brother, Guddu; and a little sister, Shekila. After several perilous months on the streets, Saroo is turned in to child services, placed in an orphanage, and after a brief period of search (India must put an advertisement for found children in the local newspapers), he is adopted by Sue and John Brierley in Hobart, Tasmania. In act two, twenty-five years have passed, and Saroo is a confident young man studying hotel management and supporting the Australian cricket team. He appears to be fully integrated into Australian life. But at a house party, he spots a plate of jalebis, an Indian dessert—a dessert featured in the opening scene of act 1. This stirs his childhood memories of Ganesh Talai and leads him to use the new publicly accessible satellite imagery program Google Earth to trace every train route out of Kolkata until he finds the station that was stirred up in his memories by the jalebis, the train station with the distinctive water tower. It is his unexpected emotional reaction to the jalebis and the searing memory of the water tower that spark more memories previously hidden as he searches Google Earth every night until he finally finds the right station and traces his way back to the goat pen he used to live in with his mother and siblings. They have moved away, but the villagers recognize him and reunite him with his kin.

---

[33] Based on the memoir *A Long Way Home* by Saroo Brierley.

The *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy and *Lion* use the cinematic technique of simultaneity to collapse time and make present the first family in the lives of the adoptees as the "Ghost Kingdom" that haunts them and must be confronted. Cinematic simultaneity traces its roots back to Vsevolod Pudovkin's 1926 essay "On Editing." Pudovkin sees film editing as "psychological guidance" and defines simultaneity as

> Constructed from the simultaneous rapid development of two actions, in which the outcome of one depends on the outcome of the other... The whole aim of this method is to create in the spectator a maximum tension of excitement by the constant forcing of a question, such as, in this case: Will they be in time? (125)

Other theorists have built on Pudovkin's early work in film editing. Bernard F. Dick's *At the Crossroads of Time: Types of Simultaneity in Film and Literature* argues that simultaneity can create and intensify irony between two disparate or parallel events (423). John Bruns in "The Polyphonic Film" puts forth the examples of *Babel* (2006) and *Syriana* (2004) as modern examples of big scale "simultaneity without unity, multiplicity without completeness" (189). I define simultaneity, on the big or small scale, in film as "creating the cinematic illusion of happening at the same time." Things are not necessarily happening at the same time, but in the cinematic experience it seems as if they could be, and as psychological guidance, simultaneity bewilders the present, the past, and the imagination.

And for adoptee-centered film narratives, simultaneity serves to muddle the present and the past, memory and hallucination, and draws kinship connections between adoptees and their various kin, the creation of the "Ghost Kingdom," communicating the emotional attachments and physical detachments of the adoptee experience. Po experiences the memories of his first family under siege as if it is happening in the present storyline in a dream sequence explicitly rendered

from his perspective. Saroo walks along a beach in Tasmania and "sees" his brother walking

along the train tracks in India towards him. He stands in the surf and "sees" his mother washing

clothes in a river in India. High overhead shots of Tasmania and India's vast natural and urban

geographies establish coherent connections between these places. Neither place is Othered with a

yellow filter. The film establishes that the protagonist has clear emotional bonds to both the land

and the people he interacts with India and Australia. Furthermore, it establishes that, despite

absence, Saroo has a continued imagined relationship with his first family built through

memories. While they are visually frozen in time as memories, Saroo's relationship with those

memories changes and evolves. Even after reunification with his mother and sister, he still sees

Guddu as a child despite knowing he is dead: the bond that continued after separation continues

even after notification of death.

 Lion struggles with beckoning the audience to look at Saroo as an object versus

accompanying him as a subject with agency. Kim Park Nelson notes in "'Loss is more than

sadness': Reading Dissent in Transracial Adoption Melodrama in *The Language of Blood* and

First-Person Plural" that the real-life memoirs of transracial adoptees are "marked with trauma,

sadness, and melodrama," standing in "opposition to the dominant [parent-controlled] narrative

of transracial adoption" (103). Saroo's (and to a certain degree, the fictional Po's) story is a

transracial adoptee story converted to a voyeuristic and scopophiliac medium; the medium of

film beckons its audience to stare at an adoptee and his trauma, sadness, and melodrama as an

object. Laura Mulvey tackles this issue from a feminist perspective in "Visual Pleasure and

Narrative Cinema," calling it the "male gaze" of cinema. It is "fetishistic," as in "to be looked

at," and "voyeuristic," as in "representative of an underlying fear of lack" (18). By extending the

Mulveyian gaze to adoptees, we see that throughout history, adoptees such as Saroo (and Po)

have been there to be looked at. Cheryl Nixon's study of the earliest roots of modern adoption,

The Orphan in Eighteenth Century Law and Literature: Estate, Blood, and Body, notes the

interventions of Captain Thomas Coram, Jonas Hanway, and the London Foundling Hospital in

attempting to refashion neglected orphans into treasured orphans by association with artwork and

operas. Sympathetic donors would adorn the walls of the Hospital with art, meant to edify the

foundlings and persuade potential adoptive parents that the children there were treasured

masterpieces. In this case, 18th-century artwork of and in the Foundling Hospital was used to

rebrand the children as valuable, something worthy of notice.

It follows that the Mulveyian gaze for adoptees on film serves to fetishize the anguished

state of orphans to make them pitiable enough for adoption while also sentimentalizing the legal

adoption process as the creation of a family through the compassionate unmaking of the piteous

orphan by the adoptive parents. In *Lion*, simultaneity serves to highlight the anguish of the

orphan as Saroo goes from orphan to adoptee to adult adoptee while also reminding the audience

of the family he left behind. The jalebi, as an object of semantic and poetic meaning, serves as a

trigger to remind Saroo—and the audience—that he never did make a clean break from his first

family, that they, despite the legal severing and transfer of citizenship, still mean something to

him decades later. In fact, they mean so much to him that he spends months of evenings on

Google Earth, to the detriment of his relationship with his girlfriend and his adoptive family.

With the Mulveyian gaze for adoptees on film, the audience—of which a majority will be non-

adoptees—experiences the emotional reaction to the jalebis at the party in Australia with Saroo,

since jalebis were the object of one of the earliest shots in the film. *Lion* toys with the inherent

voyeurism of film by—while making the audience look at Saroo, the audience also, accompanies

Saroo through his life pre-train ride. His little figure is the first noticeable movement in the

opening landscape drone shots. The camera is at his diminutive height. The audience sees his family and community from his perspective. Furthermore, the film plants the jalebis as a defining moment between Saroo and his brother Guddu early on: Guddu buys the jalebis, but there is only enough money for one, so he gives it to the very hungry Saroo, demonstrating his love and care for his brother. By planting the jalebis early in the film and making the brief interaction significant to Saroo's relationship with his brother, the film makes the jalebis more than just a familiar treat from his childhood. Rather, they are a symbol of the love Saroo lost and seeks to recover. When Adult Saroo comes upon some random jalebis at a party in Sydney, about an hour later, the audience as well recognize them with Saroo. The audience looks at poor Saroo and his plight but also, the audience, through the payoff of the reintroduction of the jalebis, experience his feelings with him of surprise and sadness at his memories. The jalebis mean more to Saroo than just an Indian dessert. The jalebis mean more for the audience than a tasty Chekhov's gun from act one. They serve as a visual connection across time of the love and care Saroo received from his elder brother and stir him to search for his first family despite a dearth of clues.

As Adult Saroo begins to use Google Earth to retrace all possible train journeys that may lead back to Ganesh Talai, the film increasingly blurs between the past, the present, and—as the film suggests by its close following of Saroo as the protagonist—the imagined. The film intersperses shots of Adult Saroo and the jalebis with a scene from the first act of the film, when Saroo asks Guddu for jalebis. The memory seems to make him happy, as he had suppressed it for so long. However, as the film progresses, these flashbacks become less straightforward as Saroo marinates in guilt. These memories, played repeatedly, are precious but also painful as they are constant reminders that they are memories of another life that Saroo lost. While some films may exotify or other an adoptee's life before adoption, such as the portrayal of the first family in *The*

Blind Side, *Lion*, through simultaneity, asserts throughout that the first family is important and present in Saroo's life through his memories' repetition and his engagement with them as being important clues to his search despite the pain they create.

When Saroo finally arrives back in Ganesh Talai and retraces his way home down alleyways and across familiar fields, past the train station water tower that used to be his only frame of reference for home, simultaneity occurs again, flashing between what could be the present and memories, as well as moments we have already seen. Furthermore, Saroo is observed, as we get shots of a woman watching him from a roof. As an adult adoptee returning to his previous community, Saroo is the outsider, and the panopticon of Ganesh Talai, the community, sees him as an outsider. Before he can be reunited, Saroo experiences one last twist of his memory. His memories took him "home," but the family dwelling is now a goat pen. While this is what happened to the real Saroo, it also demonstrates a key aspect of search that also occurs in *The Kung Fu Panda* trilogy: the importance of community. While Saroo's friends, family, and community in Tasmania support him during his search, he is increasingly isolated by his own guilt, considering his search a rejection of his present kinship bonds. His girlfriend, a sort of avatar for Saroo's success in Australia, slowly disappears from his life and the frame as the specter of Guddu increasingly follows him. In *Lion* and *The Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, the feelings of the adoptive family and community mean a lot to the adoptee in search. In *Lion*, once he finally admits to his mother that he is searching for his first family, they quickly act to support him, encouraging him to go to India and find them. Just as Po is accepted and integrated into the hidden panda community and defeats his enemies through the combined love of his adoptive and first community, Saroo, after reaching the dead end of the goat pen, receives help from the Indian community he lost. He no longer needs the train station water tower or the jalebis. He has

found the physical remnants of his home and the people who made up his home will bring his family to him. Saroo meets his mother and sister in a third place—a road we have not seen before because his search, driven by powerful memories, never really brought him home. His mother and sister have aged. He has aged. They do not speak the same language anymore. Guddu is dead. He died the same night Saroo went missing. Margaret Homans's *The Imprint of Another Life: Adoption Narratives and Human Possibility* states, "Adoptive origin stories and origin stories are not discovered in the past so much as they are created in, and for, the present" (114). When people start a search, they do not know what they will find at the end. There is a desire for some form of closure, but it is never guaranteed.

On the surface, *Lion* may appear to be a rote quality adoption story with "saviorism" pitting Angry Adoptees against Grateful Adoptees, but it exemplifies the difficulties and complexities of navigating the "Ghost Kingdom" and discursive pressure to cohere to societal assumptions about what an adoptee's actions mean. Saroo, as far as the audience knows, has never expressed a desire to search for his first family to his adoptive family. And yet, he struggles to tell them for fear of seeming "ungrateful" (*Lion*). However, repressing the desire to search was never an expectation, and his adoptive mother swiftly rejects that notion as soon as he confesses. Saroo's adoptive brother, Mantosh, is clearly struggling with mental health issues from his unstable childhood and inability to cope with the momentous change that intercountry and transracial adoption brought him. Unlike Saroo, he does not have a train station water tower or jalebi memories to escape the Ghost Kingdom, and thus, the film implies he has no way of reaching the moment of epiphany and equilibrium between kin that Saroo experiences. In *Kung Fu Panda*, the villain Tai Lung was left on the doorstep of Master Shifu, trained up for the sole purpose of becoming the Dragon Warrior for years, and then rejected. Tai Lung appears to have

been mentally broken by the pressure of perfection from his adoptive father not paying off with a solidified position in his society. He cannot accept himself as he is, just another imperfect member of his community, and it is also the reason he cannot be given a position of power within that community. His violent reaction reflects his lack of place in his adoptive society: his adoptive father rejects him, and he has no one else and nothing else except to explode as he does in the end of the first film. The Ghost Kingdom is a point of conflict within the adoptee and externally among his kin. Saroo's and Po's resolution comes not only when the adoptees resolve to accept the full breadth of their being and pursue the secrets of their past but also when their parents—adoptive, biological, and spiritual—accept their position in their sons' lives and clearly articulate a supportive role. Thus, in these narratives, escaping the Ghost Kingdom requires more than just the individual; it also requires acceptance from those around them. Without it, "Angry Adoptees" like Tai Lung and Mantosh, who seems detached from his Australian and Indian kin, flounder. If an adoptee is unable to bring his pre- and post-adoption relationships into a semblance of solace, coherence, and acceptance, these films imply, he will be stuck in a cacophony of confusion.

Lion closes by using simultaneity to create a spiritual closure for Adult Saroo, Young Saroo, and Guddu. Saroo calls his parents in Australia and affirms his love for them and his adoptive brother, Mantosh. Adult Saroo then walks along the train tracks of Ganesh Talai, the same train tracks that led him home. He sees young Guddu smiling and walking along the tracks in front of him. Guddu beckons at Adult Saroo. Then Young Saroo runs into the frame, following Guddu. This could be a memory, a hallucination, or a dream, but what we do know is that Adult Saroo no longer looks at the specter of Guddu with guilt and grief. The simultaneity, the collapse of time that brought him the semantic clues to find his way home, and the

89

overwhelming sadness of loss have brought the past and the present full circle. The memories are no longer painful, as he has closed the circle of answers. Saroo asserts, in a phone call to his mother, "I'm safe. I'm safe and the questions have been answered. There are no more dead ends." The pain stops not when an adoptive parent loves an adoptee's pain away. It is when adoptees can, with their own voice, assert that they know who they are and who their people are. And for Saroo, his people is an expansive definition: his first family and his adoptive family are equally important, no matter how far away they are or how long it takes to get back to them.

Kung Fu Panda

The *Kung Fu Panda* franchise is an animated comedy martial arts *wuxia*[34] trilogy and television series by DreamWorks Animation that has been remarkably successful financially and critically worldwide. While the franchise comprises of American films made by an American studio with Asian and American actors playing in an imagined anthropomorphized China with many main characters—Po, Tai Lung, Tigress—as orphaned adoptees, it has enjoyed global appeal and unexpectedly, appeal for Chinese audiences as well. In "Adoption, Cynical Detachment, and New Age Beliefs in *Juno* and *Kung Fu Panda*" Fu-Jen Chen argues that the film "shows how the discourse of adoption can be easily and successfully commodified and marketed under global capitalism" (4). The franchise occupies a paradoxical position in pop culture—and international law. It is distinctly American: DreamWorks, the production company

---

[34] *Wuxia* is a genre of Chinese fiction tracing the exploits of martial arts practitioners in a generally fantastical version of ancient China.

that owns the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise, even brought a civil suit against a person in China

attempting to trademark "Kung Fu Panda," and their successful suit created precedent for

international companies to legally protect their franchises from intellectual property theft in

China, which is ironic considering the franchise's source material (Hurtado 473-474). One might

even connect the idea of a non-Chinese-owned company owning the rights to "Kung Fu Panda"

to the contentious situation of thousands of Chinese adoptees who now live elsewhere in the

Global North. But it was also acknowledged in China, by Chinese artists, as a piece of media that

succeeded in appealing to them with material derived from their own culture. The first film's

success was so well received in China, being the first animated film to breach the 100 million

Yuan mark—despite a call to boycott it because "foreigners had lifted one of China's most

precious symbols"—that it created an introspective crisis in the local Chinese animation

community over their inability to make an animated film as domestically and internationally

loved as *Kung Fu Panda* despite an abundance of talent and creativity, concluding somewhere

between a "continuing historical imbalance" of the West using China as an artistic setting and

their historic position as an cinematic animation powerhouse (Bernstein). On a meta-level, the

franchise adopted Chinese source material and adapted it to appeal as broadly as possible for a

global audience. In a way, DreamWorks awkwardly re-created the idealized intercountry adoptee

success story by taking pandas and kung fu stories, displacing them from their home in China,

and adapting the themes and characters to make them palatable to the West through adaptation

and assimilation.

  In trying to sort out this paradox, philosopher Slavoj Žižek, in a 2011 interview with

Charlie Rose, described the first film as ideologically "cynical." He said,

On the one hand the movie mobilizes all that, let's call it, "Oriental military mystique":

kung fu, fate, warrior, discipline, all that stuff. At the same time, the movie's totally

ironic, making fun of its own ideology.... Although the film makes fun of its own

ideology all the time, the ideology survives. (Charlie Rose)

Žižek is identifying the fine line the film—and by extension, the film franchise—treads to

achieve its ambitions to succeed commercially and critically in American and other Western

cinema markets and in the non-Western or a "worldwide" market to maximize profits in a highly

competitive and diversifying twenty-first-century film industry and a Disney-dominated

children's animation market. *Kung Fu Panda* is a Hollywood-produced film franchise with

Hollywood actors—with some Asian and Asian American actors such as Jackie Chan and Lucy

Liu in secondary roles—set in an animal anthropomorphic cartoon universe that is informed by

the art, food, philosophies, and cultures of China. Chinese food (noodles, dumplings, etc.), art,

and concepts such as qi are integral to the narrative. The traditional kung fu fighting styles, such

as tiger and viper, are turned into their namesake animals. Even China's adoption wave of the

1980s and 1990s (a consequence of the "One Child Policy") is obliquely hinted at by Po's

foundling to adoption backstory and the relative singleness of different species of

anthropomorphic animals onscreen. In Hye Jean Chung's "*Kung Fu Panda*: Animated Animal

Bodies as Layered Sites of (Trans)National Identities," she argues that the "computer-generated

bodies" are "animated figures of transnationality, which is to say, sites of layered (trans)national

identities that depend on globally dispersed and diasporic talent and globally distributed media

images" (27). The films themselves and their production are a giant metaphor for adoption and

its critical response reflects many of the pressures placed on intercountry and transracial

adoptees to succeed in multiple contexts.

The theme of intercountry and transracial adoption starts with the first film and the protagonist. Po is an affable and silly American accented panda waiter (voiced by white American actor Jack Black) with a goose dad[35] (voiced by Chinese American actor James Hong), and is selected by a wise community figure, a tortoise named Oogway (voiced by Korean American actor Randall Duk Kim), to become The Dragon Warrior, a mystical kung fu master who saves "all of China" from corrupt and violent characters who disrupt his village, "The Valley of Peace." Po is, according to Chung, an anti-Bruce Lee or an extension or evolution of Bruce Lee, in that both are "floating signifiers to which one can assign different national identities as well as transnational imaginaries," revealing that "the kung fu master has always been transnational" (31). As Po is a trans-species adoptee, the series draws attention to the physical differences and the assumptions of biological relationality through suspended disbelief, then introduces adoption as an ongoing life experience that must be dealt with individually and collectively by adoptees, their families, and their communities. Although Po is a giant panda and his dad, Mr. Ping, is a goose, the trilogy does not acknowledge that Po is a transracial (or transspecies) adoptee until the sequel, *Kung Fu Panda 2*, which is an unusual trick in a visual medium. When this aspect of Po's character is revealed, it draws attention to an accepted aspect of the suspension of disbelief—that these anthropomorphized animals in a mystical version of China reflect our real biological expectations in some ways but not in others—and to the fact that this suspension allows us, until we are told, to believe that a goose could have a giant panda as a son. The revelation that Po is an adoptee then draws attention to the audience's assumptions about kinship when suspending disbelief to enjoy a film. The films take a contradictory or

---

[35] I will use the film's language "dad" for Mr. Ping, Po's adoptive parent, and "father" for Li Shan, Po's panda parent who shows up at the end of *Kung Fu Panda 2* and ascends to be a main character in *Kung Fu Panda 3*.

paradoxical approach by creating a narrative universe where species differences within a "family" may be excused as being a part of this fantasy anthropomorphized universe and then turning back and revealing that no, the Chinese goose noodle shop seller adopted the giant panda he found in his weekly vegetable shipment.

Kung Fu Panda uses Po's physical difference, his large roly-poly panda-ness as a humorous contrast to the typical wuxia hero (who is the villain) while allowing Po to become a talented "Dragon Warrior" protector. He fits many American stereotypes, being fat, being a bit silly, and being a bit too enthusiastic about the lore of kung fu and less disciplined than the Furious Five. And yet, kung fu is itself inclusive in its adaptability, as represented by the Furious Five, who all fight successfully in vastly unique styles that suit their bodies. And the films highlight their differences and the equality of their successes by zooming in on the ridiculously small Mantis when he fights, to communicate to the viewer that while he may be small, he contributes to the group's defense because he is small and agile. That the Furious Five and their master Shifu dismiss Po so easily represents the brokenness in pedagogical thought created in the wake of Shifu's failed training of Tai Lung.

Lion and *Kung Fu Panda* frame Saroo and Po as bodies out of place. In *Lion*, his displacement is evident from Saroo's Indianness in the isolated island of Tasmania and later at university in Sydney. In *Kung Fu Panda*, the visual signifier of displacement is fatness— specifically, Po's exceptional fatness as a panda. There are plump pigs, cows, and geese in the background, but Po's singular rotundity in comparison to other animals in the Valley of Peace serves as comic relief and challenges the fatist assumptions of other creatures who think it prevents him from performing the physical feats of kung fu. Fatism, stigma against fat creatures (in this case, pandas), is code for an adoptee out of place: transracial adoptee narratives often talk

94

about feeling or looking out of place in a place of harmony and then learning to adapt under pressure. The viewer is frequently reminded that the world Po inhabits is not made for him. His bamboo bed sags from years of bearing his weight, and he slouches in his father's noodle shop because of the low ceiling, often hitting his head so hard the frame shakes. The other villagers of the Valley of Peace are significantly smaller than him. The camera frequently shows Po from low angles, from the perspective of the little geese, mice, and pigs around him, to show how he is too large for the place he lives and the space he occupies in society, and he has had to adapt, rather than his adoptive society adapting to him. Even in his own home and noodle shop, the world is too small for Po. *Kung Fu Panda* emphasizes how much The Valley of Peace and the Jade Palace were not built for Po. During the selection scene, the camera emphasizes Po's size, un-fitness, and isolation. The villagers, despite being smaller than him, look down on him as a service worker. He arrives late and is locked outside by the rest of the village. He sits sadly on the steps as their drumming drowns out his cries for inclusion. Later, Master Shifu attempts to flunk Po by making him complete a dangerous obstacle course, but despite Po's dramatic and humorous failure, he again demonstrates his durability by surviving the obstacles despite being hit everywhere on his body and setting off every bomb in the building. In the third film the viewer sees a Po among pandas in exile, and their community, while very aesthetically similar to The Valley of Peace, is certainly designed for pandas like him with subtle architectural features such as elevators (Po's chief enemy is stairs), sturdy panda-sized furniture that does not break, and wider and higher doorways that Po will not bang his head on.

Po is a body out of place, a personality ill-suited to kung fu, and most of all, decidedly American: Po is silly. In Michelle Ann Abate's "Taking Silliness Seriously: Jim Henson's *The Muppet Show*, the Anglo-American Tradition of Nonsense, and Cultural Critique" she argues

that seemingly "silly" characters and situations provide "a paradox that is in keeping with one of the governing principles of nonsense, [in that] these seemingly silly and insignificant elements encode an array of social, political, and cultural meaning and importance" (608). Abate goes on to state,

> The general chaos, mayhem, and disorder that permeated every episode of [*The Muppet Show*], for example, called into question prevailing Western notions about central control, official power, and designated authority. After all, Kermit's futile attempts to keep the production running in an orderly manner appeared during a time that witnessed widespread social unrest, rampant student protests, and a growing loss of faith in elected officials. (602)

Po's panda-sourced silliness and the chaos he brings to The Valley of Peace and Shifu's disciplinary and ordered pedagogy of kung fu are key to his arc, as his silliness cuts through the seriousness of his enemies, and his defiance of the social order by being affable, inclusive, and choosing to defend rather than offend upends his adoptive community until the pandas come out of hiding and return to their rightful place in The Valley of Peace. Po is a bumbling American in a Chinese legend, but at the same time, his silly enthusiasm comes from a deep and knowledgeable respect for kung fu, and in the end he succeeds. As an outsider, he is eventually accepted by Shifu and the Furious Five through his respect of the warrior culture that protects his community and his willingness to take criticism, learn, and serve.

At the same time, he is still the fat panda. Once his adoptive community accepts that and adapts their pedagogy of kung fu to fit his advantages and skills, he can defend them from Tai Lung, Lord Shen, and Kai. And in turn, by the third film, despite his limitations, his communities—no longer just one community—protect him back through gifting him their qi so

he can fully ascend to Dragon Warriorhood. This is shown through them displaying their paws

(or wings) in his direction, intoning their relationship with him, and then, through a glowing

light, their qi is transferred to him in the afterlife so he can fight their enemy and return to them.

While he is accepted and loved, he earns it through service up to his death and eventual

resurrection through the power of their qi. In a way, Po turns the idea of the adoptee as gift on its

head, as he may serve the community he was brought into as a waiter and as their protector, but

they in turn give him their power. Thus, there is a critical ideological tension throughout the

franchise surrounding a familial and communal connection that, despite some complications,

"survives" and can be applicable to the complexities of an adoptee's biological and adoptive

kinship bonds. In the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, Po does eventually find a place where his body is

no longer out of place, but rather than reject his adoptive culture, he integrates them. It is through

acceptance of his panda-hood and the love of his adopted and panda communities that he can

find the means and power to become the Dragon Warrior by protecting both sets of his clans and

friends, who then offer themselves as protection in return.

