

Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity & Kinship

Kansas State University



MLA Meeting & Cash Bar

This year's annual meeting of the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity & Kinship will take place at the Modern Language Association Convention in Washington D.C. on December 28, 2000 from 5:15-6:30pm in Park Tower Room 8211 at the Marriot Wardman Hotel. We have arranged for a cash bar and encourage both members and non-members interested in adoption and kinship issues in literature and culture to attend.

In addition to an informal get together and an opportunity to reconnect in person, we will discuss next year's proposal for the convention, the newsletter and the possibility of a more formal website. We also welcome suggestions for activities and gathering resources. If you would like further information about the meeting, contact Alliance co-chairs: Marianne Novy, mnovy+@pitt.edu or Carol Singley, singley@crab.rutgers.edu

I believe...that studying the history and literature of adoption should have implications in terms of public policy and also in terms of educating individuals so that they can make better choices...

— Marianne Novy

Interview with Marianne Novy

By Linda Reingardt

(The following is an excerpt from an interview originally published in Women's Studies News, Fall 2000, U of Pittsburgh.)

Q. Describe your recent work.

A. I am writing on literary representations of adoption. One of the key issues in the works I discuss is how parenthood and kinship should be defined. Some represent genetic parenthood as the only real kind, and others suggest that parenthood should be defined as nurturing, which means that adoptive parenthood is not just pretense, but has a reality of its own. The literary works I deal with range from Sophocles' *Oedipus* through Shakespeare's plays to nineteenth-century novels by George Eliot and others to contemporary novels by Barbara Kingsolver and Toni Morrison....

Q. How did your interest in the study of adoption in literature develop?...

A. I'm adopted myself, and in my early thirties I got my original birth certificate and met my birth mother and her family...I am going to tell this story near the beginning of my upcoming book, *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Lit-*

(Continued on page 4)

Inside this issue:

Recent Presentations	2
Upcoming Presentations	2
Upcoming Conferences	3
MLA, 2001, Call for Papers	3
Submission & Listserv Info.	3
Interview (Cont.)	4-5

Recent Presentations

- ◆ Scholars gathered for a session on "Broken Genealogies: Adoption in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction" at the Northeast Modern Language Association (NEMLA) annual convention in Buffalo in April, 2000. The session was chaired by Carol J. Singley, Rutgers University, Camden. Speakers included:

Kathleen McArthur, George Washington University, "The Imperative of the Domestic: Instruction and Marriage in *Hope Leslie*."

Christopher Smith, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, "Cummins' *Lamplighter*: An Antebellum Fable of Middle-Class Adoption and Incorporation."

Deborah A. Cadman, Skidmore College, "Giving Away Frado: Identity, Kinship, and Race in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*."

- ◆ Carol J. Singley, Department of English, Rutgers-Camden, delivered the keynote address at the New Jersey College English Association annual conference at Seton Hall University in March, 2000. Her topic, "Developing Identities: Reading American Adoption," related to the conference theme of "Literacy and Identity." Adoption, she suggested, foregrounds fundamental questions of identity, serving as a kind of laboratory in which the effects of nature and nurture can be played out. Although adoption carries the stigma of "second best," it also figures prominently in theories of psychological development from Freud onward. According to those theories, all children entertain fantasies that they are adopted in order to achieve autonomy from their parents. Such theories raise questions about the adopted child's experience—does the child displace the adopted parents "as if" they are the biological ones, or does development differ in a fundamental way? Relating adoption to literacy, she discussed how familiarity with American literature about adoption expands understanding of genre, canon, cultural identity, and historical context.
- ◆ Jill R. Deans, Kansas State University, gave two presentations on adoption-related issues this year. First, she reflected on her own recent birthing experience as an adoptee at the "Becoming a Mother Symposium" sponsored by the Association for Research on Mothering at York University, York, ONT. Her talk "'Natural' Birth: An Adoptee Becomes a Mother," examined the rhetoric of the "natural" birth for the adopted mother and explored how medical interventions, like cesarean sections, are being naturalized and normalized within contemporary medical and popular discourse.

Jill's second conference paper was presented at the Autobiography and Changing Identities Conference hosted by the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, BC. "Performing the Search in Adoption Autobiographical Documentary: *Finding Christa* and *Reno Finds Her Mom*," focused on two "non-fiction" films that each feature an adoption search.

