

## ***Map-Making and the Adoption Atlas in 'Killing Karoline' by Sara-Jayne King***

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### **Abstract**

The recent proliferation of adoption narratives in mainstream media provides fertile narrative soil for sowing the seeds of adoption activism, awareness, and agency. Spanning the genres of autobiographical films to children's animation, such narratives frame the representation of adoption across ages and cultures. However, adoption studies show that members of the adoption triad (first parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents) often feel silenced and misrepresented despite these narratives, their trauma and search for belonging hidden behind what I term the "cult of gratitude". The memoir *Killing Karoline* (King, 2017) provides an insight into an adoptee's voicing of this trauma. This paper draws on two types of mapping, namely Hayakawa's (1991) concept of the semantic map, and Flatley (2008) and Jameson's (2000) work on cognitive-affective maps. Using these maps as framework, I investigate how the author navigates her adoption through map-making to create a unique adoption atlas. King sketches maps of trauma and unbelonging, while commenting saliently on core issues surrounding interracial adoption, such as racial literacy, forced displacement, and the primal wound. This sees King breaking free from the cult of gratitude, allowing the reader to see, through King's lived experience, a relief map of interracial adoption and the adoption triad. In the emerging oeuvre of South African adoption narratives, specifically, King's memoir opens the way for map-making in similar narratives in the creation of adoption atlases through the representation of lived experience.

Keywords: Interracial Adoption, Adoption Narrative, Semantic Map, Cognitive-Affective Map, Cult Of Gratitude

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## Introduction

Interracial adoption is a fraught topic characterized by ignorance and misinformation. The public's perceptions of interracial adoption, as well as the stereotypes associated with the adoption triad (hereafter the triad) – adoptive/first parents, adoptee, and adoptive parents – make it hard for this triad to express the trauma inherent in such adoptions. The triad is often shunned by once supportive communities, and needs a space where they can find support, a sense of belonging, and representation reflective of lived experience. Though the pool of adoption narratives originating from the global north is vast, those from the global south, and specifically South Africa, were harder to come by. In South Africa, adoption memoirs have only fairly recently started to gain traction. This is important not only because of vast differences in adoption practices and policies across the globe, but also because, as Harf et al. (2015, para. 1) notes, "representations of child's cultural belonging and their positions concerning connections with their birth and its culture" are of critical importance. For birth- and adoptive parents, culturally and socially representative memoirs aid in creating a sense of belonging and kinship. *Killing Karoline* (2017) by Sara-Jayne King is one such a South African adoption narrative. It is a representation of the triad's lived experience, a memoir that exposes a side of adoption often silenced in fictional depiction of the process. In short, it creates an atlas the reader can use to navigate interracial adoption.

Society at large is not without adoption atlases. The atlases we receive come twofold: those conveyed to use in mainstream popular media, and those conveyed through documentaries, memoirs, and autobiographies of those involved in adoption. Jacobson (2013) notes that the framing and representation of adoption in fictionalized versions of adoptions may impact positively or adversely on how we regard adoption and the triad. Wegar (2000, p. 363) posits that such narratives threaten the dominant family ideology, and that the "adoptive family [is] socially constructed as deviant, stigmatized, and burdened". Kline et al. (2009) state that such narratives often depict adoptees as defective and ungrateful, first parents as neglectful or having substance abuse problems, and adoptive parents as affluent saviors who benefit most from adoption. Conversely, we are presented with adoption fairy tales: an orphaned child finds a home, an adoptive family finds a child who they can 'save', and the first parents are either ignored or vilified in such a way that the child's adoption is seen as a blessing. Though the stereotype of adoption as being lost and then found is observed in these films (Herman-Gallow, 2019), these atlases culminate in happy endings, with adoption-related challenges easily solved or deflected with humor (Jacobson, 2013).