The trilogy plays with several familiar adoption-related tropes. There is an Angry

Adoptee in Tai Lung, Master Shifu's violent adoptive son, who is dispatched by Po because of

his inability to understand the emotional labor of becoming the Dragon Warrior (caring for

others vs. just kung fu violence). The first film sets up this dynamic through the antagonist Tai

Lung, who trained his entire life to be the Dragon Warrior only to be rejected, for wanting it too

much, as he felt it was the only position in that society he fit despite not fully understanding that

the Dragon Warrior was a fighter and carer. Mirrors and reflection are a frequent and repeated

theme in the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise, metaphorically and literally. Oogway says to Shifu,

"Your mind is like this water, my friend. When it becomes agitated, it becomes difficult to see

but if you allow it to settle, the answer becomes clear." Tai Lung's unwillingness to reflect on himself is his flaw—and his downfall—as he does not see himself as anything less than the perfect candidate for the Dragon Warrior because of his martial skills. He does not see that he lacks the emotional intelligence to serve his community. Shifu struggles with self-reflection on his role as an adoptive parent who "failed" his son and has thus put the Valley of Peace at risk. In a way, Tai Lung is unable to come out of the Ghost Kingdom of his own making, one of hostility and resentment, to see his adoptive father and community—and himself—as flesh-and-blood anthropomorphic creatures. He is an excellent warrior, but his very skill makes him unfit for the role. Similarly, the rebellious and genocidal peacock son in the second film is dispatched with fireworks, and he too never appears again. Po, having worked in the service industry, knows how to care for others' needs beyond physical protection from violence. As a waiter in a noodle shop, he knows how to sustain life.

Simultaneity and the convergence of time and memory come into play as Po is a late discovery adoptee and discovers he is adopted in a way that is traumatic but that also acknowledges that trauma precedes as well as follows his adoption. *Kung Fu Panda*'s adoptee conflict comes from the trauma of the unknown and the unintegrated; acceptance from all participants, including the adoptee, is what makes the resolution possible. Po has put physical and mental effort into fitting into a world not built for him. His great comparable size to other characters is emphasized by camera angles. In his talk with Mr. Goose, Po is shown from Mr. Goose's eyeline while Mr. Goose is filmed more straight on, emphasizing that Po is "too tall" for the world he inhabits. Po triumphs by affirming himself, his endurance in learning kung fu, and solidifying his connection to those around him—and that tribe of commonality increases as the

series goes on, spreading from the Valley of Peace to "all of China." He must also conquer the physical and psychological barriers that hold him back, in time, in place, and in his career.

The importance of family and inheritance of traits is established early on, as is the discontinuity—and continuity—of traits through adoption. It is revealed in the opening sequence that Po dreams of being a beloved kung fu warrior. He is awoken from his dream by his dad, Mr. Goose. Po lies that he was dreaming about "noodles," not about being a kung fu warrior, and the camera lingers on his dad's excited reaction and proclamation that he "has been waiting for this moment… this sign" and now wants to endow him with the "secret ingredient of [his] secret ingredient soup" and allow Po to ascend to "fulfill his destiny and take over the restaurant" (*Kung Fu Panda*). At the same time, in a humorous bit of foreshadowing, Mr. Goose points out that he inherited the noodle shop from his father and grandfather—but originally the noodle shop was won from a pig in a game of mah jong. Mr. Goose says, "We are noodle folk. Broth runs through our veins. We all have our place in this world and mine is here and yours is—." This side story demonstrates that Mr. Goose sees cooking noodles as his place in the world, and because Po is his son, it is his as well. But it is not through biological kinship generationally handing down the noodle shop, and Mr. Goose's ancestor winning the shop from another shows that just because one "adopts" a certain career path, it is not necessarily destiny. Visually, this is contrasted with Po crouching in the noodle shop kitchen. He is too big to work in this kitchen; thus, he works in the more open-air dining area, serving customers. Mr. Goose sees this as his inheritance, but Po really cannot inherit his dad's role. It is a role too small for him.

Patterning and symmetry are also important components of the rhetoric of these films. Each film sets up a problem related to Po's insecurities and inadequacies that is a combination of pedagogical, physical, or psychological. Po must overcome his inadequacies to defeat the

99

antagonist, who often serves as a counterpoint to Po's problems, whether they be physical,[36]

mental,[37] or spiritual.[38] Po must first overcome this problem in his own unique manner, with the

support of his community, before defeating his enemy, reaching a spiritual truth the villain fails

to see, while also becoming more disciplined and mature. While there was no guarantee the first

film would receive a sequel, adoption is foreshadowed in the film through the theme of self-

reflection and self-acceptance. Po and Tai Lung represent competing views on self-reflection:

while Tai Lung thinks it is his right to be the Dragon Warrior by merit, Po is aware of his

shortcomings and works hard—in concert with a teacher who learns to meet his pupil where he

is—and accepts himself and extends that grace to others, acknowledging that together they are

stronger, not weaker. Po looks at the Dragon Scroll and finds out it is a literal mirror. He sees his

---

[36] In the first film, Po must defeat Tai Lung, the agile kung fu master and adopted foundling son of Master Shifu, who escapes prison to destroy the Valley of Peace for not declaring him The Dragon Warrior years ago. In this film, Master Shifu must learn to adjust his strict teaching style to accommodate Po's flexible and large body and Po must overcome his own insecurities about his body and reel in his fantasies about kung fu Through his own observational intelligence, he learns a devastatingly powerful move (The Wuxi Finger Hold) and defeats Tai Lung, earning the Furious Five's acceptance and granting Master Shifu a measure of peace.

[37] In the second film, Po faces an exiled white peacock named Lord Shen who wields the power of fire cannons to reclaim Gongmen City. Po experiences flashbacks he does not understand while defending the Musician's Village from Lord Shen's minions. His dad, Mr. Ping, reveals that he is not Po's father. Mr. Ping found Po as a crying baby in his weekly shipment of radishes and adopted him as his son. More traumatic memories are triggered when Lord Shen declares that his parents hated him and threw him away. It is through the support of his dad and friends, including a Soothsayer who reveals that Po's mother died protecting him from Lord Shen's genocide of all the pandas and encourages him to accept and embrace his past, that Po can use his newfound knowledge to turn Lord Shen's fireworks back on him and defeats him. The second film ends with a stinger revealing that Li Shan, Po's panda father, is alive and knows he is alive.

[38] The third film awkwardly reunites Po with his father Li Shan, which raises insecurities for Mr. Ping and Po, who is also saddled with new responsibilities as The Dragon Warrior. A final villain arises, the spirit warrior Kai, a former friend of Oogway who returns from the afterlife to steal everyone's chi, a talent he stole from the pandas centuries ago. As The Dragon Warrior, Po must finally learn to channel his chi, which Master Shifu cannot teach him, although Li Shan claims he can. They evacuate to the pandas' hidden village, where Po meets other pandas for the first time. It turns out Li Shan was lying to protect Po. In the finale, Po uses The Wuxi Finger Hold from the first film to take Kai and himself to the afterlife, where they battle for dominance away from his friends and family. Thinking Po is dead, Li Shan, Mr. Ping, the pandas, the citizens of the Valley of Peace, and the Furious Five all learn to channel their chi towards Po by reciting the good things Po has taught them. They revive him and transform him into The Dragon Warrior, and he defeats Kai for good, restores chi to everyone it was stolen from, and is brought back to the mortal realm. Li Shan and Mr. Ping accept their roles as Po's father and dad. The film series ends with a stirring rendition of "Kung Fu Fighting" in English and Mandarin while Po teaches—and learns—kung fu from his blended community of pandas and citizens of the Valley of Peace.

own reflection and realizes that self-awareness of oneself and their limitations is imperative to the Dragon Warrior as knowing one's limitations connects him to others such as the Furious Five and their unique abilities and his community who give him support. Po has acknowledged himself for who he is while Tai Lung cannot even look at himself—despite being an ideal warrior, putting in the work and being a literal predator, he cannot understand that his definition of the Dragon Warrior is so stiffly defined that there is no space for anyone with flaws such as himself. It is Po, who expands his peers' definition of what a warrior—and a Dragon Warrior—is and eventually expands the definition of who is family, who succeeds.

In *Kung Fu Panda 2*, Po experiences paralyzing memories when he meets the antagonist, the peacock Lord Shen and his minions. Lord Shen, it turns out, played a key role in the traumatic separation of Po's family, the destruction of all pandas, which led to his eventual secret adoption by Mr. Ping. When Po rushes to protect villagers from thieves in the second film, he experiences a flood of memories triggered by a sun symbol. In these scenes of relived trauma, simultaneity is a valuable rhetorical tool, because it serves to illustrate the way past trauma can incapacitate an adoptee in the present. Po's ability to defend himself and others ceases when he experiences trauma anew, a problem when one's job is to protect one's community. Sandra Bloom, in her explanation of trauma theory, defines a flashback as

> A sudden intrusive re-experiencing of a fragment of one of those traumatic, unverbalized memories. During a flashback, people become overwhelmed with the same emotions that they felt at the time of the trauma…. Their minds can become flooded with the images, emotions, and physical sensations associated with the trauma…. When someone experiences a flashback, they do not remember the experience, they relive it. (7)

Through simultaneity, the film also makes the audience experience the intrusive flashback with Po. Po is experiencing a flashback of the psychological definition, and the audience experiences a flashback of the cinematic definition. And for the audience, as for Po, it is only through gaining knowledge of, accepting, and understanding that trauma without reliving it (i.e., having it intrude on our cinematic present) that he escapes the Ghost Kingdom and successfully defends China from a fireworks-wielding peacock. At first, Po expresses shame for a mere symbol freezing him, but his peers treat him with compassion and help him solve the mystery of why the symbol elicited such a strong reaction (it is the symbol of Lord Shen who conducted a panda genocide). He is then able to see into his past, not as the baby who experienced the trauma but as himself now, able to, with maturity, reflect on the circumstances of his abandonment with compassion for those involved. And when Po defeats Lord Shen, he does so by redirection. Using tai chi moves, Po turns the firework Lord Shen shoots in his direction, a symbol of the violence Lord Shen has and continues to inflict on Po and all pandas, and turns it back on Lord Shen, returning the pain to its source. It is Lord Shen's own form of reunion to be reunited with his violence.

In the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, Po emerges from three Ghost Kingdoms: a longing for power and acceptance in his present community in the first film, a longing for his ghost mother in the second, and finally, a longing for his lost panda society in the third. In these "flashback" scenes, simultaneity illustrates the way past trauma can collapse time and incapacitate an adoptee in the present, while the change of animation style complicates and confuses our understanding of what is going on—a confusion also experienced by Po. It is through the careful guidance of a wise ally that he can confront the trauma without reliving it in the abstract and save China (again). The audience also ceases reliving those traumatic events with Po while also not forgetting them. In fact, the franchise makes it crucial that audiences do not forget Po's past, as it

is key to understanding the sequel. In *Lion*, similarly, simultaneity slowly knits together Young Saroo and Adult Saroo's mental anguish over his separation from his biological family while also moving his life forward with the Brierleys. In a film that follows its protagonist so closely; this ambiguity of simultaneity becomes a mirror to Saroo's own mental state, caught between two continents, burdened by two strands of guilt. For Po, simultaneity serves to raise up memories that are crucial for the survival of his adopted village and to portray the ongoing trauma and importance of the first family in Po's life. Through simultaneity the viewer sees the world through Po's perspective, as an adoptee paralyzed by the past, who needs connections, love, and people to fight for beyond himself. While in the first scene, Po fantasizes about fighting off thousands of foes alone, in the finale of the third film, friends surround him, his adopted and first family, his fellow pandas, and his fellow kung fu artists, teaching their entire community to dance and do kung fu. Kung fu and being a "Dragon Warrior" is not about being the singular defender of China but about forging and reforging deep emotional connections, affirming the importance of forging strong bonds—kinship or otherwise across community lines, promoting cooperation not conquest. While Po succeeds in forging and reforging ties, his enemies, Tai Lung, Lord Shen, and Kai, break familial bonds, adoptive familial bonds, and friendships and do not reforge them.

In the *Kung Fu Panda* films, simultaneity serves to illustrate the paralyzing force of trauma but also, its solution. As Po comes to understand his traumatic memories, the animation in the flashbacks converges with the "present" animation. They are real and painful but revealing. He confronts his adoptive father, who tells him what he knows of Po's origins: he discovered Po in a radish crate. Later, a soothsayer reveals that the antagonist, Lord Shen, in a bid to kill all prophesied challengers of "black and white," murdered his family, along with all

other pandas. His mother hid him on a vegetable cart to save him, creating the final link between Mr. Ping's version of events and the mystery of Po's origins. Witnessing this violence traumatized baby Po, and it is still traumatizing him in the present. He calls these "stupid nightmares," but the Soothsayer insists they are "memory" and forces Po to acknowledge their power and his own ability to cope with them via the mental *techne* of kung fu and tai chi. For Po to conquer his enemy and escape the Ghost Kingdom, he must acknowledge these "stupid nightmares" for what they are and name them. Furthermore, he must acknowledge their pain and the effect on him to move past them. By doing so, he is able to defend the Valley of Peace.

At the heart of these films is trauma and its ongoing effects on relationships. The protagonists of *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy are both separated from their families through no fault of their own, an accidental train ride (*Lion*) and a panda genocide instigated by a peacock in fear of a prophecy (*Kung Fu Panda 2*). The films pathologize adoptee trauma to give the adoptee protagonist a third-act psychological challenge to defeat: Betty Jean Lifton's "Ghost Kingdom" (72). The solution to the "Ghost Kingdom" in both *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy is two-fold: reunion and acceptance. Po actually enters a literal ghost kingdom, in that he is punched into the afterlife in *Kung Fu Panda 3* and must be brought back by his family, friends, and community gifting him their *qi* as a sign of their love and acceptance. Formative adoption "trauma" texts such as *The Primal Wound* posit that adoptees suffer from lifelong trauma because of separation from their families (mostly concentrating on the mother-child relationship) and societal pressure to cohere to the "adoptive families are 'just as if'."

But there is trauma along the entire axis of adoption from the trauma of the circumstances that instigate separation such as poverty and illegitimacy stigma, to the trauma of relinquishment or surrender, the trauma of living un-familied in a family-centered society, the trauma of

placement, the trauma of adjustment and integration, the trauma of disclosure, the trauma of search, the trauma of failure, the trauma of reunion and reintegration, the trauma of the risk of not being accepted or being shamed for seeking reunion—or never seeking reunion—or the trauma of never having enough wealth, time, or clues to even start a search. *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy reflect this trauma on the adoptee as the Ghost Kingdom and demonstrate that the resolution lies not just in the adoptee but in those in the adoption constellation as well. An adoptee reaching a place of comfort among kin requires the emotional labor of all involved and the adoptee's sense of security is the willingness of their families to accept them. If not, one ends up with a Mantosh, quietly floundering between cultures, or Tai Lung, violently reacting to rejection. In the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, his adoptive and biological fathers inadvertently place emotional weight on him through their unwillingness to work past their possessiveness of Po. They learn to work together through their love for Po and are forced to reconcile with the effect of their competitive behavior on their son. In *Lion*, the relief in Saroo's face when his adoptive mother responds with compassion and acceptance when he tells her about his search shows just how strongly he needs her acceptance and how fragile that trust bond can be. These films, while highly interested in the inner mental lives of adoptees, argue that the semantic and poetic meaning of adoption is an ongoing labor and use the negotiation of kinship bonds, continuously under discursive pressure to affirm biological kinship, as the touchstone for intimacy. Thus they affirm that adoptive bonds are just as intimate and important as biological ties.

Adoption and Adoptees on Film

      Lion and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy's critical and financial success as adoptee-centered

films is unsurprising in an entertainment ecosystem in which adoptees and narratives that focus

on adoption are overrepresented[39] in the top rated and reviewed Hollywood films. Go to the

movies today, and at least one film screening will have an element related to adoption, foster

care, foundlings, or orphans. At least seventeen of IMDB's Top 50 rated films feature adoptees,

adoption (formal or informal), orphans, foster youth, or former foster youth as significant

characters or narrative elements. While orphans, foundlings, and adoptees have long existed in

narrative texts of history, this proliferation of orphans, foundlings, and adoptees in film

narratives can be traced back to the eighteenth century in English literature, when writers, fueled

by the emerging doctrines of the Age of Enlightenment, sought to explore the limits of belonging

in their contemporary social structures through protagonists who found themselves excised from

the familial hierarchy and needing to navigate the world without the assumed bonds of stable

biological kinship to rely on for support (Nixon 1). As Cynthia Nixon argues, characters who

were orphans, and perhaps eventually adoptees, were social individuals who could, through their

interactions with the world and loose definition of kinship, experience, evaluate, and critique the

assumed social structures that made them orphans, foundlings, and adoptees and blaze a path that

those with familial ties and by proxy, obligations, might be unable or unwilling to pursue (8). In

Kin of Another Kind, Cynthia Callahan states that "adoption embodies some of our biggest

---

[39] It is difficult to number the exact population of adoptees in the United States. Census 2000 was the first to include "adopted son/daughter" as a category, and as of Census 2013, around 7 million Americans are known to be adopted, which would make adoptees around 2% of the United States' population (*Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute*).

individual and collective concerns about belonging" and that adoptees are a means of embodying the search for belonging and the dramatic pitfalls that may ensue (166). This trope or trend seeped into cinematic storytelling.

Today, the stories on screen that can emerge from an adopted life remain popular and are frequently employed by writers to explore the horizons of loyalty and fidelity and work through the complex morality of familial bonds, breaks, and reunification. Adoptees are flexible characters for writers to use since so much of their past can lead to a grand twist—or never be explored—and their character arcs, without the assumed biological kin-based support system, can reach great heights and maybe spectacular falls.[40] In other words, there is dramatic potential to be mined in the un-kinned person. And yet, as Lori Askeland notes in "Adoption and Orphan Tropes in Literary Studies,"

> The metaphor of the orphan […] has often been severed in literary criticism from serious attention to the lived reality of child abandonment or abduction, adoption and foster care—and that reality has been mostly invisible to traditional literary scholars as narrative elements. For example, while the Oedipal story stands at the heart of the Western literary tradition and cultural criticism, its status specifically as a story of fostering and adoption had been overlooked in mainstream literary studies. (13)

Since the mid-20th century, there has been a stronger push to portray adoptive families in a kinder light, to raise the adoptive family up to the status of biological family through the "just as if" narrative. An unfortunate side effect of portraying adoptive families as if they are just as if the adoptee was a biological child directly stigmatizes the first family and creates a subtext in which

---

[40] This also occurs in superhero comics series with multi-decade arcs.

any desire of the adoptee to someday search or maintain relationships with the first family is inappropriate. If an adoptive family is "just as if" then why does one need a first family? And yet, at the same time, paradoxically, stories of search, that end in a reunion, are also still extremely popular. This paradox of happy endings, with a loving adoptive family or found family at last, or reuniting with a first family, shows again the fluidity of adoption and the constancy of familial ties even after severance.

Sometimes onscreen adoptees, like many youthful figures, are symbolic, serving as figures of belonging or figures of the concerns of belonging, bearers of meaning not makers of meaning, leaving them without much agency. Instead, they operate as conduits of social criticism. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," an analysis of women on film, Laura Mulvey states, "[W]omen stand in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (7). So too, in a culture heavily tied to biological kinship and familial culture, adoptees are bound by a familial symbolic order that ties them outside and inside in a nowhere place where they are silent. For example, orphans, foundlings, and adoptees are conduits of social and structural criticism in films such as *The Blind Side*, *Instant Family*, and *Tarzan*. These films, to a certain degree, invite the viewer to think critically about the structures (racism, poverty, colonialism) that "un-family" and "family" these adoptees, who do not get much of an opportunity to speak about their adoption, while still milking adoption for the

melodrama[41] that makes it popular and profitable.[42] And like many adoption-related narratives, these are not penned by adoptees or have significant input from adoptees themselves. Much as eighteenth-century writers used adoptees to explore belonging in the Age of Enlightenment, the adoptees seen on screen today are tools enabling non-adopted creators to explore ideas of belonging that they may be experiencing.

This creates a dilemma of sorts now that there is a considerable number of intercountry, transracial, and domestic adoptees that have come of age and shopped their memoirs, documentaries, and stories around to various presses and studios, even if they are unable to get much of a foothold beyond independent cinema and publishing. To borrow a phrase from disability activism, adoptees seek "nothing about us without us." Kim Park Nelson notes in "'Loss is more than sadness': Reading Dissent in Transracial Adoption Melodrama in *The Language of Blood* and *First-Person Plural*" that "while a handful of films, television shows and novels have been produced that focus on transracial adoptee characters, the novelists, screenwriters and directors who produce these works are not themselves transracially adopted" (102). Non-adopted creators often are using a system that they have not found themselves at the mercy and whims of to create adoptee narratives that in many cases do not center on adoptees or tell truths that emerge from adoptees speaking about an adoptee experience. Making this point

---

[41] Kim Park Nelson's "'Loss is more than sadness': Reading Dissent in Transracial Adoption Melodrama in 'The Language of Blood' and 'First Person Plural'" notes the melodrama of adoption narratives—even in adoptee-penned narratives—and argues that "melodramatic stories that engage in the sentimental terms defined in dominant discourses of transracial and transnational adoption are far more effective in bringing transracial adoptee perspectives into public discussion. While these are not the only stories about the transracial adoption experience, they are the ones that are currently most visible as the stories many adoptees have to tell. This intervention on the part of transracial adoptees is particularly crucial because their stories also do the important work of disrupting popular notions of transracial and transnational adoption as unproblematic, apolitical experiences of love, fulfillment, and happiness" (124). Melodramatic adoptee stories are not bad representation but often a more effective means of engaging other members of the adoption constellation and the public in adoption issues.

[42] *The Blind Side*, *Instant Family*, and *Tarzan* all made back three times their original budget, making them financial successes (*IMBD*).

more specifically, Kimberly D. McKee's "The Consumption of Adoption and Adoptees in American Middlebrow Culture" states, "The misinformation associated with adoption reflects popular media and mainstream society's investment in producing a stock story for adoption—the loving family rescuing a pitiful orphan—even when this story elides truths about caring birth families or abusive adoptive families" (669). While it is not objectionable to imagine stories about a system one is unfamiliar with, if those stories are perpetuated or dominate in media, they can, in their imperfection, give a false or incomplete impression of child welfare, of adoption, and of those who have found their lives irrevocably changed by strangers in that system.

This is why the focus in *Lion* and *t*he *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy on the adoptee in script and screen is so notably effective. *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy pointedly focus on the adoptee perspective, and from that the viewer learns of the fluidity, discontinuity, and constancy of familial bonds across time and terrain in adoption. Saroo and Po learn to deploy their own agency as individuals who live in between disparate groups and bring them together. While Po is indeed "saved" by Ping and Saroo's life becomes much more secure in Tasmania, the end of their stories is reunion and for *Kung Fu Panda 3*, the emotional tumult after reunion. Some of these stories, such as 2009's *The Blind Side*, center so heavily on the adoptive parents' arc as they come to accept their new role as a white parent to a Black teenager that the adoptees are reduced to flat or stereotypical portrayals. Contrast *The Blind Side,* where Michael Oher is spotted by the viewer through the gaze of Leigh Anne Tuohy, from the inside of her SUV, not from his perspective walking down the street, with *Lion*. In *Lion*, we follow Saroo into the room where his adoptive parents sit nervously. The camera is low and follows Saroo as the center of frame, so we see them from his perspective as they awkwardly hand him a plush koala. In the example of *The Blind Side*, adoptee Michael Oher commented that the film's portrayal of him by

Quinton Aaron made him seem "dumb." Oher ended up writing his own memoir, which "decisively reclaims control of this story without once taking anything away from his love of or his gratitude for his adoptive family — a family that's been elevated to near sainthood" (Holmes). That memoir has not been picked up by a studio as of 2023.

While *The Blind Side* existing, being a financially successful film, and adoptive parent Sandra Bullock receiving an Oscar for her performance as an adoptive parent are not objectionable, the pointed lack of focus on Michael Oher in favor of his white adoptive parents when he is the whole reason the Tuohy family became famous and sold their story to a family friend, writer Michael Lewis, gives the impression of carelessness, both in terms of lack of care given to tell a sensitive story and lack of caring. This becomes an even greater problem when there is no attempt by those involved at remedying or reconciling with the adoptee in question. As John Berger writes of women in *Ways of Seeing*, adoptees reading or viewing these texts "watch themselves being looked at… an object of vision; a sight" (47). While it is great to see an adoptee loved through the eyes of a loving adoptive parent, it is demonstrably different from seeing adoptees, as they mature and come to terms with their adoption, increasingly gain agency in their lives, passing from object to subject. *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy pointedly focus on the adoptee's perspective and on seeing the world around the adoptees from their perspective, from the height of the lens to the space they occupy in center frame. From that the viewer learns of the fluidity, discontinuity, and constancy of familial bonds across time and terrain in adoption. Saroo and Po learn to deploy their own agency as creatures that live in between disparate groups and bring them together. While Po is indeed "saved" by Ping and Saroo's life becomes much more secure in Tasmania, the end of their stories is reunion and integration.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the language with which to talk and write about adoption is fraught with issues of agency and policing, often to the detriment of adoptees. Novy states, "Adoption makes ambiguous the definition of parenthood and of such other important terms as *family, kinship,* and *identity,* as well as *father* and *mother*" (*Imagining Adoption* 1). Adoption narratives often deal with these definitions, and the films *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy wrestle with the interpersonal drama that comes from wrestling with these definitions. In *Lion*, Saroo conceals his search from his adoptive parents because he fears upsetting them, saying, "I didn't want you to think I wasn't grateful," and the film shows his family "haunting" him in silence. In *Kung Fu Panda*, Po first deals with the trauma of discovering he is a secret adoptee, and then Po's adoptive and biological parents clash because they both care deeply about their son. *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy are films that explore the complexities of adoption, search, and reunion while emphasizing that while there may be many emotions felt by those involved, the adoptees experience acute, life-altering trauma that must be dealt with and supported by their community through a fluid, dynamic, and expansive understanding of relationships and kinship. Askeland notes in "Adoption and Orphan Tropes in Literary Studies" that "The dominant narrative of adoption in the West is a celebratory story of rescue… but one where birth parents are often entirely erased, and adoptees are required to be grateful" (14). In *Lion* and *The Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, a fluid, dynamic, and expansive adoption constellation wins out over the Ghost Kingdom of erasure, assumed imperative gratitude, and silencing. Adoptive parents and first parents carefully set aside their feelings and acknowledge their roles in the adoptee's life are not in competition. While reunion troubles the binaries of familial relations, these films exemplify an aspect of adoption that is not often affirmed: biological families are important—not as a MacGuffin revelation but as real people (or real pandas). The

112

final shot of *Lion* is a long drone zoom out on Adult Saroo walking along the train tracks in India that took him far away from his family and community and has, through Google Earth, reunited him with them. The final postscript describes how the real Saroo brought his families and communities together to uplift them. The final shot of the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy is Po, the citizens of the Valley of Peace, and his panda relations all dancing and practicing kung fu in styles that best adhere to their unique anthropomorphic animal bodies, in unity and diversity. It is not enough for the adoptee to escape the "Ghost Kingdom." The adoptees and their kin must all emerge into the light and expand not only their view of family but of geography and community.

