

Literature and Adoption: Themes, Theses, Questions

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Adopting America: Childhood, Kinship, and National Identity in Literature. By Carol J. Singley  
Oxford University Press, 2011.

Disciplining Girls: Understanding the Origins of the Classic Orphan Girl Story. By Joe Sutliff Sanders  
Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.

Claiming Others: Transracial Adoption and National Belonging. By Mark C. Jerng University of  
Minnesota Press, 2010.

Kin of Another Kind: Transracial Adoption in American Literature. By Cynthia Callahan University  
of Michigan, 2011.

Natty Bumppo, Topsy, Ishmael, Huck, Elena Olenska, Joe Christmas, Lolita, Beloved: American literature is famously full of orphans, foundlings, and changelings—many of whom find themselves adopted into new families. Social scientists have been studying adoptive families closely since at least the 1970s, when rates of formal adoption began to drop off precipitously in the U.S. and the feminist revolution triggered key changes in family structure. Outstanding work by the historians Barbara Melosh, Timothy Hacsí, Julie Miller, and Laura Briggs, for example, has revealed the mechanisms by which American norms about kinship were implemented and policed through adoption policy and orphan care; their work also documents the means by which new forms of familial and national affiliation developed. In the last decade, literary critics have begun join this important conversation.

Many social scientific accounts stress the limitations of adoption, especially transracial adoptions occurring in the context of Indian removal, eugenicist theories about criminality, the demonization of African American maternity, neoliberal economic policy, and anti-immigrant initiatives. Literary historical projects, however, tend to start from a somewhat more sanguine position. To varying degrees, all of the humanist work on adoption considered in this essay begins with the anti-foundationalist view that adoptive families are important to study because they unsettle presuppositions that kinship is inherently and must always be biological. These scholars praise adoption stories for creating subjects who have “the opportunity to realize unlimited potential free of genealogical constraints” (Singley, Adopting America, 5). Tracing the influence of biologically grounded kinship to influential norms governing a child's legitimacy, inheritance, personal and racial identity, nationality, and citizenship, these studies locate moments in which the novels and memoirs that tell adoption stories develop other—ideally less restrictive—communities of care. Although Carol Singley, Joe Sutliff Sanders, Mark Jerng and Cynthia Callahan all underscore the ambivalence that so strongly marks adoption narratives, they also share the premise that “adoption defies the rules of kinship by which most people understand themselves” (Callahan 166), and they extract moments in which that defiance brings new possibilities for personal and collective identity into being.

While adoptees' memoirs in particular readily demonstrate the emergence of new forms of personhood, the novelty that literary critics so often associate with adoption surely remains largely promissory at the level of national belonging. This elision of one sense of the domestic (as familial) with another (as national) is not unique to humanistic studies of adoption, but they do embrace it with particular enthusiasm. The four studies I am considering here all homologize family and nation, arguing that a less biological approach to forming families and creating affiliation triggers a more flexible vision of the nation. They all identify the adoptive family with quintessentially American (to use Melosh's

phrase) ideals such as an emphasis on fresh starts or a Calvinist emphasis on personal salvation, and they stress the ways that literary adoption “addresses a collective need for improvement, assuages social guilt over inequality, and shows that disparate elements of society can be assimilated without altering the fundamental composition of society itself” (Singley 8). Adoption narratives in short are read as prompting the national community to redefine itself as a flexible, open-ended, and absorptive entity. Mark Jerng takes this logic one step farther, asserting that adoptees' “disidentification with 'birth' and inclusion of multiple histories that fracture the singularity of personhood” offers tools for rethinking accounts of national belonging that rely on unity and historical continuity (146). Literary critical readings of adoption stories sometimes identify moments when fiction also reinforces biological norms, but by and large the scholarship stresses the purportedly subversive potential of adoption as a figure for the national family.

