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## Placing the “Gift Child” in Transnational Adoption

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In this article I focus on discourses of freedom and exclusive belonging that structure the conventions of giving in transnational adoption, and I examine state practices for regulating the production and circulation of children in a global market economy. I argue that while the gift child, like the sold child, is a product of commodity thinking, experiences of giving a child, receiving a child, and of being a given child are in tension with market practices, producing the contradictions of adoptive kinship, the ambiguities of adoption law, and the creative potential in the construction of adoptive families.

**gratuitous** 1. Given or granted without return or recompense; unearned.

2. Given or received without cost or obligation; free; gratis (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*).

What would be a gift that fulfills the condition of the gift, namely, that it not appear as gift, that it not be, exist, signify, want-to-say as gift? A gift without wanting, without wanting-to-say, an insignificant gift, a gift without intention to give? Why would we call that a gift?

—Jacques Derrida, *Given Time*, 1992

Even if reversibility is the objective truth of the discrete acts which ordinary experience knows in discrete form and calls gift exchanges, it is not the whole truth of a practice which could not exist if it were consciously perceived in accordance with the model. The temporal structure of gift exchange, which objectivism ignores, is what makes possible the existence of two opposing truths, which defines the full truth of the gift.

—Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 1977

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## Complex Truths

A front-page story in the October 25, 1998, edition of the *New York Times* describes an open adoption in which Kim Elniskey chose Yvette Weilacker and her husband to adopt her newborn son. The story, illustrated by a picture of the future adoptive mother reaching out to touch the child in the arms of his birth mother, quotes Elniskey as saying, “I want you to feel that this is your baby, your family” (Fein 1998:1). The only intimation of tension between giver and receiver, and the force this might have in shaping the landscape of adoption and the experience of the adopted child, is the comment, made almost in passing, that “loaded” phrases such as “real parent” and “natural parent” have been replaced in the current climate of transparency surrounding adoption. The birth parent gives, relinquishes, and chooses; the adoptive parent receives. Together, they become “part of a clan.”<sup>1</sup>

The fascination this story evokes—its representation of a selfless mother who gives her child away in order to create a family for him—is an effect of its moral ambiguity for the educated, white, middle-class audiences to whom it is directed. A mother who gives away her child is unthinkable. She gives the child away because she loves it so much, the story and its accompanying image imply; but the unspoken subtext—If she really loved the child, how could she bear to part from it?—is no less powerful a message in a moral economy in which becoming a woman is inseparable from the work of motherhood and the assumptions about nurturance this implies (Ginsburg 1989). A birth mother I interviewed several years ago, who had placed her infant son in an open adoption in 1993, described the shocked admiration of friends who told her she was “so brave,” followed immediately by the cautionary statement, “I could *never* give away my child.” This woman is still haunted by the sense that her gesture of love and trust was morally wrong, whatever her aspirations for her son, and that he will eventually condemn her for it, possibly hate her (Yngvesson 1997:55–56).<sup>2</sup>

What is one to make of the “gift child”? How are we to place such a child in a cultural universe where being given away by a mother is tantamount to abandonment, the worst fate that can be imagined for *any* child? In “Abandonment: What Do We Tell Them?” social worker and adoptive parent Jane Brown argues

<sup>1</sup> Fein (1998:30), quoting Jim Gritter, director of Catholic Human Services in Traverse City, Michigan, who advocates adoption as a “collaborative experience.”

<sup>2</sup> See Modell (1999) for a discussion of the rhetoric of giving in open adoptions.

that the “a-word” should be abandoned in favor of more neutral language—“making an adoption plan,” “placing” a child for adoption—which depict the motives of a mother in a way that is less injurious to the feelings of the adoptee (Brown 2000). For similar reasons, the rhetoric of giving has been criticized in how-to books on adoption, which suggest that placing the child is more of a piece with the birth mother’s increased visibility in contemporary (American) society. The visible birth mother makes “a voluntary decision and a positive plan” for her child, rather than giving her child away (Melina 1989:26–27; 1998:94–95). Similarly, the giving nation is positioned differently in contemporary adoption rhetoric, as vigilant over the loss of its most precious national resources—children—rather than as a country that has only children to give away (Carlson 1994:256; Yngvesson 2000:185; Stanley 1997:1).<sup>3</sup> The rhetoric of giving and the experience of loss go hand-in-hand in these representations, in which alienation (the split subject, the fragmented nation) is an inevitable consequence of “giving.” By contrast, child “placement”—understood as planned, consensual, and regulated by the nation-state—is celebrated by adoption professionals and policymakers.

In spite of efforts to reconceptualize the physical movement of a child between persons or nations as placement rather than gift, the gift child remains a powerful and persistent image in adoption discourse. I suggest that the reason this is so is related in part to the ambiguity of the concept—the difficulty of interpreting what gifts signify about the relationship (or absence of a relationship) between donor and receiver, an ambiguity that resonates with the experience of the adoptee, the adoptive family, and, in some cases, the birth family. Ambiguity, in turn, is a function of the traces gifts bear of their passage in the world—their movement from and to *someone* and *someplace*, however vague the identity of the donor may be. By contrast, “placement” conveys a sense of grounding and permanence that is at odds with the experience of *being adopted*, of *giving in adoption*, or of *adopting*, verbs that imply a transformation of belonging and identity. A woman who wrote in response to the *New York Times* article with which I began, commented on this disjunction between language and experience:

As an adult adoptee who has been struggling with her own feelings, I’d like to remind birth and adoptive parents that the question “why did your real mother give you away?” will haunt the adopted child no matter how trained we all become in using the “language of adoption”—for example, the term “birth mother” as a substitute for “real mother” or “natural mother.”

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<sup>3</sup> Nanuli Shevardnadze told the *New York Times* in 1997 that she was “categorically against foreign adoption,” adding that “our nation’s gene pool is being depleted” (Stanley 1997:1).

Though your Oct. 25 front-page article claims that open adoptions make the process an "infinitely more transparent experience," the anxiety to cover the painful feelings of all parties is still obvious in the concern with controlling language. (Duckham 1998:A28)

In what follows, I examine the concept of the adopted child as gift and explore the difficulties of an interpretation of such gifts as "freely given." Building on Marilyn Strathern's (1988) discussion of giving relationships as "enchaining" giver and receiver, rather than freeing them, and drawing on the experiences of agencies, orphanages, adoptive parents, birth parents, and adoptees, I argue that the enchainments of adoptive kinship open up our understandings of family and identity, and the ideas about exclusive belonging these understandings assume. Practices of adoptive kinship that seek to counter the alienation of the child and the divisions of the adoptive family by imagining placement to be a consequence of voluntarism by a birth mother or of "choice" by prospective adoptive parents obscure the dependencies and inequalities that compel some of us to give birth to and give up our children, while constituting others as "free" to adopt them.<sup>4</sup> By examining the ways in which the gift of a child always leaves a trace and implies the potential for a return, I suggest how an adoptee's lived experiences of being given away may transform our understandings of personhood, identity, and belonging in an adopted world. However freestanding the child is "made" by adoption law, he or she can *never* be free of the "implicate field of persons" in which he or she was constituted as legally adoptable.<sup>5</sup>

### Commodity Thinking

The emphasis on freedom in forging the relations of adoptive kinship is deeply embedded in adoption law, both at national and international levels. Adoption lawyer Joan Hollinger noted some years ago in a discussion of U.S. adoption law that "birthparents are said to 'bestow' their children directly upon the adoptive parents or to 'surrender' them to child-placing agencies. . . . 'Solicitation' of children is deplored" (1993:49). In Massachusetts, the birth mother is required by law to "voluntarily and unconditionally surrender" her child to the guardianship of the state or of the future adoptive parents (Yngvesson 1997:34). In California, a social worker who obtains a birth mother's consent

<sup>4</sup> Susan Wadia-Ells (1995) provides a moving account of her own coming to terms with the material reality confronting her adopted son's birth mother, and her sense of the "profound cultural arrogance" involved in the assumptions and practices surrounding what she had assumed to be the "incredible gift" of a child (1995:118–22).