Conclusion

    Lion and *The Kung Fu Panda* trilogy take on the challenge of translating an adoptee's physical and emotional journey through space and time, wrestling with identity, memory, and imagination by using cinematic language to center the adoptees' voices and assert that it is their voices that matter most. Po is a panda waiter who does not know how to be a panda and the Dragon Warrior. Saroo is a scared Indian boy who was homeless and a confident Australian middle-class man. They must come to terms with their painful pasts to move forward in their present. These films use simultaneity, the cinematic illusion of happening at the same time, to represent past memory—traumatic or otherwise—intruding on an interacting with the present and psychologically guide the audience. While these films do hit typical adoption search narrative tropes, and simultaneity and good acting or animation cannot fully capture for the audience the verisimilitude of being an adoptee, the heart of these films is an affirmation of the

importance of and the challenge for adoptees to be *told* and to *know* the truth of themselves. Without it, they, like their adoptee foils, flounder.

These films emphasize the importance of self-definition in adoption search narratives and offer the solution that adoptees embrace all their kin—adoptive and biological—as equal. When adoptees define kin for themselves, they assert their agency in an adoption constellation as that which binds them all together. What adoption looks like or feels like to outsiders matters less than the adoptee's own feelings. For Saroo, he is searching for a specific geographical location and its markers (a distinct water tower next to a rural Indian train station)—but it is the additional sentimental imagery of his mother and brother and the strong poetic and emotional attachments Saroo attaches to them that lead him to sit for hours and months in front of a laptop searching for that exact water tower. For Po, in each film in the trilogy, he is asked to become something that has already been defined for him and defined as something most definitely *not* him as a roly-poly panda waiter: "The Dragon Warrior." "The "Dragon Warrior" throughout the films is defined as some intangible powerful being (and shape) that he is not and can never be. It takes until the final film for Po, in a spiritual otherworld, to manifest himself as the Dragon Warrior, which we learn is not defined by what the other characters think a "Dragon Warrior" is—the best kung fu artist—but someone who, by his relationships with friends and families, can encourage such love and loyalty that they will gift their qi to him. The concrete and the mystical, for Saroo and Po, serve as obstructions and opportunities for these characters to explore identity, kinship, and their connections to the physical world around them.

Saroo's moment of peace comes in finding his family and in speaking with his adoptive parents in Australia. Po's power comes from the integration of the love and support of his fathers, the pandas, and the citizens of the Valley of Peace. This adjustment makes the adoptee

not the source of the problem but the solution. In *Lion* and *Kung Fu Panda*, the adoptees scrape themselves back from objectification by being the "straight man" in tragicomedies of adoption. These films beckon the viewer to see things from the adoptee's perspective. Saroo's and Po's inner lives, the ways they see themselves and renegotiate their relationships with kin, are central to their arc. Rather than seeing them as objects or Other, viewers see that they are the touchstone, and their families and communities are Others and Oddities that must be negotiated with. They are the most relatable and the standards for normalcy in their films. Cinema allows the opportunity for an adoptee gaze, a gaze that un-objectifies the adoptee. In *Lion*, Saroo is unobjectified through the flipping of the camera. We do not anticipate his arrival as a surprise or gift to the Brierleys. Instead, we follow the perspective of Saroo, and Sue and Joe slide into frame, seated, not standing as if to receive him, when Saroo's social worker proclaims, "This is your mum and dad." In *Lion*, the adoptive parents come bearing gifts: a koala, a representation of Australia. Notably, Saroo does not say hello when beckoned to by Swamina, the social worker. He does not need to accept them. Their emotional reaction to him is not what is important here. In this framing, the adoptive parents appear small, and the gift is the koala, not the child. The films conclude that family is important—all family. However, the search for family, found, adopted, biological, or otherwise, still uses family as its touchstone for intimacy.

Adoption narratives being a popular trope in cinema is not necessarily a terrible thing for adoptees, their kin, or society in general. In a speech outside the Chicago Theatre in 2005, film reviewer Roger Ebert said, "For me, the movies are like a machine that generates empathy" ("Roger Ebert on Empathy"). And, like the London Foundling Hospital's proliferation of pro-foundling art, film has done a great deal for generating empathy for orphans, foundlings, and adoptees. While Ebert's statement is a bit hyperbolic and film is by no means unique in its ability

115

to generate empathy, it is true that film as a medium offers audience members the ability to immerse and explore a mosaic of emotions around a topic or situation that they may not be familiar with and may never experience for themselves. For film narratives surrounding adoption, from relinquishment to disclosure, to search and reunion, film offers a unique format in which to portray the internal and external struggles of the adoptee experience. The visual nature of cinema allows audiences to understand in a new way the conflicts that arise in adoptive narrative and in the discourses surrounding kin. These films use simultaneity in a way that can center the adoptee and represent both the interiority and exteriority of burgeoning kinship ties across time.

Works Cited

Abandoned, Adopted Here. Directed by Lucy Sheen, performances by Lucy Sheen. Foundling

> Films, 2016.

Abate, Michelle Ann. "Taking Silliness Seriously: Jim Henson's The Muppet Show, the Anglo-

> American Tradition of Nonsense, and Cultural Critique." *Journal of Popular Culture*,

> vol. 42, no. 4, Aug. 2009, pp. 589–613.

Askeland, Lori. "Adoption and Orphan Tropes in Literary Studies." *Adoption & Culture*, 2014,

> vol. 4, pp. 13-25.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*, 1972.

Bernstein, Richard. "The Panda That Roared." *The New York Times*, 20 July 2008.

The Blindside. Directed by John Lee Hancock, performances by Sandra Bullock, Tim McGraw,

> and Quinton Aaron. Warner Brothers Pictures, 2009.

Bloom, Sandra L. "Trauma Theory Abbreviated." *Final Action Plan: A Coordinated Community*

> *Response to Family Violence*, October 1999.

Bruns, John. "The Polyphonic Film." *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 2008, vol. 6,

> no. 2, pp. 189-212.

Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Vintage Books, 1957.

Callahan, Cynthia. *Kin of Another Kind: Transracial Adoption in American Literature*.

"Charlie Rose: The Power of Questions." *Charlie Rose*, PBS, 26 Oct. 2011,

> https://charlierose.com/videos4434. Accessed 24 Oct. 2022.

Chung, Hye Jean. "*Kung Fu Panda*: Animated Animal Bodies as Layered Sites of

> (Trans)national Identities." *The Velvet Light Trap*, vol. 69, Spring 2012, pp. 27-37.

Closure. Directed by Bryan Tucker, performances by Angela Tucker. Fob & Dongle

      Productions, 2013.

Dick, Bernard F. "At the Crossroads of Time: Types of Simultaneity in Literature and Film." *The*

      Georgia Review, vol. 33, no. 2, 1979, pp. 423-432.

Holmes, Linda. "Beyond 'The Blind Side,' Michael Oher Rewrites His Own Story." *NPR*, 8

      February 2011, https://www.npr.org/2011/02/08/133590180/beyond-the-blind-side-

      michael-oher-rewrites-his-own-story. Accessed 2 December 2022.

First Person Plural. Directed by Deann Borshay Liem. New Day Films, 2000.

Chen, Fu-Jen. "Adoption, Cynical Detachment, and New Age Beliefs in *Juno* and *Kung Fu*

      Panda." *Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2017, pp. (Article 3) 1-8.

Homans, Margaret. *The Imprint of Another Life; Adoption Narratives and Human Possibility*.

      University of Michigan, 2013.

Hurtado, Adela. "Protecting the Mickey Mouse Ears: Moving Beyond Traditional Campaign-

      Style Enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights in China." *Fordham Intellectual*

      Property, Media, & Entertainment Law Journal, 2018, pp. 421-475.

"IMDb 'Top 250.'" IMDb, *IMDb.com*, 2020.

      www.imdb.com/search/title/?groups=top_250&sort=user_rating.

Kung Fu Panda. Directed by Mark Osborne and John Stevenson, performances by Jack Black,

      Ian McShane, Angelina Jolie, and Dustin Hoffman. DreamWorks Animation, 2008.

Kung Fu Panda 2. Directed by Jennifer Yuh Nelson, performances by Jack Black, Angelina,

      Jolie, and Jackie Chan. DreamWorks Animation, 2011.

Kung Fu Panda 3. Directed by Jennifer Yuh Nelson and Alessandro Carloni, performances by

      Jack Black, Dustin Hoffman, and Jackie Chan. DreamWorks Animation, 2016.

Lifton, Betty Jean. "Ghosts in the Adopted Family." *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, vol. 30, no. 1, Jan. 2010, pp. 71–79. EBSCOhost, https://doi.org0.1080/07351690903200176.

Lion. Directed by Garth Davis, performances by Dev Patel, Sunny Pawar, and Nicole Kidman, The Weinstein Company, 2016.

McKee, Kim. "The Consumption of Adoption and Adoptees in American Middlebrow Culture." *Biography*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2019, pp. 669-692.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6-18.

Nelson, Kim Park. "'Loss Is More than Sadness': Reading Dissent in Transracial Adoption Melodrama in 'The Language of Blood' and 'First Person Plural.'" *Adoption & Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, pp. 101-128.

Nixon, Cheryl L. *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature: Estate, Blood, and Body*.

Novy, Marianne, Ed. *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture*.

Pudovkin, Vsevolod. *Film Technique and Film Acting, 1926*. Grove Press, 1970.

"Roger Ebert on Empathy." *RogerEbert.com*, 4 April 2018, https://www.rogerebert.com/empathy/video-roger-ebert-on-empathy. Accessed 9 January 2023.

Spencer, Marietta. "Post-Legal Adoption Services: A Lifelong Commitment." *Infertility & Adoption: A Guide for Social Work Practice*, 1988, pp. 155-167.

CHAPTER IV

"I KNOW WHAT I AM AND I'M TRYING TO BE BETTER THAN THAT": ADOPTEES,

POWER, AND THE ADOPTIVE FAMILY IN *LOKI: AGENT OF ASGARD* AND

SUPERMAN: AMERICAN ALIEN[43]

Adoptees in Comics

People who have experienced non-biological kinship relationships such as adoption,

orphanhood, and foster care are overrepresented in serials produced by the two major American

comic book publishing houses, Marvel Comics[44] and DC Comics.[45] Many of the titled serial

characters are known adoptees (Spider-Man, Superman), orphans (Batman), former foster youth

(Shazam), or eventually revealed to have been secret adoptees through a recontextualization of

their origin story (Iron Man[46]). DC Comics's Superman[47] and Marvel Comics's Loki[48] are

among these adoptees. They are presumed orphans with mysterious and powerful origins,

---

[43] Portions of this chapter appear in "'I can turn into anything as long as it's me': The Adoptee God[dess] of Lies and Stories in *Loki: Agent of Asgard*" in *Adoption & Culture*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2020, pp. 83-113.

[44] Marvel Comics was named Timely Comics from 1939 to 1951, Atlas Comics from 1951 to 1961, and finally settled on Marvel Comics in 1962 (Daniels 27, 32-33). As their media empire expanded, they fell under the greater corporate umbrella of Marvel Entertainment.

[45] DC Comics was named National Comics Publication from 1934 to 1961, National Periodical Comics from 1961, and in 1977, they changed their name to DC Comics (Cavalieri). They, like Marvel, fall under a greater corporate umbrella of DC Entertainment.

[46] The Marvel Comics character Tony Stark/Iron Man, who has appeared in various serials since 1963, learns in a November 2016 comic, *International Iron Man #7*, that his mother is Amanda Armstrong, a rockstar, and his father is Jude, a double-agent spy. In other words, he is not the biological son of Howard and Maria Stark, his established parents since 1963; his origin story has been retconned to make Howard and Maria his adoptive parents.

[47] Superman is also known as Clark Kent (his government name) and Kal-El (his Kryptonian birth name). I will primarily use Superman but refer to Clark Kent when appropriate.

[48] Loki's full name is Loki Laufeyson of Asgard. Despite being the adopted son of Odin, he still carries the vestigial remnants of his true parentage in his name and title while still being "of Asgard."

transplants from other planets/realms, placed in disparate cultures (Earth and Asgard respectively) from the ones they were born into (Krypton and Jotunheim) and to varying degrees, appear conspicuously different but also are similar enough to blend in with their adopted people (Asgardians and humans, or, more specifically, Midwestern white Americans)—to a point.

Since 1938, Superman has been the conventional modern superhero, fighting on behalf of Earth, his adopted planet, to the point that, in the comic book universe he inhabits and, in our world, he and his symbol have become an ideal of humanity even though he is an alien of exceptional power. Today, Superman and his symbols stand, contradictorily, for both universal human rights and American patriotism. In January 2022, Congressman-elect Robert Garcia announced he would swear in on his naturalization certificate, a photo of his parents, and the Library of Congress's copy of *Action Comics #1*, the first comic to feature Superman (Medlen). At the same time, Superman's iconic red S featured prominently on the shirts and flags of Arab Spring protestors during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and on the chest of a pitch-invading protestor at the 2022 Qatar World Cup advocating for LGBTQ+, Ukraine, and Iranian women's rights (*The Square*; "World Cup protester brings rainbow flag onto field during Portugal and Uruguay match"). Superman is an emblem of a humanistic ideal of goodness that, in the specific context in which his symbol is displayed, is also a signifier of American idealism and patriotism. He evokes BIPOC immigration and the rural whiteness of Kansas farmlands, an inspiring figure of service without ambition.

Throughout his print history, Superman expresses his loyalty, altruism, and sublimation by being whatever the ideal American is at that time. At the same time, he is most clearly not American, and the solutions to his conflicts and battles are often not solved only by the value and privilege of being Clark Kent, American citizen, but also by painfully employing his Kryptonian

powers in the protection of humanity and Earth. In "The Man of Tomorrow: Superman from American Exceptionalism to Globalization," Michael Soares states,

> While 2013's *Man of Steel* finds the Superman character reassuring his audience that he is "about American as it gets," his actions to spare the Earth from alien conquest find their inspiration in far more than his sense of justice bred in the American Heartland upbringing. They also spring from his recently recovered Kryptonian heritage. For Superman, being American is not enough, and only his articulation of identity in both cultures provides him with the tools to rescue the planet. (747)

By sublimating his alien powers to humanity as a superhero, Superman, with his superstrength and inhuman ability to fly, has fans. The cover of the seventh issue of Max Landis's *Superman: American Alien* features Clark Kent in plainclothes, casually standing among hundreds of people ripping open their shirts to reveal his Superman logo—while he holds his index finger to his lips, as if asking the viewer to keep his secret identity secret, demonstrating the character's growing popularity in the story as he becomes the protector of Metropolis, contrasting in story with his mediocre journalism career. At the same time, this cover reminds the reader of Superman's universal appeal as an international icon of immigration and dual heritage, the idealized values that Americans imagine and aspire to reach (Engle 331).

In the serial itself, young Clark Kent finds himself at a Caribbean yacht party and mistaken for the reclusive billionaire Bruce Wayne.[49] When he confesses to another character who he really is, Clark Kent, a nobody from Kansas who crashed a plane in the ocean, she replies, "You can still be yourself, even while being someone else. Hell, it might be easier" (61).

---

[49] Bruce Wayne is also Batman.

This declaration, in a way, epitomizes much that has been made of him as a character and a symbol of American ideals. He plays many roles in the service of others, rural farmer, journalist, superhero, but he is, deep down, himself. Clark Kent or Superman is not a liar or false, despite having a secret alter ego. It is his whole being to be both. Superman finds comfort and power in being both and using his full being in service to humanity. Superman is the ideal of the Positive Adoptee. He cannot have a full reunion with his kin as they are all dead. He has powers that originate from pre-adoption that he uses exclusively for the good of earth. He is, despite his powers, a Safe Adoptee.

At the same time, humanity may appear to accept him for sublimating his Kryptonian powers to the service of his adopted planet, but he is not in fact doing so. In "It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Synthesis: Superman, Clark Kent, and Hegel's Dialectic," Joseph J. Darowski declares,

> Superman and Clark Kent are both narrative and myth, and because of this, they appear
> to evolve but never really do so. In this perverted version of Hegel's dialectic, what
> comes out of the interaction of thesis/antithesis is not a true synthesis, but an almost
> synthesis which alarms Superman's editors so much that they find a storyline to send the
> characters backwards through the dialectic so that Superman [the alien adoptee] and
> Clark Kent [the American ideal persona] remain thesis and antithesis. (469)

By the end of *Superman: American Alien*, Clark finally declares to an alien hostile, "I'm not from Krypton. I'm from Kansas," rejecting his Kryptonian heritage (Landis 178). But his choice to continue living as Superman and Clark Kent betrays that notion. He may be "from Kansas," but he is still choosing to use his Kryptonian powers, which reveal that he is not just "from Kansas." At the same time, despite his expression of love for humanity, humans will never fully

accept or trust their adopted alien. When he arrives in hospital after defeating a powerful near-unkillable being, he must revert back to his Clark Kent identity and make up an excuse for his injuries being related to his job as an intrepid journalist, not as a superhero who saved Earth (Landis 181). Far from achieving a happy ending, Clark has just stuck himself into a cycle befitting an ongoing comic book serial, in which his heroism will reinforce his loyalty to his adopted people but his use of his inherited biological powers to defend them will reinforce their fears of the powerful stranger. Superman is on a lifelong emotional project to embrace his "humanity." But he is still a figure of suspicion, a theme constantly returned to by his primary villain, Lex Luthor, who thinks Superman cannot stand for an earthly ideal as he is not from Earth. And the villain is unfortunately correct. When he declares he is "from Kansas" he does not just mean he grew up there but that he considers Earth and humanity his people and planet, not Krypton. However, Superman lives in a universe where biological kinship is the touchstone for intimacy and no matter how much adheres to performing the signs that he considers Earth and humanity his kin, he will always be limited in his ability to stand for his beloved Earth by his innate alienness. And yet he continues to, of his own free will, choose Earth.

In contrast, Marvel Comics's Loki has given into the suspicions of his enemies and made it work for him. Loki began as an out-of-place member of the Greek pantheon in Marvel Comics serials, allied with Jupiter and Venus, and evolved from a trickster to, depending on the situation, a villain, a manipulative mastermind of a deep state conspiracy, or some variation on an antihero. He is a villain powerful enough to require multiple Marvel Comics superheroes to team up to defeat him, as in 1963 (Kirby, *Avengers #1).* Yet like his fellow adoptee Superman, Loki features in multi-issue narratives about navigating a society where he must perpetually sublimate his non-

124

adopted-origin powers to his adopted community and assert his loyalty to his adoptive people's

values and culture, which may require death as a means of expressing that loyalty.

But while Superman sublimates his power to humanity and is intensely loyal to them,

Loki in Al Ewing's 2015-2016 *Loki: Agent of Asgard* comic book serial is on a journey to

become loyal to himself. A late discovery adoptee, Loki liberates himself from his adoptive

community by, after a series of back-and-forth betrayals, choosing to not participate in

Ragnarok, an epic final battle at the end of the universe, synthesizing his conflicting time-warped

selves, and taking control of his narrative in the future by walking through a door he drew in the

page of the comic, escaping the very paper he was stuck in. In *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, a friend

asks Loki to turn into a fly to unlock a door from the other side. He replies that he cannot

because he "can turn into anything. As long as it's me" (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #5*).

While in this instance he is referring to his ability to magically transform, this is a part of a larger

theme in *Loki: Agent of Asgard*: Loki learns to set hard boundaries to his willingness to

sublimate his power and his ability to change for others. Furthermore, he learns that there have

been magical narrative limits put on him as a member of Asgardian society. No matter how

much he grows and matures and desires to be a hero, he is destined to always betray them and

usher in Ragnarok. *Loki: Agent of Asgard* is the story of how he finally escapes by asserting his

disloyalty and taking advantage of the benefits that arise when one simply chooses to *not* be tied

by kinship, whether that be biological, adopted, or created through affection.

Like Superman, Loki is an adoptee but less of an orphan-adoptee and more of a

foundling-adoptee. Loki is from Jotunheim, but he is not hundreds of feet tall and blue like a

Frost Giant, the Indigenous sentient people of Jotunheim. Like Superman, he mostly blends in.

125

He is, for reasons that have yet to be explained in the comics,[50] the height of Asgardians, he is

the color of Asgardians, he was raised Asgardian, and, while seeming to reject Asgardian society

by always trying to conquer it, he is embracing Asgard's culture by playing a pre-ordained

crucial role in its cycle of destruction and renewal (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #11*). In

contrast to Superman's immigration from a technologically superior but doomed Krypton, Loki,

an immigrant from a technological and intellectually inferior realm, is constantly proving himself

to be cleverer than most Asgardians. He deploys magic and cunning that he appears to have

learned from the scholars and magicians of Asgard, instead of brute force. He uses half-truths,

often the very half-truths that led him to believe he was a biological child of Frigga[51] and Odin,

to manipulate others. In some ways, Loki is living an adoptee's nightmare of rejection, having

integrated but not been accepted. But what he really reflects is a biological fear of adoptees; he is

a successful figure of belonging who has integrated so well and so thoroughly he is embedded

into the fabric of their society to the point of becoming their dark mirror. Loki is inescapably

embedded in Asgard's mythos, so much a part of the very fabric of their being that he is essential

for their survival through the death he brings in Ragnarok.

By examining the rhetoric surrounding Superman and Loki as adoptees, one can see the

complex evolution of the adoptee as a figure of belonging and the equivocal position these

characters are put in as perpetual outsiders. While their lives are kept by the legal fictions of

adoption, making them American citizen or Asgardian prince, the discursive pressure of

biological kinship as the touchstone for intimacy in their societies puts them permanently in a

---

[50] In the film *Thor* (2011), it is suggested that Odin, his adoptive father, enchanted him as an infant to appear Asgardian. When in contact with extreme cold, Loki reverts to blue, but does not gain any height.

[51] In *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Frigga's name is spelled Freyja.

second-class position of suspicion, and this has dire consequences for their lives. As adoptees, their position as perpetual foreigners with power complicates standard beliefs of familial and biological formations of power. Both characters are under immense pressure to prove their loyalty or disloyalty to their adoptive families and communities, but furthermore, they are under immense pressure from the very institution of family itself to assimilate and integrate. To do so, they often employ declarative statements concerning their identity, power, and allegiances that skirt the edges of coherence through oxymoron and paradox. Loki may declare that he can "turn into anything as long as it's me," asserting the expansive nature of his kinships while also setting hard limits (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #5*). Superman may declare that he is "from Kansas," but he is still an alien from Krypton and what makes him a super-man is his Kryptonian powers. However, declaring himself "from Kansas" is a statement of allegiance, not a reflection of reality but a means of positioning himself as a man of Earth to assuage the paranoia of his adopted peoples. If anything, their declarations, as clear or unclear as they may seem, almost seem to muddy their loyalties further, as if by declaring they also open themselves to the question of why they have to declare in the first place. Nothing they say or do is ever enough. It is the millstone around their necks that they cannot defeat because they live in universes where, despite a diversity of cultures, as in ours, biological kinship is the touchstone for all relationships and no declaration of allegiance or affirmation of loyalty or sacrifice can supersede that even when declaring that one's loyalty is like biological kinship. The fact that they are not biological kin to their adoptive parents diminishes their expressions of familial fidelity no matter what they do, even when dying for their family. While Loki in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* escapes the pages to freedom, Superman in *Superman: American Alien* ends at the beginning of a long entrapping arc he cannot escape—but perhaps he does not want to escape.

127

This chapter examines these characters longitudinally through their print history as it

parallels the growth in adoption and the destigmatization of adoption in the twentieth century,

and more specifically in Ewing's *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, a nineteen-issue run from 2014-2015,

and Landis's *Superman: American Alien*, a seven-issue run from 2015-2016. My focus is on the

intersections of familial kinship and biological power, the ways in which adoptee superheroes

and villains perform loyalty to their adoptive communities through the sublimation of their

powers and abilities. While touching on the visual elements of comics, this chapter is more

interested in the narrative pressure placed on comic book adoptees such as Superman and Loki as

an element of the large project of destigmatizing adoption (which parallels superhero comic

books quite nicely) by rebranding adoption as an altruistic act by adoptive parents rebounding on

to adoptees. By examining how Loki and Superman attempt to express their positionality as

trans[realm/planet] adoptees, blend in and stand out, and how writers and artists play with that

duality and longing to belong (or not to), one can see how fictive adoptees—made by such parent

corporations as Disney and Warner Brothers—can have an inadvertent historicidal[52] effect on

people's knowledge of real world adoptees and place further burden of suspicion on adoptees in

how they express their feelings concerning adoption. For Superman, the rhetorical trope being

foregrounded is the tidiness of a blank slate infant adoptee whose past will not become an issue,

who, for the most part, fits in with white middle-class America. For Loki, it is the justified

---

[52] I am using Mike Wallace's concept of *historicide* in "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World," a Baudrillardian approach to the presentation of Americana and American history at Disney World, in which, in contrast to "good historical analysis [that] informs people about the matrix of constraints and possibilities they have inherited from the past and enhances their capacity for effective social action in the present. [Disney's] Future World does the opposite: It dulls historical sensibility and invites acquiescence to what is. It should, consequently, be regarded not as historical, but as a historicidal enterprise" (51). Histories presented in highly corporatized spaces are interested more in audience and consumer satisfaction that actual education and accuracy of history and are reluctant to challenge or disturb reigning views of the past. For those who see adoption as a comprehensively good child welfare solution, the narratives laid out in Loki and Superman stories can be used to justify the disenfranchisement of adoptees in the child welfare system.

vilification of a dissatisfied adoptee who stands out among his Nordic god relations. These fictive adoptees, who are untethered from the often racist, ableist, and eugenic United States child welfare system and yet are presented as adoptees from whom one can learn about real world adoptees who often are not royalty or super in any way, complicate and misinform the public about adoptees. At the same time, these characters give voice to two differing reactions adoptees may have to the pressures of living as an adoptee who must declare some measure of loyalty. In particular, Loki's third way gives hope to adoptees who may be apathetic to the societal pressures of gratitude or loyalty.

