

Summer 2004

Volume V

Supplement

Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity & Kinship

Conference Planning, Fall 2005

Emily Hipchen and Marianne Novy, with help from others, are planning a conference on adoption and the humanities, sponsored by the Alliance for the Study of Adoption, Identity, and Kinship, in Tampa in October 2005. Please let us know about problem dates, if you are interested in coming but know of weekends where there are significantly competing events. Other suggestions are also welcome.

ASAIK Meeting at MLA

The Alliance does not have an activity listed in the program for the Philadelphia MLA. However, we would like to arrange a time to get together. We are currently planning to meet at the Cash Bar for the Division on Autobiography, Biography, and Life Writing, which will most likely be from 5:15 to 6:30 on December 28 or 29. Emily will definitely be there. If you expect to come, or have other suggestions for meeting, let us know.

Teaching Adoption in the Humanities

This supplement to ASAIK's winter newsletter is dedicated to the dissemination of information and ideas about teaching adoption: specifically, we have printed the abstracts from the 2004 NEMLA conference roundtable discussion of teaching adoption in literature.

The roundtable was led by Jill Deans and Cynthia Callahan. Jill has taught numerous adoption-themed courses, including a topic-based undergraduate course, "Family in Literature," an honor's writing seminar with the same title, and a graduate cultural studies seminar called "Adoption in Literature and Culture," all at Kansas State University. She is currently teaching freshman writing seminars that include units on adoption literature at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. Cynthia developed a course titled, "The Culture of Adoption in America" for undergraduates at Trinity College in Hartford, CT.

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“Testing Perceptions: Three Exercises in Teaching Adoption in Literature”

Jill R. Deans

Students approach adoption with preconceived notions. Even if they have relatively little experience with the topic, they are likely to find themselves passionate about the representation of specific adoption policies or practices. Rather than avoid or dampen emotional outbreaks, it's useful to harness them and make them work for the course, steering students towards an informed discussion about various elements of adoption culture in context. The following exercises help students become more self-conscious about their perceptions of adoption within a broader framework, including national perceptions, history, or the rendering of adoption in memoir, fiction or poetry.

Statistics Blitz

This use of stats is designed to provoke discussion, NOT establish quantifiable facts. I often open a course or unit focused on adoption with an array of statistics about adoption in the United States from a wide variety of sources, from U.S. Government data to special interest group web sites to the media. I will often pair the blitz with sample questions from the Evan B. Donaldson surveys on adoption. Student reaction to statistics and the survey reveal two important things: first, it demonstrates an ability to consider data within a cultural context and second, it exposes perceptions and feelings about adoption as a social institution.

Dueling Texts

This exercise involves pairing adoption texts, usually from the same genre, containing similar attributes, but diverging in some obvious way. For example, I have used Betty Jean Lifton's *Twice Born: Memoirs of an Adopted Daughter* and Sarah Saffian's *Ithaka: A Daughter's Memoir of Being Found*, two adoption autobiographies, written by adoptees, both involving the search for biogenetic relations. Lifton's book celebrates the quest for origins, while Ithaka describes the author's reluctance to forge an immediate connection with the birth parents who found her. We spend time on gut reactions, as we do with statistics and the survey, probing specifics in each text along the way. Most students veer away from a "like/dislike" approach, questioning efficacy of each author's style within the limits of the book's established aims.

Faces of Adoption

My objective here is for students to create a visual representation of their analysis of an adoption poem, revealing ideas, images, themes they might not have discovered through a traditional discussion-based analysis. In my examples, students read poems from Susan Ito and Tina Cervin's anthology, *A Ghost at Heart's Edge*. They pair up and are asked to render "the face of adoption" portrayed in the poem through a paper bag puppet. Before they are allowed to touch the scissors and glue, they meet and discuss the poem, answer some basic interpretive questions, and come up with a design plan. Then and only then are they allowed to "play." In the artistic phase of the exercise, the designs are modified as students continued to discuss the poem, now in terms of its visual significance and their own creative impulses and limitations. The results are a unique blend of poetic expression and reader-response accompanied by some provocative discussion about their choices and results.