<sup>5</sup> The phrase is Marilyn Strathern's (1997:298), in a discussion of the relationship of sociality to the production of persons in Melanesia.

to relinquish her child is required to ascertain that she is not “taking any medications that might alter [her] reasoning” (Interview, RP 11/16/94)—that is, the social worker must ensure that there is nothing that might inhibit the freedom with which the birth mother gives her consent to the adoption. International conventions, such as the *Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* (Hague Conference, 1993) also emphasize that “persons, institutions and authorities have given their consent freely, in the required legal form, and expressed or evidenced in writing.” The consents must “not have been induced by payment or compensation of any kind” (1993, Article 4).

Concern regarding the freedom of a birth mother from inducements that might jeopardize the validity of her consent is matched by the conceptualization of the institutions and/or parents who receive the child as receiving him or her gratuitously. Any payment must be characterized as a payment for services or as an “act of charity” to an orphanage or other child welfare institution, not as payment for a child (Hollinger 1993:49). As Hollinger notes, “The notion that adoption is not contractual is so powerful that it obscures the extent to which bargaining is intrinsic to a transfer of a child by a birthparent in exchange for a promise by adoptive parents or an agency to support and care for the child and thereby relieve the birthparent of these legal duties” (1993:49).

The centrality of freedom in the discourse of giving and receiving children in adoption is linked to a second key feature of adoption law, its finality. The laws of most adopting nations, whether they typically “give” children or “receive” them, require or state a preference for “strong” adoptions. In strong adoptions, the decision of a woman to surrender her child is irrevocable, and the adoption that follows creates a permanent and exclusive relationship of adoptive kinship that cannot be “undone.”<sup>6</sup> In the United States, where adoptions are both unconditional and irrevocable (Hollinger 1993), efforts by adoptees, adoptive parents, and many birth mothers to secure legislation that would make adoption records public have had only limited success (Wegar 1997; Carp 1998; Verhovek 2000; Yngvesson & Mahoney 2000). The only way for adopted adults and the birth parents who “placed” them to discover how the adoption “plan” was made, and what led to the decision to make such a plan, is to work around laws that define the adoptive family as the *only* family of an adopted child. In Chile, an official who oversaw thousands of surrenders of children by women who could not keep them and who hoped to find homes for them through adoptions to Sweden

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<sup>6</sup> This term was used by a Swedish official commenting on a contested adoption involving a Colombian-born child (see p. 242).

and other nations in the 1970s and 1980s advised these women that “it will be like your child is dead to you” (Yngvesson 2003). International conventions urge “the termination of a pre-existing legal relationship between the child and his or her mother and father” (Hague Conference 1993, Art. 26) and suggest that receiving nations be permitted to “convert” an adoption that does not terminate such a relationship in the sending nation into an adoption that does so in the receiving nation (1993, Art. 27).

The combination of freedom to choose (to exit from a parenting relationship that is presumed to be natural and given) and closure (the new relationship is exclusive of other ties) are both dimensions of a global market economy in which commodity thinking defines the meaning of personhood. In commodity thinking, “persons are assumed to be proprietors of their persons (including their own will, their energies, and work in the general sense of directed activity)” (Strathern 1988:157). These “properties” of the person “belong” to them in a definitional sense and constitute the possessor “as a unitary social entity” (104). Moreover, “belonging” is understood as “an active proprietorship” (135). Persons “‘are’ what they ‘have’ or ‘do.’ Any interference with this one-to-one relationship is regarded as the intrusion of an ‘other’” (158). Just as the individual is assumed to be the owner of his or her own person in commodity thinking, so too is society conceptualized as “owning” the properties (persons) that intrinsically constitute it. The transferal of a child from one “owner” to another unsettles this relationship of product to producer—of a nation to “its” citizens, a parent to “its” child, or a person to his or her “nature” (as Colombian or Korean, or as the “natural” child of a particular parent or parents). In commodity thinking, separation from this ground of belonging cannot help but produce an alienated (split) subject, which will always be pulled “back” to where it *really* belongs.

The idea of gratuitous bestowal of the child that is so central a feature of adoption law developed as a response to the perceived danger of producing an alienated subject. Baby-giving could be interpreted as “admirable altruism,” because “we do not fear relinquishment of children unless it is accompanied by—understood in terms of, structured by—market rhetoric” (Radin 1996:139). But as Viviana Zelizer argues in her study of the sentimentalized or “priceless” child in America during the late-19th and early-20th centuries, baby-selling and baby-giving are part of the same system, a system in which licit markets depend on illicit ones to establish the value of “priceless” objects (1985:202–3). Indeed, a priceless (gift) child presents a legal quandary that is no less a cultural and social quandary: “How could value be assigned if price were absent?” (14). The adopted child embodies this quandary, in a world where the “fundamentally seductive idea of exchange” (Kopytoff 1986:72) leaves its trace on all enti-

ties, whether these are distinguished as “persons” or as “things.” In her movement from one family (and one nation) to another in adoption, the child experiences (and symbolizes) the meaning of pricelessness “in the full possible sense of the term” (1986:75): “thrown away like a blade of grass” by her mother (to quote a 6-year-old girl adopted from China by American parents), she is embraced by someone who has “traveled to the ends of the earth” (Serrill 1991:41) to become her parent.

### Price and Pricelessness

The interplay of value and the child’s capacity to be thrown away is the central paradox of adoptability, one that is especially salient in the international arena. In India, for example, which together with Korea became one of the earliest nations to “give” children to the overdeveloped world in adoption, the value of physically abandoned, institutionalized children developed as part of an economy of desire in which heterosexual, Caucasian couples from Europe and North America sought to adopt them (Yngvesson 2000).

The desire to adopt children from Third World orphanages was not initially a function of infertility and the “scarcity” of healthy, white infants in Western nations, although this rapidly became a central consideration. Instead, this desire took shape as a dimension of development discourse (Escobar 1995) in a postcolonial world in which child adoption operated in conjunction with other forms of aid. In Sweden—which has the largest percentage of international adoptees per capita of any nation (approximately 40,000 in a nation of 39 million) and is widely regarded as a pioneer in the field—international adoption was regarded in the 1960s and early 1970s as a *responsibility* for socially conscious citizens.

Reaction to this sense of responsibility in what were to become “sending” or “giving” nations was mixed. As one woman who adopted her daughter from a Delhi orphanage in 1964 explained, “[W]e weren’t exactly encouraged” by local officials. When she and her husband came to fetch their daughter at the orphanage, “they kept asking us, ‘Why on earth are you doing anything like this?’”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, one of the earliest contact persons in India for Swedish adopters observed that “as an underdeveloped country, the only thing we [could] give away is children, you know?” (Yngvesson 2000:185).

