

# The Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture

SUMMER 2008

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newsletter from the  
Dept. of English,  
University of Pittsburgh  
and Dept. of English,  
Rutgers—Camden

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## Report on Adoption and Culture Conference: Encountering New Worlds of Adoption

Our second International Conference on Adoption and Culture: Encountering New Worlds of Adoption, took place at the University of Pittsburgh October 11, 12, 13 and 14, 2007. This conference featured over 80 speakers from various disciplines, including keynotes Susan Bordo, Emily Prager and Dorothy Roberts, and filmmakers Phil Bertelsen and Jean Strauss. Other speakers included literary critics, writers, anthropologists, philosophers, historians, sociologists, legal theorists, psychologists, filmmakers and activists. Speakers came from Spain, Norway, China, Russia, England, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada as well as from Maine to California and many of the United States between. Convened by Marianne Novy, the conference explored the various representations, practices, histories, meanings and experiences of adoption. Attendance at each keynote was well over 100, and close to 300 people attended at least one session. Co-sponsors included many units at Pitt and four other local universities, Carnegie-Mellon, Carlow, Chatham, and Duquesne. Other sponsors included the Barcelona (Spain) Institute for Childhood and the Urban World, University of Alberta (Canada) Faculty of Arts, and Rutgers University-Camden, College of Arts and Sciences.

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## MLA Special Session: *Strained Relations:* *(Narrative) Conflict in the Literature of Adoption*

By Emily Hipchen

The MLA special session sponsored by the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture will have the topic "Strained Relations: (Narrative) Conflict in the Literature of Adoption" and will take place from 7:15 to 8:30 pm in the Hilton San Francisco.

**ASAC's annual meeting will be held from 7:00 to 7:15 pm in the Hilton San Francisco before the Special Session.**

The three papers are "The Happy-Ending Myth: *Juno* and the Idealization of Adoption," by Janet Mason Ellerby, University of North Carolina-Wilmington, "Reading for Adoption in Disability Life Writing: Adam Dorris and *The Broken Cord*," by Emily Hipchen, State University of West Georgia, and "Searching for Koreatown: Afro-Asian Adoption in *A Gesture Life* and *Country of Origin*," by Jenny Wills, of Wilfrid Laurier University. Marianne Novy of the University of Pittsburgh will preside.

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# Adoption and Culture Conference continued

## Brief Comments:

*The conference was really wonderful...this combination of scholarship and activism...is my idea of what engaged academic life should be like.*

Molly Shanley, Professor of Political Science, Vassar

*A fantastic conference last week. It was an especially enjoyable and enlightening gathering of individuals in a most congenial setting. The conference seemed perfectly designed to move participants toward new perspectives in their work and new understandings of their own and others' experience.*

Bill Fitzgerald, Assistant Professor of English, Rutgers University, Camden

*A truly lovely and enlightening experience. Hopefully I can bring back some of the new insight to my own field of medicine/psychiatry!* Sonya Martin, psychiatrist, Columbia University

*It was really a great experience to hear so much new and exciting work in so many disciplines. Very stimulating and a real pleasure.* Toby Volkman, anthropologist



Susan Bordo, Craig Hickman, Emily Hipchen



Lorraine Dusky, Jean Strauss, Emily Hipchen,  
Carol Schaefer

Photo credit: Marley Greiner

*[I] consider the weekend to be utterly transformative. I came away from the conference incredibly stimulated and confident that I am meant to do work in this field and contribute an active voice to the discussion. [I am] currently applying to law school and hope to pursue a legal education with a focus on adoption and legal/social constructions of family.* Kate Livingston, grad student

## Comments from Activist Writers on the Web:

From Marley Greiner, [bastardette.blogspot.com/2007/10/asaik-adoption-rr/](http://bastardette.blogspot.com/2007/10/asaik-adoption-rr/)

The ASAIK conference is Bastardette's absolutely favorite adoption conference. The event 2 years ago in Tampa was fun (yes academics can be--and do--have fun!) and crucial to my understanding of the warp and woof of adoption politics beyond hum-drum "activism." Literature, art, rhetorical constructions, history, cultural studies, and philosophy give an authentic voice to adoption's actors. They expose the profound problems of identity loss, state-built identity, psychological repression, and otherness--illogics that go far beyond adoption industry manipulation and power politics, and into the very heart of what makes adoption absurd. Daniel Deronda is not far removed from sealed records: "How could you choose my birthright for me?"

Today's first session, "Memoirs, Classic and New," was a bang-up with authors Lorraine Dusky, Jean Strauss, Carol Schaefer and Emily Hipchen discussing their adoption experience, the process of memoir writing, and reading excerpts from their books. . . . Birthmother Dusky remembered that the reaction to her 1979 memoir Birthmark was "how dare she?" Although she was an

## continued

established journalist, and editor, MSM [mainstream media] refused to publicize the book. Adoptee Jean Strauss, also an established author and script writer, ended up self-publishing her memoir Beneath a Tall Tree after years of being told the topic was too controversial. "20 years ago you were not supposed to think about where you came from." She reflects that adoption loss is a universal loss to which those who have lost loved ones in other ways can connect.

## Our New Name

At the business meeting at the October conference, we voted to change our name from the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity, and Kinship to the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture.

This new name better suggests several distinctive aspects about our organization, among other groups promoting adoption research, which are usually based in the social sciences or social work. We started with members professionally involved with literature and we include people in other fields in the humanities, as well as social sciences and professional fields, and activists with cultural interests. We also involve creative writers and filmmakers. Furthermore, we are not only interested in what adoption does to individuals' identities but also to its relations with the larger culture and cultures.

Birthmother Carol Schaefer believes that books are a journey and "the way to heal is through memory." She, too, was an established writer, but her journey into healing, The Other Mother, published in 2001 (later turned into a film) began as a handwritten journal of memory after being reunited with her son. During early literary networking efforts she was discouraged from finishing the project: the book would never be published, you'll never hear back from an agent; the check will never arrive in the mail.

Adoptee Emily Hipchen also started her memoir, Coming Apart Together: Fragments from an Adoption, as a secret handwritten journal she kept hidden in her office. Like Schaefer, she believes that the handwritten word lets the writer "own" the story without interference from others. . . .