Each of these exercises emphasizes the student's viewpoint as she approaches some politically charged material. Allowing students to express their personal feelings in the process of critical analysis is a delicate balance and requires that you establish some limits. Getting the issues on the table, however, is the primary goal and students are often able to find in-roads to more "traditional" essay assignments once they understand the relative perspectives that complicate adoption and its representation in art and culture.



“Examining the Familiar: Pedagogical Approaches to the Literature of Adoption”

Cynthia A. Callahan

Literary representations of adoption offer fruitful pedagogical opportunities. Their concerns are “familiar” not only because they feature family relationships but also because they are recognizable to virtually anyone. These texts introduce questions about the expansiveness of our definitions of family, the significance of genealogy, and the endurance of family connections. At the [Examining the Familiar, continued]

same time, however, the very practice of adoption emphasizes its “otherness” as an alternative kinship structure based on social consensus and legal precedent rather than on biology. This paradoxical combination of familiarity and otherness makes the study of adoption in literature particularly productive. Students must apply a critical lens to a largely uninterrogated phenomenon, kinship. More importantly, these texts raise a variety of complex and often unanticipated issues related to gender, race, biology, history, and individual and community identity, extending the significance of adoption far past the individual concerns of those intimately connected with it. This essay discusses the ways in which adoption is represented in literary texts and demonstrates how these modes of representation lend themselves to study in an interdisciplinary humanities college course. It outlines a section of the course featuring adoption autobiographies—Betty Jean Lifton’s *Twice Born* (1975) and Dan Savage’s *The Kid* (2000)—and offers a strategy for situating these texts in literary, sociological, and historical contexts. Finally I discuss a sample essay assignment that allows students to focus on the use of personal narrative to write persuasive essays.



“The Literature of Adoption: Some Beginning Questions”
Lynne Dickson Bruckner

What counts as adoption literature? What are the most salient issues in adoption literature? What genres and modes of representation are most conducive to successful classroom treatments of adoption? Marianne Novy’s anthology, *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture* is an important resource for addressing these questions. Certainly, teaching this literature requires a difficult, though productive, pedagogical balancing act: moving students to see how adoption raises those issues of culture, identity, family, and heredity that we all share, while simultaneously helping them maintain a respect for the distinct experiences of the adoptee and those in the adoption triad. In terms of texts and genre, the memoir has done much to mark out the discourse of adoption, but scholars are equally interested in how adoption has been represented in magazines, legal documents, the visual arts, novels, poems, and films. Texts to consider for undergraduate classes include Jackie Kay’s *The Adoption Papers*, the more autobiographical essays in Novy’s anthology, *Seeds from A Silent Tree: An Anthology by Korean Adoptees*, and *A Ghost at Heart’s Edge: Stories and Poems of Adoption*. There are multiple and complex questions to be raised in the classroom: How does the text represent the particular situation of the adoptee—an individual with two sets of parents? How have official documents in conjunction with practices of naming/renaming been used to appropriate and erase the history of adoptees? How does a given text interrogate (or reify) how adoption—or any individual in the adoption triangle—has been inscribed as a deficient? How have the trope of motherhood and the construction of women’s roles served to make the voice of the birth mother virtually untenable? How are race, class, and/or gender negotiated or brought together differently in the literature and institution of adoption? How has the institution of adoption been used as a vehicle to produce national homogeneity and to modify, marginalize, and/or relocate those who have been deemed less socially convenient? Why has so much literature romanticized the institution of adoption? While many of these questions are daunting and perhaps irresolvable, they should not be a deterrent to teaching this rich and important literature.