As the numbers of children moving to the overdeveloped world in adoption increased steadily during the 1970s and a growing international movement to protect children’s rights took shape (Therborn 1995), officials in sending nations began

<sup>7</sup> GA, interview, August 1999.

to voice concern about the potential for exploitation of children sent abroad in adoption.<sup>8</sup> These concerns provoked child welfare officials in India to hold a series of workshops, which continued into the late 1990s, with concerned adoption professionals from Western receiving nations. The workshops were sponsored by Sweden’s Adoption Centre and the International Social Service Committee in Geneva, and were held at regional and international meetings of the International Council of Social Welfare. In 1981, workshop participants produced the “Bombay Guidelines,” a document that defined the issues that were subsequently incorporated into a 1985 Indian Supreme Court Judgment, *Lakshmi Kant Pandey v. Union of India*. Justice Bhagwati, who presided over this landmark case, declared the Indian child to be a “supremely important national asset” on which the “physical and mental health of the nation is dependent” and which should be kept, whenever possible, in its nation of origin (*Lakshmi Kant Pandey* 1985:4–5). His judgment established a quota system for international adoptions, requiring that at least 50% of Indian children placed in adoption be placed domestically.

Justice Bhagwati’s ruling was a key moment in the legal recognition of the value of internationally adoptable children as a national resource of the country that produced them (Carlson 1994:256), a moment that was contingent, however, on the experiences of Indian child welfare officials that destitute children had become “commodities [in] an export market.”<sup>9</sup> By the early 1990s, when the Hague Conference on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption was convened with representatives of 66 sending and receiving nations, the most divisive issue separating senders from receivers was that of regulating an international market in adoptable children, while at the same time “placing” children in need of families in suitable homes.

The idea that legal adoption is a “market” is anathema to many adoptive parents, adoption agencies, and government officials in sending and receiving countries. But it is accepted as common (if sensational and often disturbing) sense by the public and many adoptees, some of whom comment ironically on their status as “Made in . . . Colombia [India, Korea, Nepal, Chile, and so forth].”<sup>10</sup> In a front page, three-part series featured in the *New*

<sup>8</sup> Adoptions from India to Sweden increased from 30 per year in the late 1960s to 300 to 400 annually between 1979 and 1985. For a discussion of trends during the growth period of international adoption, see Pilotti (1993).

<sup>9</sup> AD, interview, November 1995.

<sup>10</sup> In a performance by Swedish adoptees for adoptive parents at the biennial meeting of Stockholm’s Adoption Centre in 1997, over 100 intercountry adoptees marched onto a stage wearing identical white shirts with a Swedish flag on the front, then turned to reveal the words “Made in Colombia” (and so forth) on the back of each shirt. This was an obvious reference to Swedish products that are made in the developing world but identified as uniquely Swedish by a small blue and yellow flag glued to the side or bottom.



*York Times* in the fall of 1998, one article titled “Market Puts Price Tags on Priceless” presents adoption as a baby bazaar in which the color, culture, and condition of a child are for sale and race determines fees (Mansnerus 1998:A14). While noting that the actual sale of children is illegal in the United States and internationally, the *Times* points out that many adoptions today maintain only the finest line between buying a child and buying adoption services that lead to a child. This view underscores Viviana Zelizer’s argument that, in the United States (and, at the present time, internationally), adoption is a legal market in children, one that is entwined in complex ways with illegal markets to establish the value of an adoptable child (1985:202–3).

I suggest that what seems to be an irresolvable tension between the gift child and market practices that make her priceless is a function of the “double evocatory power” of gifts in commodity thinking (Strathern 1997:301). For an object to become a gift, it must be made freestanding: It must be broken free from a producer and constituted as “part of a[n anonymous] store on which others draw” (1997:302). Gifts, then, are alienable, like any other commodity. At the same time, once given, they become a means of building relationships; and relationships constituted through “giving” are interpreted as a function of love (1997:303). Gifts represent “the intimate altruism of transactions that typify personal relations outside the market . . . the wrapped present, the exhibited taste” (1997:301–2). This representation is only possible, however, if they are (imagined to be) “free” and “freely given.” The compelled gift is an oxymoron, suggesting that the giver has been induced, seduced, or otherwise placed in a relationship of indebtedness to the receiver. Indebtedness enters time and history into what is envisioned as a timeless relation of love, a relation that endures in spite of all contingencies.<sup>11</sup>

Conceptualizing the relinquishment of a child for adoption as a gift constitutes the relations involved as family relations in an economy where family is imagined as “natural” and not contractual (Schneider 1968), the site of “love relations” (Coontz 1992:53), not of law. Indeed, the given child constitutes the adoptive family as “family,” almost as though no adoption had taken place at all. It is precisely the complex identity of the adopted child as, on one hand, a “gift of love” that makes a family (complete), and, on the other, a “resource” that has been contractually alienated from one owner so that it can be attached to another, that produces the contradictions of adoptive kinship, the ambiguities of adoption law, and the creative tension in practices that surround the construction of adoptive families.

<sup>11</sup> See Hervé Varenne’s (1977:188–9) discussion of the place of love in American kinship as a way of “relating to” people who are seen as fundamentally separate from the “self.”

## The Production of Adoptability

These considerations are central to placing the gift child in the context of transnational adoption, and especially to an explanation of the role of the state in these types of transactions. Documents such as the *Hague Convention* (Hague Conference 1993), the earlier *UN Declaration on Adoption and Foster Care* (1986), and the *Child’s Right to Grow Up in a Family: Guidelines for Practice in National and Inter-country Adoption and Foster Care* (Adoption Centre 1997), as well as *Lakshmi Kant Pandey v. Union of India* (1985)—which established terms for the commodification of the child vis-à-vis the state—emphasize the rights of the child as a state resource and the state’s obligation to protect this resource. In particular, these documents focus on “identity rights”—to a name, a nationality, and to be cared for by one’s parents—that are essential in defining the resource status of the child: his or her ownership or belonging in or to a specific family or nation (Stephens 1995).

I suggest that while these rights are crucial protections in a global economy that promotes the circulation of children, to focus on them deflects attention from the role of the state in *producing* the physically abandoned child. Reconfigured as a “legal orphan” that is “available” for adoption, this child becomes a particular kind of “natural resource” for the state that has produced it. The role of the state in this form of production is both more subtle and more powerful than its role in producing identity rights. The transnational adoption of children cannot be explained without reference to state reproductive policies (Ceaușescu’s pro-natalism, China’s one-child policy, Korea’s protection of patriarchal bloodlines), to the *violencia* of wars, kidnappings, and disappearances in which the state is a key player (in Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Honduras, and other Latin American nations, e.g.), and to the incentives for “giving” these children in adoption that are provided by conventions and agreements among cooperating states. Children’s rights to an identity are constituted so that the mobility of certain children (who are defined as “adoptable” by the state) is facilitated (Hague Conference 1993, Art. 4), while the identities of all children are fixed so that they can *only* be thought in terms of a “State of origin” (1993:Preamble) and can only be defined in terms of exclusive “identity rights” that are authorized by the state.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A striking recent example of how state policy determines the mobility of children internationally is China’s recent decision to change its adoption law, permitting domestic adoptions of children by families who already have one child (Johnson 2002 [herein]). Experience with India’s regulation of international adoption in the mid-1980s suggests that such moves to encourage domestic adoption of “available” children transform the range of children considered adoptable abroad (and eventually, at home), in this way increasing the size and diversity of the pool of children available for adoption (see Yngveson 2000 for an elaboration of this point).

The dual role of the state in producing a child whose right to “the full and harmonious development of his or her personality” entitles him or her “to grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding” (1993:Preamble) even as it produces the conditions for the abandonment of children and determines the terms of their adoptability by other states illuminates once again the tension between giving and selling in commodity thinking, and the significance of marking the divide between state and market in these transactions. The adoptable child is not sold, but is given to other states in exchange for a donation of money, a transaction that creates an orderly (and hierarchical) relation of states to one another through the movement of valued resources (children) in adoption.