Dusky, Strauss, Schaefer, and Hipchen are some of the best adoption memoirists you will ever read. They combine riveting personal narrative with uncompromising arguments against theft of identity via adoption. I also recommend highly Craig Hickman's stunning memoir, Fumbling Towards Divinity: The Adoption Scriptures about growing up adopted, queer, and black. . . and so much more.

**From Craig Hickman, <http://craighickman.blogspot.com/2007/10/putting-it-all-together-in-pittsburgh.html>:**

The best conference on adoption I've attended since becoming aware of such things in 2003. The session on Men Write Adoption Memoirs was held on Friday afternoon. Chaired by Faith Adiele, a 1986 Harvard graduate who also happened to be a friend of my best friend Gail, the session

was packed. Faith dubbed it "the man show" as women made up the vast majority of conference attendees. She got a laugh. As did all the readers, prompting Jean Strauss, who presented on the opening plenary panel Adoption Memoirs Classic and New, to ask us whether or not we consciously infused our narratives with humor.

"What struck me," she said, "was that you all say the same things we [women] say, but you make it funny." . . . Ralph Savarese, Peter McCullough, Ned Balbo, and I responded that whatever effort there was to infuse our work with humor was largely unintentional. Peter, an academic writer who read from a manuscript-in-progress, said that he used humor to tell his personal story because he wanted to make space for an audience he

*(continued on page 10)*

didn't think would be all that interested in the solipsism of autobiographical writing. Still, I think his delivery is what garnered most of the laughs. Having taught at Oxford for some time now, his acquired British accent and wit made many of his metaphors even more funny than they might have been on paper alone. Ralph dismissed with the "conceit of remembered dialogue" and read primarily from his 9-year-old autistic son's own words that his son had typed on his computer. Ralph was able to infuse humor into a story of torture and redemption. No small task. Ned read with the quiet deliberation of a literary poet, but still managed to draw a few laughs. I've never considered myself funny. But bringing the characters of my life to life in a way that I hadn't in a long time got lots of laughs. My *people* are hilarious. What with all their downright uptight religious dogma. At some point you just can't take it all so seriously...

I hope to attend the 3rd International Conference on Adoption and Culture whenever, wherever it may be.

### **From Mary Anne Cohen, for the Concerned United Birthmothers list:**

Presentations...were diverse and covered a wide variety of topics, including the Hawaiian concept of *Hana'i*, a kind of tribal open adoption practiced for centuries there, and new perspectives on foster care and foster parents that were eye-opening and in some cases heartbreaking. Especially memorable was Dorothy Roberts who presented the perspective of the African-American community on child care issues, and how our government fails these children and families. She is the author of [Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare](#) which I hope to buy and read.

I...attended a very interesting panel on adoptive parent language that included a discussion of how many adoptive parents say and believe that they were "fated" to get a particular child. I put in my two cents as a birthmother on how repugnant this concept was, considering that the adoptive parents' good fortune or fate was predicated on the suffering and loss of the birthparents. Happily nobody there was pushing the "fate" idea and everyone, adoptive moms included, gagged at Rosie's "wrong tummy" story.

The films, memoirs, and poetry session, the one I was included in as a presenter, was excellent. Jean Strauss showed two short films, "Vital Records," about open records where her camera made NCFCA's Tom Atwood look like a very stuffed shirt, and "The Triumvirate," the amazing story of Jean, her Mom, and grandma, three generations of adoptees, reunited by Jean, and all together in a magical film. There were some wonderful adoptee poets, and birthmother and filmmaker Sheila Ganz read from her new prose memoir while I read some old and new poems.

There was so much more, and I learned a lot about international and transracial adoption and the feelings of adoptees in those situations, and met some adoptive mothers trying to make things better as well as some very cool Korean adoptees. Also I met some great adoptive mothers from my generation with grown Korean kids who have been working for years towards openness and honesty in adoption...

A wonderful film by mixed race adoptee Philip Bertelsen called "Outside Looking In" painted a poignant picture of a black child in the 70s growing up in a white family and I had some nice discussions with a younger lesbian adoptive mother of two African American babies.

Sometimes I felt outnumbered or out of place, but most of the time was comfortable to be part of a greater whole in dialogue with others, no matter what their viewpoint. At times it was all TOO Academic and floating above the floor, where real life was happening, but then a new speaker or idea would bring things back to the real world of blood, laughs, and tears again. It was exhilarating to be surrounded by so many bright, talented people, and to see different views of living with adoption and trying to express what that means.

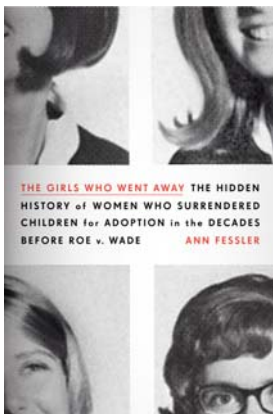


## Pittsburgh Adoption Consortium Hosts Ann Fessler, Jackie Kay

Photo credit: Jeff Barnett-Winsby



Ann Fessler



Pub. Penguin Press, 2006

The new Pittsburgh Consortium for Adoption Studies announces that its first official event will be a talk and film presentation by Ann Fessler, author of [The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of the Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe V. Wade](#) and professor at Rhode Island School of Design. Ann will speak at the University of Pittsburgh, in Frick Fine Arts Auditorium, at 8 pm on Monday, September 22, and will show her film in progress on the historical context of her book. A reception will follow.

The Pittsburgh Consortium for Adoption Studies is a group of scholars and writers in the Pittsburgh area

who want to advance the understanding of adoption in both academic and nonacademic settings. Sponsorship for the events of 2008 so far includes the School of Arts and Sciences, the Women's Studies Program, the Literature and Writing Programs of the English Department, and the Department of Anthropology, at the University of Pittsburgh, McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts, English, and Women's and Gender Studies at Duquesne University, Women's Studies, Creative Writing and Madwomen in the Attic at Carlow University, and the Department of English, the Center for Applied Ethics and Public Policy, and CMU Allies at Carnegie Mellon University.