Creators, Corporations, and Copyright

The publication history of serial comic book characters plays well into discussions of adoption because serial comic book characters do not fully belong to their creators and may not be best known as their creators' invention; the adoptee character may thus be seen as a synecdoche for the genre in which he or she appears. Ownership of the character may transfer, be taken away from an earlier rights holder, or be transformed under legal copyright or in court proceedings. Original creators may lose out on the financial benefits of a character's cross-media success decades later due to corporate manipulations of the legal system, or a lack of foresight in technological advancements. Comic book characters' stories are told over a long time, in short serial format. They may change, have [dis]continuity, and be retconned,[53] as they change

---

[53] *Retconning* is a process of revision that sets up a new piece of information and different interpretation on previously established events. It is common for long-running serial comic book characters that need a boost in sales or interest or as a part of connecting the comic book to another medium.

editorial, writing, or artistic hands. Ian Gordon states in *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon*, "At any given time, or place, in his history, Superman is, and has long been, an amalgam of factors including myth, memory, nostalgia, intellectual property regimes like copyright and trademark, authors, readers, fans, collectors, comic books, comic strips, radio series, movie serials, television shows, animation, toys, and collectibles, and feature films" (3). The multiplicity, the constant reevaluation of and realignment of loyalties and looks of serial comic book adoptees, mirrors the real-world dynamics of adoptees and their families. As Superman and Loki are serial comic book characters with many decades of publication and hundreds of comic book issues, their publication history reflects their ongoing conflicts as adopted superhero and supervillain. Superman and Loki are claimed for the prestige and material benefit they bring to their copyright owners and creators while also unveiling a sinister side of the comic books system where creators, writers, and artists are poorly compensated for their creative work.

In addition to mirroring the unstable kinship ties of the adoptee's life, the evolution of Superman at DC and Loki at Marvel aligns with the many changes in attitudes about children, social care, and adoptees. This alignment does not necessarily suggest a cohesive relationship between the comics industry and the adoption industry; rather, as characters change hands from artist to artist, writing team to writing team, and editor to editor, certain adjustments may parallel the changing atmosphere around orphanages, institutions, foster care, transracial adoption, and intercountry adoption. For example, the cross-media retconning of Superman from an aged-out foster youth (established in the first issue) to an adult adoptee (established in a radio play) reflects an evolution in contemporary American values surrounding childcare and institutionalization, suggesting a symbiotic relationship between mediums, picking out the most

popular origin story and making it canon, in a sense "adopting" the "ideal adoptee" story for the character.

The transition of Superman's origins from a foster care story to an adoptee story parallels trends of child reform in twentieth-century United States. Superman first appeared in *Action Comics #1* in April 1938. In six panels, writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster set up a bare bones origin story. Notably, in Superman's debut, he arrives on Earth and is found by a "passing motorist" but not taken home and adopted into an ideal nuclear family. And while the comic is sparse, the tone does not show that it is a dreadful thing to turn over a person who looks like a human baby found in a crashed spaceship to an orphanage. Superman is raised by "attendants," not family. And he discovers his abilities on his own, without the guidance of any parents, and chooses to use his powers to champion the oppressed on his own without the influence of a nuclear American family. This Superman may be very unfamiliar to a twenty-first-century audience, but this origin would be recognizable, if not slightly progressive, to those in 1938. Michelle Kahan's "'Put Up' on Platforms: A History of Twentieth Century Adoption Policy in the United States" finds four "stages" of adoption:

1. The late Nineteenth Century, when the first modern adoption law was passed and the "orphan train" movement began as a way to control children from poor families.

2. The Progressive Era, a time of child welfare reform, the rise of social work, beginnings of the family preservation movement, early efforts to regulate adoption, and mothers' pensions as a means to help worthy poor women take care of their children.

3. The World War II period through the 1950s, during which the prevalence of adoption increased, as did the focus on secrecy in its implementation. American adoption of children of all races from other countries also began during this period.

4. The 1970s-1990s, which, due to the increased availability of birth control and the
advent of legal abortion, were marked by decreases in the numbers of available healthy
white infants for adoption, as well as the emergence of the adoption rights movement
advocating for open processes. (53)

Superman's evolution aligns quite nicely with these stages, and the Superman of 1938 is not the
Superman of 2022. While details of his origin have changed over the years such as how the
"distant planet" met its demise (Binder, *Superman #146*), he has become vulnerable to kryptonite
(Woolfolk, *Superman #61*), and his superhuman abilities have advanced from jumping high to
being able to fly across the universe (*The Adventures of Superman*), shoot lasers from his eyes
(Siegel, *Action Comics #11*), and deflect more force with his skin (Siegel, *Action Comics #1*), his
origin story has not radically changed. However, it was around the late 1940s, when Kahan notes
that "the prevalence of adoption increased" and transracial and intercountry adoption began in
earnest, that Clark Kent went from a former inmate of an urban institution to an adoptee through
retconning (53). A 29 September 1947 radio play, "The Secret Rocket," revealed that
Superman's first parents were Jor-El and Lara, his ship landed in Iowa, he was adopted by the
Kents, and somehow his ship ended up in the custody of a non-American power. In the prequel
comic *Superboy #2*, released in 1949, the town is named "Smallville." Most Superman fans
nowadays know Superman as Clark Kent, the adopted son of Jonathan and Martha Kent, nice
American farmers in rural Smallville, Kansas. This was solidified for non-comic book reading
audiences in 1978's *Superman* and its sequels, starring Christopher Reeve, and the 2013 reboot
starring Henry Cavill (*Man of Steel*). Most probably do not know that Superman was a former
orphanage youth up until the 1940s and do not care.

However, it is important that Superman was institutionalized and that his is a story in which an orphan with no family grows up to become an admired hero, dedicated to the oppressed. The diminishing and erasure of Superman's origins in an orphanage reflects contemporary attitudes on children in social care. A 2012 study on the public's perception of former foster youth found, much like surveys done by Pew in 2003 and by the Dave Thomas Foundation in 2007, that the American public are still generally confused about why children enter the foster care system and how they age out and "as a result, people may have incorrect beliefs about the types of past experiences faced by the majority of foster children, which could possibly lead to erroneous beliefs about the mental and physical health of foster children" (Leber 1637). As institutionalization falls out of favor or fashion, Superman suddenly is no longer a formerly institutionalized child, and audiences no longer perceive him as a champion and role model of familyless youth. As transracial adoption becomes more common, the alien can be adopted by a human farmer and his wife in Kansas.

Superman's transition from institutionalized child in urban Metropolis to adoptee in rural Kansas is emblematic of the transition from institutionalization to the post-WWII/Cold War era child welfare system. By retconning Superman to an adoptee and moving his youth from an urban metropolis to the rural American Midwest, DC paralleled contemporary attitudes about ideal care in social work, as institutions and orphanages were replaced by a system of fostering children in the homes of approved strangers and adoption moved from a privatized and race- and religion-based system to transracial and trans-religious adoptions. Yet if the DC Comics universe version of the USA parallels our own, Superman is not a participant in our standard plenary adoption procedures. He was not removed from a family, legally separated, and then legally grafted on to the Kents. Thus, he is outside of the full experience of being an adoptee. His

adoptee story is one of simile. Superman's story is more "like" an adoptee's story than it is one. However, he still experiences several problems adoptees can experience, and these are highlighted in *Superman: American Alien*, such as medical trauma, access to origin information, and complicated feelings about loyalty and identity.

Finally, the legal diminishment and erasure of Superman's original creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, reflects that diminishment of Superman's original origins. In 1938 Siegel and Shuster gave Superman's copyright away for free, as was normal industry practice at the time (Jones 125). In the blog post "Finding Superman in Copyright: An Immigrant's Story" for the Library of Congress, Steve Andreadis writes,

> By selling their rights, they transferred to the publisher a copyright holder's exclusive rights, which include the right to control the reproduction, distribution, and public display of the work and to make derivatives, which are new works based on the original. The publisher continues to make new Superman works to this day, and over time, the story has been adapted into TV shows, movies, and other products. Siegel and Shuster sued several times in subsequent decades to try to win back their rights. After several unsuccessful attempts, the pair ultimately settled for a lifetime stipend and the reinstatement of their byline on the comic.

Siegel and Shuster's creation, Superman, was, in a sense, adopted, and they, the first parents, were forgotten and had to fight the corporate institution that metaphorically adopted him to be recognized as his creators.

Meanwhile, Marvel Comics's Loki started out in the wrong pantheon and did not even look the way he does today with his signature horns and gold and green palette. As noted above, he started out as an out-of-place member of the Greek pantheon before Marvel retconned him to

be Thor's brother, more in line with the actual Norse mythology that he comes from, and his character and look have taken a long time to evolve to a consistent and iconic scheme flexible enough for his variety of appearances and disguises. Loki is not a unique creation. His story is one of creeping inclusion into a family and narrative that he was not in originally and then becoming crucial to that society's view of itself.

"Loki" in his most well-known form is, in a meta-sense, an adaptation of an ancient Scandinavian mythological god. Marvel Comics's Loki achieved worldwide recognition when he was portrayed by British actor Tom Hiddleston in the Marvel Cinematic Universe franchise and has gone on to become exceedingly popular at the online fan art website Tumblr as a source of critical discourse on villainy and fandom (Thomas 3). But the character in comics has a seventy-year history in Marvel Comics and an even longer history in Scandinavian mythology. In "Loki Then and Now: The Trickster against Civilization," Helena Basil-Morozow traces the thousand-year history of Loki from the *Elder Edda* to the present-day *cinematic* Loki. In summary, the mythological Loki is a "mischievous and dangerous... Icelandic god" and a "classic trickster figure." In the *Edda*, "Loki transforms into a fish, a falcon and many other things… [and] his modern version also enjoys changing shape" (Basil-Morozow 85, 90). The Marvel Loki created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby first appeared in *Venus #6*, a romance comic series by Timely Comics in 1949. In this version, he was an Olympian god and resembled the impish Devil with a purple shirt. While still skinny, he certainly did not visually resemble his current incarnation. This Loki had buzzed red hair instead of long greasy black hair, and his color scheme was purple and blue, not green and gold. The only thing really kept was his presence on Earth, secretly causing interpersonal problems through subterfuge. He was later ret-conned in 1962 as the supervillain brother of a hero and member of the Avengers, Thor, the God of Thunder, and was

the first villain the Avengers united to fight against as a group. In an example of how one medium affects another, Loki has evolved to more of an anti-hero since *The Avengers* film in 2012, as Hiddleston's performance on screen elicited sympathy for the character. In the same way that Superman evolved from former foster youth to adult adoptee, Loki's meta-journey has been one of adapting to contemporary attitudes about un-kinned people.

However, in this case, while still being a figure of anxiety about adoptees with unseen talents, he also unsettles assumptions about adoptee norms and behavior. He was folded into the family of Thor and the Marvel Universe from mythology and his own strange Greek pantheon canon and folded again into the archetype of the Angry Adoptee and the Adoptee Killjoy. In *Disrupting Kinship: Transnational Politics of Korean Adoption in the United States*, Kimberly D. McKee defines "the adoptee killjoy" as emerging "When an adoptee unsettles discourse concerning adoption as an act of humanitarianism" and refuses "to engage an affective performance of gratitude" (11). Loki is not happy to be adopted. He recognizes that despite being loved by his family, he is out of place. Through adoption, he lost his royal seat in Jotunheim, and he unsettles adoption by continuously trying to conquer Asgard either through war or subversion, playing into societal fears about adoptees who come in from outside the kin, the community, like an invader.

From the Asgardians' point of view, as an adoptee, Loki is in debt to them for their kindness in letting the son of their enemy be raised as a prince. In "The Emotion in Aristotle *Rhetoric* 2.7: Gratitude, Not Kindness," David Kostan argues that the "kindness" of Aristotle's is gratitude. He states,

> Performing a kindness is not an emotion; neither is kindliness, for that matter. If a favor were to be prompted by an emotion, the relevant *pathos* would be love or *philia*. The

pathe in Aristotle are typically responses to the behavior of others, and more particularly

to words or deeds that have consequences for the relative social standing or *doxa* of the

parties involved. Gratitude is such a state since it depends on the need of the recipient in

relation to the generosity of the benefactor. The awareness of one's indebtedness to

another triggers a painful sensation or *aisthesis* that is an indispensable component of

emotion, according to Aristotle. For the ancients, gratitude was a powerful and innate

sentiment. (249)

Gratitude is demanded of Loki. He "should" be sublimating his cunning and power to Asgard as

its agent, but in a sense, his attempts at conquering are gratitude. He sees himself as the best

leader for Asgard, over his father Odin and his brother Thor, and thus uses his cleverness to try

to usurp the throne.

In Marvel Comics, Loki was a foundling, found on a battlefield, and much later identified

as the son of the king of the realm of Jotunheim even though instead of being many stories tall

and blue, he was small and Asgardian-skinned. Over the years, Marvel Comics's Loki has taken

on a multitude of mantles: a hero, a villain, a man, a woman, a child, a Frost Giant, an Asgardian,

a snake, a bee, a bird, a liar, and a truth teller, working mostly behind the scenes, manipulating

events on Midgard (Earth) in his favor, sometimes aligning with the heroes of Marvel but often

turning on them at some point—to the point that his double-dealing has become cliché. He

evolved from a peevish and youthful god of mischief, the kid brother of Thor, to the older and

grimmer God of Evil. These various manifestations of Loki have even interacted and argued with

each other about their purpose and meaning.

And yet, despite his long history in comics, Loki's origin story is stable and has only

been retconned once. It is Marvel canon that Loki is a secret forced adoptee, taken from

Jotunheim as a baby after the defeat of his father, King Laufey, by the All Father, Odin. Odin and the All Mother, Freya, raised him as a son and revealed his true origins when he was older, starting him on his course towards becoming the God of Evil and the doom of Asgard ("Loki," *Marvel.com*). In a sense, this story transfers the blame for Loki's actions from him to destiny, trapping him in a cycle (Ragnarok) where he must play the role of the Angry Adoptee repeatedly, only to be resurrected and live out another variation on the same theme. In "The Pursuit of Identity in the Face of Paradox: Indeterminacy, Structure, and Repetition in Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman" Clare Pikethly states, "Superhero narrative is repetitive, it follows a recurring pattern… The conflict between hero and villain is followed by a passing period of resolution (by state of harmony, or unchallenged unity)" (220). He was always meant to be abandoned, adopted, adapted to Asgardian life, and its doom. At same time, despite his continual defeats by the designated heroes of Marvel Comics, Loki in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* reaches a point at which the character has freed himself of his familial obligations and worked on himself. While Superman may embrace humanity, Loki embraces his personhood and independence of thought and action, becoming something singular. It is through the uniqueness of his struggle and the character's escape from the rote Angry Adoptee story that Loki gets his own spin-offs and separate arcs, away from the adoptive family that ensnared him.

Sublimated Power

Central to modern plenary adoption is the belief that adoption, even transracial and intercountry adoption, is the preferable and expedient solution to un-parented or un-kinned

people, bringing people who were excised from the social order back into the social order through taking vulnerable minors and placing them in the home of a presumably compassionate and financially solvent family that has been vetted in some way by government bodies (Briggs 15-16, 250). In *Adoption, Identity, and Kinship: The Debate Over Sealed Birth Records*, Katarina Wegar notes, "Search stories depict adoptees as similar yet different: similar to the extent that the reader identifies with the adoptee's yearning for identity, different to the extent that the adoptee is doomed to stand outside the natural order of things" (103). In this dynamic, adoptees are something of a helpless agent in the system, powerless and outside the social order, in need of a family with power and authority to care for them and ensure they are indoctrinated in the ways of their community. Superman and Loki upset this dynamic by being either naturally more powerful than their adoptive communities and submitting that power to their adoptive community's service or by challenging their adoptive community by refusing gratitude and choosing to use what they learned from their adoptive community to oppose it.

Eleana Kim states in *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*,

> Adoptees present an implicit challenge to essentialized notions of identity in which isomorphisms of place, space, and culture... reduce multiple vectors of difference and power that compose subjectivities to knowable and homogenous cultures. … Kinship, race, and nation are all hybrid frameworks that organize social personhood and gain explanatory and normative force through their purported rootedness in biology and blood even as they are understood to be social constructions. (129)

Superman is visibly human, and yet he understands there is something decidedly and innately inhuman about him that makes him dangerous. In *Superman: American Alien*, after an incident

139

involving his powers, Clark gazes at his reflection in the mirror and sees himself first, in one frame, as himself, and then as a green wrinkly Roswell-esque alien but still with his blue eyes and black hair. He punches the mirror and takes out the entire wall, his alien-given powers revealing themselves despite his intense desire to conceal them (12). Notably, he sees himself as a green alien, a color that comic books typically assign to villains. In this moment, the adoptee is wrestling with the unknown. Clark and his family do not know what he is, where he is from, or who his biological parents are, and it is the fear of the unknown that drives him to search but also to submit his powers to the service of humanity as a superhero. In the moment that he sees himself as an alien, he keeps the hue of his eyes and the color of his hair, as if, even revealed to be monstrous, there will always be something of humanity left on him. He also bears the advantage of looking like his adoptive parents despite not being the same species.

Narrative inversions or complications of power and privilege are a fashionable way both for adoptees to critique the system of adoption and for non-adoptees to express the complicated dynamics of the colonized person in a so-called "post-colonial" society. In an interview with *Encore! Encore!*, adoptee filmmaker and researcher Amandine Gay, in response to a question about a quote from her work *Ouvrir La Voi,* said, "People always say, ''thanks to our parents, we got a family' and they never say, 'thanks to us, they got a child'." Gay continued, "It's important sometimes to reverse the angle on the issue so that people can realize that it's not a clear cut as they thought" ("Filmmaker Amandine Gay"). Earth needs Superman to protect it from powerful beings. Asgard needs Loki to take part in its society's "story" so Ragnarok can happen, and they can all go to appropriate afterlives. Both characters are essential to the power structures of their society. Superman and Loki, as trans-[planetary/realm] adoptees, highlight anxieties about power that familial biological hierarchy-based societies rely on. The vulnerability of adoptees is

140

essential to them being right for inclusion. If they reveal that they are not vulnerable or assimilate to the point of being a dark mirror of that society, they are villainized.

In *Loki: Agent of Asgard* and *Superman: American Alien*, these adoptees threaten the power structures of the societies they enter with their difference. Superman is physically near invincible, and Loki troubles ideas of gender and rank by being a competent Asgardian magician and keen schemer. In "The Myth of Superman: A Review of *The Amazing Adventures of Superman,*" Umberto Eco states,

> The hero equipped with powers superior to those of the common man has been a constant of the popular imagination… often the hero's virtue is humanized and his powers, rather than being supernatural, are the extreme realization of natural endowments such as astuteness, swiftness, fighting ability, or even the logical faculties and the pure spirit of observation found in Sherlock Holmes. (14)

They are both capable of taking over their worlds. In fact, in the limited alternate reality series *Injustice: God Among Us* and Rob Rodi's 2004 *Loki*, Superman and Loki do just that, although in these narratives, Superman is thwarted while Loki experiences a change of heart. In *The Years of Lyndon B. Johnson: The Passage of Power* biographer Robert Caro writes, in an inversion of John Dalberg-Acton's remark on power, "Power doesn't always corrupt... What I believe is always true about power is that power always reveals. When you have enough power to do what you always wanted to do, then you see what the guy always wanted to do" (qtd McGreal). In *Injustice: Gods Among Us* this version of Superman's ultimate desire is to protect his people even through tyranny. In *Loki*, Loki realizes he wants love and acceptance and that despite everything, he loves his brother and his family.

In modern plenary adoption, power is held by the adoptive parents, as authority figures within the family unit and as generally celebrated as compassionate by their inclusion of adoptive children. They are doing a service to the children by including them and to their society by removing the burden of financial and emotional labor from the state and, in a sense, re-privatizing those children. Yet adoptees may not be happy with this disposition of power. McKee states,

> When an adoptee unsettles discourse concerning adoption as an act of humanitarianism, she becomes "angry." Adoptees' responses demonstrate their engagement in a politics of refusal—refusal to engage an affective performance of gratitude. In the eyes of mainstream society, ungrateful adoptees are failures—unfaithful betrayers of the nation for failing and refusing to embrace humanitarian narratives of adoption. Adoptees kill joy when they fail to adhere to the adoption fantasy—where adoptive parents save the orphan from poverty and degradation. Not only is the joy of adoptive parents killed, the adoptee killjoy also outwardly scrutinizes and troubles narratives promulgated by orphanages and adoption agencies concerning the benefits of adoption. They reveal the contradictions and violence of adoption including fraudulent creation of orphans and denial of rights to birth parents. The adoptee killjoy sabotages the potential futures of adoptable children as they advocate for more stringent adoption regulations to ensure ethical adoptions. (11)

Superman and Loki embody contrasting inversions of power in their respective adoptive societies, and that affects their loyalty to their adoptive and biological people and societies. Superman is a super… man. He presents as human. However, he is indestructible. He does not get ill. He can leap tall buildings and eventually fly. He can shoot lasers with his eyes. He is a man but superior. At the same time, Superman aspires to a semi-normal life as a journalist (as

142

normal as a journalist's life can be). Superman's mission is to make a better tomorrow; he is always looking to the future to make it better. That is why he also can be taken down by the smallest piece of a rock, kryptonite,[54] a remnant of his birth-planet, Krypton. His past, his origins, poison him while also revealing his inhumanity as kryptonite has no effect on humans, just him. It outs him as an outsider. While he is not illegitimate in the legal sense, he is an "American alien" in that he did not emigrate in a standard fashion and thus carries a secret. His sustenance is from Earth's yellow sun. His adoptive planet nourishes him, while remnants of his birth planet kill him.

Clark's power manifests early on and is integrated as a challenge for his parents. In "Pax in Terra; Superman and the Problem of Power in *Superman Returns* and *Man of Steel*," Kwasu D. Tembo states,

> Superman's existence is disruptive and invariably forces diegetic humanity to rethink not only its understanding of power and the fact that they are not alone in their universe, but also the systems they use to make each of these aspects of being comprehensible and amenable to them. While controversial and pervasive issues like global financial crises or racism are rarely if ever directly encountered in Superman's adventures, one cannot overlook the fact that the character's mere existence on an earth is as inquisitive [of humanity's understanding of power] as it is disruptive. (54)

In the opening of *Superman: American Alien*, a young Clark has begun to uncontrollably fly through the roof and his mother is gripping his leg as they ascend into the air (2). She manages to

---

[54] Depending on its color, kryptonite can weaken and kill him (green), make him crazed (red), nullify his powers (blue), split him into two beings (black), or turn him into a gay person (pink) (*Supergirl* #79). The pink kryptonite was used as a humorous jab at there being too many types of kryptonite.

get him to descend but falls and breaks her ankle. Clark's father panics, cutting his feet on broken glass. Clark, understanding his parents' injuries come from him not being able to control his new power, feels understandably guilty despite his parents' assurances. This is a tone setter for Clark. Clark is a person who, despite his age, respects and fears his power and is empathetic to the pain of others. In contrast, Loki, as someone considered "weak" and "feminine" by Asgardian standards, develops skills that give him an edge over the stronger people of Asgard and uses powers of the mind and magic to defend himself.

Superman came to Earth as a baby from a destroyed world, but he is more powerful than all humans. At the same time, he has a weakness they do not: an extreme vulnerability to Kryptonite. On a less explored level, he is an undocumented infant immigrant and outsider, and he has an asymmetrical power dynamic with his parents, community, nation, and planet. By becoming Superman, he resists dominant discourses about undocumented migration, alien invasion, and Americanness ("truth, justice, and the American Way!"). Superman is the American Ideal, but he is also firmly an Outsider and Other and as such, potentially excites constant suspicion and paranoia. Tembo's "'Among them but not one of them': A Xenological Exploration of Otherness and Power of DC Comics's Superman" states, "As a fictional representation of alien Otherness, the character Superman attests to and demonstrates these limits while, ironically, gesturing beyond them. Therefore, Superman occupies a liminal space between a representation of self (human being) and Other (alien)" (186). In *Superman: American Alien*, Jon Kent either remembers or dreams the night Clark landed as a baby at their farm. Jon envisions Clark as an otherwise human-looking baby with the signature hair curl, but he rises from the ship glowing red with tentacle-like wires extruding from his fingers. Jon Kent awakens in shock. The ambiguity of this scene, whether it is a memory of Clark's Alien and Other origins

or just a manifestation of Jon Kent's anxieties, emphasizes the risk the Kents take by having him in their homes and lives (Landis 1-7). Clark is made keenly aware of the risk his parents take by adopting him. He learns early on he must not only control his emerging powers but also sublimate them to humanity lest he cause more injury.