This orderly traffic is officially distinguished from a market in children (Hague Conference 1993, Art. 1), which is viewed as the source of alienation and loss for the adopted child. In the marketplace (of adoption), all that counts is money, and children become, in effect, *only* money, in this way losing “themselves.”<sup>13</sup> The gift child, by contrast, does *not* lose him- or herself (according to national laws and international conventions), either because the move is erased (the child’s belonging is transferred to a new family or country), or because the child’s source of belonging (his or her national identity) moves with the child. The assumption that identity is inalienable and moves with the child is implicit in everyday depictions of adopted children as “Chinese,” “Russian,” “Colombian,” and so forth. It can be seen as well in popular representations of adoption, such as the *New Yorker* cartoon that appeared a few years ago depicting two couples having dinner. One woman says to the other, “We’re so excited. I’m hoping for a Chinese girl, but Peter’s heart is set on a Native American boy” (7 July 1992). Here, the child moves, but “Chineseness,” “American Indianness,” “Koreanness,” or “Colombianness” remains the same (or rather, these qualities are enhanced and constituted anew as immutable in this movement).

As this discussion suggests, it is the *circulation* of persons, as promoted or prevented by state policy, that establishes borders, belongings, and the right of a child to “an identity.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, studies of undocumented immigrants in the United States suggest that their mobility or immobility is constituted by agents of the state in ways that secure a traversal of boundaries (the official act of immigration or deportation) only when recognized by im-

<sup>13</sup> See Greenhouse et al. (1994:100) for a discussion of people with “dollar signs in their eyes”; and see Radin (1996:18–21, 136–48) for a discussion of children and market inalienability.

<sup>14</sup> See Elizabeth Grosz’s discussion of this issue in *Space, Time and Perversion* (1995:131). Citing Massumi (1993:27–31), Grosz argues that “boundaries are only produced and set in the process of passage. Boundaries do not so much define the routes of passage: it is movement that defines and constitutes boundaries.”

migration officials, regardless of when the immigrants physically entered or departed the country (Coutin 2000:29–34). Likewise, the idea that adoptees originate in one place or another and have or lack parents (they are legally abandoned or do not qualify as abandoned) is also constituted by state agents.<sup>15</sup> Mobility (and the traversal of boundaries this implies) is fundamental to modernity and the fixed identities this requires.<sup>16</sup>

If identity is grounded in movement rather than immobility, what does this suggest about the place of the gift child? If identity (and its associated rights) is contingent on the cut-offs mandated by adoption law, citizenship decrees (Coutin 2000), and other legal processes that establish rights by erasing pre-existing social and legal ties, how might “giving” a child in adoption refigure not only identities but the transactions in which identities take shape? To explore this question, I begin with a re-examination of the meaning of a gift.

### Identity and Enchainment

The concept of “gratuitous transfer” of a child in adoption might be viewed as a legal and social fiction that “misrecognizes” the contractual nature of a process in which children are separated from one author and attached to another, in exchange for a promise to (exclusively) care for them. Marilyn Strathern, for example, argues that the alienability of gifts in a market economy is systemic—“[I]t is hardly admissible to decide that this particular transaction results in alienation, while that particular one does not” (1988:161). But as Pierre Bourdieu argues in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977:3), this approach fails to take into account the limits of a standpoint that grasps practices “from outside, as a *fait accompli*,” instead of situating itself “within the very movement of their accomplishment.” In order to situate oneself within the movement of practices, attention must be directed to their temporal structure, a structure that differs depending on whether one is a participant or an observer. With regard to gift exchange, “[T]he observer’s totalizing apprehension substitutes an objective structure fundamentally defined by its *reversibility* for an

<sup>15</sup> See Coutin & Yngvesson (2002) for a discussion of the parallels between adoptees on roots trips and deportees who have been forced “back” to a country they no longer consider their “own.” In both cases there is a “back” but what constitutes such a place (and the desires and fantasies associated with it) is dependent on the role of the nation-state in producing a place from which each form of expatriate is exiled.

<sup>16</sup> Slavoj Žižek, in a reinterpretation of Marx’s work on commodity fetishism, argues that the essential (unchanging) “nature” of an object is constituted in the act of exchange. Drawing on the work of Sohn-Rethel, Žižek argues that commodity exchange requires a fundamental “as if” (“*als ob*”): that the object exchanged is not subject to the uncertainties of time and the processes of generation and corruption that transform all objects in the world. Commodity exchange (and the transacting states that guarantee it) stamps the object exchanged with an unchanging essence, a kind of “immaterial corporality” that “endures all torments and survives with its beauty immaculate” (1989:18).

equally objective *irreversible* succession of gifts which are not mechanically linked to the gifts they respond to or insistently call for” (Bourdieu 1977:5). This suggests that the “full truth” of the gift of a child in adoption lies neither in the experienced truth of a cut-off from the past nor in the longing for reconnection, but in the capacity of such a gift to evoke “two opposing truths” (5) at the same moment:

1. The truth that identity is located in the inseparability of a child from an author, a concept of selfhood (or of nationhood) in which there is “an identity between owner and thing owned” and in which there is no place for the intervention of social others “except in the guise of sup-  
planted authorship” (Strathern 1988:158). In this account of identity, legal adoption is a process that alienates a child from its “origins”: the mother (nation) must give the baby *up* (Yngvesson 1997:53, quoting a birth mother), termination of parental rights is irrevocable, and legal adoptions cannot be “undone” (see case that follows). The finality of law in adoption—what Duncan (1993:51) describes as the principle of the “clean break”—reflects a specific cultural perspective on the child as property, but has come to dominate the practices of transnational adoption.
2. At the same time, and co-existing in painful tension with this finality, is a parallel truth that is both hard to hold onto and impossible to let go: that the identity of the adopted child is created in its exchange *among* partners (states, agencies, orphanages, and very occasionally, parents), neither of whom is the “author” of the child. This competing story about the gift child places the emphasis on *giving*, rather than on giving *away*, and requires that the connection between giver and receiver (“giving” nations and “receiving” nations) be kept open rather than shut down. Unlike commodity thinking—where the emphasis on single authorship means that the connection to “roots” is always in the foreground, constituting a pull on adopted children either to find their roots or replace them (but in any case to define only one set of roots as “real”)—the given child cannot be alienated from roots, but can only “find” herself in the relationship *between* self and other, birth country and adopted country, birth parent and adopted parent. In this sense, the gift of a child in adoption enchains giver and receiver, even as it alienates a child from his or her “roots.”

The concept of giving as enchainment creates forms of identity that are both more complex and inherently more divisible than the “in”dividuals created by the identity rights spelled out in

the *Hague Convention*, the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and other legal instruments. Enchainment is a function of the link between persons and nations out of which the internationally adoptable child is born; it presumes a field that is not dissolved but strengthened with the passage of the child. This relational field connects rather than separates, and has implications for the confusions and ambiguities that surround the internationally adopted child's "identity." Adoptive identities, constituted in the "in-between" of nations, agencies, and orphanages, position the adoptee as simultaneously "placed and not stitched in place" (Hall 1997:50)—she "belongs" in Korea when she is in the United States or in Sweden, but is "American" or "Swedish" when she is in Korea (Trotzig 1996; von Melen 1998; Liem 2000). The simultaneity of fixity and non-fixity, and the placement in an in-between that this compels, forges identity for persons no less than for nations.

The adoption story below lays open the tension in the concept of a given child, elucidating the child's connection to market "forces" and to the longing for exclusive belongings these forces provoke. In this particular story, the tragedy that underpins so many adoptions is explicit. The story also makes plain both the fragility of connections which tie "identity" and belonging to one particular place and the power of the structures of feeling these connections incite, propelling people to challenge the law (even as they use it), to undo an adoption that cannot be undone and to create unexpected relationships across nations and across the more conventional family boundaries these nations seek to maintain.