Also scheduled for the fall is a Pittsburgh visit in November by Scottish-Nigerian adoptee Jackie Kay, author of the prize-winning book of poems, [The Adoption Papers](#), in which she imagines the thoughts of an adoptee, a birth mother, and an adoptive mother. She has continued to win awards for her writing: her collection of short stories, [Wish I Was Here](#), made her the British Book Awards Decibel 2007 Writer of the Year, "the African, Asian or Caribbean writer judged to have made the greatest contribution towards, or to have the most significant impact on, literature during the past year." She will read [The Adoption Papers](#) and later poetry at Duquesne University in the Power Center Ballroom at 7 pm on Monday, November 17, and read poetry and fiction in 501 Cathedral of Learning on the Pitt campus on November 18 at 8:30 pm.



Jackie Kay

Photo credit: Denise Else

A panel on gay and lesbian adoptive parents, October 1, will begin with the film [Daddy and Papa](#), and follow with responses by gay and lesbian Carnegie Mellon faculty and staff members who have adopted, including Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Humanities and Social Sciences, Kristina Straub. It will be held at 4:30 pm in the Danforth Room of University Center on the CMU campus. An event at CMU with anthropologist Toby Volkman, editor of [Cultures of International Adoption](#), is being planned for the spring. For more information about any of these events, contact Marianne Novy, [mnovy@pitt.edu](mailto:mnovy@pitt.edu).

For people coming to the Ann Fessler event from out of town, there will be rooms available at the reduced rate of \$114 a night at the Holiday Inn Select University Center, if booked by September 2. Call 412-682-6200 or 1-800-HOLIDAY. Similar arrangements may be made for Jackie Kay's events if interest seems to warrant.

This session addresses the tensions arising from the existence of conflicting narratives of adoption. Many of these are cultural myths, as Janet Ellerby's paper argues, as the myth of the martyr-birthmother in the film Juno simplifies the emotional complexities of adoption. Some stories go unheard because they're de-emphasized, as in "The Story of Adam Dorris" in The Broken Cord, a text widely read as "only" about fetal alcohol syndrome and the damage it does to Native American children. Read as an adoption narrative, it insists on its protagonist's autonomy. Some accounts exclude whole groups of racialized Others, the mixed and the indefinable, lumping every adoption from Korea, for example, as the adoption of a pure-race Asian who can be understood to embody the familiar story of rescue and redemption. What happens when the adoptee is Afro-Asian, the product of the Korean conflict, for instance? How is that racial, adoptive body accounted for—or not—in the stories we tell of adoption? How can we read the tensions between the cover stories and the ones that complicate them?

Janet Ellerby's essay, "The Happy-Ending Myth: Juno and the Idealization of Adoption," demythologizes the idealized narrative of adoption in last year's Oscar-award winning film Juno, focusing especially on its embedded endorsement of closed adoptions as "happy-endings" for birthmothers. Ellerby argues that the protagonist's unthinking generosity exemplifies an acclimatizing to a culture that automatically approves of relinquishment as a prudent, morally upright, and unselfish answer to unplanned pregnancy. In casting Juno's story as a fairy tale, Diablo Cody and Jason Reitman represent the adoption as the most responsible, best option for all concerned. In doing so, they ignore another, conflicting set of narratives—music, memoirs, films, novels, and oral histories that detail many birthmothers' anguish after relinquishment—that are equally part of the "unplanned pregnancy zeitgeist" (Cody on "Fresh Air"), but hidden by the two men's choice of stories. Reitman and Cody reject the extensive collection of stories that refute the one that the film presents with its happy-ending and consequence-free relinquishment. Juno tells teenage mothers only one cultural story—"If you love your child you must give it up, move on with your life, and forget"—the one in conflict with birthmothers' reports of their own experiences, as shown in Ann Fessler's The Girls Who Went Away.

Emily Hipchen's "Reading for Adoption in Disability Life Writing: Adam Dorris and The Broken Cord" opens Michael Dorris's book to examination as an adoption memoir. Scholars currently represent it as a story of a disabled Native American, not an adoptee. The adoption narrative embedded in The Broken Cord (1989) is submerged in the narrative of the historical and biological meanings of Adam's disease. Hipchen reads Adam instead as an adoptee writing adoption autobiography in "The Adam Dorris Story"—an essay appended to the main text of his life as written by Michael—first to point out the ways in which "The Adam Dorris Story" belongs in the genre of adoption life writing, then to discuss the conflict created by the repression of the text's adoption narrative. Reading "The Adam Dorris Story" as adoption life writing in the context of The Broken Cord ultimately complicates the ethics of what Tom Couser in Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing (2004) describes as Michael's inability to represent Adam as an autonomous person rather than as an object lesson. Read as an adoption story, Adam's story instead reveals his liberation from his father's narrative.

In her essay, "Searching for Koreatown: Afro-Asian Adoption in A Gesture Life (1999) and Country of Origin (2004)," Jenny Hei Jun Wills addresses fictional representations of Asian adoptees of mixed-race, Afro-Asian ethnicity who are typically overlooked in the now-extensive body of scholarship on transracial adoption. Reading Chang-Rae Lee's A Gesture Life and Don Lee's Country of Origin for conflicting narratives of adoption, Wills demonstrates how Korea's complex colonial past (and present) has confused the "normative" Asian adoption story; how stories about mixed-race children resulting from relations between Korean women and American G.I.s, and the migration of thousands of ethnic Koreans to Japan, collide with cultural ideas about and expectations of stories about Asian adoptees. Obvious complications arise both in terms of transculturality between Japan and Korea, along with the increased racialization of these who are Othered both in North America and Asia by their bi-racial bodies. Colonialism, diaspora, war, and anti-miscegenation complicate the typical narratives of Asian adop-

tion literature, Wills' essay argues, including the return story, narratives of cultural discovery, and the assimilation trope.