Media representations of adoption based on lived experience – documentaries, memoirs, etc. – are becoming more prevalent, but are arguably less palatable fodder for mass consumption. Mainly, though, whether fictionalized or based on lived experience, adoption representation is mainly viewed through the lens of adoption practices in the global north. South African adoption narratives are not as much audio-visual as they are textual, and are a rather novel addition to the South African literary canon. *Killing Karoline* (2017) is interesting in this regard, as it describes adoption from both a European and South African perspective. As *Killing Karoline* is a memoir spanning both the UK and South Africa, this culture-dependent representation of adoption is particularly salient.

In this paper, I investigate the semantic and cognitive affective maps King employ in her memoir to represent the territory, the lived experience, of adoption, in order to examine how she creates an adoption atlas based on lived experience. Following a short synopsis of the memoir, I will provide a very brief outline of semantic and cognitive affective maps before

briefly explaining two specific landmarks evident in these maps, namely the triad and the cult of gratitude. Through a thematic analysis of the memoir, I will show that King's adoption atlas allows these landmarks to find a voice in a narrative landscape where they are often suppressed.

### ***Killing Karoline***

In Apartheid South Africa, Kris, a white woman, is engaged to Ken, her white fiancé, while she has an affair with a Black employee, Jackson, by whom she falls pregnant. At the time, interracial relationships were illegal. Pregnancies resulting from such illegitimate couplings resulted in orphaned children and incarcerated parents. Kris gives birth to a daughter, Karoline, who is classified as white according to the Population Registration Act of 1950, where individuals were classified as "native", white, or "colored" (mixed race). However, during a later medical appointment, the child's changed appearance results in her being reclassified as colored. The reality of possible incarceration prompts Kris to have Karoline declared dead in South Africa. She travels to the UK and has Karoline adopted by Malcolm and Angela, who are already parents to adopted son Adam. The memoir follows the journey of Karoline, who is now called Sarah, as she navigates being a brown body in a white society, in a white family, how she becomes aware of her adoption and the circumstances that led to it, her growing rage towards her birth mother, and her ultimate return to South Africa.

### **Using Maps to Navigate Lived Experience**

To take us on her journey, King provides us with access to her semantic and cognitive-affective maps to forge an atlas of the lived experience of interracial adoption. In brief, Hayakawa and Hayakawa explain the concept of the semantic map as follows: "Our verbal (intentional) world . . . stands in relation to the extensional world as a *map* does to the *territory* it is supposed to represent..." (1990, p. 20). They argue that we produce semantic maps through the words we use in verbal and written texts to depict the territory of our lived experience. However, Hayakawa and Hayakawa, as well as Korzybski (1995), note that "The map is not the territory ... The only usefulness of a map depends on similarity of structure between the empirical world and the map..." (p. 58). Therefore, semantic maps only represent the territory of thoughts. In an adoption narrative, semantic maps allow us to navigate the follow thought patterns of those affected by adoption through their descriptions thereof, so as to lay open the navigated territory of their lived experience.

Cognitive maps were proposed in 1960 by Kevin Lynch as our internalised maps of the cities we inhabit. However, Jameson (2006) extends the concept to include what Flatley (2008, p. 777) calls "a cognitive map of social space for a sense of agency in the world more generally". As such, cognitive maps allow us to use spatial concepts to make sense of the world around us, to create an individual representation of the vast totality of societal structures, norms, and beliefs. Without cognitive maps, our views of ideologies, socio-political-, and normative structures are fragmented and, like the semantic map, only represent the topology, and not the territory, of lived experience. Affective maps, Flatley (2008, p. 77) argues, "indicate(s) the affective aspects of the maps that guide us, in conjunction with our cognitive maps, through our spatial environment". We rely on these maps to negotiate our emotions and affect. The places we go are permeated with affect, emotions, and beliefs; affective maps become our individualistic maps representing the territory of our senses and emotions. Cognitive-affective maps (Shoda & Mischel, 1995) combine both these maps and aid in incorporating new information, experiences, and surroundings. The totality of these

maps is not completely self-invented, but is also a culmination of others' maps, those we inherit from our forebears, or those that have been socio-historically contextualized. Cognitive-affective maps therefore allow us to navigate places, the world, norms, institutionalized ideologies, etc.

