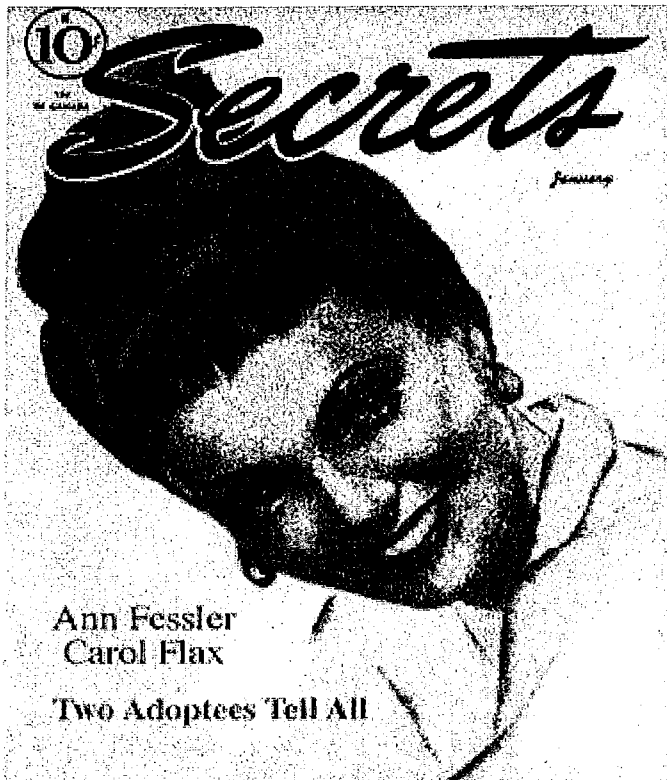


# Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity & Kinship



-- from Fessler & Flax's Ex/Changing Families exhibit, see page 4

The reviews in this issue were generated from a graduate seminar on Adoption in Literature and Culture taught by Jill R. Deans at Kansas State University in the Spring, 2001. See our syllabus on the web: [www-personal.ksu.edu/~jrdeans/830.html](http://www-personal.ksu.edu/~jrdeans/830.html)

## Special Book Review Issue

*Kin: Poems*  
by Crystal Williams  
Michigan State UP, 2000  
Reviewed by Josh Shuart

Crystal Williams' debut collection of poems gurgles, seethes, and nearly bubbles right off the page. "To get good collards," she reveals in "Collard Folk," "ya gotta add a little of this, / stir in a little of that, put some love into & / some other what-nots." Ultimately, "you'll see/that when you work with what you got, / you'll get what you want." This recipe is true, of course, not just for collard greens: *Kin* itself is a lyrical stew of sounds, rhythms, textures, and histories boiled into one delicious volume. Intellectual, raw and often hilarious, it evokes the rich African-American oral tradition with authentic vibrancy and soul. A steeled veteran of the poetry "slam" circuit, Williams composes words that sing, poems that *move*.

(Continued on page 2)

## Alliance at Dec. 2001 MLA Convention, New Orleans

The annual business meeting of the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity & Kinship will take place at 5pm, Friday, December 28 in the Sheraton's Nottoway Room at the MLA Convention in New Orleans. Both members and interested non-members are encouraged to attend.

Following the meeting at 5:15pm will be a poetry and prose reading on "Adoption and Color," the first of two sessions hosted by the Alliance. The second, a special session on "Adoption, Identity, and Race," will be held on Saturday, December 29 at 12 noon in the Sheraton's Pontchartrain Ballroom.

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Much of *Kin* reflects upon Williams' experiences as an African-American woman adopted by an interracial couple, a school psychologist and a jazz pianist/Ford Foundry worker. It voices the sorrows of being severed from one's roots, the anxiousness of facing down a cryptic past while contemplating an undetermined future. At the same time, Williams celebrates her love for her ancestral culture and for her adoptive family, the new parents who welcomed her as a child and nurtured her along the tenuous path into womanhood. The poems are set in Detroit, where Williams was raised, and also trace back to Alabama and to towns along Route 66. As a result, the poems are as raucous and sassy as they are poignant.

"For the Woman Who Didn't Know My Name," for example, describes "small boys in play / around the spot in town where men once herded / my people. There were those games too." "The Famous Door" portrays her adoptive father "on the sneak, askin' / momma on a date n the cops followin' / momma-n-mary home cause white / girls didn't hang out in (black) jazz bars / in 1966." "Hell," she decides, "proper white / girls probably didn't hang t'all." Meanwhile, "Collard Greens," on a lighter note, depicts "Uncle Ruff & Delmar & Granddaddy" shooting dice "in corner side, chompin they bits / over cream-corn smellin corn bread," while Momma rebukes Uncle Cecil, who "can't play worth a horse's ass, / can't shoot shit, & always been a bit funny like that."