**Janet Ellerby** is a Professor of English at the University of North Carolina—Wilmington. She has published numerous essays on contemporary literature and memoir, in particular on adoption memoir. Her first book, *Intimate Reading: The Contemporary Women's Memoir* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2001) focuses on feminist readings of women's memoir; her second, a birth-mother memoir titled *Following the Tambourine Man: A Birthmother's Memoir* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP), was released last year. **Emily Hipchen** has written about adoption life writing, including an essay on ethics in the genre for *Winter Verlag* and several on depictions of incest, the adopted body, and representations of family for meetings of organizations such as The National Women's Studies Association, the International Autobiography and Biography Association and the Modern Language Association. She is co-chair with Marianne Novy of The Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture, and general editor of that society's journal, *Adoption & Culture*, as well as of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, a scholarly journal publishing criticism focused on life writing. Her adoption memoir, *Coming Apart Together: Fragments from an Adoption*, was published in 2005. She is an Assistant Professor at the University of West Georgia. **Jenny Hei Jun Wills** is a scholar of Asian adoption literature in Canada and America and a recipient of a three-year Canada Graduate Scholarship from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council. She's written widely on the subject of transracial adoption, and has won numerous grants and awards to support her research. Her dissertation, entitled *Representations of Asian Adoption in Canadian and American Literature* will focus on conflicted and marginal pictures of Asian adoptees in North American literature. She will complete her doctoral degree at Wilfrid Laurier University in the next two years.

## *Adoption & Culture*

The Interdisciplinary Journal of The Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture Announces its First Issue

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The Logic of Exchange: The Child Welfare League of America, The Adoption Exchange Movement, and the Indian Adoption Project, 1957-1968	KAREN BALCOM
Judging Men: Assessments of Fathers in Canadian Adoption Circles	VERONICA STRONG-BOAG
“Loss is more than sadness”: Reading Dissent in Transracial Adoption Melodrama in <i>The Language of Blood</i> and <i>First Person Plural</i>	KIM PARK NELSON
Disembodied and Free-Floating Bodies Out of Place and Out of Control: Examining the Borderline Existence of Adopted Koreans	TOBIAS HUBINETTE
Finding Oneself: Images of Adoption in Children's Fiction	MARTHA SATZ
Performance and Adoption in Noel Streatfield's Children's Fiction	CLAUDIA NELSON
Circling Adoption: The Art of Ann Fessler	JILL DEANS

Editorial Board: Susan Bordo, English, University of Kentucky; Sally Haslanger, Philosophy, MIT; Emily Hipchen, English, University of West Georgia, editor; Ellen Herman, History, University of Oregon; Margaret Homans, English, Yale University; Marianne Novy, English, University of Pittsburgh, associate editor; Joyce Maguire Pavao, Center For Family Connections; Mary L. Shanley, Political Science, Vassar; Carol Singley, English, Rutgers University, Camden

For a copy of *A&C*, and membership in the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture, send \$20 to Emily Hipchen, Department of English and Philosophy, University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA 30118. For the journal alone, send \$10. You may make the check out to either Emily Hipchen or ASAIK (former acronym for the Alliance). To submit an essay, since essay review is blind, include your name, title of your essay, and contact information (email and land addresses) in your cover letter, but do not include contact information on the essay itself.

Three of NED BALBO's ekphrastic poems appear on-line at Unsplendid (1.3) at [www.unsplendid.com](http://www.unsplendid.com) beside the Nora Sturges paintings that inspired them. (Sturges' work follows the travels of a contemporary Marco Polo to offbeat or imaginary places.) Forthcoming later this year on Unsplendid are two adoption-related poems, and an omnibus poetry review forthcoming in Pleiades will include commentary on David Mason's Ludlow, a verse novel that features an adopted protagonist. Ned and his wife, JANE SATTERFIELD, will be poetry fellows this summer at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

JAN BEATTY's new book of poems, Red Sugar, was published in Spring, 2008 by the University of Pittsburgh Press. Beatty is in a censorship battle with Joseph-Beth Booksellers, who have labeled her work "too explicit" for their "family-friendly" bookstore. (See [www.post-gazette.com/pg/08113/875323-42.stm](http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/08113/875323-42.stm).) Since Beatty's work addresses issues of the trauma of bloodlines, the adopted family, and redefining "family," this objection by a "family-friendly" bookstore remains ironic.

JENNIFER KWON DOBBS received her Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Southern California and was appointed Assistant Professor in the Department of English at St. Olaf College. Her first book, Paper Pavilion, won the White Pine Press Poetry Prize and was published November 2007. Among other fellowships she's received the Notudol/Korea Exposure and Education Program Fellowship (2008) and the Paros New Symposium Fellowship (2008). Her work has been published in The Broadside Series, New York: Center for Book Arts (2007); MiPoesias; and In KoreaAM. She has recently been an active participant in the Association of Asian American Studies 2008 Annual Meeting; and Associated Writing Programs Conference 2008. Lastly her recent readings have been housed at places such as the House of Literature, Paros Greece; The Bowery Poetry Club, New York; Los Angeles Times Book Festival, Los Angeles; and Asian American Writers Workshop/Cave Canem Reading, New York.

JANET ELLERBY's book, Following the Tambourine Man: A Birthmother's Memoir, was published by Syracuse University Press in 2007. The publisher says, "Ellerby crafts a cultural and personal memoir, relating and reflecting on the shifts in adoption culture and the overlooked heartbreak that many birthmothers endure."

SHEILA GANZ has been awarded a grant from the Pacific Pioneer Fund to support her work on Moms Living Clean, a documentary film about six moms who transform their lives in whole-family substance abuse treatment over three years--and the drug policies that make this possible or not.

ELLEN HERMAN's book Kinship by Design: A History of Adoption in the Modern United States will be published in early fall 2008 and will be issued simultaneously in paper and cloth editions. The price for the paperback will be \$25. There is already a brief description available on the University of Chicago Press website, including the table of contents, at [www.press.uchicago.edu](http://www.press.uchicago.edu).