This threat reflects the risk taken by Master Shifu (a red panda) and his adopted son Tai Lung (a snow leopard) in *Kung Fu Panda*, discussed elsewhere in this dissertation. Master Shifu may see potential in his son as a protector of the Valley of Peace, but Tai Lung is coded as dangerous by being a snow leopard in a Valley of Peace filled with anthropomorphized herbivores. The level of destruction he wreaks reflects the risk and the consequences of welcoming adoptees into the social order and giving them a place. Tai Lung's chief enemy is a fat panda who works in the service industry. Superman's chief foe is a rich white American billionaire named Lex Luthor who sees himself above humanity because of intelligence, not physical strength. When Luthor is introduced in *Superman: American Alien*, he is cast in shadow on a sunny day, seen from below, dominating the frame, his hand grasping towards Clark, telling him "You are not important. You're not. I AM" (91). Lex and Tai Lung are threats to their communities because they use their superiority in mind and body to place themselves above humanity. As Superman, Clark takes what sets him above humanity and places it in service to them as a means of becoming an insider. And yet, he repeatedly is not allowed in. He may be a founding member of the Justice League, but he is continually reminded of his difference, which sets him outside.

In Marvel Comics, Loki also inverts the power of Asgard as an adoptee. He is from a colonized realm, but he becomes the ultimate conqueror and colonizer. His power stems from Asgard, and he uses it upon Asgard. While he is a Frost Giant, he is mostly uninterested in taking

up the Frost Giants' cause. Over his fifty- to seventy-year run, Loki expresses the frustrations of many transracial adoptees, anger about being racially isolated, being not good enough or even trying too hard to be an Asgardian (Rodi, *Loki #1*). Loki's inner turmoil and pain is his version of Spider-Man's "With great power comes great responsibility": Loki wants to take over everything because everything was taken from him. He does not see himself as a "freestanding child" or "a rooted child" (Yngvesson 26). His pain is accentuated by the Asgardians' role as the most powerful and classically heroic beings in the nine realms, and by their collective hatred for the Frost Giants. Loki is not just Othered as a non-Asgardian in Asgard; as a small Frost Giant he has been twice rejected. A constant and coherent character drive over his many years in comics is Loki's fury that he is Asgard's Magical Frost Giant (the magical equivalent of a Noble Savage), and that his presence as a Frost Giant and prince of Asgard frames the Asgardians as compassionate and tolerant of other realms and diffuses the violent acts Asgardians inflict on other realms for the sake of obtaining honor, while his own aspirations for leadership and power are heavily policed and considered a deviation from Asgardian values.

Loki is Asgard's own angry adoptee: unstable, untrustworthy, and un-anything, not a good enough Asgardian, prince, or Frost Giant, and he is terrifying. Often when Loki appears, characters cower in horror, even though most of the time he creates mayhem not carnage and is there to sneak his way into power, not seize it using violence. Loki's adoption-induced fluid identity makes him exceptionally flexible in loyalties and identities, often to the derision and occasional admiration of those with less complicated backgrounds who see his ability to fully embrace his "Laufeyson" identity and his "of Asgard" identity as a threat to their violent war-like society. At times, Loki can reject or embrace both. Earlier in this chapter, I quoted Loki telling a friend, "I can turn into anything as long as it's me" (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #5*).

This comment shows his awareness that within him are multiple identities, loyalties, ways of being, histories, and futures waiting to be summoned forth at the whim of his magic but that he is also limited to what is already "me." Adoption for Loki is not just another element next to his races, his cultures, his sexualities, or his genders but the conduit through which he can play with identity while still being truthful to himself.

In Golden and Silver Age comics (1938-56 and 1956-70), Loki's inner conflict was taken less seriously. Loki's attempts to seize Asgard and Earth and the inevitable clashes with Thor made him a villain because he was ungrateful and a trickster, constantly annoying—or violently opposing—his brother. However, in recent years, comic book writers have taken Loki's inner conflict seriously. In the 2004 four-issue series *Loki*, Rob Rodi presents an alternate universe known as Loki Triumphant. Loki has claimed leadership of Asgard and imprisoned Thor. From his throne, he struggles over the question of whether to have the God of Thunder executed. By killing Thor, whom he is not biologically related to, will he really be committing fratricide? In the end, an apparition of Balder appears and proclaims that Loki, across all dimensions and forms, will eventually lose because it is his role to fail. The universe in which he resides—at a literary and meta level—is designed to make him fail. Appalled, Loki rushes to spare his brother—the only person he realizes he genuinely loves and loves him—only to be brutally beaten by a freed Thor. The cycle of violence is complete. This pessimistic series was the first to examine Loki as a character upset, rather than joyful, about his fated role as Trickster in the Asgardian monomyth. This was the first time we saw the character express real worry about his role in the wider scheme of things and question whether he really wanted what he kept saying he wanted. In Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa's *Thor: The Trials of Loki*, the violence of the Asgardians against those who cause trouble is highlighted when Loki is put on trial for nearly causing

Ragnarok. Loki testifies that he tricked two dwarves into creating gifts for him to make the gods

love him. Things got out of control, and to stop him from lying, Thor helped the dwarves hold

Loki down and silence him by sewing Loki's lips shut. Loki tried to cause Ragnarok as revenge.

When Loki reminds him of his actions, Thor insists he never helped assault Loki. Loki replies,

"But you did! You helped, and you laughed. I heard the laughter as I pulled the thread from my

mouth and thought: 'I do not belong I am alone.'" While Asgardians may traverse the universe

and come to the defense of those who pray to them, Loki cannot buy their love, and the

punishment for acting out is silencing and gaslighting.

Overall, Loki and Superman serve as powerful figures who astonish their adopted

communities with their power. Loki is a key part of the mythos of his community, but he is the

Assigned Outsider. It is through embracing his status that he sets himself free of them.

Meanwhile, Superman is a melting pot of American anxieties of power and virtue. And yet,

Superman is not Lyndon B. Johnson. Or, at least, he's not the Johnson Robert Caro envisioned, a

man for whom the ends justified the means and an embodiment of Acton's famous phrase

"absolute power corrupts absolutely." Superman has absolute power. In the alternate reality

video game and limited comics series *Injustice*, he deploys that power to set up a fascistic rule on

Earth after his wife and child are murdered by the Joker. However, this iteration of Superman is

not the iconic one. He may use all his power to save humanity from bank robbers and

intergalactic super aliens bent on freezing the world in a bottle, but he is "not from Krypton," a

powerful intergalactic superpower brought low through its own hubris. He is "from Kansas"

(Landis 178). When given all the power he did exactly what he wanted with it and served

humanity. Superman is a formal indictment of paranoia about adoptees. In *Superman: American

Alien*, humans may adopt his symbol, wave at him when he flies overhead, and allow him to live

among them, but he is still looked upon with fear about his potential for tyranny. In *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Loki forsakes such ties considering the revelation that he is prescribed to betray. Instead, he saves himself.

Obligation to Altruism and Loyalty

As Loki and Superman are both powerful in might and mind, they are under pressure to sublimate their powers to their adoptive communities. They are also bound to demonstrate their commitment to their adoptive people through altruism, through willingness to serve and even die for their adoptive people—even those who may not have contributed to their lives in a direct manner. And this loyalty, as this is the high drama of comic book superhero stories, includes choosing a sacrificial death. This comprehensive and expansionist view of adoptee altruism is not unusual, since the kinned are also under pressure to sacrifice for their people. But in the case of adoptees, multiple people may lay claim to their consanguineous loyalties. And the demand for loyalty and the obligation to altruism stem from a need for the adoptee to willingly go along with upholding the legal fiction of adoption and the discursive pressure of familial biological model of kinship. The high drama of comic books communicates to the reader that these fictive adoptees' struggles are also struggles that adoptees may feel in the real world despite not possessing any sort of extraordinary powers or even conflicts of allegiance.

The dominant rhetoric of adoption focuses on and frames the act of adoption by adoptive parents as altruistic, as a compassionate act bringing a child excluded from the kinship order back into a facsimile of family. Adoption is one of two transactions "where markets and altruism

149

intersect in a bureaucratized system" (Raleigh 9). The other is organ donation. Like organ

donation, adoption "grows out of an altruistic framework (e.g., providing the gift of life),

workers are especially wary of sullying the narrative with allusions to the business of donation"

(Raleigh 10). At the same time, the reality is that an entire adoption industry of intermediaries

necessary to ease the transaction has risen to obtain both organs and children for donation, and

these intermediaries exact a price. Domingos Abreu notes in "Baby-Bearing Storks: Brazilian

Intermediaries in the Adoption Process" that

> The transfer of a child from one household to another involves an exchange between
>
> adults who may see the transaction as anything from an altruistic gift to a strategic
>
> investment… The adoption of a child is imbedded in a social space of personal relations
>
> marked by competition and dispute. A child may be considered not only for its mercantile
>
> value but also for what it symbolizes as a "priceless" valuable, or an untransferable good;
>
> a child may be seen as a blessing or a burden, depending on the logic of the agents in
>
> conflict. (139-140)

In *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children,* Viviana Zelizer

states, "Pricing the priceless child… [creates] confusion in legal thought and practice,

controversy in the insurance business, and uncertainty in the 'exchange' of adoptive children.

New sentimental criteria were set up to determine the monetary worth of child life" (210). Esben

Leifsen in "Person, Relation and Value: The Economy of Circulating Ecuadorian Children in

International Adoption." argues that the rhetoric of the "gift" and that of "commodification"

usually coexist in adoption (192). While the rhetoric of the altruistic adoptive parent and children

as a "gift" over "commodity" works in promoting adoption, it sets up a significant problem for

the adoptee, and despite not being a part of that commodification system, Superman and Loki are

ensnared by it. Margaret Jane Radin calls this a "domino effect" of commodification: adults "fail to treat children as persons, to make them all realize that they have a definite commercial value, and that this is all their value amounts to, even if their parents did not choose to sell them or did not obtain them by purchase" (100). In *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*, a film directed by an adoptive parent team, Superman must perform painful acts of obeisance under extreme pain to convince Batman, a human, that he values his human mother (who is kidnapped by their conflict's instigator, Lex Luthor) "just as if" she was his biological mother. It is only after this extreme act of piteous genuflection that Batman reconsiders killing him and, in turn, saves Martha Kent on his behalf. In *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Loki, after centuries of causing havoc for Asgard, must become an "agent" of Asgard to get back in his adoptive peoples' good graces. He does not live on Asgard, but he works for them in a form of allied exile on Earth. It is only through servitude to Asgard in high-risk operations that he declares that he sees his closest kin at Asgard.

As adoption is framed as altruistic, there is narrative pressure on the adoptee to reflect that altruism with gratitude-laden service and sacrifice. Clark and Loki in their respective comics try altruism. Clark chooses a life of permanent servitude to humanity, despite the cost to his health and social life. Realizing whatever he does will never be enough, Loki rejects Asgard and escapes the end of the universe. At the same time, Superman is evil if he is not continuously sublimating his power to the best interests of humanity and Loki is vilified for refusing to sublimate his powers to Asgard. This is an exaggeration of the obligatory altruism expected of transracial and intercountry adoptees. Superman can protect, but he cannot rule. Loki is royal, but he cannot inherit. Their powers must be in the control of their adoptive communities. If not, their adoptive communities' values must be enacted through their power.

151

For Loki, obligation to altruism results in him sacrificially dying, coming back, and being coerced into being a secret agent for a diminished remnant of Asgard. He is bound in loyalty to serve as an "agent" to a floating piece of the former realm (really a planet) after several catastrophes reduce it to a mere scrap of rock. He is not even asked to be subservient to Asgard at its height, when it ruled over the nine realms, including his own, but rather to serve the skeleton of an intergalactic empire. As Franz Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Mask*, "The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards" (18). Much as real world intercountry adoption reflects the ongoing project of post-empire colonization through continued military interventions, continued military presence as bases in an area of responsibility, and post-independence special relationships, Koreans, Somalis, and Filipinos to the USA, Indians to the UK and Australia, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* reflects the continuing façade of familial loyalty as a stand-in for bonds of empire and the continued Cold War power tensions between the so-called First World and Third World, the East/Rest and the West.

Clark Kent is an idealized adoptee. He has submitted to the compulsory loyalties of his adoptive nation, despite their betrayals, and he sacrifices his life continuously because of it. While readers are invited to idolize him as a symbol of goodness and of an imagined Americanness, the reader is also continuously reminded that his sacrifices are costly. The cover of *The Death of Superman* in 1993 is reminiscent of the 1945 photograph *Flag Raising on Iwo Jima* commemorating the bloody battle and triumph for the Allies that occurred there, but instead of Superman raising a flag in triumph with his comrades, the image features a crumpled Superman under a cairn of rubble with a spear sticking out of his corpse and his torn cape waving in the wind as shadowed viewers watch. Thus, while triumphant (Superman defeated his

foe), he is skewered, is defeated, and is also the enemy subdued because a creature as powerful

as him is an enemy of humanity in a way. Obviously, he comes back, but the message is clear

that this sacrifice is the necessary conclusion of being the powerful hero that protects his weaker

adoptive family. The end of the story for Superman the Exceptional Adoptee is death, and

Superman dies a lot. Eco's "The Myth of Superman" states,

> In an industrial society […] where man becomes a number in the realm of the
>
> organization which has usurped his decision-making role, he has no means of production
>
> and is thus deprived of his power to decide. Individual strength, if not exerted in sports
>
> activities, is left abased when confronted with the strength of machines which determine
>
> man's very movements. In such a society the positive hero must embody to an
>
> unthinkable degree the power demands that the average citizen nurtures but cannot
>
> satisfy. (14)

Superman, in his cyclical serial stories, saves Earth repeatedly, and he may be an ideal, but his

life is a nightmare of continuous altruism without end. The final panel of *Loki: Agent of Asgard*

features Loki escaping the page. The final panels of *Superman: American Alien* feature a bruised

and beaten Clark prone in a hospital bed pondering what he will do next. And the answer is to

continue defending his adoptive planet from beings they themselves could not beat, until he dies,

repeating the cycle until his comics are no longer profitable and he is canceled.

In *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, a newly resurrected Loki is serving as an Agent of Asgard,

running secret missions set by his adoptive mother, Freya, as a redemption program. For

example, in the first issue, he sneaks into Avengers Tower and exorcizes an evil spirit from his

brother, Thor. However, at the end of the issue, it is revealed that this evil spirit is actually "King

Loki," a version of Loki from a dark future where Loki "won" and destroyed the universe.

Without Loki's knowledge, Freya recruits King Loki as the Agent of Asgard because while he will bring about the end of the universe, in his timeline, Asgard experiences a brief revival of their power. At a dating pool on Earth, Loki meets a human woman named Verity who sees through all lies after consuming a magic ring as a child. Verity is miserable with her power. She cannot even enjoy fiction. Eventually, Loki's secret—that he did not sacrifice himself to save Asgard during *Siege* and reincarnate into innocent Ikol but is the original Loki, and he killed his innocent reincarnation Ikol and replaced him—is revealed to Thor and all Asgard, and they abandon him. As this is all happening, in the wider Marvel narrative universe, all the universes are being destroyed, including the "prime" universe known as Marvel-616 and Ultimate universe Earth-1610. Eventually Loki is trapped in a place between universes with Ikol and King Loki being watched by Those Who Sit Above in Silence, faceless shadowy gods that feed off stories. He calls on Verity for help, and she motivates him to accept King Loki and Ikol and remove his golden horns. He vanishes. In the next issue they reappear as the ambiguous God[dess] of Stories and saves Verity from the destruction of their universe by putting her in a magic bracelet and rushes to the front lines to save the Asgardians in the magic bracelet as well. As the Marvel universe[s] collapses, so does the separation between panel and white space on the page. Loki creates a door in the page and walks through into an unknown "Next" universe, turning to smile at the reader and wave. By freeing himself from his obligation to serve his people as their betrayer, he breaks the cyclical narrative, saving them as they are so they can improve rather than be stuck in a cycle of endless reincarnation. By refusing to be who his adoptive society wants him to be, he becomes what they need him to be and liberates them from the norms of tropes and storytelling.

When Loki takes on the mantle of Stories, he morphs from a masculine to a feminine appearance, just as he did earlier in the series when he explained to Lorelai that he could be anything as long as it was him (1). Loki tells Verity, while transitioning across panels into a woman, that s/he is "never going to be just one thing… I'm not the goddess of some stories" (15). By taking on the mantle of stories, Loki grants herself power over all, even gender since "your story's what makes you you" (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #17*). Femininity is innate to Loki and can be called forth at will. This assertion shows another new and ambiguous twist on Loki: Loki Laufeyson of Asgard is a god loved and abused by his adoptive family for the diversity of his adoptee status. He is the physical manifestation of lies told and untold, of lies performed and lived out as truth. Now, as the God[dess] of Stories, he is independent from his Asgardian and Frost Giant identities, morally neutral, benign, and all-powerful.

In the end, the answer to Loki's frustration and anger, Loki's love and hatred for his brother Thor, Asgardian silence and Frost Giant violence, is stories. By seeing all around him as "stories" to be told, Loki transforms from an evil destructive force to a morally ambiguous transformative (destructive and constructive) force, a final defeat of narrative tyranny. In Issue 17, he confronts Those Who Sit Above in Shadow. They are furious that Loki has broken the natural order of things by saving his fellow gods as stories in a magical bracelet. Without their stories, Those Who Sit Above in Shadow fade away, and Loki becomes the "Teller." By becoming the Teller, Loki escapes and by doing so, escapes all rules—of physics, of time, of morality, of ethics—and absorbs his future King Loki self (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #5*). Loki faces the obligation to altruism and loyalty and finds a third path that saves his adoptive community, in contrast to Superman's commitment of himself to a cycle of heroism and sublimated power. Rather than play his role of the Angry Adoptee of Asgard, Loki removes

155

himself from the story. The artist Lee Garbett communicates this point visually by fading away the lines between frames and the white space. Loki, through adoptee reason, chooses the holistic acceptance of multiple, fluidic, and morally ambiguous stories within himself as a means of transformation from narrative victim (and yes, villain) to narrative survivor. He survives the collapse of the multiverse by escaping the story. In the closing panels of *Agent of Asgard*, Loki turns to the audience, standing in front of the marker door he diegetically drew on the page with the words "NEXT." He tells us, "You can't kill stories… let's skip ahead a bit. See what comes after." In the bottom left corner, a line from Ben Folds's *Jesusland* is written in bold green letters, "Out the gate you go and never stop" (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #17*). The use of "Jesusland" and its call to leave the monotony of suburban America emphasizes the break with convention and mythological narrative obligations, a fitting choice for a god about to tour a patchwork planet ruled by Dr. Doom, who remakes himself as God.

The Golden and Silver Ages of comic books coincided with the Cold War and the legalization of transracial adoption in the United States; thus, it makes sense that many comics focus on superpowered outsiders and the threat they potentially pose as a ticking time bomb of betrayal. Underpinning each of their stories is the tension of familial loyalty, but in an uneven manner. Superman is bound to stay loyal and true to Earth despite the emergence and existence of other Kryptonian survivors and other planets. He also must remain true to Ma and Pa Kent. When he does not, terrible things happen, as suggested by the videogame and comic book series *Injustice* and the pseudo-Superman speculative film *Brightburn*.[55] Loki's ambivalence towards Asgardians is contrasted with his goal of becoming the ruler of Asgard despite being the "second

---

[55] *Brightburn*'s premise is "What if adolescent Superman was evil?"

son" (in some canons, third son or even first son, but he is not in line to be king because he is a Frost Giant). In arcs such as *Siege*, which precedes *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Loki, despite himself, at the last-minute sacrifices himself for the sake of Asgard and his brother Thor. His sacrifice is minimized as an obligation. Despite the existence of myriad intimacies, kinship—biological kinship—is still a criterion by which all other intimacies are measured, even in statements that express an association stronger than consanguinity. By sacrificing himself, he shows that he is declaring for them, in a reinforcement and a defiance of biological kinship.

As this plot line illustrates, characters whose origin stories include adoption are overwhelmingly characterized by the extent to which they perform their assimilation into their adoptive families and cultures. Adoption is a double-edged sword. It can bring an extraordinary person like Superman to Earth, but if that Superman embraces his Kryptonian power to rule over humanity, he is a despot, not a super-man, as explored in *Injustice: Gods Among Us* and Mark Millar's *Red Son*. The patriarch Moses, who was plucked from the river Nile and raised by the Egyptian royal family while his people were threatened with genocide, is only a hero despite brutally betraying his adopted Egyptian roots for the Hebrews because the author of his story is Hebrew. In *Oedipus Rex*, Teiresias asks Oedipus, "Tell me, Oedipus, who are your parents?" (558-562). His lack of knowledge leads to his and his city's downfall. Jenny Teichman states in *Illegitimacy: An Examination of Bastardy*, "Illegitimacy itself is the paradigm of a shameful secret and can symbolize all kinds of other secrets, deceptions and mysteries" (123). It is not just that the adoptees do not know who they are, but also that by not knowing who they are, they are markers of illegitimacy. Superman's and Loki's goodness is measured by their willingness to meet the perceived altruism of their adoption with their own altruism and loyalty.

157

Altruism has long been an expectation in adoption circles, from first parents to adoptive parents, although adoptees speak of it less. In *Strangers and Kin: The American Way of Adoption*, Barbara Melosh states that

> Some advocates of adoption were so confident about [adoption's] general benefits that they dismissed the need for extensive deliberation over placement. This stance generally went hand in hand with a confident assumption that children are highly malleable and a belief that parental love and altruism are expressed as naturally in adoptive families as among blood kin. (53)

In *Loki: Agent of Asgard* and *Superman: American Alien* Superman and Loki are, as adoptees, framed simultaneously as gifts, an intelligent mind of magic among a martial race (Loki) and a superpowered human-looking protector (Superman), and as liabilities, usurpers, and tyrants. While Superman embraces his adopted people and culture ("truth, justice, and the American Way!"), Loki rejects Asgardians, their culture, and even the printed page. And yet, by the end of *American Alien*, it does not appear that the society Superman protects is that interested in keeping him as an asset. He is marked with fear, as a target who brings trouble to them in a large universe. In contrast, Loki escapes with his best friend and not only rids his adoptive people of their obligation to play out the Ragnarok story repeatedly, but also breaks the cycle of altruism, which is a cycle more of retaliation than of forgiveness.

Identity, Language, and Destiny

Superman and Loki recognize that they threaten the status quo through their abundance of identity/identities—whether that be Kryptonian strength or Jotunheim royal heritage—and thus they must find some means of performing harmlessness through the creation of a rigid conforming identity (the Clark Kent) or find themselves under permanent suspicion as a fluidic threat (the Loki in all manifestations) in need of confinement. Under such pressure, these adoptees may create an identity that seems inauthentic, an exaggeration, or fictive, but this is merely an extension of being in a fictive kinship (as in a relationship built on story) such as adoption. This conformity is emotional labor. Against a powerful, magical, and dominant narrative, Loki engages in a form of narrative resistance against King Loki, the All Mother and All Father, and the Marvel universe itself (which is colliding and collapsing) by tricking his way to a new definition of Loki. This redefining of terms I call *adoptee sophism*. Gorgias was a significant Sophist who deployed his skills of language and rhetoric to defend ridiculous ideas about basic and accepted ideas about existence, often for the amusement of others (Gorgias). Adoptee sophism is an important feature for adoptee agency because to assert an identity that challenges our culture's general conception of adoption with the same language the culture uses to silence dissent is to defy norms. For Loki, adoptee sophism means queering the language of comics, of heroes and villains, specifically "lies" and "stories," to take control of the discourse and create a new means of performing villainy and heroism.

In Landis's *Superman: American Alien* and Ewing's *Loki: Agent of Asgard* the titular protagonists wrestle with their adoptee-induced obligations to altruism, through the assertion of their *rhetorical sovereignty* as transracial adoptees. However, while Superman declares himself

as of Earth despite being Kryptonian, Loki declares himself as merely himself. This self-definition is achieved through a transformation of their appearance that embraces their alliances in unique ways and sends clear messages about who they are and what they aspire to be seen as. In their own words, they assert that they need not be who those around them wish them to be but who they themselves *choose* to be. Rhetorical sovereignty was first theorized by Scott Richard Lyons in "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?" and defined as "the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" (emphasis his; 449-450). In the case of Indigenous sovereignty, this self-determination encompasses the various means of protest but most of all, the use of language and discourse to unbind Indigenous persons from the language and discourse that bound them in the first place. Lyons states that "the pursuit of sovereignty is an attempt to revive not our past, but our possibilities" (449). He uses the examples of slates and pencils. At boarding school, Indigenous children were issued slates, pencils, and blankets. The children at once drew the homes and familiar places they were taken from and missed. The slate and pencil were then used to rename them and teach them the white settlers' ways. American Indians have used a variety of means to unbind themselves from the violence of white settler colonialism, from burning down residential schools to running away to rejecting ("counting coup") the Western canon. Lyons promotes literacy as a means of rhetorical sovereignty, which he calls "an ideal principle, the beacon by which we seek the paths to agency and power and community" (449). If through language one is bound and betrayed, through expertise in language and its nuances, one can be unbound.