#### **Carlos Alberto/Omar Konrad<sup>17</sup>**

On the night of December 9, 1992, Nancy Apraez Coral was kidnapped with her 11-month-old son, Carlos Alberto, from the home of her son's father in Popayan, a town in the district of Cauca in southern Colombia. The kidnappers were later identified as members of UNASE (Unidad Antiextorción y Secuestro), an anti-kidnapping unit connected with Colombian state security forces in Popayan. They were apparently searching for the father of Nancy's child, who himself was suspected of involvement in a recent kidnapping. When they did not find him, they took Nancy and her infant son instead.

Nancy was killed some time in the next 8 days. In the early morning of December 16, her baby boy was left, dressed warmly and with a bottle of milk, on a street in Pasto, a town about 300 miles south of Popayan, in the Andes near the Ecuadorian border. The child's cries were heard by Cecilia and Conrado España,

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<sup>17</sup> The following discussion of this case appears as well in an earlier publication (Yngvesson 2000:173–8).

who took him in and later that morning notified the Colombian child welfare department, ICBF (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar). According to a subsequent Colombian newspaper story, “[H]e was a precious child, swarthy [*trigueño*], robust, acceptably clothed and had a little white poncho” (Calvache 1995:12A). The child was picked up that evening by welfare officials, and subsequently placed in a foster home pending location of his family or a legal declaration of abandonment. The local newspaper, *Diario del Sur*, published his picture on its front page the following day, along with an account of his discovery by local residents (Calvache 1992:1).

Colombian law requires that efforts be made to locate a “lost” or “abandoned” child’s family by placing a notice in the local or national mass media. If no family member appears to claim him, the child becomes available for domestic or international adoption. In this case, apart from the report in *Diario del Sur*, the effort to locate Carlos Alberto’s family consisted of announcements on the local (Pasto) radio station on January 14, 15, and 18. When there was no response to these notices, he was declared legally abandoned on February 4, 1993, and was named Omar Conrado España, after the family who found him. Two months later, a Swedish couple was selected by ICBF as adoptive parents for the child, and on June 4, 1993, the adoption was completed in Colombia. The child left for Sweden with his new parents, and his adoption was officially recognized by the Swedish government on August 4, 1993. His new parents named him Omar Konrad Vernersson, retaining in his new legal identity the traces of the violent displacements that had shaped his brief life.

In September 1993, three months after the adoption of Omar Conrado and nine months after the kidnapping, the baby’s maternal grandmother received an anonymous phone call telling her that her grandson had been abandoned at the town plaza in Pasto. When she arrived there and found no baby, she went from door to door with a picture of the child and eventually located the España family, who sent her to the ICBF. There she was told by the director of child welfare that her grandchild had been legally adopted, the adoption was final, and the record of the adoption was sealed, thus there was no possibility of locating the child (Calvache 1995:12a,1b).<sup>18</sup>

The grandmother hired a lawyer, who filed an appeal with the Pasto Superior Court to have the record opened, and the appeal was approved in February 1994. On June 9, 1995, the adoption was overturned by a Colombian court, which ordered the Colombian authorities (ICBF) and the adoptive family to return the child to his maternal grandparents. Sweden, however

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<sup>18</sup> Colombian law requires that adoption documents be sealed (*reservados*, hidden or shut away) for 30 years (*Código del Menor*, Art. 114, 1990).

(representing the position of the Adoption Centre, which arranged for the adoption, and of NIA, the Swedish State Board for International Adoptions) did not recognize this action, arguing that since the child was now a Swedish citizen, a Colombian court decree could not affect his legal relationship to his Swedish adoptive parents. In Sweden, according to the Adoption Centre, "adoptions cannot be undone."

The child's grandmother visited Sweden in June 1995, with the assistance of Colombia's ASFADDES (Association of the Family Members of the Disappeared) and Norway's Council of Political Refugees. The Adoption Centre, under pressure because of widespread media publicity in both Colombia and Sweden, received the grandmother at its office in Stockholm, and facilitated a meeting between the grandmother, her grandson, and his adoptive parents. No agreement was reached, however, about the child's return, and the Colombian government said that it lacked the resources to pursue the case in Sweden.

In 1996, Amnesty International intervened on the grandmother's behalf by providing a lawyer for her, and she made a second trip to Sweden, where she visited her grandson and his adoptive parents at their home. During this visit, an unofficial agreement regarding visitation and the child's education was drawn up and eventually (in 1997) signed by the adoptive parents and the grandmother. The agreement specifies that the child is to remain with his adoptive parents, that his grandmother has visitation rights once a year, that the child is to take Spanish classes, and that when it is "suitable," the adoptive family will visit Colombia. These terms satisfied the Adoption Centre, which continued to affirm its position that it was in the best interest of the child (now six years old) to remain with his adoptive parents—"He has no other parents"—but conceded that "the biological maternal grandparents should continue to be the child's grandparents." This concession by adoption officials, together with the signed agreement between the parents and grandparents, blurs the concept of adoption as a "clean-break" process and tacitly contributes to the official endorsement of a model of family that is heterotopic (Foucault 1973), in that it suggests forms of belonging that disrupt the orders, divisions, and groupings of blood kinship and of exclusive national identities.<sup>19</sup>

This story illuminates the complications of any simple interpretation of parental "abandonment" of a child. It demonstrates the embeddedness of physical abandonment in the violence of the state and in the "pull" of international agreements and un-

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<sup>19</sup> As Foucault argues, "*Heterotopias* are disturbing . . . because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences, but also the less apparent syntax which causes words and things to 'hold together'" (1973:xviii).



derstandings (such as those that underpin intercountry adoptions from Colombia to Sweden). Physical abandonment and the legal erasures that follow (and may provoke) this abandonment are central to the commodification of the adoptable child. While the routinization in processing that is implied by this story is not necessarily characteristic of other Colombian adoptions, it is nonetheless revealing of the erasures of belonging—the effacement of traces that would link the child to a specific social, cultural, and political surround—that have accompanied the emergence of adoption as a practice for creating families among infertile couples of the north and for managing a political or economic “excess” of children in the south.

These erasures of belonging—and the identities and histories they imply—have become a site of personal struggle for adoptees and their families, as well as an arena for ongoing policy negotiation between sending and receiving countries. This was particularly in evidence during the three years of the Hague Conference on Intercountry Adoption that culminated in the signing of the 1993 Convention. Negotiations at the Conference focused on reconciling the apparent “need” for the adoption of children transnationally with the reassertion of nationalisms, ethnicities, and identities grounded in a particular national soil—particularly with the proclamation of the key place of the child as a “natural” resource through which a claim to a “national” identity can be made.

In this sense, adoptions such as that of Carlos Alberto both challenge (and entrench ever more deeply) ideas of children’s identity rights as tied to exclusive national belongings and as deeply rooted in the blood connections of one generation to another “through” time (Anderson 1983). The tenaciousness of Carlos Alberto’s grandmother in pursuing her “right” to a relationship with her grandchild, and her skill in mobilizing both national and international groups in support of this right, together with the persistence of Sweden’s Adoption Centre in affirming Omar Konrad’s Swedish citizenship, the irrevocability of his adoption, and the applicability of Swedish, rather than Colombian law in this case, point to the complex ways in which identity rights may be deployed to secure a specific cultural embeddedness for a particular child.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, this case suggests the unexpected permutations of belonging that struggles over these contradictory rights may produce.