TOBIAS HUBINETTE ([tobias.hubINETTE@mkc.botkyrka.se](mailto:tobias.hubINETTE@mkc.botkyrka.se) and <http://www.tobiashubINETTE.se>) has recently published the following: "Asian bodies out of control" in Rhacel S. Parreñas & Lok C.D. Siu (ed.), Asian diasporas. New conceptions, new frameworks, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, pp. 177-200. "Nationalism, subalternity, and the adopted Koreans," Journal of Women's History no. 1/2007 (vol. 19), pp. 117-122. "Contested adoption narratives in Sweden," The OAK. Global Overseas Adoptees' Link Newsletter Winter/2007 (vol. 9), pp. 82-89. "When racism becomes individualized: Experiences of racialization among adult adoptees in Sweden," Korean Quarterly no. 3/2008 (vol. 11), pp. 15. He also gave two papers at the 1<sup>st</sup> International Korean Adoption Studies Research Symposium, Dongguk University, Seoul, Korea, 2007-07-31: "Bodies out-of-place and out-of-control" and "Representations of international adoption and overseas adoptees in Korean media and popular culture."



HEATHER JACOBSON's book, Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference (Vanderbilt University Press) is coming out in November 2008. This book offers the first comparative analysis of the two most popular international adoption programs into the United States, China and Russia. It focuses on a relatively new social phenomenon, the practice by international adoptive parents, mothers in particular, of incorporating aspects of their children's cultures of origin into their families' lives. Jacobson follows white adoptive mothers as they navigate culture keeping: from their motivations, to the pressures and constraints they face, to the content of their actual practices. Through her interviews, she explores how women think about their children, their families, and themselves as mothers as they labor to construct or resist ethnic identities for their children. The choices these women make about culture, Jacobson argues, offer a window into dominant ideas of race and the "American Family," and into how social differences are conceived and negotiated in the United States. She presented "The Rise of 'Adoption Medicine' and the Management of Health Risk in International Placements," at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (7/31-8/2, Boston, MA).

JESSACA LEINAWEAVER is beginning a position as Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Brown University on July 1st. Her book The Circulation of Children: Kinship, Adoption, and Morality in Andean Peru is forthcoming from Duke in September 2008. In this vivid ethnography she explores "child circulation," informal arrangements in which indigenous Andean children are sent by their parents to live in other households. At first glance, child circulation appears tantamount to child abandonment. When seen in that light, the practice is a violation of international norms regarding children's rights, guidelines that the Peruvian state relies on in regulating legal adoptions. Leinaweaver demonstrates that such an understanding of the practice is simplistic and misleading. Her in-depth ethnographic analysis reveals child circulation to be a meaningful, pragmatic social practice for poor and indigenous Peruvians, a flexible system of kinship that has likely been part of Andean lives for centuries.

ELISHA MARR has a tenure-track appointment at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan as an Assistant Professor of Sociology.

JOYCE MAGUIRE PAVAO did trainings in Dublin, Ireland at Trinity College and University College Dublin. She also presented at the Adoption Ethics & Accountability Conference and CWLA Adoption & Foster Care Conference and organized the Adoption Resource Center Summer Intensive in Provincetown in July. See "Conferences, etc." for the conference she is running in February 2009.

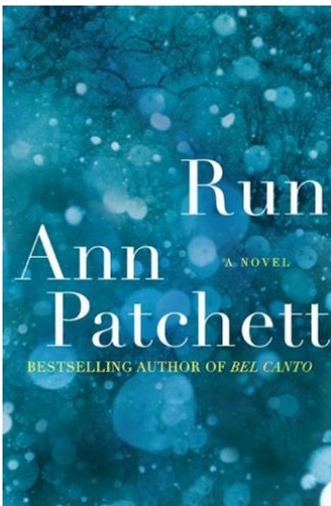
MARIANNE NOVY organized a panel, "Birthmothers: Invisibility to Activism? Or Continued Subordination?" for the NWSA conference in Cincinnati, June 18-23, and gave a paper, "Emily Prager's Feminist Mothering of Her Adopted Chinese Daughter," in the panel on Multicultural Mothering. She spoke at the Shaker Heights General Meeting of Adoption Network Cleveland, the Books for Lunch program at the Wheeling, West Virginia Public Library, and Donna Montalbano's radio program Speaking of Adoption, on 1240 AM in Rhode Island, which streams live on the internet Tuesdays at 2 on [www.onworldwide.com](http://www.onworldwide.com). She also gave a short course "Where Did I Come From: When Adoptees Want to Know" for the Osher (Continuing Education) Program at Carnegie-Mellon University.

ADAM PERTMAN spoke on many occasions about new reports from the Donaldson Institute: "For the Records: Restoring a Right to Adult Adoptees" ([http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2007\\_11\\_for\\_records.php](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2007_11_for_records.php)) and "Finding Families for African American Children: The role of Race & Law In Adoption From Foster Care" ([www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2008\\_05\\_mepa.php](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2008_05_mepa.php)).

MARTHA SATZ published "Trans-Racial Mothering: Double-Edged Privilege" in Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless: Adoption across race, culture and class: Special Issue 17: 1-29 (February, 2008).

## Review of *Run* by Ann Patchett (Harper Collins, 2007)

by Margaret Homans, Yale University



Ann Patchett's novel *Run* presents the dream of U.S. transracial adoption: that poor black children can seamlessly join well-off white families, even Irish Catholic ones in bigoted Boston, and that such adoptions benefit the children, the white parents and siblings, and even the racist world they inhabit. The novel opens with an icon of idealized white femininity, an heirloom statue of the Virgin Mary that closely resembles the beautiful white mother (now dead) and that is traditionally passed down to the daughter who most resembles it. By the end of the novel, the statue has become the property of Kenya, the black daughter whose integration into her new family signifies both her own flourishing and an end to the tiresome feuds that have marred the ingrown Doyle-Sullivan clan. For the whites, difference refreshes the literal and metaphorical gene pool; for the blacks, access to white culture means fulfillment. Waking up for the first time in her spacious new home, Kenya notices that "in the light that soaked this room a girl could read the spines of the books on the very top shelf. 'The Double Helix,' she said aloud. 'A Separate Peace.'" She notices, too, the contrast between this intense morning light and the "dimness" of her own home (157). Reviewing the novel in *The New Yorker*, John Updike praises this scene's celebration of "the civilized enlightenment whose glories should be available to all;" to Updike it is an unquestionable good that, after a childhood of relative material deprivation, Kenya should gain access to the benefits of white middle-class culture.<sup>1</sup> And yet those familiar with the challenges of transracial adoption may find it hard to credit the view that Kenya's absorption into the Doyle family could be this smooth and pleasant – or even that it should be.