This reinforcement and defiance of biological kinship by the adoptee informs the very drawing of Loki across the years. While there is great narrative consistency in drawing Loki as a European Other villain, in "Otherness and the European as Villain and Antihero in American Comics" George Drennig cautions against tracing a linear progression of a comic book character as a certain racial stereotype over the comics. In comics, a stereotype, such as Loki being a prototypical European Other villain, can be complicated by the "textual (in)stability of character constructions in longer-running titles, and second, the fact that stereotypes often are often amorphous and highly dependent on historical context" (128). However, Ewing clearly means to emphasize Loki's connection to the smug British villain trope in issue seven. In this issue, King Loki drapes himself over a throne, quoting Julian of Norwich to Odin, saying, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.' … She had a revelation from God you know." In *Loki: Agent of Asgard* and most Marvel titles, Thor, Freya, and Odin are all decidedly Nordic, blonde, and stockily built with white wing motifs on their helms, while Loki is drawn as paler with dark hair, large demonic gold horns, a slim build, and a decidedly less hairy and masculine appearance. Characters even comment on his feminized and youthful look: in *New Avengers*, two characters deride him as looking like the boy band One Direction or the teenage pop star Justin Bieber. Loki's horned appearance is unique: his horns do not come from the culture of the Frost Giants, and Asgardians mostly do not wear massive gold horns. The green and gold palette and the horns make Loki stand out and stand apart from Jotunheim and Asgard. They are Loki. He has chosen a look that is *him,* and he carries it into every form he takes. And this look makes him a threat because it visually shows just how unwilling—or even perhaps unable—to conform to anyone's expectations. He remains a threat in all forms because in all forms he is still Loki.

Loki is trapped not only in the role of villain, but also in the comic book stereotypes of villainy. Artists and writers have drawn and written the character of Loki to be visually distinct from all those around him, even Frost Giants and Asgardians, by making his speech bubbles green no matter what form he takes. Loki's speech is lettered decidedly differently from that of all other characters, even Asgardians. It has sharp curled edges, as if, despite living with them all his lives, he cannot hide his sharp Otherness once he opens his mouth. In Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers* she also uses font to show difference. The daughter speaks with a serif font, the adoptive mother with a sans serif font, and the birth mother with a bold typeface. However, while in Kay's verse this typography is used to create distinction and to stand for the daughter as being influenced by both mothers, in Marvel Comics, Loki, in whatever form he currently occupies, speaks with curved green letters, revealing to the reader that it is him. In DC Comics, no effort is made to differentiate Superman's voice from those of other humans. While Superman and Loki perform multiple identities, Superman's are not considered deceitful but necessary. In contrast, Loki is permanently Othered by his very words. If he speaks, he gives himself away. Without even having to read the words in the speech bubble, on sight the reader knows it is Loki and Loki is up to no good, although Superman is given the benefit of the doubt. In humanoid form, Loki is a stereotypical British villain in a Nordic-American comic book universe. Even when he turns into an animal, it is a decidedly English-looking wolf (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #2*).

At first, Loki's attempts to erase his past, the traditional redeemed villain way of serving those that he hurt, appears to work. However, he cannot escape the weight of his role in Ragnarok and his role in the comic book universe he inhabits, which demands certain hallmarks from him. Gina Misroglu and Michael Eury's *The Supervillain Book* describes "The Lee/Kirby

take on Loki" as "a classic dramatic device as old as the tale of Cain and Abel: the sibling rivalry." While Cain and Abel are a tidy story of consequences in the Old Testament, the Marvel saga of Loki and Thor goes on for years, and by 2014 it no longer seems necessary for Loki to still play the part of Cain. Loki is motivated by resentment towards his "clearly more-favored adopted brother" (212). This description negatively describes Loki's embrace of his racial, gender, and moral ambiguity and fluidity, some of which stems from his families and his magical developments, and how it sets him apart as unique and dangerous to the social order of Asgard and the Marvel universe, all of which come from Loki being an adopted child who has grown into adulthood. *The Supervillain Book* even characterizes him as representing "the eternally countervailing influence of chaos" while Thor and Odin represent "forces of order in the universe" (213). While Thor is allowed to evolve as a character, from a violent youth to a responsible adult worthy of Mjolnir, Loki is not. He stays fixed in his oppositional role to Thor. He is not allowed to grow up or expand his modus operandi in the same way Thor evolves. Loki is just against whatever Thor is for now.

If Thor deploys a hammer and power over the elements, Loki deploys magic and his narrative awareness of the morality system that underlines their mythos. In *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Loki and King Loki are hyperaware of the power and tyranny of story and use the fourth wall to comment on the role of Loki. The only other Marvel character to interact as regularly with the reader on this level is Deadpool, who breaks the fourth wall to make quips. While Lokis in the past have shown an awareness of the fourth wall, this trope has normally been deployed to mock the reader's impotence in stopping the damage Loki is about to inflict on our designated heroes. King Loki uses the fourth wall to mock the reader that like Jessica Rabbit in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, he is "not bad... just drawn that way," making the reader pity the

163

younger Loki for being unable to escape his destiny. King Loki possesses a narrative awareness and the ability to transcend his prescribed story, but unlike the younger Loki, he must accept limits and operate within his prescribed oppositional narrative, telling a young Odin, "I know this manner of story works." He deploys his narrative awareness for humor, bringing a "M20 recoilless rocket launcher" to dispatch a huge magical pike named Anðvari who cannot be landed by "hook, net, or magic." As a Trickster, King Loki embodies narrative subversion. The narrator notes this twist: "For Anðvari could only guard against what he could think of. And wise as he was in the ways of magic… he was somewhat unimaginative" (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #3*). Under the control of the Ragnarok narrative, the Trickster can only trick within limits. Because King Loki knows how these stories go, he only works within their limits. He reveals the ridiculousness of the players, but he does not transcend his prescribed role or reveal the dominant narrative's tyranny until young Loki draws him in.

Ewing uses this mythological and in-canon clash between Loki and King Loki to highlight a problem in developing Loki the compelling Marvel supervillain. Over the last fifty years, Loki's past has led to narrative assumptions about his destiny. The sole motivation for the mayhem Loki has generated over hundreds of comics has been his rivalry with Thor, a repetitive performance that has become recognizable to the comic reading audience as unfair and boring. Recent comics have highlighted a sea change in discussing Loki's motivation, moving his evil motivation from jealousy to angst to confusion over his adoptive culture's martial lifestyle. In the 2004 mini-series *Loki*, Loki has taken control of Asgard and imprisoned his brother. Unfortunately, the deals he has made to get there require him to sacrifice his brother to Hera, his daughter, the Goddess of Death. In a twist of fate, Thor escapes, and Loki, on his way to free his brother and accept the consequences of his insurrection, is soundly beaten by Thor. Throughout

the story, Loki wrestles with whether he really loves his brother and whether he, as an outsider and conqueror, is deserving of love. Loki makes the argument that the long-running character is trapped by narrative convention. Loki is bound, restricted by the confines of the comic book narrative, which is by no means binary. In *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Loki comes to the realization that he is the God of Lies not because he lies to influence others but because he has been lied to throughout his entire life, given false hope of inclusion and redemption, and has thus lost the agency to become a hero because once lied to, the narrative universe he occupies will not let him. The source of his anger, mischief, and rebellion is being "trapped by that definition" (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #1*). Loki can change shape, gender, species, age, but he can "never grow" as a person (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #6*). If Loki were to mature and change, moving away from violence, he would no longer serve as a counterpoint to Thor, the biological son. However, this Loki is determined to grow despite the desire and necessity for him to never grow. To grow out of the role of Angry Adoptee is to break the Ragnarok cycle (the source of his adoptive family's immortality), the heroic myth, and the morality system that says anything Loki is bad and anything Thor is good that the Marvel universe and comics have set up over many decades and issues of comics.

Loki: Agent of Asgard is a series drenched in self-reflection. In Loki's first panel, he sings his story to the tune of "The Wizard and I" from *Wicked*—a musical re-telling of *The Wizard of Oz* about an ambiguously illegitimate, misunderstood magical person resisting social norms. The new Loki has a level of narrative awareness previous Lokis did not. He characterizes his antagonist role as fulfilling a role he had little control in developing. The universe pulled him into the role, narratively, making Loki naturally evil: "Once upon a time, Thor was exiled to Midgard, and spent his time playing the role of the hero. So, his brother Loki—smarting over a

165

few minor squabbles—decided to play the role of the villain." The needs of the universe to create a coherent and classic tale of brothers in opposition traps Loki in his role of villain, and because "The gods are creatures of magic, creatures of story, we must be careful which roles we step into" (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #1*). "Loki" becomes a construct of this version of Loki, called Ikol, and wishes to escape the pattern completely.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler troubles the idea that gender is a fixed idea attached to body. Instead, gender is performed, repeated, and normalized, creating an effect. In "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions" Butler states, "Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (94). In the same way that gender is performed until it achieves an effect, adoptees' acceptance in their adoptive family is achieved by making first the signs of kin to their adoptive family and then the signs of breaking with their birth family. For all adoptees, this can mean silencing parts of their identity such as race, culture, or language to pass in the new family, sublimating their power to the adoptive society, and committing extreme acts of altruism or loyalty. In *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, after making several efforts to emulate some of Asgardians' more martial traits, such as violence and conquest, Loki makes a concerted effort to pass as an Asgardian hero after millennia of being bad and being a bad adoptee, not passing enough as Asgardian or Frost Giant. Just as Butler notes in *Bodies That Matter* that "bodies never quite comply with the norms by which they materialize" (2), Loki thinks he is "free to choose his own fate" in this new body, but at the same time, he is uncertain. He is still Loki-shaped, with the horns to contrast with Thor's wings, with green to contrast with Thor's red, and a spear and sword to contrast with Thor's hammer.

166

Loki demonstrates that the simulation, the endless cycle of sibling rivalry and Ragnarok, can be resisted with language. Clearly alluding to Lacan's drive, Loki demonstrates that the endless drive toward Ragnarok is not natural but a social and cultural construct that does not satisfy the gods of Asgard or Those Who Sit Above in Shadow. At most, it is a "paradoxical satisfaction" that only leads to more pain, suffering, and evil (Lacan 166). Facing Kid Loki (a version of himself he killed) and King Loki, he asks them,

> "What is a lie? … And what does the God of Lies mean…?" He answers that the God of
>
> Lies is The magic theatre… the trickster… the shape-shifter… the master magician of
>
> them all… [and a lie is] a story told. That's all. And we can rewrite our stories… our own
>
> happy endings. Our own redefinitions. We don't have to be what we're told to be. Even
>
> by ourselves.
>
> If you really want to change, you can't just trick yourself into thinking you already
>
> have… I have a friend who believes in me. I have a brother whom I love. I am my own
>
> and will not sit long in any box but for me. These things are right. These things we'll
>
> keep. As for the rest… let's tell a different story.

With that, he takes off his character-defining gold horns and burns them by summoning "metaphorical flames" that lead to an explosion that immolates all the Lokis (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #13*). Loki achieves his jouissance when he self-immolates. By choosing to burn, he reveals his sincere desire, not to kill Thor but to stop the cycle that condemns him to be an Angry Adoptee. This magical act, where Loki removes and breaks the horns that visually make him a devil to Thor's winged angel helm, hearkens back to the first panels of the series, where Loki explains magic as he invades Avengers Tower: magic is "taking a thought and making it real. Taking a lie and making it truth... telling a story to the universe so utterly, cosmically perfect that

for a single, shining moment the world believes a man can fly" (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #1*). This act asks the reader to believe in Loki, believe in change, and believe that a comic book character can transcend the moral code of comics itself.

While King Loki uses the fourth wall to mock the reader's impotence, Loki breaks the fourth wall to call for help against narrative tyranny and his prescribed role. The answer comes from the reader's surrogate, Loki's human friend Verity, who can see through all lies. Loki calls her from Elsewhere crying, "I can't change what I am. I am the God of Lies. Forever" and she retorts, "What does 'God of Lies' even mean?," giving him the inspiration to take charge of the title and reinterpret it with magic reasoning (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #13*). In *Agent of Asgard*, Loki and King Loki both queer events in their own magical time-traveling ways, but King Loki plays towards inevitability while Loki attempts to resist narrative logic while also going along with his mission. While Loki tries to resist narrative logic, he too acknowledges that he has limits and must go along with the missions the All Mother has laid down for him through the recurring motif of burning. King Loki burns happily while Loki fears burning "the rest of forever in chains on fire" (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #6, #1*). King Loki is a manifestation of a Loki who has accepted his role as Asgard's Pet Trickster. With the Sword of Truth embedded in his spine, he mocks Loki, saying, "I'm not the fool who thinks he can ever be anything new. I know what I am, and I love it… I am destiny! I am King Loki! I am your Future! I am You!" Loki fears the inevitable. He fears being stuck in a box, in a stereotype, in a role that requires and harnesses his unhappiness. He fears story. At the same time, Loki is aware that his journey to be a better Loki must come at a cost and take time or it will not be a good story. He says to the reader, "Why don't I just magic everything better? Tell the universe a nice big story? … It's not a very good story, is it?" (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #5*).

Loki's reinvention is not mere humorous trickery, like King Loki bringing a bazooka to fight an immortal magic pike; he redefines the meaning of Trickster in the universe in which he exists. He attacks the very heart of narrative, the imperative for binaries of conflict (good son, evil adoptee), and replaces it with the optimistic and the ambiguous: a lie is a story, and the story is a trick the reader accepts as truth. Loki queers suspended disbelief. Lived existence is pure sophistry. The true trick of the Trickster is not fooling his friends and family but tricking the narrative into making him the hero. While his Asgardian friends and family fight off the end of the universe, Loki, the God[dess] of Stories, quietly collects their "stories" in a magic bracelet and thus saves them all from the death of the multiverse. Loki ends Ragnarok and rather than killing everyone, saves everyone. The Trickster tricks his way out of being the Trickster. The God[dess] of Stories, not the All Father and All Mother, the one who belonged to everyone and no one, who betrayed everyone, saves everyone.

In *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Loki is aware of and offers an assessment of the dynamics of Marvel Universe and his treatment as a villain in the comics, saying, "This universe prefers old patterns, old cycles, it would prefer me in an old shape, but I am Loki and more than that—I am myself… Whether you like it or not" (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #1*). Loki's ingratitude at being abducted by an enemy king, made a prince, and then made fun of for diverging from the Asgardian ideal is the cause of his villainy. On top of being a master magician and close to his mother, Loki is too feminine to be an Asgardian hero. He does not beat his enemies into submission. He tricks them into electing him leader. He was always adopted to be the villain. Even Loki's adoptive father, the grumpy All Father Odin, realizes this and recognizes that this pattern is problematic. He tells Loki, as a comfort and piece of advice, "Remember what a lie is" —that is, remember that in this universe, lies are avenues for possibility (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of*

169

Asgard #13). With this advice, Loki goes on a quest to save himself from his future, embodied by King Loki. It is only when he faces his former and future incarnations and realizes they too are trapped by the definition of Loki that he fully embraces his Trickster-hood and plays his last trick: remembering what a lie is. He transforms himself into Loki, the God[dess] of Stories, a godhood separate from the moral coding of "lies." Instead of lies, corruptions of truth, Loki is made of possibilities for truth, and he can break free from his restraints and resolve his future and past selves.

It is important to note that Loki's story does not end there. Gerald Vizenor states that "Trickster stories arise in silence, not scriptures… characters that liberate the mind and never reach a closure in stories" (15). Without survivance, we "must be the simulations of the 'absolute fakes' in the ruins of representation, or the victims in literary annihilation" (9). The Trickster embodies "reason and mediation in stories" (15). Loki's assertion that a lie is a story and that stories are not dreadful things in themselves, but only in relation to the power structure, is a form of natural reason, of adoptee affirmative sophistic reason. Through Loki, *Loki: Agent of Asgard* argues that it is not being adopted that causes the wound, it is the expectation to submission that makes villains of adoptees who choose to step out of line. Rather than play his role of the Angry Adoptee of Asgard, Loki removes himself from the story altogether. To "win," Loki must change the discourse from trickery, lies, and evil to stories. The cover of issue seventeen emphasizes this defeat of narrative itself: Loki sits on top of a pile of *Loki: Agent of Asgard* and *Journey into Mystery* comics, snarling at the reader with broken horns, his magical bracelet holding the true "stories" of all of his friends and family, sidestepping "Ragnarok," their annihilative narrative cycle. Loki turns from object-adoptee to the "Teller" and escapes all rules—of physics, of time,

of morality, of ethics—absorbing his future King Loki self into himself, finally becoming "everything, as long as it's me" (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #5*).

In *Loki: Agent of Asgard* and *Superman: American Alien* the adoptees perform searches: Superman, a search for information about what happened before he arrived in Kansas; Loki, a search for a way out of the cycle that narrative has trapped him in. At first, Loki seeks redemption and forgiveness, but like Superman, search reveals alternative identities and futures with which he must wrestle. For Loki, it is literal versions of himself from the future and an innocent version of himself that he murders. Superman spends his formative years attempting to piece together a coherent narrative of his origins while discovering—and concealing—his superhuman powers. Wegar notes,

> Popular culture depicts adoptees and their quest for genealogical knowledge as familiar yet different: adoption stories are compelling to the extent that the audience can identify with them. Yet, by placing adoptees firmly outside the order of nature, adoption is also a marker for difference. The media envisions the adoptee as the Other, and the search as potentially dangerous; consequently the audience's identification with the adoptee remains safe and detached. (98)

At the end of the seventh issue, through a parallel narrative of Lex Luther, Superman comes to realize the importance of the nurturing his adoptive parents gave him while learning of his origins and finally coming to a peaceful hybrid identity, protecting the planet he claims as his own. He visually completes the metaphor of the adoptee as gift by wrapping himself in the blanket, enrobing himself in the gifts of his people, waving against the wind as he flies to save Earth. At the same time, Superman commits himself to the role as sublimated power to his adoptive people. He chooses to bind his power to their service and fulfill their expectations. Far

from being destined to change the world, he is merely the preserver of the status quo and reinforcer of the biological kinship model.

In *Loki: Agent of Asgard* Loki, as an adoptee character and a character of extreme magic, unsettles familial, gender, and racial ideologies. In this series, Loki, as a master magician, uses language as magic and the language of comics to twist his anti-hero adoption narrative around. Loki challenges comic books' traditional construction of angry adoptee villainy. While in *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy the two film protagonists are beset by angry adoptees and must avoid or defeat them, Loki, who is construed as the Angry Adoptee or Adoptee killjoy, instead confronts the angry adoptee trope, and demonstrates that rather than making one powerless, anger at adoption is a position of magical might and agency. He connects adoption, as a kinship bond built on language and symbolic action, to the magical power of language as it operates in the Marvel universe and comic books in general and challenges its use in his "canon" to make him one of the most feared (and popular) villains in Marvel history. Meanwhile, Loki, a villain and later an anti-hero in Marvel Comics canon, is an adoptee who refuses, to an almost heroic degree, to let his adoptive culture, the Asgardians—and by proxy, Earth—, become comfortable with him. Loki will not let them make him, like Superman to humanity, an icon of their own. To become an icon of the Asgardians would mean to reify them as good because they, a martial and violent intergalactic settler race, made a good Asgardian out of a Frost Giant castaway. Instead, Loki embraces his status as someone in between. He uses the blend of identities and prescribed loyalties to challenge identity and loyalty.

Conclusion

Superman and Loki reflect society's evolving fears about adoptees concerning power and loyalty. While Superman sublimates his power to his adopted culture (Earth, specifically the United States of America), Loki finds liberation in deploying his power for his own liberation. In *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon states, "Like adopted children who only stop investigating the new family framework at the moment when a minimum nucleus of security crystallizes in their psyche, the native intellectual will try to make European culture his own" (218). While Superman is trapped in a cycle of attempting to win full acceptance by humanity, he will be loved but never trusted since the likes of Lex Luthor rule the world. In contrast, Loki breaks away from his adoptive family, and then breaks through the very pages of the comic book to escape being "trapped" in the narrative (*Loki: Agent of Asgard* #19). And yet, while Superman and Loki are the protagonists of their stories, they are clearly delineated as heroes and villains according to their willingness as outsiders brought into a community through adoption to sublimate their power to that community at all costs. While both appear to have full agency over their destiny by the end of these limited series, the recurrent and recessive nature of comics serials means that the undoing of their kinships is always on the horizon.

Clark Kent and Loki Laufeyson serve as contrasting depictions of the adoptee in serialized superhero comic books that, through their popularity, shape the public's imagination of the adoptee while also being adoptee in name only as they never encounter the legal framework of modern plenary adoption and its systems. Nonetheless, they have in common a position of being what I call a Schrödinger's Adoptee: they are loyal and traitorous, an insider and an outsider, a convenient avatar for the best and worst of their adoptive culture, family, and birth

173

culture. Their only way out is through their rhetorical power to declare themselves. Loki declares himself as able to "turn into anything as long as it's me," expressing that his loyalties, his actions, emerge from within and he is limited by his own self, not external forces (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #5*, *#3*). His ability to transform into a malleable subject acceptable to his society is limited by his own person, and he accepts that about himself. In *Superman: American Alien*, it is another character who states Clark's duality and loyalties as "You can be yourself even when you're not being you" (61). These confusing statements exemplify the compulsory loyalties, obligatory altruism, and presumption of familial betrayals surrounding Schrödinger's Adoptee, someone who holds all the rhetorical power and none of it. The lesson learned is that adoptees who fully sublimate their power to their adoptive culture through speech and action— even at the encouragement of their origin culture—can be a hero in that culture but never one of them; if adoptees reject their adoptive culture, they are villainized. And in the endless cycle of comic book serials, redemption or freedom is in the next issue, just out of reach, to be ret-conned away when such a development no longer serves the purposes of the publishing house in selling more books.

Works Cited

Abreu, Domingos. "Baby-Bearing Storks: Brazilian Intermediaries in the Adoption Process."
International Adoption: Global Inequalities and the Circulation of Children, edited by
Diana Marre and Laura Briggs, New York University Press, 2009, pp. 138-154.

Aguirre-Sacasa, Roberto. *Thor: The Trials of Loki*. Marvel Entertainment LLC, 2011.

Andreadis, Steve. "Finding Superman in Copyright: An Immigrant's Story." *Copyright:
Creativity at Work at The Library of Congress*, 27 May 2022.
https://blogs.loc.gov/copyright/2022/05/find-superman-in-copyright-an-immigrants-
story/. Accessed 13 November 2022.

Basil-Morozow, Helena. "Loki Then and Now: The Trickster Against Civilization."
International Journal of Jungian Studies, vol. 9, no. 2, 2017, pp. 84-96.

Bates, Cary, and Dave Hunt. *Superboy #2*. DC Comics, 1980.

Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice. Directed by Zack Snyder, performances by Ben Affleck,
Henry Cavill, and Jesse Eisenberg. Warner Brothers, 2016.

Bendis, Brian Michael. *International Iron Man #7*. Marvel Entertainment LLC, 21 September
2016.

Binder, Otto. *Superman #146*. DC Comics, 1961.

Briggs, Laura. *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption*.
Duke University Press, 2012.

Brightburn. Directed by David Yarovesky, performances by Elizabeth Banks, David Denman,
Jackson A. Dunn. Sony, 2019.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Routledge, 1993.

175

_____. "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Acts." *The Butler Reader*. Edited by Sara Salih with

     Judith Butler. Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 90-118.

_____. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Cavalieri, Joey, Barry Marx, and Thomas Hill. *Fifty Who Made DC Great*. DC Comics, 1985.

"Clark Kent: Mild Mannered Reporter." *The Adventures of Superman*. 14 February 1940, Radio.

Daniels, Les. *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics*. Abram Books,

     1991.

Darowski, Joseph J. "It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Synthesis: Superman, Clark Ken, and Hegel's

     Dialectic." *International Journal of Comic Art*, vol. 10, no. 1, Spring 2008, pp. 461-470.

David, Peter. *Supergirl #79*. DC Comics, 2003.

Drennig, George. "Otherness and the European as Villain and Antihero in American Comics."

     Comics as a Nexus of Cultures: Essays on the Interplay of Media, Disciplines, and

     International Perspectives, edited by Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, and Gideon

     Haberkorn. Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2010.

Eco, Umberto, trans. Natalie Chilton. "The Myth of Superman: A Review of *The Amazing*

     Adventures of Superman." *Diacritics*, vol. 2, no. 1, Spring 1972, pp. 14-22.

Engle, Gary. "What Makes Superman So Darned American?" *Popular Culture*, Popular Press,

     1992, pp. 331-343.

Ewing, Al. *Loki: Agent of Asgard: The Complete Collection*. Marvel Entertainment LLC, 2021.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Mask*. Pluto Press, 1986.

_____. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 1963.

"Filmmaker Amandine Gay and the politics of international adoption." *YouTube*, uploaded by

France 24 English, 3 June 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGgQuAXfIvs. Accessed

14 November 2022.

Gordon, Ian. *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon*. Rutgers University Press, 2017.

Injustice: Gods Among Us. NetherRealm Studios. Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment. 16

April 2013.

Gorgias. "On Rhetoric: Reputative." *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to

the Present Second Edition*, edited by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, Bedford St.

Martins, 2001, pp. 87-138.

Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*. Basic

Books, 2005.

Jurgens, Dan. *The Death of Superman: Doomsday!* DC Comics, 1992.

Kahan, Michelle. "'Put Up' On Platforms: A History of Twentieth Century Adoption Policy in

the United States." *The Journal of Sociology and Social Work*, vol. 33, issue 3, 2006, pp.

51-72.

Kim, Eleana Jean. *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of

Belonging*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Kirby, Jack, and Stan Lee. *The Avengers #1*. Marvel Comics, 1963.

Kung Fu Panda. Directed by Mark Osborne and John Stevenson, performances by Jack Black,

Ian McShane, Angelina Jolie, and Dustin Hoffman. DreamWorks Animation, 2008.

Kung Fu Panda 2. Directed by Jennifer Yuh Nelson, performances by Jack Black, Angelina,

Jolie, and Jackie Chan. DreamWorks Animation, 2011.

Kung Fu Panda 3. Directed by Jennifer Yuh Nelson and Alessandro Carloni, performances by

    Jack Black, Dustin Hoffman, and Jackie Chan. DreamWorks Animation, 2016.

Kostan, David. "The Emotion in Aristotle *Rhetoric* 2.7: Gratitude, Not Kindness." *Influences on*

    Peripatetic Rhetoric: Essays in Honor of William W. Fortenbaugh. Edited by David C.

    Mirhady. Leiden, 2007, pp. 239-250.

Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. W.W. Norton,

    1978.

Landis, Max. *Superman: American Alien*. DC Entertainment, 2017.

Leber, Christina and Craig Winston LeCroy. "Public perception of the foster care system: A

    national study." *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 34, issue 9, 2012, pp. 1633-

    1638.

Leifsen, Esben. 2004. "Person, Relation and Value: The Economy of Circulating Ecuadorian

    Children in International Adoption." *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Adoption*, edited by

    Fiona Bowie, Routledge, pp. 182-196.

Lion. Directed by Garth Davis, performances by Dev Patel, Sunny Pawar, and Nicole Kidman,

    The Weinstein Company, 2016.

"Loki." *Marvel.com*. Marvel Entertainment. 2016. https://www.marvel.com/characters/loki.

    Accessed 30 April 2016.

Lyons, Scott Richard. "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from

    Writing?" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2000, pp. 447-468.

Man of Steel. Directed by Zack Snyder, performances by Henry Cavill, Amy Adams, Michael

    Shannon, and Diane Lane. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2013.

McGreal, Chris. "Robert Caro: a life with LBJ and the pursuit of power." *The Guardian*, 9 June 2012.

McKee. Kimberly D. *Disrupting Kinship: Transnational Politics of Korean Adoption in the United States*. University of Illinois Press, 2019.

Medlen, D.R. "This Congressman-Elect Is Living the Dream and Taking His Oath on a Superman Comic." *The Mary Sue*, 4 January 2022.

Melosh, Barbara. *Strangers and Kin: The American Way of Adoption*. Harvard University Press, 2006.

Millar, Mark. *Superman: Red Son*. DC Comics, 2014.

Misiroglu, Gina, and Michael Eury, eds. *The Supervillain Book: The Evil Side of Comics and Hollywood*. Visible Ink Press, 2006.

Pitkethly, Clare. "The pursuit of identity in the face of paradox: indeterminacy, structure, and repetition in Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2012, pp. 215-221.

Radin, Margaret Jane. 1996. *Contested Commodities*. Harvard University Press.

Raleigh, Elizabeth, and Jesus Rosales. *Selling Transracial Adoption: Families, Markets, and the Color Line*. Temple University Press, 2018.

Rodi, Rob. "Loki #1." *Loki*. Marvel Entertainment LLC: 6 October 2004.

_____. "Loki #2." *Loki*. Marvel Entertainment LLC: 18 August 2004.

_____. "Loki #3." *Loki*. Marvel Entertainment LLC: 21 July 2004.

_____. "Loki #4." *Loki*. Marvel Entertainment LLC: 7 July 2004.

Siegel, Jerry, and Joe Shuster. "Action Comics #1." *80 Years of Superman: The Deluxe Edition*, DC Comics, 2018.

_____. *Action Comics #11*. New York: DC Comics, 1939.

Soares, Michael. "The Man of Tomorrow: Superman from American Exceptionalism to

     Globalization." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol, 48, no. 4, 2015, pp. 747-761.

Superman. Directed by Richard Donnor, performances by Marlon Brando, Gene Hackman,

     Christopher Reeve, and Margot Kidder. Columbia-EMI-Warner, 1978.

Teichman, Jenny. *Illegitimacy: An Examination of Bastardy*. Cornell University Press, 1982.

Tembo, Kwasu D. "'Among them but not one of them': A Xenological Exploration of Otherness

     and Power of DC Comics's Superman." *Caeitele Echinox*/*Posthuman Configurations*,

     vol. 34, *Posthuman Configurations*, 2018, pp. 181-198.

_____. "Pax in Terra: Superman and the Problem of Power in *Superman Returns* and *Man of*

     Steel." *postScriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. ii, no. ii, July

     2017, pp. 35-56.

The Avengers. Directed by Joss Whedon, performances by Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans, Tom

     Hiddleston, and Chris Hemsworth. Marvel Studios, 2012.

"The Secret Rocket." *Superman Radio Series*. 29 September 1947, Radio.

The Square. Directed by Jehane Noujaim, performances by Khalid Abdalla, Ahmed Hassan, and

     Dina Abdullah. Netflix, 2013.

Thomas, Kayley. "Revisioning the Smiling Villain: Imagetexts and intertextual expression in

     representations of the filmic Loki on Tumblr." *Transformative Works & Cultures*, vol.

     13, 2013, pp. 3.

Thor. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, performances by Chris Hemsworth, Tom Hiddleston,

     Natalie Portman, and Anthony Hopkins. Disney, 2011.

Wallace, Mike. "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World." *Radical History Review*, vol. 32, 1985, pp. 33-57.

Wegar, Katarina. *Adoption, Identity, and Kinship: The Debate Over Sealed Birth Records*. Yale University Press, 1997.

Who Framed Roger Rabbit? Directed by Robert Zemeckis, performances by Bob Hoskins, Christopher Lloyd, Joanna Cassidy, and Stubby Kaye. Buena Vista Pictures, 1988.

Woolfolk, William, and Al Plastino. *Superman #61*. DC Comics, 1949.

"World Cup protester brings rainbow flag onto field during Portugal and Uruguay match." *ABC Australia*, 28 November 2022, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-29/protester-runs-onto-world-cup-field-flying-rainbow-flag/101709292. Accessed 13 December 2022.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*. Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

Yngvesson, Barbara. "Going 'Home': Adoption, Loss of Bearings, and the Mythology of Roots." *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*. Edited by Toby Alice Volkman. Duke University Press, 2005, pp. 25-48.

Zelizer, Viviana. *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*. Princeton University Press, 1994.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: "WHETHER SHE'S REAL OR NO": IMAGINING THE KIN IN BETWEEN

POLYVOCALITY IN JACKIE KAY'S *THE ADOPTION PAPERS*

Introduction

This dissertation examines the boundaries put on the language of adoptees, their families, and communities and the expectations placed on adoptees to adapt, assimilate, sacrifice, and integrate into a society in which biological kinship is the rhetorical touchstone for intimacy. This dissertation also explores opportunities for a more expansive lexicon of kinship created by those in the adoption constellation, specifically adoptees, and the ways adoptees discover they can speak back to the dominant discourse of biological kinship through their own, assertive nuanced discourses that complicate and develop the definition of kinship, family, and community, blurring the poetic and the semantic meanings of kinship such as parenthood, siblinghood, and kinship and demonstrating the imaginative ties that endure across time and space between kin in adoption. Whether it is Loki reinterpreting his status as The God of Lies in his adoptive community to escape the very bounds of his universe or Po calling upon the expansive bonds of friendship and family to empower himself and come back from the afterlife, adoptees as creators, as characters, and as archetypes complicate and compliment the Burkean understanding of "symbol-making and symbol-misusing" people in rhetoric by being the objects and the subjects

of their own narratives and constructing multifaceted definitions and meanings around their adoption (Ewing, *Loki: Agent of Asgard #1*; *Kung Fu Panda* 3; Burke 41).

Voice, time, and imagination have been crucial touchstones throughout this dissertation. "Positive, Accurate, and Honest: Contemporary Conflicts in the Lexicons of Kinship" discusses the prescriptive languages of adoption, most created, spread, and reinforced by non-adoptees. "The 'Ghost Kingdom' in *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* Trilogy" discusses the use of adoptees to explore relationships across time and space in the visual medium of film. "'I Know What I Am and I'm Trying to Be Better Than That': Adoptees, Power, and the Adoptive Family in *Loki: Agent of Asgard* and *Superman: American Alien*" examines the use of adoptees, heroic and villainous, to explore the importance of self-expression and self-invention in identity formation. While adoptees cross frontiers of kinship, race, and nation, to be re-kinned into another kinship, they create opportunities to cross frontiers that expand our collective vision of family and kin and in some cases, can, like Loki, leave all kin behind entirely. In many adoption stories, such as *Kung Fu Panda* and *The Adoption Papers*, the adoptee experience is a polyvocal experience; there are many voices that come and go across time, and the adoptee is the axis on which those voices turn in the adoption constellation.

To conclude, I examine Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*, a 1991 autobiographical poetry collection by the former Makar (poet laureate) of Scotland. In *The Adoption Papers*, Kay explores her personal life and history as an adoptee, a lesbian, and a Black Scots-Nigerian woman living in Scotland, with free verse poems depicting her ("the Daughter" in Palatino typeface), her white Scottish birth mother ("the Birth Mother" in Bodoni typeface), and her white Scottish adoptive mother ("the Adoptive Mother" in Gill typeface), as they navigate infertility, pregnancy, relinquishment, paperwork, adoption, motherhood as an adoptive mother to a mixed-

race Black daughter in Scotland and as a birth mother without a daughter present but still with a daughter out in the world somewhere (Kay 16).

The Adoption Papers uses a harmonious and discordant polyphony to explore the pliant and intransigent bonds of kinship in adoption and how that affects the way the Birth Mother, the Adoptive Mother, and the Daughter see themselves as connected and/or disconnected from each other. Kay explores the Burkean semantic and poetic meanings of motherhood and daughterhood, of "adoption papers"—the paraphernalia of adoption from photos to legal documents to letters—to build a polyvocal kinship between these various people in the adoption constellation. However, these voices, who at times speak in harmony, and at times discordantly, are imagined by one person, making *The Adoption Papers* a reflective piece on how an adoptee imagines the inner lives of her kin, present or absent. While these women are separate, they carry on imagined and real lives with each other, and on a level one step removed from the world of the fiction, in *The Adoption Papers* they are held in the adoptee author's imagination. In the final fantasy meeting of the three, Kay writes, "she is too many imaginings to be flesh and blood" (33). In a 2021 interview with *The Guardian* Kay says, of preliminary stages of *The Adoption Papers*,

> The birth mother I made up, from snippets of things I'd been told from fantasy versions of her, and from some of my search. In a sense, in a literary way, I gave birth to my mother rather than the other way around. I wanted her voice to be lyrical, ethereal, not grounded in anything, not rooted. I couldn't place her. She wasn't in any sense my "real mother." She would need to be my made up one. The adoptive mother, my "real" mother, I wanted to be the exact opposite: earthy, witty, grounded, bold. I based her on my

184

adoptive mum, but she is made up too. ("'I felt a strange grief when I found my birth

mother': Jackie Kay on *The Adoption Papers*")

Kay creates a polyvocal three-part harmony between her and her mothers, creating motherly

figures who, present or absent, feel connected to her, the Daughter, but in ways that are

intangible and, in some ways, difficult to describe, a bond that reifies and contradicts biological

kinship bonds as a rhetorical touchstone for intimacy.

Kay disperses formal "adoption papers" from "original birth certificates" to the adoption

"waiting lists" that the Daughter's prospective adoptive parents sit on (until they are suddenly

given two days' notice of the baby's arrival) as documents used in search or separation to blur

the engagements of empathy and kinship in adoption and the ways that the semantic easily

becomes poetic. In "Semantic and Poetic Meaning," Kenneth Burke argues that language has an

interlinking nature and that "the ideal of a purely 'neutral' vocabulary, free of emotional

weightings, attempts to make a totality out of a fragment" (138). Instead, vocabulary has

semantic meaning and poetic meaning. The semantic or the "ideal" meaning is the anesthetic,

reductive through process of elimination, rigid, logically extreme definition, heavily reliant on

truth and reality. Just as a birth certificate is meant to be a statement of facts that rely on many

underlying legal truths that decide what is a mother, father, or a place of birth, other rigid

semantic guidelines are also presumed to be true and certain (Burke 139). Poetic meaning also

can fall on a spectrum of truth and falsehood and it invites drama and emotion, argument and

expression, expansion rather than specificity and reduction. Through these poems, the emotional

bonds between the mothers and the daughters are reified, are proved important and most

certainly not broken by time or differences. In that way, *The Adoption Papers* diminish the

importance of legal adoption papers—despite the important connections they make—for other

adoption paraphernalia such as letters or even *the* hoped-for letter from the Birth Mother that she imagines in the last stanza, focusing less on "thud of words" that will be enclosed and more on the "colour of her paper" and "whether she'll underline First Class / or have a large circle over her 'i's" (Kay 34).

In the same way that artifacts in the London Foundling Hospital's *Threads of Feeling* project are practical semantic objects symbolizing biological kinship that may or may not reunite a mother and child, adoption papers, forms, objects can elicit strong emotional responses. The poetic meaning of adoption is defined by aesthetic, emotional, and attitudinal degrees with moral and ethical implications (Burke 139). When adoptees go in search of their original birth certificate, it does not necessarily mean they want to reject the poetic and aesthetic meanings of adoption for a semantic, anesthetic, and biological definition of kin; rather, they are often searching for a polyvocal kinship such as Kay's in *The Adoption Papers,* in which the real and imagined voices of the adoption constellation can live—and by live, I mean: be held not as Other or alternative but as a means of being kin.

Semantic and Poetic Adoption Papers

The Adoption Papers traces the dynamic inner lives of three participants in an adoption from pregnancy in 1961 to the edge of a reunion in 1990: the Adoptive Mother, the Birth Mother, and the Daughter. The cycle shows what they share, tracing their evolving feelings about their kinship to and belonging in the adoption constellation. In *Kin of Another Kind*, Cynthia Callahan states, "adoption embodies some of our biggest individual and collective

186

concerns about belonging" and that adoptees are a means of embodying the search for belonging and the dramatic pitfalls that may ensue (166). There is a noticeable absence of the perspectives of the Adoptive Father, the Birth Father,[56] and even the social worker, permitting Kay to really focus on these three perspectives and their individual and shared discomfort concerning motherhood and daughterhood.

The three voices are haunted by the adoption papers in diverse ways. For the Adoptive Mother, they cause her to muse on whether she is a "real mammy" after infertility leads her and her husband to adoption; eventually she concludes that they are "closer than blood" and "thicker than water. Me and my daughter" (21, 34). The Adoptive Mother moves from seeing the adoption and its accompanying papers as a threat to her motherhood, as something she must have to be a mother while also hanging over her head identifying her motherhood as different, to understanding that the love she and her daughter share supersedes her own assumptions of motherhood. "She's my child," the Adoptive Mother says, "I have told her stories / wept at her losses, laughed at her pleasures, / she is mine" (23). The Birth Mother is a mother without a child, having signed away her child, and as the years pass, the Birth Mother experiences anxiety about her status until she buries the baby clothes she had bought for the Daughter in the backyard as if being able to bury a child, even symbolically, was better than imagining her daughter out in the world as someone else's daughter to mistreat or kill (18). "It would have driven me mad imagining," says the Birth Mother (33). The Daughter goes seeking out her original birth certificate and finds herself laughed at by an official who slowly gives her the information she seeks (12, 24-25). When she finally meets her first mother in a dream, the Daughter struggles

---

[56] While Kay does not reunite with her lost family members　within the pages of *The Adoption Papers*, she did eventually meet her first mother and, as chronicled in *Red Dust Road*, visit her father in Nigeria.

with keeping her composure but also with finding a way to express how she feels for someone who is a stranger to her. The Daughter says, "If I picture it like this it hurts less. / There is no sentiment" (Kay 32). In *Kinship* Kim TallBear states, "A kinship exchange . . . is more than a transaction. Everyone is always on the hook, and those hooks are hooked together" (Myers 136). In *The Adoption Papers*, The Daughter and her Mothers learn that there is no true unhooking from each other. They are intricately and unexpectedly hooked into each other's lives even if they have not met for many years or even at all. They both conjure up imaginative visions of each other and live with them despite absence.

In *The Adoption Papers*, Kay uses polyvocality to grapple with the semantic and poetic meanings of adoption in motherhood and daughterhood. In fact, she uses the very semantic adoption papers, the paraphernalia of her adoption such as her medical records, her adoption certificate, and her updated and original birth certificates, as avenues to explore the emotional weight these documents carry for her and her mothers. The Adoptive Mother tells herself, "I'm not a mother / until I've signed that piece of paper," but she is using the papers as an emotional wall to lean on, so she does not get attached to this baby she has already insisted upon being the mother for and is clearly attached to emotionally (16). The Birth Mother tells herself, "My name signed on a dotted line" as a salve, distancing herself from her daughter since legally, by signing the adoption papers, she has unmade herself as a mother despite her ongoing feelings of interest and worry for her daughter (17). The adoption papers mean everything to them. They make and unmake them as official legal mothers, but they are also nothing in comparison with their bond with the Daughter and with each other, which to their surprise endures. The Birth Mother says, "I know she thinks of me often / when the light shows its face / or the dark skulks behind hills, she conjures me up or I just appear" (29). The Adoptive Mother, in an attempt to assert her kinship

188

over her daughter, says, "all this umbilical knot business is nonsense" (23). The Daughter equivocates when asking her counseling agency to track down the Birth Mother through marriage certificates, rationalizing, "If she wants to meet that's fine if she doesn't / that is also fine"—when it clearly will not be fine with her if the Birth Mother does not want to meet (Kay 19). The Daughter is clearly invested in finding her. The Daughter is the semantic bridge between the two women who, despite losing custody and gaining custody, have a strong emotional connection to the Daughter that confounds their assumptions about motherhood, from thinking the break would be clean for the Birth Mother to the Adoptive Mother thinking her bond with the Daughter would be secondary to "real" motherhood.

Kay presents *The Adoption Papers*' polyvocality with distinct fonts for each voice while also separating each fonted voice with a new line. The fonts, specifically Bodoni (serif), Gill (sanserif), and Palatino (serif), are a means of subtly communicating to the reader hints of the narrator's position on the adoption constellation. Bodoni is the oldest of the typefaces (Hansard 370). Hence it is used for the Birth Mother, who is the first mother of the Daughter. While she is the "oldest" of the mothers in terms of time, she is forgotten. Gill is used for the Adoptive Mother, and is quintessentially British, with the sanserif version being used by British Rail and Transport for London, as if communicating to the reader that the Adoptive Mother is a more properly traditional British mother worthy of taking in a child, even though she and the Birth Mother are both white Scottish women and the Adoptive Mother harbors nontraditional beliefs as a communist in the early 1960s (Tam 22-23). Both mothers, that is, fall outside the traditional British model of middle-class motherhood. It takes effort from the Adoptive Mother to conceal aspects of her family and home that the social worker might take offense at (Kay 16). Finally, the Daughter speaks with Palatino, the youngest and also the quirkiest of the fonts included, as if to

189

express how different she is from her Mothers, the white Scottish teen who had a relationship with a Nigerian international student, and the communist versus the Daughter who is Black and a lesbian (Zapf 8). As the font that is used the most—including in the latter half, "Severe Gale 8"—Palatino also makes the Daughter's voice seem as if it is the medium between these two mothers.

While these voices are distinct through font and line, they do at times blend, such as when the Adoptive Mother, in conversation with the Daughter, projects what the Daughter is saying to her, "Mammy why aren't you and me the same colour?" (21). Elizabeth Bahs notes in *On the Threshold: The Polyphonic Poetry Sequence* that "The interweaving of voices in *The Adoption Papers* creates an emotional intensity that is doubled by the doubling of voices in the text. The method of juxtaposing these speakers without punctuation or labels mirrors the turn-taking of conversation" (103). Bahs also notes that the lack of speech tags "allows the voices to merge without authorial intervention to signal the change of voice to the reader, while font differences for speakers are distinct enough to keep the reader from confusion" (103).The question emerging from the Adoptive Mother's voice, not the Daughter's who is also just repeating what her mother said to her, "Ma mammy bot me oot a shop / Ma mammy says I was a luvly baby" and "She says my real mammy is away far away", demonstrates how closely and fragilely knit these characters are to each other (21). Their bond is under pressure by their differences and the external pressures of biological kinship as a rhetorical touchstone for intimacy, and yet, despite that, the Daughter "love[s] my mammy whether she's real or no" (Kay 21). Adoption papers or no, that daughter loves the person she calls her mammy.

Creating relationships between the Daughter and the Mothers through polyvocality, as Kay does in *The Adoption Papers,* serves as a point of expansive meaning through self- and

collective definition and as a recognition of the demands that limited and anesthetic meaning can make on the lives of adoptees who feel constricted by the existing definitions in adoption. The polyvocality, the ambiguous admixture of first mother and adoptive mother, begins with the dedication page, which reads, "For my mother, Helen Kay." One could read this as Helen Kay, Jackie Kay's only adoptive mother, being addressed as her mother but also as a list, my mother and Helen Kay. Furthermore, willing creative collaboration across the adoption constellation allows participants to build their own poetic meanings of adoption by placing them next to other adoption writers, allowing them to capture a greater expansive meaning of adoption. In other words, the narrow semantic definition of kinship can be resisted by those of the adoptee constellation by creating emotional diverse and poetic meanings in the lexicon of adoption.

In *The Adoption Papers* Kay explores the semantic and poetic meanings of motherhood and kinship. At the end of Part One, the Daughter, feeling indifferent, or trying to protect herself from disappointment if she cannot find the Birth Mother, muses, "a few genes, blood, a birth. / all this bother, certificates, papers … It is all so long ago. Does it matter?" (20). By Part Three the Daughter affirms that there is intense pressure on her to see her biological kin as mattering even if she feels it perhaps may not: "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" (29). Kinship matters to those who sustain it through pointing at genes, blood, and birth to connect, and in turn they point to certificates and papers of adoptions as reifications of their beliefs about genes, blood, and birth. The adoption papers in question, are, as Joan Heifetz Hollinger states, "legal fictions"—but essential fictions in a system where a child may be denied access to "passports, social security numbers, health care, insurance, admission to school, or driver's licenses" without a revised birth certificate with the adoptive parents' names on it (74). It also highlights the

delicate nature of legal modern plenary adoption: when people are unwilling to play games with the legal fictions of adoption, the whole fiction breaks down often with dramatic emotional damage. The Daughter's legal life depends on the fiction of the adoption papers. At the same time, the Daughter lives with the knowledge that she has two sets of identification papers as an adoptee, and she pursues the original birth certificate as it contains crucial knowledge about her life before adoption but also holds deep meaning to her as a symbol of her adoption, making the laughter of the official who gives it to her all the more cruel (Kay 12). The document holds no true legal power anymore. However, it does hold facts and great emotional power in distressing the Daughter and those in her adoption constellation as a reminder of the need to have a revised birth certificate. It is a symbol of their divergence from biological kinship and a reminder of how their adoption papers are secondary to the originals—despite the fact they hold no legal power over any of the participants.

Given the way that the mothers wrestle with the existence of "adoption papers" and have to acknowledge that the signing of adoption papers represents both their motherhood and non-motherhood, the Birth Mother as a mother who signed away the Daughter and the Adoptive Mother knowing that she would not be a mother without them, it is clear that the dossier does matter as it binds and separates them. At the same time, it is a reminder that legal kinship is just easy to severe as it is to build. The Daughter loves her mammy "who bot me oot a shop" even if her "mammy says she's no really ma mammy" (21). The Adoptive Mother evolves from claiming her as "the baby" to "my baby" and "our baby" as the adoption gets completed (16, 19). And the Daughter claims her Adoptive Mother back. In a slightly distorted way, the Adoptive Mother's willingness to name herself as not the real mother to the Daughter demonstrates her own beliefs about the importance of her daughter's first mother as kin. She only evolves on the

192

issue when she comes to understand that "But she says my daughter it matters to her" (24). The

repetition of "She says my real mammy is away far away" by the Daughter demonstrates an

attempt to reify the importance of distinguishing adoptive motherhood from biological

motherhood, but at the same time, the Adoptive Mother diminishes herself through her use of

"real" by casting herself as "no really" her "mammy" (Kay 21). The Daughter's love shows that

perhaps "really mammy" doesn't matter as the Adoptive Mother has clearly built up a sufficient

bond with the child. They are a kin or akin, whether real or not.

The polyvocality of *The Adoption Papers* draws connections between the Daughter and

her Mothers, creating, as John Bruns states in "The Polyphonic Film," a "simultaneity without

unity, multiplicity without completeness" (189). The adoption papers in *The Adoption Papers*

create a semantic order of voices and simultaneity, but at the same time, *The Adoption Papers*

show the poetic emotional bonds that tie them together. Bernard F. Dick's *At the Crossroads of*

Time: Types of Simultaneity in Film and Literature states that simultaneity can create and

intensify irony between two disparate or parallel events (423). The order of voices in the short

section before Part One is particularly notable for its simultaneity, starting with the adoptive

mother, then the adoptee, then the birth mother. First, the adoptive mother's "secret failure" of

infertility, then the daughter's pain of birth through forceps, notably, not followed up by the birth

mother's pain from the doctor's use of forceps but memory from twenty-six years later, looking

back: "she is twenty-six today" (10). The Adoptive Mother's pain is in the past. The Daughter's

is in the present. The Birth Mother is in the future, looking back. She was there when the forceps

were used, and probably felt pain then, but here it is the sharpness of the reminder that she gave

birth and that her child is an adult now and she knows nothing of her life that gives her pain. The

Daughter's physical agony, the Adoptive Mother's shame, and the Birth Mother's sad remembrance are made parallel despite occurring at separate times.

Their emotional investment in each other as mothers and daughter crosses time and space as they are slowly hooked into kinship with each other. The Adoptive Mother takes emotional possession of the Daughter when she first refers to her as "our baby" (17). The Daughter notes the Adoptive Mother's singular devotion to her; even when the Daughter is born sickly and must stay in hospital for weeks, "she would not pick another baby" (10). The Daughter acknowledges her dual identity as "the Daughter" to the Birth Mother and the Adoptive Mother when she goes to the archives official and proclaims, "I'd like my original birth certificate" (12). At the same time, the adoption papers themselves are not claimed by either the Adoptive Mother or the Birth Mother and are always spoken of as a separate entity: "The adoption papers cannot be signed" (Kay 16). It is the Daughter who seeks them out, but for the Adoptive Mother and Birth Mother, they are ephemeral, haunting them in their motherhoods.