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<sup>20</sup> The success of Carlos Alberto’s grandmother in mobilizing international support for her right to a relationship with her daughter’s son is surely connected, in part, to the publicity surrounding the efforts of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina to establish their right to a relationship with grandchildren who had been “adopted” by agents of the state, following the murder of their parents. See Bouvard (1994) for a study of the Mothers.

Nevertheless, what is most interesting about this case is not its illumination of the contradictions of rights discourse, but the way it gestures toward a more complex adoption story than the familiar narrative of identity rights. In this more complex narrative, a child (and the parents/grandparents to whom he or she is connected and from whom he or she is separated) is at the same time alienated and enchained. The trace of enchainment is signaled in the implied continuity of mothering (or of parenting) that the terms "biological" grandmother and [adoptive] mother suggest, even as the distinction of the marked terms (*biological* grandmother, *adoptive* mother or parent) sets them apart from "real" mothering/parenting (Yngvesson 1997:73) and embeds in them the hierarchies and injustices of an economy in which the desire for a "real" family shapes the actions of both kinds of parents—the parents who adopted Carlos Alberto so they could have an "as if" real family, and his grandmother who fought for him so she could have a relationship with her "real" grandson (the biogenetic son of her biogenetic daughter). In this case, while the longing for conventional families is apparent, the "in practice" family has not been pinned down by law and is instead evolving over time in the relations among adoptive parents, birth grandparents, and adopted child.<sup>21</sup> This actual family is tacitly acknowledged in the unofficial agreement between grandparents and parents—one that defies the official clean-break policy that established this adoption as final (in accordance with both Swedish and Colombian adoption law)—and provides a blueprint for similar, more "open" relationships in the future.

As this example suggests, the "full truth" of the gift relation in adoption is in the simultaneity of closure and openness it represents, in its deferral of meaning, and in the play with time this deferral requires, as "the trace of something which still retains its roots in one meaning while it is, as it were, moving to another, encapsulating another" (Hall 1997:50). The tension between closure and openness in adoption can be found in legislation, such as the Hague Convention, that makes provisions both for cutting the adopted child off from his or her birth family and country (1993, Art. 26, 27) and for connecting the child to his or her "background" or "origin" (1993, Art. 16, 30). While the simultaneity of cutting off "the past" and of preserving it might be viewed as simply reflecting the power of commodity thinking and the alienability of identity it makes possible, it can also be seen as more than this. Indeed, it is the ambiguity of the gift in commodity thinking that gives the gift its power. It is all "a matter of style"—whether and how an exchange for the child is handled, whether the relations between nations and organizations is main-

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<sup>21</sup> This is reminiscent of a birth mother in an open adoption who didn't want to "make a plan" for her relationship with the adoptive parents of her son, but felt they should "just basically leave it open."

tained, whether the records are open or sealed, whether the adoptee goes “back”—not only in relations between families but also in relations between nations, and in the ways adoptees experience the “pull” to return to the nations where they were born.

### **Inter/national Attachments**

At the national level, the gift child of adoption and the donations the child provokes is one of the forms of exchange that creates an order of nations (see Malkki 1992), an order in which the child as gift is arguably a key symbolic resource. When we locate the child of one nation in the heart of another (in its middle-class families), we can forge the most intimate international ties (as in the adoption of Carlos Alberto). The repeated performance of these ties through continued adoptions, over time; their expansion in return visits by adoptees to their birth countries; and their formalization in policies that facilitate ongoing connections between adoptees and their birth countries (see discussion below), suggest strongly that adoption, both at the national and increasingly at the individual/familial level, is as much about enchainment and the multiple authorings and attachments this implies as it is about fixing a child to an identity.<sup>22</sup>

This enchainment is most apparent in the relations connecting representatives of Western adoption organizations with the officials of orphanages, child welfare organizations, and other institutions through which Third and Second World children are made adoptable to families in the North and West. These relations began as person-to-person connections and eventually developed as “a network of social workers, honorary secretaries of institutions, magistrates, doctors, and lawyers in various countries,” which made possible “a cooperation built very much on personal trust and a shared belief that children fared better in families than in institutions” (Andersson 1991:7). These networks of cooperation are the operative mechanism that makes intercountry adoptions possible among established agencies and organizations approved by international conventions (the Adoption Centre in Stockholm, Holt in Eugene, WACAP in Seattle, Danadopt in Copenhagen, and so forth). Similar networks underpin the activities of so-called private operators and facilitators who negotiate for babies in the shadow areas cast by “Central Authorities” and by official adoption laws.

These networks and the transactions they make possible involve multiple reciprocities, dependencies, and commitments, including “donations” of several thousand dollars that are paid by First World agencies and parents to Third World orphanages and

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<sup>22</sup> Intercountry adoptees are referred to in some literature as “bridges” or as “little ambassadors” (Aronson 1997:103–4).

facilitators (but not to birth parents) in exchange for the gift of a child. Donations are explained in terms of the support they provide for the activities of the orphanage, and they are a key dimension of the reciprocity that defines southern orphanages and northern agencies as exchange partners. They are never defined as a per-child payment, or as "buying" a child. Indeed, some Colombian adoption homes are attempting to shift the terms of the donations so that they are paid on an annual basis, rather than on a per-child basis, so the appearance of impropriety is avoided. As the director of what is arguably the premier private adoption home in Colombia told a *Time Magazine* reporter in 1991, her organization "is not a business; it's total devotion to children" (Serrill 1991:46).

What never takes place in these exchange relations is a reversal of the flow of children in one direction and of donations in the other. In this sense, the enchainments of intercountry adoption, like those of other forms of gift exchange, function "both as relations of production *and* as ideologies . . . upon which mythologies are built" (Strathern 1988:146). Strathern (161) argues that "enchainment is a condition of all relations based on the gift." Legal adoption bears the traces of this condition, even as it is premised on the erasure of the mutual dependencies enchainment assumes.

The gift of a child in adoption bespeaks the potential for an enchainment that is unthinkable in commodity thinking but that exists as a kind of "shadow other" to commodity thought—it is the foreclosed relationship on which the exclusivity of commodity thought is contingent (see Butler 1993:8). Enchainment haunts the gift relationship of adoption with what sociologist Avery Gordon (1997:8) describes as a kind of "seething presence" that "act[s] on and often meddle[s] with taken-for-granted realities." Haunting, Gordon argues, "draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (1997:8).<sup>23</sup>

What is transformative about the recognition of adoption as giving, and not simply as giving *up*, is the always unfinished quality of the exchange, its inherent incompleteness (in contrast to the inherent completeness of the identities of commodity thought), and the potential for a response that may exceed the alienation of the gift and the commodification of a child. This is so in spite of all the pressures—legal, social, political, bureaucratic, economic—for closure and for the reproduction of identical selves and national identities that this closure secures. From this perspective, the emphasis on identity rights in international agreements such as the 1989 *UN Convention on the Rights of the*

<sup>23</sup> See Mahoney & Yngvesson (1992) for a related approach to structures of feeling.

*Child*, the 1993 *Hague Convention*, and the 1997 *Guidelines for Practice on National and International Adoption and Foster Family Care* is as much about openings as it is about closures. It is not only about the right to an identity but about “the right to [a] . . . life story . . . which may be presented in many forms” (Adoption Centre 1997:2, 10), leaving open the possibility that a life story might connect the adoptee to *two* names, *two* nationalities (or more) and to multiple parents (as in the adoption of Carlos Alberto). A life story of this kind is less about “identity” than it is about “points of identification and attachment” (Hall 1996:5); and it is less about “wholeness” (Lifton 1994) than it is about doubleness, about splitting, and about holding the tension between identity and difference. The ways in which this tension manifests itself and the kinds of openings and closures that adoption stories entail are as diverse as the circumstances of physical abandonment that underpin the adoptability of a child.