Even Updike notices how odd it is that race consciousness (not to mention class loyalty) never troubles the smooth surface of the adoptive family's integration. The two older sons, the children of the same black birth mother, experience no difficulty negotiating their transracial identities or navigating racial meanings in a rarefied fictional Boston whose color line has been quietly erased. Nor do they suffer any sense of loss from having lost their birth mother, about whom they never wonder; instead they grieve the early death of their Mary-like mother, Bernadette. Despite their father's heavy-handed attempt to mold them into the image of the white politicians in whose footsteps he himself once aspired to follow (they are named Teddy and Tip), each son seems essentially happy and has found a more or less colorblind institution – the Catholic church for Teddy and scientific research at Harvard for Tip – with which to identify his aspirations. (Tip and Teddy are made to contrast favorably to Sullivan, their white older brother, the black sheep in the family who is reconciled to his father only through their shared love of Kenya.) Kenya's pure pleasure in inheriting the statue of the white adoptive mother she never knew, but whose memory is worshipped by her brothers and father, constitutes Patchett's optimistic revision of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, where a blue-eyed white doll has the most devastating effects on the black girl Pecola. In *Run*'s fantasy of racial harmony achieved through transracial adoption, love transcends racial division.

All this happy news about transracial adoption must have a downside somewhere, and it is, predictably, the fate Patchett creates for the black birth mother, Kenya's mother and the mother of the two boys. Perplexingly, especially given Patchett's sympathetic and soulful representations of birthmothers in her 1992 novel about a home for unwed mothers, *The Patron Saint of Liars*, Tennessee and her story are mostly flattened into stereotype. Unbelievably self-sacrificing in the novel's prehistory (having given Teddy up for adoption as an infant, she soon gave up her eighteen-month-old too, so he could look after his little brother), and again in the episode that precipitates the novel's action, when she throws herself in front of an SUV to prevent Tip from being run over, Tennessee spends the entirety of the novel's present time slowly and almost speechlessly dying, an abject lump of black

flesh. Literary critic Valerie Smith pointed out two decades ago that black women have served for generations to represent everything that western culture denigrates about embodiment; both “in classic Western philosophy and in nineteenth-century cultural constructions of womanhood . . . women of color [have been associated with] the body and therefore with animal passions and slave labor.”<sup>ii</sup> Except in flashbacks, we never see Tennessee whole and human; in the present time of the novel, she is always injured, exhausted, bloody, and silenced, dying of blood leaking into her abdomen from an undetected internal injury, clutching her belly, her complaints of stomach pain dismissed because they do not match the official diagnosis of a broken hip.

Tennessee’s representation recalls that of the underclass birth mother in George Eliot’s *Silas Marner*, the dark-haired drug addict whose convenient and unmourned death makes possible blond Eppie’s adoption by Silas. In what seems like a deliberate allusion to the death of Eppie’s mother (who passes out in the snow), Tennessee lies face down in the snow after her fatal injury, and both mothers die so that adoptive fathers can become the sole parents of their daughters. In a mythic tale such as *Silas Marner*, the rapidity with which the birth mother is eliminated is perhaps understandable; but the genre of *Run* is contemporary realism, and the birth mother’s silencing is more troubling because it seems more arbitrary. Why should the three children’s transcendence depend upon their mother’s immanence and abjection? Why should their centrality require her marginalization? Tennessee’s death is not unmourned, and yet the reader is left to imagine what might have been the novel’s emotional center: Kenya’s discovery of her loss when, to everyone’s surprise, her much-loved mother dies after seeming on the road to recovery. To foreground and celebrate the transracial adoptive relationships seems to require the muting and even the violent severing of black family ties, just as Kenya’s accession to Eurocentric culture is made to seem worth the price of her mother’s death. Indeed, at the end of the novel Kenya imagines that her mother deliberately sacrificed herself to give her daughter the cultural and educational advantages of the Doyles’ world.

Moreover, the novel underscores the birth mother’s separateness from the family whose children she has provided and literally sacrificed herself for. In an interview with Amazon.com, Patchett remarked that the novel explores alternatives to blood kinship by asking “who is your family really, who are you responsible for?” The father, Doyle, makes it clear that while he will happily take responsibility for the adorable eleven-year-old Kenya, he draws the line at that daughter’s mother: she is uninsured, but despite what it would seem he owes her, in his view her expenses are between her and the driver of the SUV. The birth mother is, constitutively, outside the family, a position she herself has seemed to embrace by – we learn in retrospect – invisibly following her sons all over Boston, Kenya in tow, without ever revealing herself. She knows all about them (she even owns a copy of the ichthyology book she sees Tip reading on the subway one day), while they know and think nothing of her. Her narrative function is the same as her familial role, to serve as a reference point for others. Her injury not only propels the plot but also prompts the Doyle-Sullivan clan to gather after more than a decade of mutual alienation. The bad brother Sullivan and the saintly great uncle Father Sullivan meet Doyle, Tip, and Teddy at Tennessee’s bedside, and from this occasion emerges a heartwarming family reconciliation. Watching her in her hospital bed, Sullivan “saw her as a box of clues,” a key to the faces of her children (142) but not of interest in herself. No one in the novel hears her story from her.