This case for the transformative force of the adoptee's narrative in particular rests largely on the readings of illegitimacy and race offered in these studies. Carol Singley's Adopting America is particularly rich on the former subject. She examines in some detail the legal framework for determining inheritance and legitimacy from the colonial period through the early twentieth century, and she draws needed attention to the way these norms were navigated by individual writers—from Cotton Mather and Ben Franklin to Lydia Marie Child, Nathaniel Hawthorne, the less well-known transcendentalist poet Ann Sargent Gage, Louisa May Alcott, and Edith Wharton. Singley traces a shift from early Calvinist writings that depicted adoption of illegitimate children as a form of salvation for adoptive parents and the adoptee to later sentimental accounts that understand adoption as an emotional and then legal bond. While the norms of the former are established through insightful close readings of key texts by Mather and other Puritan divines, the key text for the latter is Horace Bushnell's parenting manual Christian Nurture (1847). Singley provides an especially clear and fine-grained account of the effects of Bushnell's vision of Christian evangelism on adoption, deftly

explaining how sentimentalism continued the Calvinist understanding of the church itself as an adoptive family while also shifting emphasis away from inherited depravity and toward a nurtured grace. The theological reasoning underlying adoption in a given period, on Singley's account, contested older notions of an exclusive national community of virtue, even as it also reinforced limits to the imagined family by restricting adoption to co-religionists.

Although Singley's narrative continues into the heyday of modernist skepticism, the mid and late nineteenth century are her main concern. In this period, she sees gender differences emerging in the adoption plot. Orphaned or needy boys were commonly depicted as “benefiting from the help of a parent, teacher, mentor, or friend but resisting permanent integration into adoptive households,” Singley asserts, while “female characters experience placements as training grounds for their roles as wives and mothers” (91). An ideological emphasis on fostering male self-sufficiency limited the appropriateness of adoption plots mainly to female protagonists. Gender thus joins religion as a crucial coordinate for imagining adoption, even when it is not women as such who are being imagined.

In Disciplining Girls, Joe Sutliff Sanders even more intently scrutinizes the work of femininity in a genre that he designates the “classic orphan girl story.” Sanders' remarkably well argued study tracks a shift from Susan Warner's The Wide, Wide World (1850) to L. M. Montgomery's Emily of New Moon (1923), covering much of the same historical ground (and several of the same texts) as the second half of Singley's study. Both Singley and Sanders take as turning points of adoption history the first law authorization of formal adoption in Massachusetts in 1851 and the shift away from sentimental adoption and toward a professionalized institution of adoption mediated by social workers in the 1920s. While Singley asks classic American Studies questions about national self-concept, however, Sanders' central issue derives more from the fields of children's literature and gender studies. He is mainly interested in the ways that literary texts written for and about girls model a type of gendered discipline.

While Singley would have us rethink the cultural work of sentimentalism by shifting from the woman to the child, Sanders reconsiders the sentimental focus on “the efficacy of love—what has come to be called affective discipline or moral suasion” (1), arguing that this tactic migrates from women's fiction to popular fiction marketed for girls but also widely read by men. Through a series of close readings of classics such as Louisa May Alcott's Eight Cousins, Frances Hodgson Burnett's The Little Princess, and L. M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables, Sanders demonstrates that sentimental moral suasion changed over time. Initially directed at orphan girls as disciplinary objects within adoptive families, moral suasion becomes in these novels a tool that the heroines use to assert their individuality, in addition to disciplining parents (especially father figures) to meet their increasingly consumerist needs. Sanders demonstrates how in novels on the later end of his spectrum, “the point for these girls is not shopping for themselves, but training a man to know what goods the girl desires and teaching him to long to please her” (96). This strategy marks the midpoint in a path that Sanders traces from a nineteenth-century model of the coercive patriarchal family to a child-centered family whose late twentieth-century extreme condemns any imposition of discipline directed at the child as abusive and excessively regulatory. Sanders' story, in other words, tracks the universalization of sentimentalism to its ironic consequences rather than assuming its repudiation in the twentieth century. This universalization occurs to the extent that affective discipline detaches itself from women and becomes available for “narratives about the empowerment and improvement of men” (185). While not concerned directly with adoption, then, Sanders' Foucauldian argument demonstrates some of the ways that thinking about ideal family structures and the techniques of discipline that bind families together shifted over time in orphan girl stories. Like Singley, he reads the incorporation of orphans and adoptees into new families as a microcosm for a cultural question primarily by focusing on the trade-offs in power and imagined benefits distributed among the adoptive parents and child. Gender is the primary limit imposed on this flow of goods and power in Sanders' account of the orphaned adoptee novel.

Although Singley certainly acknowledges gender, it is the use of race as barrier to the familial incorporation of the vulnerable child to which she devotes most attention; her chapter on Harriet Wilson's Our Nig makes a telling comparison between this novel and indentured servitude narratives featuring white heroines. Although orphaned children of many complexions were commonly “bound out” as laboring apprentices in the nineteenth century, for Wilson's heroine Frado, adoption into a white family is not a possible outcome of the placement, and she is also denied the comforts of joining the symbolic family of the Christian community while she is indentured. These constraints differentiate Wilson's novel from comparable sentimental narratives with white heroines, such as Sarah S. Baker's Bound Out; or, Abby at the Farm (1859). Singley suggests that the interracial adoptive family was often unimaginable in the mid nineteenth century.