## **Navigational Tools**

To navigate these maps, I focus on two aspects. The first is the adoption triad, mentioned earlier. The second is a concept I call the cult of gratitude. This concept underpins many fictional adoption narratives, but also colours the lived experience of the adoption triad: they should be grateful, for they have been blessed by adoption. This toxic positivity negates the trauma of adoption; it requires the triad to be grateful for their trauma. Adoption is the ultimate solution: an orphaned child finds a home, first parents are relieved of a burden, and adoptive parents receive a child they have longed for. Members of the triad who are perceived to be ungrateful, traumatized, or displaced are admonished to be grateful. The trauma of adoption should be suppressed in favor of the fairytale ideal. This silences the triad and negates their trauma, forcing them to act in a way that conforms to the societally accepted trope typified by the cult of gratitude.

## **The Adoptee's Agony**

The memoir states early on that, though perhaps not yet fully aware of being, King at a young age becomes aware that adoptees "are . . . born for the sole purpose of becoming part of their adoptive families" (King, 2017, p. 31). However, she is still young, and her "voice is still too quiet to be heard over the din of other people's needs" (King, 2017, p. 35). Thus, she shows an awareness of the silencing of adoptees. These statements enable us to see double consciousness, a term coined by DuBois in 1903 to signify a feeling of racial duality in Black individuals, through a new lens. Not only is it based on racial duality in terms of being interracially adopted, but it is also relevant in terms of the adoptee's identity *as an adoptee*, in the sense that adoptees are aware that, though they are part of a family, they do not truly 'fit'. Inculcated in this particular sense of double consciousness is the unfortunate cult of gratitude, as well as King's feeling of shame when this state of toxic positivity is one she does not experience.

I would have no words to express those feelings . . . the deep and profound sadness I feel will be compounded by a sense of shame. Shame, that . . . I am showing myself to be 'ungrateful' for the good fortune [of] by being so selflessly 'taken in' by my adoptive parents. (King, 2017, p. 43)

What this excerpt also shows is a subtle awareness that rejection forms the core of King's being, her identity as an adoptee, and that it shapes her navigation of her image and beliefs regarding herself from a young age: rejected from one family, and adopted into another, King is not wholly part of either of these communities. It is also a subtle foregrounding on the judgement King will eventually fall on her biological mother, noted later.

This theme of adoptee double consciousness is further typified in King's struggle regarding 'real' vs. 'unreal' families. King's grandfather refers to her as his adopted granddaughter, an incident which makes her feel othered. There are various references to family resemblance, especially when King compares herself to her cousins, who are "don't need explaining" (King, 2017, p. 34), because they physically resemble their grandparents: "Adam and I are

denied full, peak membership to our family because we don't have the 'family nose'" (King, 2017, p. 33).

Race is another contributing factor to King's double consciousness as an interracial adoptee. In her white community, King is racialized and othered. King's otherness is further emphasized by her perusal of an advertisement for financial aid in Africa, depicting an emaciated brown child holding an empty bowl. To King, her birth country is described as:

where people who are brown like me come from and it is dirty and poor ... I remind myself again to be grateful for having been rescued from a life in such a desperate place. (King, 2017, p. 63)

This is another allusion to the cult of gratitude, manifested not only in terms of being a rescued adoptee, but also being a person of colour rescued from dire circumstance. A further link to racialization is King's mention of how the only brown people she regularly sees are two television personalities. Both of these women have energetic and buoyant personalities. So akin to these personalities feels King that she wonders whether perhaps the one is her "real mom" (King, 2017, p. 64), even before she realizes the significance of her skin colour. However, King notes that "what happens inside the television isn't real" (King, 2017, p. 64). Racialized bodies may serve as role models, but is not the norm, furthering King's feelings of otherness.