*Kin* is a strong overall effort devoid of any serious weaknesses. Dead-on use of vernacular and a fresh sense of humor combine to prevent the poems, despite their weighty subject matter, from becoming too sentimental or melodramatic. Those interested in adoption will find much of interest here: Williams is painfully honest in discussing the sense of loss, alienation, or "otherness" adoptees often struggle with, but readers will delight in the enthusiasm with which she embraces and rejoices in her adoptive family.

Ultimately, this collection is about memory. On the level of language, it summons a proud, blues-tinged oral tradition that shimmers in every word. In regard to family, it ponders what is remembered and also forgotten or unknown in every adoptee's past. And in terms of African-American heritage as a whole, it

questions how a collective memory informs the individual as a human being and as an artist. In these poems, as does the narrator of "Collard Folk," Williams certainly gets what she wants. So will the reader.



*Through Yup'ik Eyes: An Adopted Son  
Explores the Landscape of Family*

by Colin Chisholm

Alaska Northwest Books, 2000

Reviewed by Kelley Deane McKay

What does it mean to be a second-generation adoptee? That is the question that writer Colin Chisholm sets out to answer in this memoir. After the death of his adopted mother, a transracial adoptee, Chisholm decides to "reconnect" with the family she lost so long ago. Doris Chisholm, half Yup'ik Eskimo, was adopted by a white family as a young child after the death of her mother and never saw her biological family again. Shortly before her death, she had been considering going back to Alaska but never got around to it. This book follows her son's journey into his mother's past where he seeks to understand her sadness and in the process gains a better understanding of himself as well.

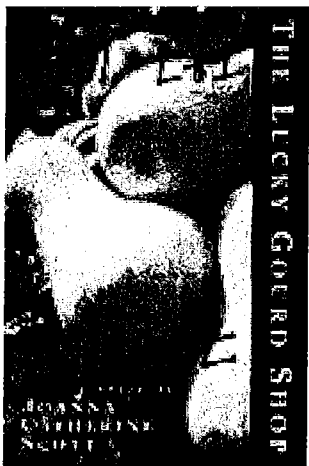
Chisholm's narrative stretches over one hundred years into the past, but factual information runs out about halfway into the tale. The remainder of the story is told through fictional accounts of events. An easily bungled literary strategy, Chisholm's use of mingled truth and fiction is well-executed. While the transitions between the two are smooth and nearly seamless, it is still clear what is fictional and what is not.

The Chisholm family is very diverse. Because of her own adoption, Doris found adoption to be a "natural" process. Of the five Chisholm children, three are adopted. Each child came from a different mixed-ethnic background (the author is half Yugoslavian and one quarter each English and Irish),

and the Chisholms celebrated each and every one. Colin Chisholm says that he was grateful to "...have a quarter each of English and Irish, because I thought that it somehow connected me to my dad's Scottish blood" (26). While it is ethnic background that connects Chisholm to his father, it is the experience of being adopted that connects him to his mother.

In exploring the circumstances of his mother's adoption after her death, Colin Chisholm truly gets to know his mother. He shows, through anecdotes and flashbacks, some of the challenges that are faced by transracial adoptees--these children who are caught between two worlds. One very moving moment in the book comes when Doris receives her temporary driver's license, and the woman in the Bureau has made certain that Doris's license says "half-breed" on the back. Doris is understandably upset by this blatant racism, but she does not lash out; instead, she internalizes and sublimates this ugliness. It emerges later in other forms such as alcoholism and physical violence toward her children.

Chisholm's relationship with Doris's Yup'ik family has a surprising effect. He has found his mother's roots, but he also seems to have found the hope that he, too, has a family somewhere in the world who would be happy to be found. The process of writing his mother's history seems to have increased his desire to find his own past. Chisholm's voice is friendly and familiar, and one cannot help but hope that he finds what's looking for in the end.



*The Lucky Gourd Shop*  
by Joanna Catherine Scott  
MacMurray & Beck, 2000  
Reviewed by Lisa C. Torres-  
Wigton

In a world of hard choices and tragic consequences, Joanna Catherine Scott creates a moving tale depicting loss of innocence, difficult decisions, and survival. Recognizing her children's need to "find an anchor in their [Korean]

ancestry," an adoptive American mother attentively transcribes her eldest child, Dae Young's story as he delves into his soul to recount his memories of life before the adoption. What follows is an amazing tale that begins not with the children, but with Mi Sook, the birth mother, her story of origin and how her children came into being.

Herself an orphan left outside a cafe, Mi Sook's world lies within this shop; and as she grows, she finds her ambitions to be different from those of other Korean women. Mi Sook desires to be independent and childfree. But in a world that favors male children, she finds herself a victim of Kun Soo, a married man who uses her to produce a healthy son. As Mi Sook becomes pregnant again and again (she has one son and two daughters), Kun Soo pushes his first wife out of the home, marries Mi Sook, and reveals to her the reality of her existence -- a poor home, an old mother-in-law, violence and despair. To Mi Sook, the marriage is doomed. She leaves her family and returns to the cafe to gain control of her life and choices.