Upcoming Presentations

November, 2000, Martha Satz will be presenting a paper, "Identity Politics and the Post-Modern Self in Contemporary Adoption Movies" at the South Central Modern Language Association Conference (SCMLA) in San Antonio, TX.

April 18-21, 2001. "Poor, Motherless Frauds?: 5 Poets on 'the Adopted Voice,'" featuring Ai, Nick Carbo, Jan Beatty, Margaret LeMay, and Jennifer Dobbs will be heard at the Associated Writing Programs Conference (AWP) in Palm Springs, CA.



Upcoming Conferences

- ◆ October 21, 2000. The Adoption Journey: Psychological, Socio-political, and Legal Challenges, Ninth Annual Conference, St. John's University Center for Psychological Services and Clinical Studies, Jamaica, NY, Speakers: Penny Partridge, Betty Jean Lifton, Joyce Maguire Pavao, Madelyn Freundlich (For info. Call 718-990-1900 or 718-380-7711).
- ◆ November 8-13, 2000. Visions for Families: Continuity and Change Across Cohorts and Generations, NCFR Annual Conference, Minneapolis Hilton Hotel, Minneapolis, MN, Plenary Speakers: Stephanie Coontz, Alejandro Portes, Mary Pipher. See their website, <http://www.ncfr.com>
- ◆ March 3, 2001. Mothering, Sex, and Sexuality Conference. Association for Research on Mothering, York University, York, ONT. See their website, <http://www.yorku.ca/crm> (CFP late DEADLINE Jan. 1, 2001)
- ◆ March 8-10, 2001. Family, Kinship & Cultural Studies, 10th Annual Cultural Studies Symposium, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, Keynote Speakers: Stephanie Coontz and Carter Revard. See their website: <http://www.ksu.edu/english/culturalstudies>
- ◆ July 7-8, 2001. Mothering: Power/Oppression Conference, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia (CFP DEADLINE Jan. 15, 2001).
- ◆ October 12-14, 2001. Mothering, Literature, Popular Culture and the Arts, Association for Research on Mothering, York University, York ONT. See their website, <http://www.yorku.ca/crm> (CFP DEADLINE March 15, 2001).



Call for Papers

2001 MLA Special Session Call for Papers. Adoption Fiction and Nation-Building.

Narratives of adoption, child-exchange/relinquishment, and/or adoptees' discoveries of ancestry in relation to nation-building, national identity, national fantasy, acculturation, imperialism, decolonization, multicultural hybridity. Proposals/abstracts by 20 March to Marianne Novy: mnovy+@pitt.edu

Submissions & Listserv

Notices of events, publications, book/film reviews, and short articles are encouraged. Please send your contributions to: Jill R. Deans, Dept. of English, 106 Denison Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506; phone: 785-532-2406; FAX 785-532-2192; email: jrdeans@ksu.edu

If you would like to join our listserv, send an email message to: majordomo@post.cis.smu.edu. In the body of the message write: `subscribe adopt_lit` (do not write anything in the subject line). You should receive confirmation if the subscription is successful. If you have questions, contact Martha Satz at: msatz@post.cis.smu.edu

Interview with Marianne Novy (cont.)

erature and Culture, which includes writing by other people on the representations of adoption and is due out from the University of Michigan Press this February...My previous book included a chapter on *Daniel Deronda*, and I found I wanted to look at its representation of adoption more closely. I also kept noticing characters in twentieth-century novels who were adopted, and the frequent use of adoption to deal with other topics like colonization or class difference. I had been thinking of writing about representations of the work of motherhood, and realized that was part of this topic as well.

Q. How did this work develop out of your previous research?

A. I've always been interested in literary representations of the family. The first chapter of my dissertation dealt, in part, with the tradition of family recognition scenes in Greek drama...and other kinds of recognition scenes in Shakespeare. My first book, *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare*, considered plays in relation to feminist theory and to the social history of Shakespeare's time, including practices of parent-child separation and surrogacy. After that I wrote a book about the ways women novelists have responded to Shakespeare in their novels....

Looking at adoption in literature...has parallels to looking at how writers respond to earlier writers. In both cases, big issues are how do you relate to the past, what from the past do you relate to, and what do you do with it in relation to the present and future....

Q. Adoption and related issues are illuminated by an interdisciplinary approach. What material from other disciplines have been important in your work?