“Teaching Colonial to Nineteenth-Century American Adoption Literature”
Carol J. Singley

Although a common feature of American literature, adoption is often missing in literary discourse about constructions of US individual, family, and national identity. This omission occurs in part because theories of identity are often predicated, implicitly or explicitly, on genealogically-based models and in part because kinship is less frequently used as a lens to examine

[Teaching Colonial to Nineteenth-Century American Adoption Literature, continued]

literature than categories such as race, gender, and class. In contrast, I would argue that kinship structures, and adoptive ones in particular, are central to understanding American literature and culture.

Adoption's signifying power is suggested by the fact that at points in history adoption has been marginalized, stigmatized, and even made secret by custom and law (Carp, Melosh). It has not, to use Priscilla Wald's phrase, been part of the "official stories [that] constitute Americans" (1). At the heart of discussions about adoption lies ambivalence. This ambivalence stems, in Western culture generally and in American society especially, from a deeply rooted, historical definition of identity as that which is derived only through bloodline, and from a modern belief in the power of individuals to shape their own lives. These competing sensibilities gain special potency in an American context, in which the genesis and development of the republic is predicated on genealogical rupture and fusion. That is, the story of American adoption is embedded in that of the nation itself.

The republic was founded on the concept of breaking away from a "birth parent" country England and adopting, or being adopted by, a new land. The nation was an initially "imagined" to borrow Benedict Anderson's term, not as continuous genealogy, but as community constructed by a consensual process of disaffiliation and re-affiliation. Indeed, the United States remains today a nation of immigrants drawn together by geography and common purpose rather than by blood—a nation as equally dependent on creation as on generation. Yet even as they embrace newness as a hallmark of national identity, Americans remain fascinated by genealogy. Their ambivalence toward adoption derives from this preoccupation with origins, located in the inheritance of a hegemonic Anglo-European culture, and an ideological commitment to severing all genealogical ties, starting afresh, and creating oneself and one's nation anew. Adoption narratives dramatize the struggle of individuals and families to draw and redraw lines of bonds and affection; on a larger scale, they portray a nation wrestling in multiple ways with conflicting notions of citizenship in which belonging and entitlement are bestowed either by birthright or by ideology.

A study of American adoption might begin with sermons of Puritan minister Cotton Mather, which model the adoption of orphans on the desire for "adoption" or salvation by a heavenly Father. It might include Samuel Sewall's diary, which chronicles the Puritan practice of placing children in others' homes for education and training. It might continue with Indian captivity narratives—for example, those by Mary Rowlandson (1682) and Mary Jemison (1824)—and with historical romances *Hobomok* (1824) by Lydia Maria Child and *Hope Leslie* (1827) by Catharine Maria Sedgwick, in which cross-adoptions of whites and Indians articulate and help define the struggle for rights between these two groups. It might include Benjamin Franklin's autobiography (1791-1798). Franklin, advocate of American rebellion against the restrictive parental authority of England, promotes liberty and self-adoption; his public role as founding father and signer of the Declaration of Independence depends upon his willingness to sever relations with birth nation. However, by addressing his autobiographical letter to his son—who responds to questions of loyalty by becoming a Tory, not a rebel—and by opening his memoir with a description of his genealogical search in England, Franklin reveals his attachment to roots as well as to adoption.

In the mid-nineteenth-century, novels of orphans and adoptions abound. One thinks of Ellen in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1851); Gerty in Susanna Maria Cummins' *The Lamplighter* (1854), Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Dan in Louisa May Alcott's *Jo's Boys*; boys in Horatio Alger's Ragged Dick volumes; as well characters who fail to achieve adoption, such as Frado in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) or Huck in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). In these novels, adoption does "cultural work," to use Jane Tompkins' term. The process of adoption, confirming inclusion while acknowledging genealogical rupture, contributed to the nation's sense of itself as cohesive yet flexible, capable of extending its boundaries and absorbing new ideas and individuals. At once multi-cultural and multi-familial, adoption is not an isolated literary element in American literature but a complex expression of ambivalent, sometimes contradictory, notions about the child, family, community, and nation.

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