As Scott weaves her tale, the reader is plunged into Mi Sook's world and is jarred by its limitations on women which result in the "abandonment" of children. We learn that choices are sometimes based upon desperate need. Both Mi Sook and her mother-in-law attempt to overcome these limitations. The reader is awed by Mi Sook's transformation as she saves money, educates herself, and falls in love, only to have her plans disintegrate and her three children taken from her. Juxtaposed to Mi Sook's reappropriation of her own life is her mother-in-law whose plight and love for her grandchildren further moves the reader; her strength and wisdom is reflected in her decision to take action and place her grandchildren in an orphanage.

Although the novel ends with a tone of promise, it does not provide any real resolution. There is no return to the three children within their present circumstance. The search leaves the reader to wonder why the novel begins in such a fashion. What will happen to these children? What information will they ever obtain? Where did this narrative come from since it certainly could not derive solely out of Dae Young's mind?

Despite these questions, Scott has created an enthralling narrative that haunts the reader with strong, determined women whose only reward is the survival of their children at any cost.

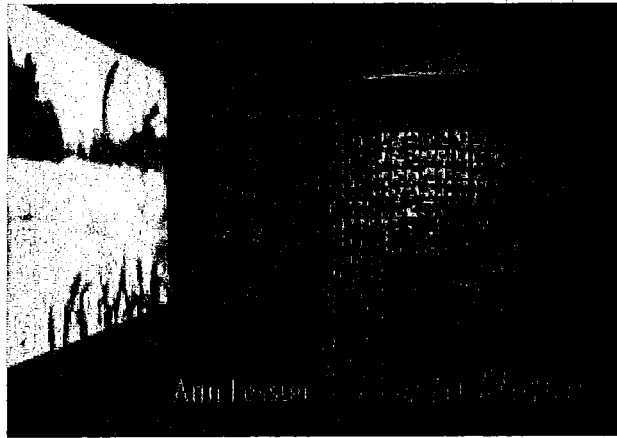
*The Art of Adoption:*  
*Ann Fessler and Carol Flax*  
by Jill R. Deans

Artists, adoptees, and academics, Ann Fessler and Carol Flax are giving voice and form to adoption through powerful multimedia installation projects, parts of which may be viewed on the web. Fessler, who received her MFA from Arizona, is now Professor of Photography at the Rhode Island School of Design. Flax, who received her MFA from the California Institute of the Arts, is currently an Assistant Professor at the University of Arizona. While they share an interest in the secrecy and silences that adoption harbors, each approaches the subject through her own experience and vision.

Together, they have foregrounded the significance of self-narrative and adoption in an exhibit called *Ex/Changing Families: Two Stories of Adoption*.

First installed at the California Museum of Photography in 1997, the exhibit has travelled to Dallas, and can now be viewed, in part, through an interactive website <[www.cmp.ucr.edu/Ex/Changing](http://www.cmp.ucr.edu/Ex/Changing)>.

The original installation featured four rooms dedicated to the adoption experience: the "Waiting Room," designed to evoke the anticipation of labor, waiting adoptive parents, searching adoptees, and dispossessed birth parents; the "Nursery/Orphanage" (conceived by Flax), filled with arcane steel cribs and tattered dolls to evoke abandonment and the unwanted; the "Living Room" (conceived by Fessler), filled with family photographs, found furniture, and a tv tuned to footage of Fessler's adoptive mother; and finally the "Mail Room," a place where visitors compose their own stories of adoption and kinship. Viewing the rooms on-line requires a special plug-in, but is well worth the effort. Other links share the artist's stories and pose loaded questions, like "What did good girls do when you were born?"



The site may also be accessed from Carol Flax's home page <[www.arts.arizona.edu/cflax](http://www.arts.arizona.edu/cflax)>, as one of "Two Pieces" on adoption. The other one, *M/Other Stories* (1998) also uses digital imaging and hypertext. Visitors to this site are invited to add stories of their own.

Unpacking the troubled discourse of adoption, Flax often weaves a legacy of shame with exposure to disarm illegitimacy. In her web-based work, she captures the analogy between the virtual topography of the internet and the liminality of the adoptive identity. Her site's opening image, for example, is a baby that slowly dissolves into the black of the page. To navigate her work, it may be useful to visit the the Digital Imaging Forum <[www.art.uh.edu/dif](http://www.art.uh.edu/dif)>, an academic site that features Flax among other artists experimenting in this emergent medium.

In 1999, Ann Fessler completed the final cut of *Cliff and Hazel*, a twenty-five minute film short derived from the *Ex/Changing Families* exhibit. In her pregnant pauses and often surprising remarks, Fessler's eighty-year-old mother embodies the complexity of adoptive kinship, gender and generational issues. As it did in its original context, this film manages in a very small space to raise a lot of questions and still serve as a loving tribute.