That we know anything about her that deviates from the near-caricature of the black mother that she embodies in the novel’s present time is owing to two interactions recalled from the past. Years before the novel’s action, Tennessee worked as an aide in the home for elderly priests where Father Sullivan lives, and he remembers her as a friend and intellectual companion. We also learn that she once aspired to go to college and perhaps to law school, perhaps to enter politics; Tennessee still attends public lectures because she is interested in them and not just because she is likely to see her sons, dragged to such events by their father. Her potential to have become a rich and interesting character, always located in the past before she became a mother, is brought out even more strikingly in a highly contrived plot twist that, depending on the reader’s viewpoint, either mitigates or intensifies

the stereotypicality of the black birth mother's imprisonment in her doomed and silenced body. After some carefully dropped hints, the novel finally reveals that Tennessee is not the biological mother of Kenya, who was born to Tennessee's best friend, who died when Kenya was a baby. We learn this when Tennessee, emerging from anesthesia after surgery, hallucinates that her friend is there with her, visiting from the dead. To facilitate the adoption, Tennessee adopted her friend's identity as well. As Tennessee puts it, "In my last life I was somebody named Beverly who had two little boys and gave them up. In this life I'm you and I have a daughter" (197). Beverly and her friend Tennessee Alice Moser lived in different apartments in the same run-down building and became best friends if not lovers (the novel is not explicit, but the first Tennessee is the person our Tennessee loved most in the world).

On the one hand, the story of Kenya's prior adoption complicates the identification of Tennessee with abject maternity. As Kenya's adoptive rather than biological mother, Tennessee lines up on the same side of the mind/body dichotomy as other adopters in the novel, the cultured whites. She is an artificer who astutely gamed the system: lacking the resources to adopt legally, and realizing that no one would notice the disappearance of a little black girl (as Tip and Teddy also discover when they take her home from the hospital the night of her mother's accident), she simply steps into her friend's role and walks off with her baby. And the loving relationship of the two women before the original Tennessee's death gestures toward a non-normative family form that might have supported the flourishing of two black women subjects.

On the other hand, the death of yet another black mother behind the death of Tennessee in the novel's present time suggests an underscoring of black maternal erasure. Invisible as Tennessee has been, she erases her friend's identity along with her own, doubly burying her. Her relationship to the original Tennessee is a secret from everyone else in the novel. Kenya has no idea she is adopted and knows nothing of her biological mother; she has a photograph of the two women, her mother with a nameless friend about whom she knows only that she must have made her mother happy. It is as if this character were created only to emphasize the disposability of black mothers. Moreover, adopting Kenya at least partially causes Tennessee's plunge into abjection. Although she had already begun her practice of invisibly tracking her birth sons, it is with her secret appropriation of her friend's identity and her adoption of Kenya that she loses both her vocational ambitions and her sense of existing as a self. When the hallucinatory Tennessee suggests that her friend might have married or made friends, Tennessee replies: "How was I going to make friends? I couldn't tell them about my boys or about you or Kenya or even what my name was. I don't know how much there is after you take all that away" (210).

The double adoption of Kenya also mobilizes the novel's "study in genetics" (196). Tennessee believes that Kenya is a "carbon copy" of her biological mother, yet when Tip and Teddy look for family traits in the girl they believe to be their biological sister, they find them, imagining that her prowess as a runner confirms the biological tie. Nonetheless, although the novel seems eager to demonstrate that genes have nothing to do with love, genetic essentialism survives in the form of Kenya's endowments as a runner. Kenya is a natural, instinctive, and possibly world-class runner, and descriptions of her running are among the most lyrical in the novel. That she exhibits her skill at the Harvard track, witnessed by a collection of awe-struck Harvard students, indicates Patchett's intent to value running as a talent on the same level with the intellectual accomplishments more usually associated with Harvard, and the running scenes endow Kenya with a rock-solid sense of self and allow her to participate in the narrative as a subject. Yet Patchett engages a racial stereotype when she has a black character called "Kenya" excel as a runner, fleet-footed where her mother is tired and earth-bound, yet, like her, preeminently a body. If she does not share her mother's individual genes, Kenya does inherit the burden of racist cultural stereotyping that goes with both of her mothers' African genetic heritage. When the dream-Tennessee suggests to her friend that she might have married Doyle, the improbability of this idea underscores the racial and as well as class divide that marks a limit to the transcendence transracial adoption can achieve.



Readers will differ on whether Patchett is rehearsing a tired stereotype or critically exposing and complicating it. But isn't it time for a new adoption plot, one that does not celebrate the rise of the children at the expense of the birth mother?

<sup>i</sup> John Updike, "A Boston Fable: Ann Patchett's New Novel," *The New Yorker*, Oct. 1, 2007, p. 100.

<sup>ii</sup> Valerie Smith, "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other'," in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 44.

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## Review of *Juno*

by Sheila Ganz



A rash of irate comments by adoption triad friends gave me concern about seeing *Juno*. When the picture won the Oscar for best screenplay, it seemed like an establishment endorsement for the message of the film, but as a filmmaker, my curiosity was piqued.

Autumn: In the breezy set-up for the story, Juno walks to the store drinking a jug of juice, so she can pee on a stick and take the pregnancy test again. As soon as she enters, the store attendant refers to her as "mama bear" and several other nicknames for "mother."

*This scene is a far cry from 1969, when I was an "unwed mother" and had to hide my shameful secret. And yet I wonder how many teens today use the bathroom at the corner store announcing to anyone who will listen that she is taking a pregnancy test. Though often what makes a movie interesting is that the main character behaves in an unusual way.*

The test is positive and Juno takes control of the situation when she tells her boyfriend she is pregnant, absolving him of all responsibility by admitting it happened because she was bored. And she tells him she plans to "nip it in the bud."

She makes her way over to the abortion clinic, waylaid by a friend from school, who is picketing against abortion and tells Juno that "it has fingernails." The young woman behind the counter is irritatingly unorganized.

*She seems like a caricature invented by someone who is anti-abortion.*

The women in the waiting room make weird noises and scratch their stomach. Juno can't take it and leaves.

There is apparently no deep conflict for Juno, named after a goddess, the wife of Jupiter. The movie rolls through 18 harmonica playing and guitar strumming songs. Her boyfriend, Bleeker, isn't offensive. And her father--"I know you will always love your D. A. D"---isn't oppressive. The movie is superficial and sappy. And therein lies its inflammatory nature.

*(continued on page 14)*

Juno's decision for adoption is the turning point that leads to Act Two, where the heroine begins her journey to achieve her goal. She gets the Pennysaver paper, where you can see ads from sellers of used cars, appliances and furniture--and from couples looking to adopt. After reading three ads, Juno finds the perfect couple. She calls them to make arrangements for a meeting.