Adoption is a hot topic these days, not so much because it transgresses familiar assumptions about what a family should be, but because it compels us to contemplate what commodity thinking produces, over and over again, as its most unsettling “frontier effect” (Hall 1996:3): not the alienation of self from author, but the possibility that there *is* no author, no “core” that owns the self (or to which the self belongs) other than the states of origin that produce (and then exchange) the adoptive child. The popular wisdom that adoptees will “find themselves” or “complete themselves” or become “whole” (Aronson 1997; Trotzig 1996; von Melen 1998; Lifton 1994) by returning “home” is one way in which the affirmation of “identity” takes place in this frontier zone. This is the flip side of Swedish adoptee Astrid Trotzig’s observation that it is “annoying . . . to always be met with questions about me and my origins. [As though] it is not natural that I am here” (1996:62).

The idea that identification with a nation to which s/he belongs pulls the child “back” nicely captures the compelling quality of “the nation” as a root metaphor and the multiple ways the power of an “original” identity makes itself felt in the life of the adoptee.<sup>24</sup> For example, President Kim Dae Jung invited Korean adoptees from eight adoptive nations on an all-expense-paid visit to the Republic of South Korea in 1998. In a ceremony at the Blue House, held in their honor, the President apologized for South Korea’s foreign adoptions (which until the mid-1990s regularly topped the lists of foreign adoptions to the United States, Sweden, and other receiving nations). He described South Korea as “filled with shame” over the practice; but he also pointed out that “no nation can live by itself” and urged adoptees to “nurture

<sup>24</sup> Liisa Malkki (1992:31) describes a similar “powerful sedentarism” in the lives of refugees. See also R. Radhakrishnan (1996).

[their] cultural roots" because "globalization is the trend of the times" (Kim 1998:16).

In a related move (one not directed specifically at adoptees, however), current government policy in India encourages close ties between India and its diaspora. For example, the Persons of Indian Origin Card, established in 1999, is intended to "make it easier for people of Indian descent sprinkled around the globe to travel to their familial homeland and invest in it" in ways that are "hassle-free" (Dugger 1999:4). The card is "part of a broader recognition by a growing number of countries that people who move abroad remain potentially valuable contributors in an economically interdependent world" (1999:4).

### Doubling and the Politics of the "In-Between"

"Because of my exterior, the foreigner, the unknown, is always with me."

—Astrid Trotzig, *Blood Is Thicker Than Water*, 1996.

During the 1990s, as the push to open adoptions and search for roots mounted in intensity in countries of the overdeveloped world, and as the number of intercountry adoptions to the West from Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America continued to rise, intercountry adoptees who had arrived as infants or children in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s began to speak and write about their experiences of coming from one world and living in another. Their narratives reveal how complex their effort is to occupy the "in-between" constituted by the double evocatory power of a gift child (her capacity to evoke alienation and connection at the same time) and to resist pressures to resolve the opposing truths of gift exchange as a lived experience, into a single reality—what Jean-Luc Nancy (1991:76) describes as resolving "the play of the juncture" into "the substance . . . of a Whole."<sup>25</sup> The lived experience includes what R. Radhakrishnan (1996:175) describes as the "painful, incommensurable simultaneity" that accompanies efforts to inhabit a location where "the political reality of one's present home is to be surpassed only by the ontological unreality of one's place of origin."<sup>26</sup> In this concluding section, I draw on

<sup>25</sup> "By itself, articulation is only a juncture, or more exactly the play of the juncture: what takes place where different pieces touch each other without fusing together, where they slide, pivot, or tumble over one another, one at the limit of the other—exactly at its limit—where these singular and distinct pieces fold or stiffen, flex or tense themselves together and through one another, unto one another, without this mutual *play*—which remains, at the same time, a play *between* them—ever forming into the substance or the higher power of a Whole."

<sup>26</sup> Betty Jean Lifton (1994:57ff) also describes what she terms the "ghost kingdom" in which adoptees reside. Unlike Radhakrishnan's subtle exploration of the notion of a ghostly "location," however, Lifton regards this place as one that can be escaped, or come out of, by searching for and finding a birth parent. What Lifton misses is the constitution of this kingdom and its co-existence with one's "present home," by histories that cannot be erased by simply "finding" what seems to be lost. A search for a birth parent (or the

memoirs of adult adoptees in Sweden and the United States and on interviews conducted with adoptees in Sweden to explore what it means to inhabit this “ghostly” place.

Sara Nordin, who is now 34, was adopted from Ethiopia by Swedish parents in 1969, when she was one-and-a-half-years old. She recounts her experience of growing up black, in a special issue of the journal *SvartVitt* [*BlackWhite*] (1996:4-5) devoted to accounts by international adoptees. Nordin says that the meaning of the word “BLACK”

has grown with each passing year, until I have finally understood that I am black. It is something big, personal and hard. It is a fact for me. The people who only see my color don't see all of me. The people who suggest that they can look beyond my color don't see all of me. When I try to gather together all the bits of myself, I easily lose myself. In colors and stories. In theories and dreams. When I walk by a mirror I see something exotic that I barely recognize from TV, newspapers and books. Sometimes it makes me happy, sometimes sad, and sometimes astonished. But most often the reflection in the mirror evokes questions that have no simple answers. I have tried to absorb [*ta till mig*] the “black” but then I have difficulty holding onto [*få med mig*] the Swedish. I have tried to absorb the “Swedish” but then I haven't understood what I see in the mirror [freely translated].

In an interview four years later, Nordin spoke of a particularly awkward situation (*en jobbig sits*) in which she found herself in the early 1980s when she was a teenager, a time when “I became almost an immigrant even though I felt myself to be extremely Swedish (*jättesvensk*). And the immigrants thought I was like them. And my Swedish friends thought I was like them. And I couldn't really decide where I belonged” (Interview, 8/22/99, freely translated).<sup>27</sup>

The ambiguities of identity and confusions of belonging experienced by Nordin in Sweden were intensified in the late 1990s when she returned to Addis Ababa. She explained in an interview that Addis “is not a place I would have chosen to live,” apart from the fact that she was “from” there. “It wasn't terrible. It was poor, but the poverty wasn't catastrophic. And people were really nice.” But she added that once she got back to Sweden, she had a diffi-

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opening of adoption records) cannot undo the fundamental alienability of a unitary self that participation in a commodity economy assumes, and the unrealizable “wholeness” that such an economy always sets up as the heart's desire of those who “belong” to it.

<sup>27</sup> It might be argued that the centrality of race to Swedish identity is in inverse relation to official silence about race in that country. Thus, in Sweden, “[i]t is not fitting to describe immigrants in terms of race or ethnic minority groups. Even if there is a terminology for race (e.g., black or white skin color) and ethnic minority groups (e.g., Gypsies, Jews, Sami, etc.) in everyday language, no official concepts have been developed to register persons in such terms. It would be widely considered as discriminatory to ask a person about his or her ‘race’ in a survey or official questionnaire. The basic concepts used when officials classify immigrants' ethnic background are citizenship and country of birth” (Martens 1997:183).

cult (*jobbigt*) time. "It was hard there [in Ethiopia], but since I was alone I more or less shut off those feelings, just so I could manage. When I got home [to Sweden], it all caught up with me and everything seemed unfathomable. 'Why just me?' And all the children you see. 'What would have become of me if I had stayed there? Who was I while I was there?'" (Interview, 8/22/99, freely translated).