Her collaboration with Flax represents a middle-stage for Fessler whose work on adoption charts both her understanding of her adoptive parents and her measured search for her birth mother. Her first exhibit on the subject was *Genetics Lesson* (Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art 1990) which stemmed from an encounter with a birth mother who might have been her own. Fessler's use of "found" photographs (culled from the National Archives) is layered with meaning. Footage of a 1950s sex education class, in which the class is watching a film of another sex education class, for example, demonstrates the "reproductive" quality of both her medium and subject matter. An artist's book from this work is available from Nexus Press (535 Means St., Atlanta, GA 30318).

Fessler's most recent project, *Close to Home*, was installed this summer (2001) at Brown University and is likely to travel in the upcoming year. Here she explores the landscape of adoption through the mid-western terrain that links her adoptive home with her birth mother's home up-river. In this exhibit, she positions full-size corn "cribs," fills them with sound, video (and sometimes even corn) to evoke the mind and memory of the adoptee edging closer to her "origins." Through the cage like cribs, a stream of river footage, and ghost-like projections of mid-western life, Fessler isolates the symbolics of adoption as she narrates on video the details of a search that leads to the "source" of the river and whereabouts of her birth mother.

Fessler and Flax operate at a critical nexus in adoption studies, where theory on kinship and identity takes shape and personal history finds meaning. For those interested in narrative identity, visual autobiography, photography, art and design, their work on adoption is a valuable contribution. Visit their sites on the web and look for upcoming work as it stakes its claim not only in the art world, but in our own fields of adoption, identity and kinship.

*Like Our Very Own:  
Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood,  
1851-1950*

by Julie Berebitsky

University of Kansas Press, 2000

Reviewed by Kelly L. Freeman

Those interested in the growing field of adoption study and criticism will find a valuable resource in Julie Berebitsky's *Like Our Very Own*. The list of critical adoption texts has grown in recent years with notable research done in the history of sealed records as well as the experience of single birth mothers. Adding to this growing wealth of adoption research, Berebitsky carves out an equally compelling and informative niche for her study of the experience of adoptive mothers and the accompanying shift in the cultural narrative of motherhood. She succeeds in framing the history of adoptive motherhood within the context of contemporary debates on the issue; she shows how current constructions of the nuclear family are partially the results of contests waged by adoptive mothers in a search for "real" motherhood.

Primary text documents allow the reader to follow the evolution of the social construct of adoption from its dual beginning as both a formal indenture and an informal care-giving arrangement. Berebitsky begins her

study in 1851 with the first adoption laws passed in the United States and examines the effect of the possibility of a legal construction of family. Initially, the laws do little to change the structure of the American family as they are met with resistance from both adoptive families and social workers alike.

The focus of the study moves quickly forward to the turn of the century. The second chapter of the book is devoted to the "Child-Rescue Campaign," a featured series in the popular magazine *The Delineator*, which ran from 1907-1911. The series sought to connect children in need of homes with "homes in need of children." As such, the "Child-Rescue Campaign" represents the first occasion when the discourse of adoption became available to a wide public audience. On the pages of *The Delineator*, the construction of adoption-as-rescue met head-on with the construction of adoption-as-personal-fulfillment. As one newly adoptive mother wrote to the magazine's editor, "I never really lived until Ralph came to be my little boy" (62). Berebitsky demonstrates that this public forum was the beginning of the adoptive mother's struggle to assert her claim to the throne of motherhood.

The adoptive mother's claim to motherhood is the dominating theme of this study. Berebitsky examines the impact of the "chosen child" narrative as a method for adoptive mothers to identify themselves as "real" mothers. Berebitsky follows the shift in adoption trends, from older children to younger, from single adoptive mothers to married, from the child in need to the child that "matches". In each of these instances, the adoptive mother is working to identify with the larger cultural trends of "natural motherhood" and reinforcing the new way of seeing adoption – through the "as if biological" lens.

While Berebitsky's study is powerful in its depth and thoughtfulness, it deals specifically with the experience of white, middle class adoptive mothers. It is undeniable that this group of women comprised the overwhelming majority of adoptive mothers during the period of this study; however, it seems that this book leaves voices yet to be heard. Berebitsky's study lays a foundation on which others may build. Analyzing the progression of the cultural construct we call adoptive motherhood will enable us to see into other facets of this phenomenon. Readers will find Berebitsky's work engaging, informative, and time well spent.

*Ten Thousand Sorrows: The Extraordinary Journey of a Korean War Orphan*

by Elizabeth Kim

Doubleday, 2000

Reviewed by Erin Newport

*On the night Omma Died, it seemed as if the Land of Morning Calm held its breath in disbelief at the horror visited upon its children.*

So begins Elizabeth Kim's memoir to her mother and her lost childhood, an offering rich with both beautiful and destructive images of our nature as human beings in a story that will haunt and horrify the reader. For those interested in transracial adoptions, in cultural responses to illegitimacy, in Asian-American and women's studies, this book will not disappoint.