It is therefore not surprising that fitting in is another recurring element in King's memoir. Individuals, clothing, furniture, are described in terms of how they fit into their environment, drawing attention to King's physical and affective separation from what she deems normative. One such an example is evident in her description of a dress made for her by her grandmother:

Making your own is better, because then whatever you make will fit perfectly. Fitting is important. Sometimes things fit . . . But sometimes even things that are new do not mould to us and they occupy an awkward space . . . When things don't fit, we panic. (King, 2017, p. 45)

The dress serves as metaphor of King's double consciousness – 'making your own', or having your own biological children, is better than adopting someone else's new creation, something that does not quite fit. King further strengthens this point through the use of other metaphors, such as the family home, "normal from the outside . . . but which inside is odd, topsy-turvy" (King, 2017, p. 52), much like the haphazard fashion in which the family itself had been constituted: "My family looks normal from the outside . . . but when you look closer you realise it doesn't quite match" (King, 2017, p. 52). Later, after her adopted parents' divorce, King refers to the jumbled items in her father's flat: "You can't just take something from one life and put it into another . . . There will always be something of the old life . . . that means it doesn't quite fit into the new" (King, 2017, p. 80). This becomes another metaphor for King's realization that an adoptee cannot merely be slotted into a new family without the agony of feeling othered.

The issue of race, as well as the many metaphors employed in the memoir, summarizes King's representation of her identity as an adoptee: that of not fitting in, but also that of continuous double consciousness regarding her adoptee status and as a racialized body in a white community. This affective displacement is perhaps best summarized in King's own

words: “I felt so desperately misunderstood and unable to speak about the feelings of sadness, insecurity, abandonment and otherness . . . It is a familiar feeling among adoptees. That we must be silent and, above all, constantly grateful” (King, 2017, p. 39). These words indicate that the semantic and cognitive-affective maps representing the interracial adoptee double consciousness, and an overwhelming sense of their silencing under the cult of gratitude. What King succeeds in doing in this memoir is to become a voice for the adoptee – the very act of highlighting the silence, breaks the silence. This may point to the creation of a new atlas with which to navigate the representational maps in South African adoption memoirs.

### **Adoptive parents: Victims or Villains?**

As far as the depiction of the adopted- and biological parents go, a pattern of idealization, realization, and final resentment or disappointment emerges. King’s adoptive father, Malcolm, is, at first, her “captain [and] team-mate” (King, 2017, p. 59). Not much more is said regarding their relationship, until her parents’ divorce. This leads to Malcolm’s slow disappearance from King’s life. When she goes to university, she states, she has not had contact with him for nearly seven years, “I have almost, *almost* forgotten that I am his daughter” (King, 2017, p. 128). When Malcolm falls ill with leukemia, King attempts to visit him in hospital, only to be told by a nurse that “Mr. Kirk does not have a daughter” (King, 2017, p. 128). Nevertheless, King never expresses resentment. Their relationship is summarized in King’s words: “Although he hurt me by leaving me behind . . . he would still . . . be the first man who ever loved me” (King, 2017, p. 129).

Ultimately, King does not problematize her relationship with Malcolm as much as she does with her adopted mother, Angela. Angela is depicted as a devoted housewife and mother. As King grows older, she increasingly feels that she does not meet her mother’s expectations of what she wanted in a daughter: “I would be overwhelmed by the sense that my mother was eternally disappointed by me. I wasn’t the daughter she had really wanted” (King, 2017, p. 38). This is compounded by the fact that “Mum is always wistful and sad when she talks about her not being able to have children. Understandably so, but her sadness was greater than her desire to reassure us . . . that we were enough” (King, 2017, p. 37). These instances lead King to resent her mother. King implies that Angela was unaware of King’s struggles with coming to terms with her abandonment at birth: “According to my mother, I showed absolutely no sign of distress at being parted from Kris” (King, 2017, p. 42), and that Angela was mostly unaware of the constant “uncontrollable fear of abandonment, crippling self-doubt . . . and pitiably low self-worth” (King, 2017, p. 42). King paints a fresco of her adoptive mother as well-meaning and loving, though ill-equipped to deal with the rigors of life as an adopted parent, and largely ignorant of her adopted children’s affective needs and the underlying trauma that shapes their existence.