A. Social history has been very important...I've used historians like George Behlmer, who enumerates some of the disasters of de facto adoption in nineteenth-century England, when there was no legal regulation of the procedure, E. Wayne Carp, who traces the changes in American practices about the secrecy of adoption records, and Rickie Solinger, who studies the difference in the experience of white and black unwed mothers before *Roe v. Wade*. Judith Modell's ethnography of the way people involved in adoption discuss kinship has also been valuable, as has been the sociologist Katarina Wegar's *Adoption, Identity and Kinship: The Debate Over Sealed Birth Records*....

Q. What particular importance do you, as a scholar who has long been interested in women's issues, feel the study of adoption and the discourses surrounding it have today?

A. ...Some representations of adoption demonize birth mothers and others demonize adoptive mothers; both kinds of stereotypes should be analyzed and critiqued. I believe furthermore that studying the history and literature of adoption should have implications in terms of public policy and also in terms of educating individuals so that they can make better choices because they can imagine the feelings of those affected by them. Studying the history and literary representations of children born out of wedlock and their mothers—the major source of adoptions in the US—could provide a cautionary note against attempts to restigmatize illegitimacy, which some politicians have favored as part of their attempts to end welfare. Women who are considering adopting—or becoming involved in surrogacy or other new reproductive technologies—might benefit from hearing some literary attempts to imagine or express the experience of adoptees, so that they know some pitfalls to avoid. Being aware of this material might also lead to the idea that the money proposed for advertising safe havens for babies abandoned anonymously would be better spent educating about more constructive options and providing counseling and sup-

port services. In recent years, the open records movement...has succeeded in making it possible for adult adoptees in several states to see their original birth certificates and find out about their genetic families; studying the history and literature of adoption tends to support this movement. On the other hand, today not only adoption but many other issues—e.g. stepfamilies, new reproductive technologies, same-sex unions—raise the question of what makes a family; adoption literature...suggests it is neither genetics nor law as much as love and nurturing work.

Q. Are there any particular challenges inherent to research in this area?

A. It's a new field—that is, those of us working on it are trying to define it as a field. There are adoption plots and representations of people involved with adoption in literature of all historical periods, in genres ranging from epic to romance to novel to drama to lyric to satire to autobiography. People are studying it in English, American, Canadian, French, and other literatures. Although there are many different forms of adoption in different historical periods and countries, many of the same issues repeat, and thus it makes sense for this diverse set of scholars to be in contact with each other...But adoption as a topic doesn't fit easily into previous institutional structures...and unlike many other minority literatures, adoption literature doesn't have much of a pre-existing community on which to build. [This is where the *Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity & Kinship* comes in.]

It's also a challenge to be working on a topic that many people relate to on a level so personal that they don't want to talk about it. But this is also part of what makes it interesting...People with different perspectives on it from their lives also approach it differently in literature, and can learn from each other. A lot of high school and college students—adoptees, birth mothers and potential birth and adoptive mothers—would benefit if their English teachers were sensitive to the complexities of adoption in literature.

Q. Is there anything else you would like to mention?

A. ...Finally, one of the other facts that has influenced my approach to adoption in literature is that I am mother myself, by birth and nurture, and find that my fifteen-year-old daughter is very different than I am. She's a great athlete, for one thing, and my main sport is noncompetitive walking. (She may well be more different from me than I am from my adoptive mother.) When I read novels that portray adoptive parents learning to respect a child's different culture, I identify with them. Parent-child difference occurs in all families, not just adoptive families, and maybe one of the reasons why many readers from all kinds of families relate to literature about adoption is that they find it portraying extreme forms of issues they face in their own lives even if they are not involved with adoption.





The Alliance for the
Study of Adoption,
Identity & Kinship

Kansas State University

Jill R. Deans, Ph.D.
Department of English
106 Denison Hall

Phone: 785-532-2406
Fax: 785-532-2192
Email: jrdeans@ksu.edu

**The Executive Committee of the Alliance for the Study of
Adoption, Identity & Kinship**

- Marianne Novy (co-chair, University of Pittsburgh)
- Carol Singley (co-chair, Rutgers University, Camden)
- Martha Satz (Southern Methodist University)
- Deborah Cadman (Skidmore College)
- Jill R. Deans (Kansas State University)

For more information about the Alliance, contact :

Marianne Novy, Department of English, University of Pittsburgh , 4200 Fifth Avenue,
Pittsburgh, PA 15260; email: mnovy+@pitt.edu

To join our growing membership, contact:

Deborah Cadman, 110 Liberty Road, Troy, NY 12180; email: dcadman@skidmore.edu