Mark Jerng contests this periodization. His theoretically ambitious and psychoanalytically focused Claiming Others: Transracial Adoption and National Belonging finds transracial families in early American captivity narratives and Lydia Marie Child's abolitionist fiction, as well as in the late nineteenth century and after 1945 when international adoption became more common. For Jerng, transracial adoption is foundational for American narratives of personhood and national belonging rather than being an innovation of the second half of the twentieth century. Focusing on limit cases and continually renegotiated norms rather than sociological trends, Jerng identifies specific ways in which racial differences open up spaces in adoption narratives as well as closing them down. Racial discourse is, for Jerng, crucial to any adoption narrative, because he understands both race and adoption as inherently relational and transactional—i.e., as matters of claiming others as one's own. Jerng argues that reading adoption can help us understand how race is, like adoption, “enacted relationally through processes of projection and introjection that threaten and stabilize the conditions of individuation and the boundaries between persons” (121). One is not, on Jerng's account, inherently identified with a

particular race any more than one is inherently a member of a particular adoptive family. Only the repeated making of claims to that effect establishes that relationship.

Jerng, in other words, sees race not so much as a limit to adoption narratives—something that needs to be overcome in order to share the benefits of familial affiliation to all—but rather as an effect of the affiliating relationships established in adoption claims. In the second half of his study (which is devoted to Asian-American adoptee narratives), he offers a number of sharp retorts to essentialist positions on racial identity advanced by advocates of international and transracial adoption, human rights lawyers, psychoanalysts, and adoptees' rights organizations. He describes, for example, the work of Pearl S. Buck (a founder of the first American agency devoted to international adoption from Asia) as “a narrative construction of U.S. obligation, care, and paternalism for China and Asia more broadly, [that] also required a figuration of [adoptees'] terms of personhood as 'piteous lonely children whom no country claims'” (127). While others insist on the birth identity as the adoptee's essential self, Buck treats the orphan and future adoptee as essentially blank. Jerng's main aim is to recover a model of adoptee personhood that avoids both forms of pathologizing persons adopted as young children. He does this by attending carefully to the competing needs and counterfactual imagination that underlie efforts to establish a continuous narrative of personal history. He pursues this task through readings of a group of adoptee search and reunion memoirs as well as novels such as Chang-Rae Lee's A Gesture Life and Gish Jen's The Love Wife; in these readings, Jerng depicts a quest for racial and cultural origins as a project of transference, rather than recognition. Seeking to recognize and forgive one's biological parents and consequently creating a continuous narrative of personal identity involves repression of inevitable gaps, Jerng asserts. Treating these adoption stories as transference is preferable, because “the repetition of transference does not repair the past relationship so much as it repeats what was repressed in the past relationship” and these repressed conflicts rather than the person as a fictive whole demand visibility (197). Identifying processes of transference in adoption narratives

allows Jerng to isolate highly important and productive moments when adoptees in particular face “the lack of internal unity at the heart of the family” (243). For Jerng, in other words, transracial and transnational adoption stories continue to reproduce norms of racial personhood to the extent that they insist that only continuous access to the nation and parents of origin anchor the adoptee's authentic, coherent self.

Like Jerng, Callahan (who identifies herself in the introduction as an adoptee, though not a member of a transracial family) also questions the merits of cultural preservation projects in Kin of Another Kind: Transracial Adoption in American Literature. Callahan locates “authenticity crises” in adoption fiction ranging from Charles Chestnutt's The Quarry and William Faulkner's Light in August to Toni Morrison's Tar Baby, Sherman Alexie's Indian Killer, and Anne Tyler's Digging to America (several of which were also studied by Jerng). Callahan describes the forceful criticisms of transracial adoption launched by the National Association of Black Social Workers and the Indian Child Welfare Act during the 1970s. These spokespeople harshly repudiated the formation of interracial families through adoption on the grounds that such adoptions amounted to cultural isolation for the adoptee and/or genocide for the adoptee's culture of origin, and Callahan amply illustrates the impact their positions had on novelists interested in depicting the alienation of transracial adoptees. Building on these North American discussions, she opens her chapter on international Asian-American adoptions with the statement that “cultural preservation practices such as language classes and culture camps ...do not and perhaps cannot restore origins lost in the adoption process” (131). Callahan locates adoption fiction between this kind of overemphasis on origins and an overly hasty assertion that all origin stories are fictive and thus irrelevant to the adoptee's identity. While Jerng stresses the productive potential of this ambivalent condition, Callahan's more sociologically influenced project keeps the losses and contradictions of adoption stories more fully in view. She reads efforts to provide (and claim) racial identifications as flexible but not fully adequate efforts to compensate for the loss of biological kin.