Apart from her views of her adoptive parents as individuals, King tells of how her initial view of an ideal adopted family unravels as she grows older. Her bifurcated double consciousness is mentioned earlier, but her adoptive parents’ role in this affective displacement should be scrutinized. In Chapter 4 of the memoir, King observes: “My adoptive parents were never really meant to have been my mother and father . . . They forget that the start . . . of every adoption story is pain” (King, 2017, pp. 30-31). The reasons behind this observation stem from King’s belief that her adoptive parents never addressed the issue of adoption itself, and far less so the issue of interracial adoption. Instead of personally addressing this aspect, King’s parents provide her with a book titled *Jane is Adopted*.

The pictures in 'Jane is Adopted' shows me how it works. A lady with red hair and a smiley face has a big tummy. Then on the next page she is holding a baby. Then she gives the baby to a lady in a green dress and a man with a moustache like Daddy's. They are smiling too. At the end, there is a little girl sitting on the lap of the lady with the green dress; she is smiling too. Adoption just means lots of smiles and everyone is happy. (King, 2017, p. 43)

Though the book may initially soothe her and answer the questions she may have regarding the process of adoption, King is, from the outset, conditioned to subscribe to the cult of gratitude inherent in the idealized concept of the adoption fairytale, her trauma silenced. King also recognizes that adoption is seen as the purview of affluent whites, an uncomfortable truth exposed in extant adoption research, while also highlighting the white savior narrative perpetuated by interracial adoption (*cf.* Samuels & LaRossa, 2009; Zill, 2017; Steinberg & Hall, 2011; and others). Thus, King's adoptive parents' lack of open discussions pertaining to adoption leaves her unequipped to deal with larger issues she may have, such as feeling of abandonment, rejection, shame, and guilt. In this sense, one might say that the adoptive parents' voices are heard and that, in the process, the adoptee is silenced.

Furthermore, King states in no uncertain terms that she and Adam were not first-choice children. King feels disposable, and Angela's constant pining for her unborn biological children makes King feel inadequate, and that neither she nor Adam could "eradicate, or at least usurp, her own disappointment" at being unable to bear children (King, 2017, p. 37). Although King does feel loved, she also experiences a certainty that, had Malcolm and Angela conceived naturally, she and Adam would never have been adopted. King goes on to situate this in the larger context of adoption outside of her family, stating that she has never met adoptive parents whose choice to adopt was spurred on by the need to provide a child with a home rather than as a replacement for biological children who would never be born. This is not an uncommon view among adoptees as well as the general public, as discussed by Bramlett and Radell (2017), Palacios and Brodzinsky (2010), and others. What this indicates in terms of the adoptive parents in adoption atlases, is that their voices are imprinted on the adoptee. In this case, the adoptive parents' trauma – their infertility – serves to silence the trauma of the adoptees themselves.

### **First Parents and the Negation of Trauma**

As is the case with King's perceptions of her adoptive parents, she at first has an idealized view of her biological parents. However, as she grows older and gains insight into their reality, mostly through letters written to her by Kris, her first/biological mother, and later through her interactions with Kris' other children, this perception changes to one of resentment and anger.

King paints an idealized picture of her biological father, Jackson; however, little is written about him in the memoir. Based on the single photograph she has of him, King fantasizes about her biological father. She notes that all that is good in her must have come from Jackson, and that, despite his race being a disadvantage in the South African socio-political climate at the time of King's birth, he would have been a revered and respected man: "In my mind my father is Othello" (King, 2017, p. 23). This is one of the only times King refers to Jackson, and she acknowledges that she only pretends to know him.