Amanda F., who is 29 and has visited her birth family in Ethiopia twice, describes what she experiences as a constant process of "doubling":

I felt that a lot when we were there recently—that there is so much one has to relate to all the time. Here I have to relate to the fact that I look different and all that. And there I have to relate to the fact that I don't look different, but I *am* different. I don't know the language, I know almost nothing of what they are about or what they do. And so one has to relate to that also. There is a lot to keep track of. . . . It's hard, because when you are there everything is so real to you. As soon as you come here—after just a couple of weeks, Ethiopia feels so far away and they [her family] feel *really* far away. You have to struggle all the time to keep everything in mind and look at pictures. Although I have begun to feel clearer now, I mean I feel that they are my family and I love them. But we haven't lived together, so there are things that make it seem—I mean, we can't recover twenty years, it isn't possible, it has to start with now. (Interview, 8/22/99, freely translated.)<sup>28</sup>

Astrid Trotzig, adopted by Swedish parents in 1971, returned to South Korea when she was in her twenties, in hopes that she might find a place where it would feel "natural" to be. Instead, as with so many other intercountry adoptees who return to a homeland where they have never lived, what she encountered there was a powerful sense of loss. She found "no memories . . . which all of a sudden could well up from my subconscious, be remembered, be reborn here and now. . . . [N]othing [was] awakened other than melancholy" (Trotzig, 1996:214). Rather than finding a homeland, Trotzig found that "I have no home, nothing that constitutes both an outer and an inner homeland, a place where I belong [*hemvist*]. In Sweden I can never be fully integrated. My appearance is against me. In South Korea it's the opposite. I disappear in the crowd, people who see me think I am Korean, but inside I am in another place."

Experiences such as these reveal the impossibility of fully belonging in Sweden for these adoptees, whose names, skin color, facial configuration, or hair texture set them apart, tying them to a forgotten past that nonetheless infuses the present, separating adoptive parent from child, the Kingdom of Sweden from its "im-

<sup>28</sup> And see Amitav Gosh's (1988:194) description of people like his narrator's grandmother, who because "they have no home but in memory, learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection."



migrant” adoptees, and adoptees from the country of birth that made them “adoptable.” This past will always haunt their present, dividing the identities of adoptees and challenging the unstable boundaries of nations that seek to absorb adoptees as citizens. At the same time, the constant presence of this “past” challenges the concept of identity as either divided or whole.

Deann Borshay Liem, whose autoethnographic film, *First Person Plural* (Liem 2000), has been aired to wide acclaim on U.S. television, was adopted from South Korea when she was eight years old. Liem’s adoptive history was complicated by the fact that she was sent to her American parents with the false identity of another child. When she arrived, she attempted to explain that she already had a family in Korea and was not an orphan, but her new parents told her (and believed themselves) that this was a fantasy. Her adoption papers confirmed the deaths of her birthparents. Eventually, Liem recounts, she came to believe this story. She forgot Korea, forgot her home, forgot the path that led from her home to the orphanage, and lost her capacity to speak Korean. She became in most ways a typical American girl—prom queen, cheerleader, popular classmate, adored by her parents. After graduating from high school, however, Liem became increasingly depressed. Dreams of the orphanage, and the sudden appearance of her father’s face “flying” into her car and around her kitchen, sent her back to the file of documents in her parents’ house, where she found what had been previously overlooked: two pictures, one of Liem as a child with her name penciled on the back, the second of an unknown child. The second picture also bore her name.

Liem wrote to the orphanage in 1983, asking about the two pictures. Six weeks later, she received a letter from her brother confirming that she had a family in Korea and that her adoption had been a mistake. *First Person Plural* follows Liem and her adoptive parents on a journey to Korea, where they meet her birth family and she tries to come to terms with the significance of a “forgotten” past for her sense of belonging in the present. Especially traumatic for her is the realization over the course of this journey that although she has returned to her “real” mother in Korea, the only possibility of developing a relationship with this woman is to accept the fact that she is *not* her “real” mother. Indeed, Liem’s film hints at the realization that the very question “Who is my real mother?” may be the wrong question. In spite of a past that lives in Liem’s imagination, time is not reversible, the “gift” cannot be given back. There is no “return,” only a new journey that embeds the implicate field of persons out of which Deanne Borshay Liem was born in new, inevitably painful, sometimes astonishing, ways.

Astrid Trotzig’s sense that, as an adoptee, there is nothing that constitutes for her both an inner and an outer homeland,

no "belonging" that is "beyond the reach of play" (Derrida 1978:279) is echoed in descriptions by other adoptees of an inner landscape that never quite fits with their lived experience but that becomes an enabling place, a site of "painful, incommensurable, simultaneity," through which they can make contact with a ghostly "past." This often vivid inner landscape, constituted from exclusions that construct the adoptee as "legally abandoned" by/in her homeland (family, nation), becomes a point of investment, a surface of desire, a site of temporary identification with a "past" that is a constant unknown presence.

An adoptee, now in his thirties and living in the United States, describes this "absent presence" as a life that has always run parallel to his everyday life but has never overlapped it. When he was asked by his adoptive mother if he would like to search for his birth parents, he answered that to do so would be like "removing an organ": he was so used to the doubled vision of an unknown interior life and a known life of the everyday that he couldn't imagine living without it.

This adoptee is "white," like his adoptive parents, and it is striking that, in the metaphor of doubling he uses, the unknown self is on the "inside," while his "outside" self is one that connects him to the familiar world he knows. For Korean, Ethiopian, Colombian, and other adoptees of color in contrast, the split is more likely to be experienced, as in Astrid Trotzig's case, as involving a familiar Swedish (American, Dutch, etc.) inside and an unknown exterior that connects them to a homeland that is not their home.

This kind of doubling and the doubled vision it bespeaks might be interpreted as simply a replication of the familiar story about alienation from roots and the split self this produces.<sup>29</sup> While the narratives of these adoptees speak about fragmentation and loss, they also seem to be pointing in the direction of what Stuart Hall describes as "not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms with our 'routes'" (1996:4, quoting Paul Gilroy), a sometimes agonizing process that is captured in Sara Nordin's struggle to "absorb the 'black'" while holding onto the Swedish, and to absorb the Swedish while at the same time understanding "what I see in the mirror."

This process of holding onto points of identification that are contradictory builds on the exclusions of commodity thinking but produces a "constantly shifting frontier" (Balibar 1991:44) rather than an "identity." This shifting frontier emerges from the

<sup>29</sup> An anonymous reviewer of this article pointed to the relevance for my discussion here of Nahum Chandler's discussion of "double consciousness" in his essay on W. E. B. Dubois (1996:250). Chandler describes the sense of double consciousness as a "pivotal recognition" in Dubois' (1975) [1940] *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, one which was "self-consciously and strategically apprehended as a path of inquiry and understanding" (Chandler 1996:251).

adoptee's experience of not fully belonging anywhere and of being suspended between mutually exclusive places and conditions. "Roots trips," depending on how they are enacted, allow a kind of retracing of the "routes" through which the adoptee moved from one condition to the other, and may provide the material context (the enabling surfaces) for a desire that is not so much about a "return" to origins that cannot be found, but about the "mandate . . . to live 'within the hyphen' and yet be able to speak" (Radhakrishnan 1996:175–76). This hyphen, for many adoptees, is a space "between two humanities which seem incommensurable, namely the humanity of destitution and that of 'consumption,' the humanity of underdevelopment and that of overdevelopment" (Balibar 1991:44). Adoptees cannot serve as "bridges" between these incommensurable humanities (Aronson 1997:104–6), but may be able to bear witness to the tension between them.

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