In *The Adoption Papers* polyvocality and simultaneity reveal that the very heart of adoption is a reliance on the semantic meanings of family, kinship, and friendship while at the same time adoption and its affirmation relies entirely on the poetic meanings of family, kinship, and friendship. Adoptees are reliant on their papers to confirm that their existence is within the lines of law and cultural understandings of kin. At the same time, they are, as minors, beholden to an adult or adults' willingness to play or perform at kin with them. This is why Kay's imaginative conjuring of her mothers, mixing their voices—or her feeling of their voices through her —into her poetry is so important. Adopteehood is lonely. Adoptees are the claimed, not the orphaned. And yet, as links between kins, they do stand alone. Imagined polyphony and simultaneity make Kay as poet adoptee less alone. She expands her kin through an embrace of

empathy. At the same time, notably, as the primary voice, it is the Daughter who shares in the

mothers' pain of relinquishment and infertility, but they do not share in hers. Bahs states of the

isolation,

> On its own… Birth Mother's speech would become a monologue on the slowness of time
>
> and the quickness of one moment. The theme of this is unremarkable on its own, yet
>
> Birth Mother's speech, set above and below the text of Adoptive Mother's speech, allows
>
> the voices to be interlinked to highlight their similarities and differences. Kay uses this
>
> weaving, along with the repetition of imagery and diction to create a contrast between the
>
> speakers. (104)

Through imagining and giving life to her adoptive and first mother, the Daughter blurs the

boundaries between her and her mothers. The Daughter says, "We all have our contradictions, /

the ones with the mother's nose and the father's eyes / have them / the blood does not bind

confusion, / yet I confess to my contradiction / I want to know my blood" (Kay 29). In "Fluid

Identity of the Daughter in Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*" Gamal Elgezeery states, "Jackie

Kay in her *The Adoption Papers* (1991), tends to adopt hybridity and fluidity as the main

markers of identity in a trans-cultural community" (125). Elgezeery defines fluidity as meaning

"that the various aspects of identity may have no clear-cut boundaries among them, because

identity is subject to change, modification, reinvention, and even questioning" (125). Noticeably,

it is the voice of the adoptee, the daughter, which is the least dynamic as a voice bridging the two

mother voices. It is the Adoptive Mother who proclaims the first negative, the first rejection of

connection through "*I'm not your real mother*" (21). And it is the Daughter, in Part Two, still a

child, who responds and repeats, as a refrain, "I love my mammy whether she's real or no,"

mentally rejecting her mother's definition of what a "real mammy" is (21). And while it seems

that she may be moving away from her Adoptive Mother's love in the concluding chapter, her mother's voice returns to acknowledge the physical similarities between the Daughter and Birth Mother and says, "we're on the wavelength so we are" (Kay 34).

Kay uses polyphony and polyvocality to explore the intersections of adoption, the imaginative space of the mother, the fluidity of empathy and love across kin. Throughout *The Adoption Papers*, Kay's three voices move towards a polyvocal kinship, a kinship of many voices, melodic and discordant, a dialogue ongoing with voices drifting in and out of the center, looking inward to ponder their relationship with the other mother and the daughter. By "The Meeting Dream" they are interacting, looking at each other, commenting on similar features ("she's your double she really is") and how "we are not as we imagined" (Kay 32). Kay notes that the expansive kinship of adoptees, of the connections and unexpected familial bonds created, can be quite strong. When her first mother died, it was Kay's adoptive mother who was the most deeply upset. According to Kay, she "felt an adoptive mother's debt of gratitude" and told "the district nurse called to give her insulin… 'My daughter's mother has died'." At the same time, Kay acknowledges that what is imagined in *The Adoption Papers* is the creation of an imaginative harmonious polyphonic kinship in her head, saying, "When you're adopted and you trace your original parents, those two worlds start to collide. I remember feeling a strange grief when I found my real birth mother. I grieved for the one I had made up, who had been in my imagination all along" ("'I felt a strange grief when I found my birth mother': Jackie Kay on *The Adoption Papers*").

In "Semantic and Poetic Meaning" Burke argues that semantic and poetic meanings do not necessarily have to be in opposition, with semantic being the anesthetic and poetic being the aesthetic, but that they become opposites under dialectical pressure. For Burke, semantic and

196

poetic meanings overlap heavily (146). Semantic meanings may only give the impression of having suppressed or denied attitudes and emotional sides to give the impression of neutrality or truth. Burke also notes that semantic and poetic meaning can change over time and that poetic meaning—while it may not be as truthful or exact—can yield greater understanding and usefulness (146). Kay conjured up her mothers in *The Adoption Papers*. Adoption poetry, sentimental and melancholic at times, highly personalized and yet constructed in a way to reflect and build a common adopted experience for others to draw on, uses Burkean semantic and poetic meaning in its wordplay and design to explore the flexibility and inflexibility of adoption in creating and breaking kin.

 The Adoption Papers ends with the Daughter musing on "adoption papers" again. In his 2016 monograph *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption*, John McLeod states that origin searches do not promise "complete personhood through the identification of biogenetic ancestry" and that adoptive beings are a "distinct and trans-figurative rendering of transcultural adoption's possibilities as it emerges across a range of texts" (36, 4). The lack of closure is the point. Instead of dwelling on the semantic meanings of the original birth certificate that led her to her mother's sister, the Daughter muses on the prospect of her Birth Mother writing her a letter and fantasizes about "the colour of her paper / or whether she'll underline First Class / or have a large circle over he 'I's'" (Kay 34). The fixation has gone from names and legal titles to the type of paper and the handwriting, the possibility of a relationship with her Birth Mother beyond just the adoption papers that bind them.

Conclusion

  This dissertation began with the assertion that despite the existence of myriad intimacies, biological kinship is the dominant—and dominating—criterion by which all other intimacies are measured even when expressing an association stronger than consanguinity. Hence, modern plenary adoption was set up in the shadow of biological kinship. Those with a vested interest in the success and normalization of adoption built prescriptive adoption languages to assert control over discourse that presented adoption as inferior. However, those prescriptive suggestions still stand in the shadow of biological kinship's discursive power, creating an imagined world, a rhetorical Ghost Kingdom of "unresolved grief, loss, and trauma" made even more challenging by the tendency of prescriptive languages such as Positive Adoption Language and Accurate Adoption Language to portray adoption as a single legal event in the lives of its participants, not a continuing life experience (71). Time, then, is contested territory. It is an impossible situation that those in the adoption constellation and adoption narratives such as the films *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, the comics *Superman: American Alien* and *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, and the poetry collection *The Adoption Papers* have used techniques of simultaneity to wrestle with, to varying degrees of resolution.

  Within the discourse of adoption, there is disagreement about the significance of time and its effect on kinship bonds. This dissertation opened with a reference to the earliest known adoption law, line 185 from the Code of Hammurabi, "*šumma awīlum ṣeḫram ina mêšu ana mārūtim ilqē-ma urtabbīšu, tarbītum šī ul ibbaqqar*/If a man adopted a baby at birth and has raised it, that offspring will not be reclaimed" (Huehnergard 129). Elsewhere in the Code of Hammurabi, they note that to claim a child as one's own, one did so by "pronouncing a solemn

198

formula of words[57]" thus "adoption created in law an exact replica of the status of natural son (Westbrook 145). Even within the earliest known adoption law, adoption is both a singular legal pact made and an ongoing lived experience in which evidence of nurture and familial exchange is a part of proving an adoption kinship for matters of good citizenship and inheritance. Prescriptive adoption languages such as PAL and AAL that arose in the mid- to late twentieth century frame adoption as a single momentary life event of family making—and family unmaking, something done once and then no longer pertinent to the members of the adoption constellation. However, even in texts about adoption not penned by adoptees, adoption's long effects are seen. Far from just an anesthetic legal process completed at the sound of a gavel, adoption is really an ongoing experience that profoundly hooks adoptees and their kins into each other's lives forever. As Pamela Fox states in "The 'Telling Part': Reimagining Racial Recognition in Jackie Kay's Adoptee Search Narratives," adoption is a "non(coda)": it may appear to bring a kinship tie to an end but does not (292). Even without a search and reunion, an adoptee in the family brings a hinge of adoption, a root reaching out to another tree, permanently into the adoptive family tree.

In *The Adoption Papers* Kay reveals that for everyone involved, there is a continuous negotiation and navigation of what kinship means. In *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, simultaneity conveys the anguish of the adoptee as he conducts search but also the flexion of time and memory for parties involved in adoption. Saroo's dead relatives stay alive in his memories. Memories cross over with the present. Objects such as jalebis and a train station water tower carry meaning that he must unpack. Time away from his first family and adoption did not

---

[57] As a marriage vow, pronouncing "You are my son/daughter" before witnesses (Code of Hammurabi, 170-171)

fix Saroo's life, although, of course, they gave him security and "a family" as promised by the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (1989) and the Hague Convention. In a legal sense, they resolved the crisis that was Saroo by adopting him out to "a" family in Australia. But they did not resolve *him*: reuniting with his community and family, finding his voice, and solving the mystery does. For his part, Po is haunted by the specter of his mother's sacrifice; in this sense he is in thrall to his imagination. His resurrection comes from his ascendency to Dragon Warrior, which he cannot accomplish alone. He must be given qi from his panda and Valley of Peace communities, with whom he has built strong emotional ties as their waiter and protector across three films, and must be reknit into his panda community, which loves and accepts him despite his non-panda habits (*Kung Fu Panda 3*). The emphasis here is on duration, the inverse of simultaneity.

In *The Adoption Papers*, it is the act of imagining the voices of her mothers that helps the Daughter come to a position not of closure but of contentment with her position as the daughter who links the two, with a vastly different relationship with each mother. While search and reunion may not be inevitable, adoption is an unending mystery involving our closest bonds and our most intimate feelings. Greenway notes in "The Hierarchy of Motherhood in Adoption: Literary Narratives of Kinship, Maternal Desire, and Precarity" that "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" (121). As her birth mother is absent and her adoptive mother quite guarded, the narrator, an adoptee, uses polyvocality, the representation of the Birth Mother, the Adoptive Mother, and the Daughter in poetry, to create a polyphonic experience of adoption, three voices in one, in a harmonious and discordant experience playing with the anesthetic and emotional meanings of "adoption papers"

in these women's lives. Through Kay's work, the audience participates in an adoption experience that is polyvocal, complicated, evolving across time but at the same time collapsing time to meet different voices as they intersect emotionally. In this version of simultaneity, Kay presents us with voices that mature while also holding onto painful memories of youths, with the adoptee, the Daughter acting as the axis on which those voices turn in the adoption constellation.

On the topic of writing about adoption and being an adoptee, Kay states in an interview with Nancy K. Gish,

> I think of identity as being a very fluid thing, and my own identity as being very fluid, as something that changes with culture and with time and with perspective. I think of it as being not at all static and not at all fixed. And 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. Sometimes we don't even know about it. The past is unknown to them, adopted people; the past is 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. You could just go on and on and on. As I do. I mean I don't stop writing about adoption because I just find it an interesting subject to write about. (174)

Biological kinship as a touchstone for intimacy may be inescapable. But *Lion*, the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, *Superman: American Alien*, and *Loki: Agent of Asgard* offer avenues of defiance. In Landis's *Superman: American Alien* and Ewing's *Loki: Agent of Asgard* the adoptee protagonists sort through their feelings about identity and loyalty regarding their adoptive cultures. Superman freely chooses to declare himself for Earth, his adoptive planet, and seems overall satisfied with his decision even though it leaves him in an awkward position. In contrast,

Loki leaves his Asgardian community entirely behind. While adoptees cross frontiers of kinship, race, and nation, to be re-kinned into another kinship, they never really leave biological kin behind, but they also create opportunities for new frontiers that expand our collective vision of family and kin and in some cases can, like Loki, leave all kin behind entirely. And yet even in Loki's case, due to the nature of comic books, he does eventually return to his Asgardian brother, Thor, in his time of crisis. Adoption truly is a non-coda.

Alongside time and imagination, a recurring theme throughout my analysis of prescriptive adoption languages, the films *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, *Superman: American Alien*, and *Loki: Agent of Asgard* is voice: control over the discourse, the words, the very thoughts in the minds of others before a single utterance. Whether it is social worker Marietta Spencer declaring the end of "real" in kinship discourse or the evil adoptee Loki declaring he is no longer the God of Lies but the God of Stories, where voice and its power lie is an ongoing debate in the field of critical adoption studies. In *Lion* and the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, some measure of control or at least, control of perspective is created by framing key moments in the adoptees' lives from their perspective, suggesting that it is for them to speak about their lives. When Saroo meets the Brierleys for the first time, they are unveiled from his perspective with Swamina pronouncing them as "your mum and dad," reversing the proclamation usually given of the parent declaring a child as their own (*Lion*). When Po remembers being put on the vegetable cart, the vision is seen entirely through his eyes, with his little panda arms reaching in from the edge of frame to grasp his mother's paw one last time (*Kung Fu Panda 2*). In *Superman: American Alien*, Clark is a powerful person in search of a purpose as someone living in between worlds. It is when he declares himself as "from Kansas" and thus devoted to the protection of Earth that he solidifies himself as Superman. For Loki, it

takes thousands of years, but he finally escapes his adoptive community's grip and sets out on

his own to forge a new path free of the "story" they built that requires him to be a villain for their

salvation. Being adopted is portrayed as both a solitary emotional experience but also one that,

through adoption, is not meant to be.

It is through recognizing that adoption has profound and long-term emotional effects, not

all positive, but manageable with empathy and community, that these adoptees find resolution.

Saroo and Po seek out support from their adoptive family and community and having received it,

pass out of the Ghost Kingdom. In "Epistemological Binds and Ethical Dilemmas in Frontline

Child Welfare Practice" Melissa Hardesty states, "The dilemmas [of child welfare] might be best

resolved not by substantively changing the specific interventions and tools commonly used in

child welfare today but by rejecting the premise that disembodied objectivity is an epistemic

virtue and recognizing that people and values underlie all forms of evaluation" (494-495).

Adoption is a lonely and communal experience but one that, like Kay in *The Adoption Papers*

shows, lies on the adoptee as the axis, with polyvocality as a radical means of empathy making.

Modern plenary adoption continues as a popular means of dealing with unparented and

unkinned minor children. According to the US Children's Bureau's latest statistics, domestic

adoptions have fallen since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020 from a historic FY2019 high

of 66,200 adoptions, but "there is no way to confirm the reasons for the shifts" (*Trends in Foster*

Care and Adoption: FY 2012-2021). At the same time—despite briefly falling in 2005 and

creating a small panic—global intercountry adoptions have increased, "confounding predictions

from the early 1990s that [intercountry adoption] was a phenomenon that had peaked" (Selman

223). At the same time, adoptees do not remain children forever. Like the coming-of-age stories

analyzed in this dissertation, the adoptees of the post-WWII booms and scoops have all grown

up. The adoptees of the Chinese and Korean adoption booms of the 1980s and the 1990s are well into adulthood. Their kin are aging, but they are still managing to find each other with new search methods such as DNA databases and Hague-mandated post adoption services. They are writing. They are talking. They are publishing books[58] and making films. Adoption may someday not be with us, or it may someday not be the dominant solution to unparented children. McLeod states in *Life Lines* of the future of adoption studies, "It may require scholars of adoption and culture to be aware, too, of not only the very many historical and cultural contexts of adoption practices but also how imaginative representations of adoption possess something akin to the vital postcolonial propensity to dare to imagine a progressive futurity emerging from the heartaches of the past" (226). As time goes on, maybe we will change our minds about adoption. This dissertation examines techniques and tropes used in existing lexicons that expand the lexicon of kinship by affirming the dominance of biological kinship in descriptions of intimacy while also troubling its essentialist roots. In the texts analyzed here, adoptee protagonists and antagonists complicate and develop the definition of kinship, family, and community, blurring the poetic and the semantic meanings of kinship, finding their voices by reimagining time itself.

---

[58] See Karen Pickell's *Adoptee Reading: Books Written & Recommended by Adoptees* online database.

Works Cited

Bahs, Elizabeth. *On the Threshold: The Polyphonic Poetry Sequence*. 2017. Royal Holloway,

    University of London. PhD dissertation.

Bruns, John. "The Polyphonic Film." *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2,

    2008, pp. 189-212.

Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Vintage Books, 1957.

Callahan, Cynthia. *Kin of Another Kind: Transracial Adoption in American Literature*.

    University of Michigan Press, 2011.

Dick, Bernard F. "At the Crossroads of Time: Types of Simultaneity in Literature and Film." *The*

    Georgia Review, vol. 33, no. 2, 1979, pp. 423-432.

Elgezeery, Gamal. "Fluid Identity of the Daughter in Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*."

    International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature, vol. 4, no. 4, July

    2015, pp. 125-136.

Ewing, Al. *Loki: Agent of Asgard: The Complete Collection*. Marvel Entertainment LLC, 2021.

Gish, Nancy K. "Adoption, Identity, and Voice: Jackie Kay's Inventions of Self." Ed by

    Marianne Novy, *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture*, 2011.

Hague Conference on Private International Law. Hague Convention on Protection of Children

    and Co-Operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. 29 May 1993. The Hague

    Conference on Private International Law (HCCH).

    https://www.hcch.net/en/instruments/conventions/full-text/?cid=69

Hansard, Thomas Curson. *Typographia, an Historical Sketch of the Origin and Progress of the*

    Art of Printing. London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1825.

Hardesty, Melissa. "Epistemological Binds and Ethical Dilemmas in Frontline Child Welfare

    Practice." *Social Service Review*, vol. 89, no. 3, Sept. 2015, pp. 455–98.

Hollinger, Joan Heifetz. "Resisting Challenges to the Rule of Full Faith and Credit for Adoption

    Judgements." *Adoption Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2005, pp. 73-85.

Huehnergard, John. *Key to a Grammar of Akkadian*. Eisenbrauns, 2013.

Kay, Jackie. *The Adoption Papers*. Bloodaxe Books, 1991.

_____. "'I felt a strange grief when I found my birth mother': Jackie Kay on *The Adoption

    Papers*." *The Guardian*, 27 February 2021.

    https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/27/i-felt-a-strange-grief-when-i-found-my-

    birth-mother-jackie-kay-on-the-adoption-papers

Landis, Max. *Superman: American Alien*. DC Entertainment, 2017.

Lifton, Betty Jean. "Ghosts in the Adopted Family." *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, vol. 30, no. 1, Jan.

    2010, pp. 71-79.

Lion. Directed by Garth Davis, performances by Dev Patel, Sunny Pawar, and Nicole Kidman,

    The Weinstein Company, 2016.

Kung Fu Panda. Directed by Mark Osborne and John Stevenson, performances by Jack Black,

    Ian McShane, Angelina Jolie, and Dustin Hoffman. DreamWorks Animation, 2008.

Kung Fu Panda 2. Directed by Jennifer Yuh Nelson, performances by Jack Black, Angelina,

    Jolie, and Jackie Chan. DreamWorks Animation, 2011.

Kung Fu Panda 3. Directed by Jennifer Yuh Nelson and Alessandro Carloni, performances by

    Jack Black, Dustin Hoffman, and Jackie Chan. DreamWorks Animation, 2016.

McKee, Kimberly D. "Reproductive Futurity and the Adoptive Family." *Adoption & Culture*,

    vol. 7, no. 2, 2019, pp. 176-191.

McLeod, John. *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption*. Bloomsbury Press, 2015.

Myers, Jess. "Kinship." *Log*, vol. 48, 2020, pp. 135-139.

Nixon, Cheryl L. The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature: Estate, Blood, and
Body. Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011.

Novy, Marianne. *Reading Adoption: Family and Difference in Fiction and Drama*. University of
Michigan Press, 2005.

Pickell, Karen. *Adoptee Reading: Books Written & Recommended By Adoptees*. 2023. Raising
Voices Publishing. http://adopteereading.com/

Reardon, Jenny, and Kim TallBear. "'Your DNA Is Our History': Genomics, Anthropology, and
the Construction of Whiteness as Property." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 53, sup. 5, April
2012, pp. S233-S245.

Selman, Peter. "Intercountry adoption the new millennium; the 'quiet migration' revisited."
Population Research and Policy Review, vol. 21, 2002, pp. 205-225.

Styles, John. *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital's Textile Tokens, 1740-1770*.
Synergie Group, UK, 2010.

Tam, Keith. *Calligraphic tendencies in the development of sanserif types in the twentieth
century*. University of Reading, 2002. PhD dissertation.

US Children's Bureau. *Trends in Foster Care and Adoption: FY 2012-2012*. 28 June 2022. *U.S.
Department of Health & Human Services*.
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/trends-foster-care-adoption-
2012-2021.pdf

United Nations. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. 20 November 1989. *United Nations*.
https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/crc.pdf

Westbrook, Raymond. "The Adoption Laws of Codex Hammurabi." *Law from the Tigris to the Tiber: The Writings of Raymond Westbrook*, edited by Bruce Wells and F. Rachel Magdalene, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009.

Zapf, Hermann. "I've been asked to tell you about myself and my types." *Linotype*. https://download.linotype.com/free/howtouse/ZapfBiography.pdf

A Comparative Chart of Positive, Accurate, and Honest Adoption Languages

Positive Adoption Language	Accurate Language	Honest Adoption
Birth parent/biological parent	Birthparent/biological parent	Natural parents, mothers, fathers Parents, mothers, fathers
My child	My child	adopted son/daughter
Parent	Parent	adoptive parents, adopters, people who have adopted
Birth child	Birth child	son, daughter, or child natural son, daughter, or child lost son, daughter, or child son, daughter, or child lost to adoption
Terminate parental rights		Surrendered, lost to adoption, taken for adoption

Was adopted	Was adopted	"is adopted"
Make an adoption plan	Make an adoption plan, choose adoption	Adoption transaction
To parent	To parent the baby/child	Raising a child, nurturing a child, caring for a child
Making contact with		Reunion
Waiting child	Child in need of a family	
Birth father, biological father	Child who has special needs	

Positive Adoption Language

From Marietta Spencer's "The Terminology of Adoption" in *Child Welfare* 1979 and

Parents.com and Adoption.com.

Positive Adoption Language	Negative Adoption Language
Birth parent	Real parent
Biological parent	Natural parent
Birth child	Own child
My child	Adopted child, own child
Born to unmarried parents	Illegitimate
Terminate parental rights	Give up
Make an adoption plan	Take away

To parent	To keep
Waiting child	Adoptable child, available child
Birth father, biological father	Begettor (sic)
Making contact with	Reunion
Parent	Adoptive parent
International adoption	Foreign adoption
Adoption triad	Adoption triangle
Permission to sign a release	Disclosure
Search	Track down parents
Child placed for adoption	An unwanted child
Court termination	Child taken away
Child with special needs	Handicapped child
Child from abroad	Foreign child
Was adopted	Is adopted

Accurate Adoption Language

From page 17 of the *Consider the Possibilities Adoption Specialist Handbook*.

Accurate Language	Less Accurate Language
Birthparent/biological parent	Real parent, natural parent
Birth child	Own child, real child, natural child
My child	Adopted child, own child

Person/Individual who was adopted	Adoptee
Born to unmarried parents	Illegitimate
Make an adoption plan, choose adoption	Give away, adopt out, give up, put up
To parent the baby/child	To keep the baby
Child in need of a family	Adoptable child/unwanted child
Parent	Adoptive parent
Child who has special needs	Handicapped child/hard to place
Was adopted	Is adopted
Choosing an adoption plan	Giving away your child
Finding a family to parent your child	Putting your child up for adoption
Parenting the baby/child	Keeping your baby
Confidential adoption	Closed adoption
Unintended pregnancy	Unwanted/problem pregnancy
Fully disclosed adoption	Open adoption
Semi-open adoption	Open adoption

Honest Adoption Language

From *Origins Canada*

Adoption Industry	Honest Adoption	Explanation
"birthparents"	Natural parents, mothers, fathers	The mother-child relationship does not end at birth. As well, "birth-

		terms" dehumanize mothers into being walking incubators whose purpose is solely reproductive
	Parents, mothers, fathers	
"parents" (when only used referring to people who have adopted that child)	adoptive parents, adopters, people who have adopted	An adoptee has at least 4 parents: two natural parents and 2 adoptive parents, and often step-parents as well.
"placed for adoption" "relinquished"	Surrendered, lost to adoption, taken for adoption	A mother seldom chooses adoption for her child – financial, emotional and/or social coercion often play a role – as well as professionals intentionally withholding information from her so she is unable to make an informed decision. See our articles on Adoption Coercion
"birthson" "birthdaughter" "birthchild"	son, daughter, or child natural son, daughter, or child lost son, daughter, or child son, daughter, or child lost to adoption	Children are not "products." We may refer to our lost children as our sons and daughters, even though others may have taken them and raised them, our spiritual/emotional/psychological

		bond with them endures past years and even decades of separation.
son/daughter/child (when in reference to only the adoptive family)	adopted son/daughter	For media and other third-person references, the industry wants all mention of "adopted" removed from newspaper articles. This presents a false picture that the adoptee was born to adoptees.
"was adopted"	"is adopted"	Unless a person who was adopted as a child has terminated his or her adoption, or has been adopted-back by his or her natural parents, he or she is still legally adopted. However, the decision on terminology must remain with the adopted person themselves.
"adoption triad" "adoption triangle"	Adoption transaction	There are no triads, mosaics, circles, or constellations of adoption. These constructs exist only to dilute voice, and to falsely equate the lived experiences of those individuals marginalized in adoption transactions to those of the adoption 'status quo.' This term

		renders invisible the power dynamics involved in adoption and seeks to equalize the parties.
Parented	Raised	"parented" implies that the only parents a child has is those who are raising them.
Parenting a child	Raising a child, nurturing a child, caring for a child	"parenting" is much more than raising a child, it is also an emotional/psychological/spiritual bond that comes from pregnancy, birth, genetics, and a clan bond coming from millions of years of evolution.
"meeting" "making contact"	reunion	