The book begins with the portrayal of a violent and oppressive Korean culture where "Women are at the very bottom of the hierarchy and existed only to serve men and give birth to men" (11). Here Kim begins her young life labeled a honhyol, a non-person, the child of an unwed Korean woman and an American serviceman. As a child, she witnesses her mother's hanging at the hands of her grandfather and uncle in a "mercy killing" for having a child of mixed-race. Kim is subsequently tortured by family members until an Aunt intercedes to save her life, promising to take the child to an orphanage in Seoul where she is abandoned in every sense, given no name and no birthdate.

The narrative follows her life at the orphanage and her adoption by a dysfunctional American couple. Throughout the story, sorrow upon sorrow is visited upon her; however, what is most remarkable about Kim's story is her ability to juxtapose beautifully these disturbing moments with artful prose recollections of her brief childhood under the tender care of her mother, her "Omma," or with haunting verse, such as the following:

*The rain comes down in the forest of my dreams.  
Through the mist I glimpse velvet, verdant green.  
Wash away my tears, all the lost and lonely years  
While the leaves sing love songs to me. (165)*

Kim lives out much of her life in a continuation of her mother's social situation, as an outcast who was "tolerated but not embraced" (14). So too is Kim,

in an abusive adoptive family and marriage where she seems tolerated, but never fully embraced by anyone until she gives birth to her own daughter. In the moments Kim writes of herself as a mother, the reader is given a partial pardon from the despondency of her story by recalling and reaffirming the tender affinity between Kim and her birth mother.

The book examines the roles of women in Korean and American culture, and how this plays out in a life Kim cannot seem to control and in which she continually struggles to find her place. Exquisitely and honestly, she relates an infatuation with physical intimacy in search for connections meaningful and powerful. The book is a gracious gift that allows the reader into Kim's life of continual yearning for her mother and her search for identity and love.

*Banished Babies: The Secret History of Ireland's Baby Export Business*

by Mike Milotte

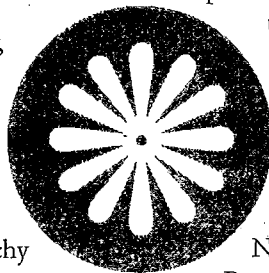
New Island Books, 1997

Reviewed by C. M. Malm

To the extent that it suggests the violent removal of a school-age child—a child already integrated into Irish society—the cut-up cover photograph on Mike Milotte's *Banished Babies* is somewhat disingenuous. Most of the illegitimate children sent to America for adoption were infants or preschoolers who already lived in the isolated world of Catholic charity homes and who had little hope of acceptance into a society in which bastard birth carried a heavy stigma. Nevertheless, the emotional impact of the cover—evoking a shock not unlike that produced by the death or kidnapping of a child—accurately conveys the book's portrayal of exported Irish babies as the victims of religiously-sanctioned kidnapping.

Mike Milotte is a senior television reporter for the RTE, and the book (a follow-up to a TV documentary on the same subject) is definitely an *exposé*. What Milotte reveals is the complicity of the leadership of the Irish Catholic church and the near-silence of the government while thousands of Irish babies were taken from the country by wealthy, childless, American Catholic couples, mostly during the 1940s, 50s and 60s.

Although the fate of these illegitimate children before the baby export business began is not clearly spelled out, it is apparent that the social, moral, and legal climate of mid-twentieth century Ireland made their exportation seem like a near-ideal solution. The children got a "better



life." The nuns benefited, both as a result of generous "donations" to charity homes by adoptive parents, and because without such adoptions the homes would be overflowing with illegitimate children and birthmothers--girls who were often forced to work at the homes for years to repay their "debt" to the nuns. And the parents got "pure" white children--something impossible to know about a "foundling" child in the United States. The losers, however, were Ireland (already suffering from excessive emigration) and the birth mothers, whose children were often taken from them whether they were willing to give them up or not.

Irish political officials--who did not legalize adoption within Ireland until 1952--seem to have had only minimal concerns about the suitability of this solution. Nevertheless, Milotte's unearthing of numerous documents shows how such adoptions continued to be arranged by clearly illegal means (including the forging of original birth certificates), how Catholic officials persistently covered up their illegal actions, and how government officials seemed unable to consistently enforce what few laws did govern the business of American adoption.

Particularly troubling is the suggestion that many of the officials--both church and secular--were exporting their own "misdeeds," and that the (unnamed) man chiefly responsible for the actual profit-making business of arranging many of these adoptions has still not been brought to justice.

Milotte's exposure of Irish politicians and churchmen appears to be the major focus of his research, and he seems to tell the story as well as it can be told at present. But another issue is persistently raised--the fate of the adopted children--and here there is a failure to go far enough in the investigation. The problems involved in assuring that American parents were meeting the qualifications established by the Irish church and state are discussed at length. But although Milotte asserts repeatedly that many of the adopting couples were "unsuitable," this assertion lacks adequate evidence. Even the term "unsuitable" is never very clearly defined.