King's idealization of Kris and with own her birth story soon become colored with the reality communicated to her in Kris' letters. She realizes that giving her up for adoption was not an action taken in her best interest, but was her mother's choice to ostensibly protect herself from recrimination and incrimination. King interprets this as Kris absolving herself of impropriety and, ultimately, a choice she made to shirk the responsibility of dealing with her affair. King's belief is not without merit, as Kris states: "It is not true to say that you were simply the product of a romance story, nor that your adoption was simply down to the politics in South Africa when you were born" (King, 2017, p. 114). In the same breath, Kris proceeds to blame King for her need for information regarding her origins. While being seemingly accepting of and open to King's requests for information, she blames King for traumatizing her with these requests, negating King's trauma in the adoption process: "Your curiosity about your ancestry is understandable, but is the curiosity of a young idealistic woman worth the pain I am once again feeling?" (King, 2017, p. 114). She minimizes King's need for closure, and blames King's birth, and not her affair, for her divorce: "You have so many more years ahead of you and the first days of your life are not important on that scale ... Your conception and birth were partially responsible for my divorce not long after you were born" (King, 2017, p. 114). In this and other letters, King is told to cease asking questions, that "I want to keep that part of my life in the past . . . please let me go from your life" (King, 2017, p. 114). The rejection that informs King's identity as an adoptee is now verbalized, and solidifies her (relevant) belief that she was unwanted. King's resentment and anger coalesce into a message Kris:

I don't forgive you. I do not forgive you. I want pain and dark and nothing for you ...  
I want to crawl back up inside you, covered in barbs, ripping you open from your womanhood to your gullet and expose all of the things that fester under your skin [...] I want you abandoned and frightened . . . I want tears for my tears, scars for my scars . . . loss for my loss, because I do not forgive you... (King, 2017, p. 174)

King argues that there was indeed a way for her mother to keep her – to return to England along with her husband and child (King, 2017, p. 88). As King can rationally think of increasingly viable reasons why her adoption never needed to happen, she becomes convinced that she was unwanted, and was put up for adoption "because I was an inconvenience" (King, 2017, p. 88). Kris is painted as mothering without a of agency, a belief cemented with the arrival of the aforementioned letter. Ironically, it is in this instance that King feels closest to what can be called her true identity:

With the arrival of this letter, everything I've wanted – perhaps *needed* – to believe about my biological mother flies from my mind . . . I am overwhelmed with anger. Time stands still and the 'gone before' catches up with the 'yet to come'. It is where the two meet that I am most present, but also most afraid. (King, 2017, p. 117)

The idealized biological mother becomes instantly vilified and deceptive. Once more, Kris rejects her daughter, and King becomes "the thing she fears the most. The litter from her belly, the filthy issue, the prodigal daughter" (King, 2017, p. 118). Using the word "thing" in reference to herself speaks to the rejection and incongruity King experiences, and echoes the discussion on her identity as black, her embodied yet contested identity, above: "everything I know and think I know and have always understood about where I came from evaporates" (King, 2017, p. 115). She starts questioning what she had always believed – that for Kris this was a decision accompanied with doubt, grief, and internal conflict. Kris becomes the



embodiment of her lie – that Karoline has died. Kris had killed Karoline in order to escape possible legal and familial recriminations.

## **Conclusion**

When we investigate the semantic and cognitive-affective maps King presents in her memoir, we come to realize that this is an atlas of lived experience. It is an atlas that provides maps of how King, her adoptive parents, and her first parents, navigated adoption, laying bare the trauma and long-term consequences of specifically interracial adoption. Rather than taking the essentialist approach of adoption as a fairy tale or vilifying those involved in adoption, King sketches the relief map of the motivations behind her relinquishment and adoption, and grapples with questions of identity, racialization, ignorance, good intentions, and unjust political ideologies. Though Kris is vilified, it is not done based on her choice of giving her child up for adoption, but rather for the selfish reasons leading to this decision and the duplicitous way in which she went about it. In a sense, this memoir is an atlas not only of adoption, but of adopting a life that is unconventional, that spans continents and political regimes, and different ways of family creation. In the South African context, King succeeds in exposing the dark underbelly of adoption in the Apartheid era while also commenting on how the country later adopts back those children it shunned, abused, and ostracized for decades. It is an atlas that does not shy away from showing the deepest crevices of despair, identity struggles, the cult of gratitude, and how good intentions really do pave the way to hell. Through this atlas, King creates a space where members of the adoption triad can recognize themselves and their lived reality, an atlas that transcends the fairy tale or horror story boundaries imposed by popular mass media and our consumption thereof.

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