Juno announces her condition to her parents and her plan for adoption, so she can "pretend it didn't happen." No voices raised, no tears, just okay, "You're our Junebug." Her insightful stepmother later guesses that Juno had sex because she was bored.

*Would this frustratingly uncomplicated scene convince a real sixteen-year-old to think this is the way it would go for her if she found herself pregnant? Even with today's more permissive climate than when I became pregnant in 1969, parents can still feel disappointment and anger upon hearing the dreaded news.*

Juno's father goes with her to interview the couple in their suburban home. Juno takes one look at them and decides on the spot. Their attorney has the necessary papers ready for her to sign.

*I've heard of fast-track adoption, but this is ridiculous. Juno just found out she is pregnant.*

When they offer openness to Juno, she declares that she wants the adoption closed. Like the old days, she wants it to be "quick and dirty. Just close it up."

Whether by design or sheer ignorance, the screenwriter fails to have Juno express any feelings for her unborn child. Instead she makes a vicious reference to baby abandonment in China, which made me cringe for girls adopted from China, some of whom I have met.

In her flip sarcastic manner Juno tells the prospective adoptive mother she will "squeeze it out and hand it over." This sent a shudder through me for adoptees who may imagine this is how their birthmother felt about them. And there is the obligatory mention of Moses in a basket.

Winter: Juno has an ultrasound. All looks well, but the technician is glad the baby is going out for adoption. Juno's stepmom protects her by verbally attacking the woman, driving her out of the room. Juno thinks this is cool.

Juno makes an unannounced visit to the couple. Mark is home alone and tells her she can't drop in like this. He works at home writing music for television commercials. Juno is surprised to find this out. *Why didn't Juno's father ask?* They end up watching a slasher movie.

The wife, Vanessa, is the only person who seems to have feelings for the baby, expressing this by speaking more softly than anyone else. She decorates the baby's room. Mark thinks it's too soon.

Juno and her girlfriend accidentally run into Vanessa in the mall. They see her playing with a little girl. This convinces Juno that she is making the right decision. She lifts her shirt so Vanessa can talk to the baby.

Spring: Juno's stepmother sews elastic into her jeans. Juno calls Mark about the music he gave her. They banter about the different bands, all foreign to me. Juno finds out that Bleeker is going to the prom with a girl he once claimed to not like because her house smells. It looks like their relationship might be in jeopardy.

Juno thinks the prom is lame and goes to visit Mark and Vanessa. Mark is alone and shows her his basement music room. She thinks it will be the baby's room. He puts on music and they dance with her large stomach between them. He then confesses that he doesn't love Vanessa any more. He would be a bad father and is moving out.

Blindsided, Juno asks him to "Do me a solid" and stay married. But when Vanessa returns home, he announces his plans. She takes it with restrained emotions, asking practical questions like if he's found a place to live. She reiterates how much she wants to be a mother. He knows and is sorry.

Juno runs out of the house, drives the van down the highway, pulls over and cries. This is the second turning point that leads to Act Three. The clock is ticking and the protagonist must resolve the situation. This is the only time we see Juno alone.

She drives to a store parking lot with a bright neon sign “Milk and Honey.” She lies on the hood of the van to mull it over, then gets back in the van, scrounges around for something to write on, drives back to Mark and Vanessa’s house, leaves the paper on their front door and goes home.

She asks her father about love and what makes a relationship that will last. He thinks she’s talking about him. He advises her it’s real when someone loves you just the way you are. The audience, or at least I--thought she was referring to Mark and Vanessa. She makes another decision and leaves in the night.

The next morning, Bleeker is surprised when a sign on the front steps tells him to open his mailbox. He walks down to the free-standing mailbox, opens it and tons of Tic Tacs fall out. They are his one vice. He smiles and knows who they are from.

He goes to the track to run and Juno is there. She tells him that she loves him and that the baby always kicks more when he is near her. He confesses his love for her and they make out.

Back home lying in bed Juno’s water breaks. Her family rushes her to the hospital and she has the baby. She doesn’t tell Bleeker, because he is running a race, but he knows anyway and runs over to see her in the hospital. He climbs into bed with her, she cries a little. Neither of them wants to see their infant son.

Vanessa arrives. The nurse asks her, “Do you want to see your son?” Holding the baby, she doesn’t know if she will be a good mother. Juno’s stepmom assures her that her doubts will make her a good mother.

Summer: Vanessa is home with the baby, Juno’s note framed on the wall.

Juno gets on her bicycle and rides over to Bleeker who is sitting on the steps with his guitar. Juno picks up her guitar and they sing a duet about love as the camera slowly pulls away.

Juno is not a cautionary tale about teen pregnancy. It is a make-believe world where an unplanned pregnancy is a fleeting nine month experience, like the seasons. According to classic dramatic structure, the timing is good and each plot point is where it’s supposed to be. Juno turns into the kind of movie Hollywood loves—a sweet off-beat love story.

The movie is insidious in the way it puts a comedic spin on the message that an unmarried pregnant teen should give up her baby for adoption and then go on with her life as if it never happened.

In fact, for many mothers with an unplanned pregnancy, in the past and today, relinquishing their child for adoption is a serious heart-wrenching experience that impacts every area of their lives. And the insensitive way Juno talks about her unborn child completely denies the feelings and humanity of people who are adopted.

More than a problem-solving recipe, adoption is a lifelong process that reverberates throughout the lives of parents who relinquish a child for adoption, for the adoptee and for the adoptive parents. I conclude that my friends’ outrage is well-founded.

Sheila Ganz is a reunited birthmother and filmmaker. Her documentary *Unlocking the Heart of Adoption* explores the lifelong process of adoption for adoptees, birthparents and adoptive parents in same race and transracial adoptions interwoven with illuminating historical background. She is currently working on the documentary *Moms Living Clean*, which chronicles six moms who transform their lives in whole-family substance abuse treatment over three years interwoven with drug policies that impact pregnant and parenting mothers. For info visit: [www.unlockingtheheart.com](http://www.unlockingtheheart.com) and [www.momslivingclean.org](http://www.momslivingclean.org).

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