*Banished Babies* demonstrates that the issues surrounding unwed motherhood and the profitability of adoption were addressed in much the same way in Ireland as they were in the U.S. during the post-WWII period, although the problem was undoubtedly magnified by the heavy involvement of the Catholic church in Irish society and Ireland's social welfare programs. Unwed mothers were banished to maternity homes where they were "punished" for their sins, and the resulting children were

whisked away--after extreme pressure on the birthmothers to relinquish them--for the profit of others. The main difference appears to be the destination of the children and the fewer legal protections afforded to Irish birthmothers. Ireland appears to have woken up to the injustice of this system only a decade or so later than the U.S., but the alteration, forging, and hiding of records--far worse than in the U.S.--means that adopted Irish children have even less chance of reconnecting with their birth families.

## Jackie Kay in Pittsburgh

Jackie Kay, acclaimed Black Scottish poet and author of the book *The Adoption Papers* (1991), will be visiting the University of Pittsburgh this Fall.

She will give a public reading on Tuesday, December 4 at 8pm, 501 Cathedral of Learning, U of Pittsburgh, in connection with a course offered by Marianne Novy on the Literature of Adoption.

*Ma mammy bot me oot a shop  
Ma mammy says I was a luvly baby*

*Ma mammy picked me (I wix best)  
your mammy had to take you (she'd no choice)*

*Ma mammy says she's no really ma mammy  
(just kid on)*

*It's a bit like a part you've rehearsed so well  
you can't play it on the opening night  
She says my real mammy is away far away  
Mammy why aren't you and me the same  
colour*

*But I love my mammy whether she's real or no  
My heart started rat tat tat like a tin drum  
all the words took off to another planet  
Why*

-- from *The Adoption Papers*

*Can You Wave Bye Bye, Baby?*

by Elyse Gasco

Picador USA, 1999

Reviewed by Lisa Rasmussen

A birth mother reconciles the relinquishment of her unborn child by saying, "only the remembering and imagining...are important" (20). Memory and imagination are two central themes in Elyse Gasco's collection of short stories, *Can You Wave Bye Bye, Baby?* Creating a story where the truth is unobtainable is a frequent coping method, from birth mothers making plans for "when I start my life over again" (11) to an adopted woman inventing ghost-like images of her birth mother. Because these stories express so many common themes found in adoption literature, some feel as if you've read them before; nevertheless, Gasco provides a new perspective on many facets of adoption.

One of her stories, "Mother. Not a True Story," deals with an adoptive mother's turmoil and deception directed toward her daughter who wants to find her birth mother. Told from the perspective of the adoptive mother, this story takes an unexpected turn. The mother, not knowing the "right" course of action, whether or not to give permission for her daughter to begin a search, finds herself creating an imaginary birth mother for her daughter. We still see an adoptive mother's fear of losing her daughter, but unlike the other stories, this one features a mother unable to "take the high road" or learn from her daughter's need to know. Gasco takes the common theme of deception, usually used in covering up the occurrence of an adoption, and manipulates it. The daughter knows her entire life that she is adopted; it is in her teen years that her mother begins to deceive her.

"The Spider of Bumba," the only of Gasco's seven stories to use a man as a central character, shows the perspective of a birth father unaware that he has a child. Upon discovering his child, the father kidnaps her from her adoptive parents. In the beginning, the daughter dreams of "the Other People," her adoptive parents, but these dreams eventually fade. Through time, the memory of her former life dwindles, and with the encouragement of her father, she learns to focus on reality and truth, neglecting memory and imagination.

In reading the collection, there is a sense of continuity, as if all of the stories belonged to one person, told from different perspectives, at different points in her life. Details, such as the veterinary husband, recur in multiple stories, but are hindered by the inclusion of the birth father story, which progresses through multiple life stages, seemingly negating cohesion. It is entirely possible, however, that this is a father fantasy, an imagined story, of the adoptee from the other six stories. Although memory and imagination are prevalent throughout the seven stories, Gasco does address other themes found in the genre of adoption literature. Birth parents' rights, mother-daughter relationships, the doubt an adoptee experiences in having her own child, and the fear of passing on "bad" traits all find their way into Gasco's stories. The narrator's internal dialogue on issues of adoption make Gasco's collection an important contribution to North American adoption fiction.

*Orphan Trains:*

*The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children He Saved and Failed*

Stephen O'Connor

Houghton Mifflin, 2001

Reviewed by Carol Russell

In his book, *Orphan Trains*, O'Connor has chronicled the pioneering child-welfare efforts of Charles Loring Brace, who started the Children's Aid Society in 1853. *Orphan Trains* is effectively laced with interesting, authentic and sometimes alarming stories and letters from New York orphans who rode the infamous "trains" in order to be adopted by families in the West. It is through these original letters and personal interviews that O'Connor discloses some of the "untold" stories -- the atrocities of abuse and neglect endured by the orphans placed by the CAS.