Together, then, these four new studies stake out some of the major issues for a humanistic approach to studying adoption. They share a sense of the key turning points in adoption history (1851, 1920s, 1945) and establish a common core of relevant texts, as well as suggesting how reading through the frame of adoption (as Callahan puts it) redirects critical attention—e.g., from racial to family problems in Tar Baby. They also point to a difference of opinion on several key questions: How indebted to Calvinist doctrines of salvation is the American adoptive family? What are the legacies of sentimental norms of family bonds in the contemporary era? Are male and female adoption plots and the neighboring genre of search and reunion memoirs so formulaic that they admit of little variation? What relationship do imagined adoptive families have to national romances that envision paternity, inheritance, and biological reproduction as essential to the collective? These are some of the same significant questions explored in scholarship examining orphans and adoption in other national contexts (see Peters and Allrys, for example).

Of course, the group of literary texts that might be read in dialogue with adoption questions can certainly be expanded within the American canon as well as internationally. Perhaps narratives in which the adoptee is a secondary character would be interesting to examine. It would also be exciting to see how contemporary adoption dilemmas and practices (e.g., single parent adoption, gay and lesbian parenting, informal kin adoption, so-called orphan families or community care facilities) are being thought through in this literature. The topic of family formation is an indisputably rich one and full of potential for future work.

With new projects in mind, then, I want to close by suggesting six questions that merit consideration and whose exploration could shift the humanistic discussion of adoption in still more new directions. Most of these questions are prompted less by omissions made in individual research than by my

observations on the habits and attitudes that commonly recur across this group of impressive studies.

First, is there more to say about the critique of rescue fantasies and, more generally, the motives of white adoptive parents in the U.S.? Rescue fantasies are commonly attributed to adopters with religious motives, and they are generally subjected to pointed political criticism. Is there more to explore in this topic? For example, are religious motives for adoption always imagined in the contemporary literature as suspect, culturally inappropriate, and/or equivalent to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century versions of salvation? Or, to swing the question another direction: what cultural work might rescue fantasies accomplish? Why are they so persistent? Although political and social criticism of white uplift scenarios is widely evident (witness the Native American distaste for Barbara Kingsolver's The Bean Trees, described by Callahan), these narratives nonetheless have a large readership, and their effects may not be limited entirely to the reproduction of racial hierarchy. Surely, scholars should find out why rescue fantasies continue to thrive.

Second, the role of contemporary religious movements in adoption institutions and story-telling demands deeper study across the board. Journalistic exposés, such as Kathryn Joyce's The Child Catchers, have opened a window into the orphan theology movement, and there is certainly space for a deeper consideration of the literary origins and effects of the contemporary evangelical movements involved in adoption alongside an investigation of the theological origins of secular ideas about kinship.

Third, all of these studies in one way or another merge discussion of orphans with adoptees, even as they occasionally note that many adoptees are not “really” orphans (i.e., have living birth relatives, including one or both birth parents). Perhaps these topics could be distinguished even more fully, so that, for instance, the tendency toward counterfactual narration that Jerng identifies as a feature of

adoptive processes of constructing personhood might allow for a difference from counterfactual personal narratives imagined by orphans. Might not a narrative imagining one's origins differ substantially for adoptees living—however uncomfortably—in a second family and for orphans living in institutions, on the streets, or in foster care—that is, without a second set of family coordinates? How can and should a literary imagination be deployed to aid the unadopted orphan as well as the adoptee? How, too, might fictional narrative resist the teleological pull of idealized adoptive or marital families when wrestling with the apparently perpetually attractive figure of the orphan?