One such letter was from Harry Morris. He was sent west by the Children's Aid Society, pushed into a "crowded to suffocation freight-car without windows" (109). He rode the train west virtually in darkness until the day when he was "chosen" by a farmer to help with the chores. However, his promise of employment and family placement was not fulfilled and he made his way back to New York as a runaway, to be reunited with family members. Harry was one of the sixteen percent who were sent west only to run away or simply leave their placements in search of what Brace had promised them: shelter, education, and "a chance for a better life" (140). Though O'Connor claims that "the



orphan trains gave homeless children alternatives to jails, juvenile asylums and traditional indentured servitude" (155), he equitably describes the difficulties encountered by both participants of the emigration program as well as social workers.

The bulk of *Orphan Trains* reflects the tremendous research O'Connor has done to reveal how Charles Loring Brace sought to reform social disintegration in New York from the 1850s through the 1920s. O'Connor states that twenty to thirty percent of the New York population were orphaned and destitute children (98). He has gathered much of his research from primary sources, such as the *Company Books* from 1854-1909, *Sketches and Incidents in the Office of the Children's Aid Society 1857-59*. Even his chapter titles, such as "Draining the City," "Almost a Miracle," and "Invisible Children" reveal his insight into the world of the impoverished family of the late-nineteenth century.

O'Connor's final issue is to make the connection "between the orphan trains and our own child welfare programs" (xxi). He makes a plea to monitor placements by allocating fewer cases for social workers and donating financially to the child-welfare cause because he believes, as did Brace, "that the sacredness of children and families is a fundamental American value. Our whole nation has a lot to gain by doing what *can be done* and what is *right* to do for the neediest and most defenseless members of society (330). O'Connor does admit that today's social service methods have severe difficulties as well, with some ending in tragedy as with some of aspects of CAS.

Although O'Connor provides evidence of failure in Brace's placing-out system and makes a connection to today's system of foster care, this book should be read in the historical context it views. O'Connor does not romanticize Brace's foundational beginnings of social welfare programs. Instead, he provides the reader with poignant portraits of the people we will forever remember as the children of the orphan trains.

*The Velveteen Father:  
An Unexpected Journey to Parenthood*  
Villard Books, 1999  
Reviewed by Shawna S. Dulan

This memoir invites the reader to take an intimate look into the life of author Jesse Green, as we witness his lover, Andy, journey down the path of adoptive parenthood. In his book, Green addresses the already delicate matter of adoption, yet takes the issue a step further when he

successfully illustrates the struggles of Andy, a single, Jewish, gay man and his dedication in the quest to adopt.

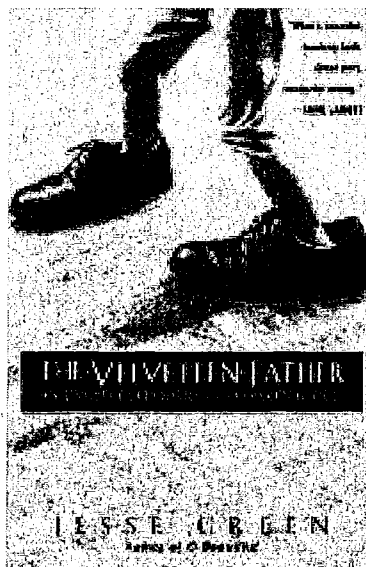
Early in the book, we visit Andy's past and follow him through the degrading act of masturbation as he makes deposits in a New York City sperm bank, in hopes of artificially inseminating one of the two Karens, a lesbian couple. When neither of them become pregnant, they reject Andy, severing their friendship and thwarting his attempts at becoming a father. Andy soon realizes he was no more than a sperm-donating pawn, and the rejection by the Karens encourages him to pursue another avenue. He decides to adopt a child of his own.

The adoption option proves to be an equally taxing process for Andy. Green vividly captures the boundaries set by many adoption agencies, and members from both the gay and straight communities who question his motives. While gay and lesbian adoption is slowly gaining acceptance in the 1980s, the onset of HIV and rise in crack cocaine addiction in the general population is "thr[owing] the already unbalanced supply-and-demand adoption economy entirely out of whack" (15). Many single gay men are willing to adopt these "special needs" babies, but Andy, after much anticipation and red tape, ultimately adopts Erez, a healthy Latino baby boy.

Just as Andy is contemplating child-rearing, Green is on the opposite end of the parenting axis. He believes that there is a lifestyle choice that one has to make, and finds no interest in becoming a father.

Green celebrates his sexuality and independence. As a childless gay man, he is able to travel abroad and invest in expensive homes instead of college funds. "Never trust patterns," he warns us throughout the book. His life abruptly changes when he meets, and falls in love with Andy--and his son, Erez.