Fourth, Jerng and Callahan also explicitly make the case that transnational and transracial adoptions inhabit essentially the same conceptual space, and both take adoption of African-American children by white families as the prototype of domestic transracial adoption before applying that model of race to international Asian-American adoption. Since adoptees born in Korea in the 1950s and 1960s are now poised, as adults, to publish complex accounts of their experiences in memoirs and fiction, it is not surprising that scholarly studies focus on this generation. Nonetheless, I wonder how well the account of racialization developed in this context and in the context of black-white domestic adoption works for other transnational adoptions. Would transnational adoption of “white” children from, say, Russia, Ukraine or Kazakhstan make sense through the same frame? The rapidly proliferating journalistic features, memoirs and fiction surrounding African adoption raises a related set of questions. Black people adopted as children or teens from Ethiopia, Congo, Ghana, or Liberia (not to mention immigrating from Sudan, Sierra Leone, Angola, or Nigeria) often have important stories to tell about their oblique relationships to racial discourse in the US; adoptive parent and talented journalist Melissa Fay Greene has written several books on this subject, and the fiction of Dinaw Mengestu explores similar themes. At the very least, the question of whether (or how) domestic transracial adoptions and domestic black-white race politics establish a framework for narrating international adoptions needs to be explored rather than assumed.

Fifth, to set up my last two questions, I need to invoke the famous “adoption triad” of birth parents, child, and adoptive parents. With the exception of a few passages in Jerng's chapters devoted to search and reunion memoirs, birth parents are almost entirely missing from these accounts—even domestic birth parents. Instead, the adoptee's quest to establish viable personhood and racial identity grounds Sanders, Jerng and Callahan's projects, and Singley attends more fully to the concerns of adoptive parents as they are narrated in the American novel. While there may be no American equivalents to Thomas Hardy's Tess, there certainly are birth parent memoirs such as Karen McElmurray's Surrendered Child or psychological novels such as A. M. Homes's In a Country of Mothers to examine. How would pulling works told from the birth parents' perspective into the discussion redirect the questions one might ask of contemporary novels such as Lorrie Moore's A Gate at the Stairs or Jennifer Gilmore's The Mothers (both focalized through adoptive parents)? How can the stories of birth parents be researched and studied—not just imagined as a blank space of raw need, loss, anger, or anxiety?

Finally, what happens to adoption narratives if we move outside the adoption triad and ask how these stories and families appear to the “gaze of strangers” (Jerng 218). After all, especially in writing focused on transracial families, the quality of being constantly conspicuous to others as an adoptive family plays a very large role, and these ever-present “strangers” in large part frame the narratives and claims that all members of the adoption triad are able to create. Strangers set state policy, distribute (or not) funds for child welfare, adjudicate custody agreements, trigger ethics scandals, teach adopted children, provide (or not) reproductive health services, and listen (or not) to the stories of these families. Most transracial adoptive families I know have dozens of anecdotes in which total strangers felt authorized to insult, praise, or otherwise evaluate their existence as a family. No matter how powerful adoption memoirs or fiction—not to mention sentimental orphan stories and rescue fantasies—might be for those inside the adoption triad, by sheer numbers alone their largest audience

share must surely be comprised of watchful strangers. Scholars of adoption need to know more about how and why strangers demand adoption stories and what these stories provide them. Perhaps answering this question would require a new type of reception study, but it might also involve examining the figures of strangers that appear in adoption literature and/or moments when the stranger's fantasy about the orphan or adoptee rises to the surface in work focused on an entirely different subject.

Answering all of these questions on top of undertaking the remarkable labor of building a new subfield is of course far too large a task for any one scholar, and I raise them mainly out of hope that this newly bustling area will continue to grow in depth and range. Whether taken in isolation or all together, the remarkable work of Singley, Sanders, Jerng and Callahan will definitely be an enormous asset for anyone who joins the discussion. Each of these studies has unique merits—outstanding historical research and clarity of writing in Adopting America, a gripping central question and striking counter-intuitive claims in Disciplining Girls, a boldly confrontational argument and novel rethinking of widespread views in Claiming Others, and a brisk pace and imaginative collection of primary texts in Kin of Another Kind. Together, these projects advance the discussion surrounding sentimentalism, gender and the child initiated by Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler among others, and they put a new spin on the institutional approach to literary studies, suggesting—or better, demonstrating—that the institutions shaping American literary culture may be the Department of Social Welfare and adoption agencies as well the little magazines, literary prizes and MFA programs to which literary scholars have already turned with such alacrity. This is outstanding work, strongly recommended for scholars with any interest in gender, genre, or the literary history of children.

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