*The Velveteen Father* focuses on the relationship between Green and Andy, as they "cross over" a threshold into a new life as a family unit. It is a story of truth and identity, love and despair. It is a story of relationships, family bonds and determination. Borrowing from the theme of Margery Williams' *The Velveteen Rabbit*, Green illustrates how the love of a child can indeed make one real.



## MLA 2001: New Orleans

(Continued from page 1)

Nick Carbo and Susan Ito will participate in a reading of poetry and prose about adoption and color at this year's MLA Convention. They will read some of their own work, and some by others.

In addition to editing volumes of Filipino poetry, Carbo, a Filipino-American adoptee, has published three books of his own poems, *Secret Asian Man* (2000), *El Grupo McDonald's* (1995), and *Running Amok* (1992). He has received a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, residencies at McDowell and Yaddo, and other awards, and has held visiting positions teaching creative writing at Miami, Pittsburgh, Rutgers, Hofstra, Manhattan College, American University, Iowa Summer Writing Festival, and elsewhere.

Susan Ito, a Japanese-American adoptee, coedited (with Tina Cervin) *A Ghost at Heart's Edge: Stories and Poems of Adoption* (1999). Donna Seaman, in the *Hungry Mind Review*, called this book, "A vital and unforgettable reading experience for everyone," and other reviewers have termed it "beautifully compiled," "moving," and "wonderful." Ito's fiction, poetry, and nonfiction have appeared in *Growing Up Asian American*, *Making More Waves*, *Two Worlds Walking*, and elsewhere. She is the founder of Rice Papers, a Bay Area organization of Asian-American women writers, and teaches writing at the University of California Berkeley's Extension program.

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For the first time since 1996, the MLA Convention will include a special session dealing with adoption. "Adoption, Nation, and Race: Family as Contact Zone," chaired by Marianne Novy (U of Pittsburgh), will examine adoption narratives that involve racial and national difference.

In the first paper, "Renaming the Body, Rewriting Race: Adoption in Anglo-Indian Novels," Nancy Paxton (Northern Arizona U) will explore how Victorian novels began to reimagine adoption when colonial children in British India were adopted by Indian families. She compares Kipling's *Kim* with children in W.J.G. Kingston's *The Young Rajah* (1876), Sara Jeannette

Duncan's *The Story of Sonny Sahib* (1895), Philip Oliphant's *Maya* (1908) and others, shows the obsession with skin color as race overrides class, and considers why British imperial identity in this period was anchored by reference to a "nationalized family." Paxton is author of *Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel, 1900-1930* (2000), *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer: Feminism, Evolutionism, and the Reconstruction of Gender* (1991), and co-editor (with Lynn Hapgood) of *Writing Under the Raj: Gender, Race, and Rape in the British Colonial Imagination, 1830-1947* (1999).

In the second, "Ramona's Uneasy Adopted Mexicanness," Robert McKee Irwin (Tulane U) will consider the function of adoption in Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1884). Raised by Mexicans in the U.S., Ramona turns out to be half Scottish and half Native American by birth; she marries another Native American but after his death moves to Mexico. Irwin reads the novel as an ambivalent border text, reinforcing the values of both the U.S. literary tradition and the tradition of Jose Marti's "Nuestra America," but constructing a satisfactory national allegory in neither context. Irwin is co-editor (with Sylvia Molloy) of *Hispanisms and Homosexualities* (1998). He is in the process of publishing his dissertation, *Mexican Masculinities: The Trials and Tribulations of los Hijos de la Chingada*, and is at work on a new book project, *Al Borde: The Anti-National Romances of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 1848-1910*.

In the third, "Adoption as Foreign Policy in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I* and Pearl Buck's *Welcome House*," Danielle Glassmeyer (Loyola U, Chicago) will examine two Cold War popular narratives that portray a Western woman's concern for Asian children, and, she argues, construct the American attitude to Asia as maternal adoption of a young nation. She reads both *The King and I* and Buck's description of the founding of Welcome House, her international adoption agency, to suggest that American popular culture used the model of adoption to justify intervention in Asia. Glassmeyer recently finished a dissertation on "*Sentimental Orientalism*" and *American Intervention in Vietnam*. She has spoken on Tom Dooley and on "Orientalism in Hollywood Film."

Marianne Novy is author of several books and editor of the recent critical anthology, *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture* (2001). She is co-chair (with Carol J. Singley) of the Alliance.

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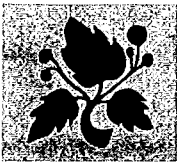
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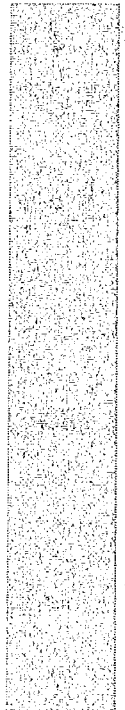


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- Jill R. Deans (Kansas State University)
- Barbara Melosh (George Mason University)
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