

Transracial Adoption: Love and Pain

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Abstract

In various social and political discourses, we hear both that orphaned children need homes and love, and that children of the disenfranchised are being taken (Briggs, 2012). In the spectrum of families between these positions, I question the possibility of loving relationships in transracial adoption, where individuals from different cultures and ontological understandings are positioned to live as kin. Adoptive families, amongst other 'social families', can be prejudiced by prevailing discourses that privilege biological parenting, which can extend to expectations of what normative, loving parental relationships entail. Despite global trends toward social families, (Gabb, 2008), the development of complex relationships in oppressive social situations, across boundaries of race, personality, desire and trauma, has not been adequately explored.

Judith Butler describes kinship: children, because of divorce and remarriage, because of migration, exile and refugee status, because of global displacements of various kinds, move from one family to another, move from a family to no family, move from no family to a family... (Butler, 2000, p. 22).

This paper interprets qualitative field research to examine what facilitates and impedes possibilities of love in families with transracially adopted children, supporting my thesis that for individuals to form loving relationships they need to meet in an equal emotional space that acknowledges difference. This paper is an exploration of ways that love emerges, or not, and is presented as a response to theory, incorporating a creative writing process. Creative writing facilitates integration of various theories and voices, generating different understandings of inter-subjective emotional phenomena.

Keywords: Transracial adoption, love, kinship, creative writing, spaces of communication.

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Introduction

Transracial adoption has high stakes. Not least is the common desire of the adoptive parent(s) of establishing an imagined 'loving home'. Yet, there is no unique way of defining a loving home, and no unique way of achieving it. Here, I discuss different approaches, from my research archive, that may impede or facilitate the formation of loving relationships between adults and transracial adoptees. My investigation includes an original piece of creative writing, *Markings*, that integrates my qualitative research with theory. But first I will set the social and political context in which transracially adoptive families emerge.

For the subjects involved in transracial adoption, there are various social and cultural discursive influences and psychic dimensions that affect inter-subjective relationships and flows of emotion. The uniting subjects come from different ontologies and experiential realities, making the possibility of a 'mutuality of being' (Sahlins, 2011), and loving kin relationships formidable.

Hegemonic discourses can privilege biogenetic families over social families. Here there is much literature, especially from Queer theory. As has happened in my archive, the perceived need for adoptive families to mimic nuclear family dynamics can restrict generative practices of relatedness and emotional connections by not acknowledging difference.

On top of this, there are conflicting discourses within Adoption scholarship, notably between those who see transracial adoption as stealing children from the disenfranchised to fulfil western desires for family, and those who view it as rescuing orphaned children. There is a range of positions between these stances.

The private domain presents still more obstacles. Once the children have been adopted by unknown parents and removed to another culture, adults have diverse ways of managing the merging of lives. Scholars, such as Myers (2009), Dorow (2006), and Kim (2007), among others, have exposed the problems associated with the "clean-break" trope of transnational/racial adoption, where the adoptee's birth culture and kin ties are replaced with the new family. Kit Myers (2009) reflects on the "violence" done to adopted subjects who are not assisted to keep their pasts alive.

The materialisation of statements that explicitly reject the historical and global, through the trope of 'clean break' and articulations that the past does not matter enacts further violence on adoptees and related subjects, specifically birth parents. Thus, the act of adoption, which has been interpreted as an act of love, compassion, and humanitarianism, can also be an act of violence (p.120).

To adopt a child from another country, of another race, and keep the birth country's cultural and kinship links alive is difficult to achieve. In fact, it seems to be a rarity. In my archive, there were a range of examples from the clean break through to regular visits to birth country and family involvement. Some families joined support groups with other adoptees from the same nation, and some did not.

Barbara Yngvesson (2007) argues that this refiguring of kinship “reaches back to rework the past and reaches forward to construct the future, as well as stretching “across” the national borders that transnational adoption has both secured and unsettled over the past half century” (p. 576).

Yngvesson points out that these refigurings incorporate Euro-American dichotomies, such as: nature and nurture, blood and law, and biogenetic and adoptive family, reworking them “in ways that have the potential to create new forms of consciousness as well as to transform everyday practices of relatedness” (p. 576).

Transracial adoption is also framed politically. As Elena Kim (2007) explains:

hegemonic cultural scripts congeal kinship ideologies out of naturalized categories of “family,” “nation,” and “diaspora” and in so doing conceal forms of governmentality and state power that underwrite and legislate certain relationships as “kin” while disallowing others, left “unnamed and unrecognized” (p. 523).

While controversy around the historical context, purposes and practices of transracial adoption dominates much discussion, racial discourses must also be examined, both in the larger social context and within intimate spaces. This dimension is too big to address in this paper, but must be acknowledged. Importantly, I refer to the feminist position that understands racial inequalities are perpetuated with the practice of transracial adoption, as summarised by legal scholar, Twila Perry (1998):

Obviously, there are children adopted from poor countries who would face a very bleak life or even death in their homelands. However, a feminist analysis of international adoption should go farther than a simple altruism narrative. Indeed, an appropriate question might not be what Westerners are giving to the children of impoverished countries, but what they are taking from those countries or from the poor women who live in them (p.135).

In practice, people are finding different ways to escape these historic, hegemonic discourses, to merge and generate new discourses, while relating emotionally with children who already have birth parents, living or deceased. The flip side of this proposal is that some people are persevering with more traditional, nuclear family discourses, where transracially adopted children are accepted as ‘the same’ as biological children in all respects. I will now give examples of both these complex predicaments.

Negotiating difference and trust

When strangers meet, they negotiate a space from where they can relate to each other. The participants' stories illuminate how this occurs, often by affective means. As the two previously unknown individuals become family, there are obvious power imbalances.

Some of the participants specified that their families, or their children and their relationships, were 'the same' as everyone else's, or 'normal,' even though it would be ludicrous to imagine that there is a normal way of living and loving as a family.

My thesis is that for love to arise between any two people they need to be in an equal social and emotional space, conceptually connected to Homi Bhabha's famous notion of a third space of liminality, ambivalence and hybridity, where cultural difference is negotiated. Following are examples of shared affective spaces, from my archive.

Yvonne and her partner adopted a three-year-old girl from Ethiopia. The space they created was reading books together to bring alive imaginary and other worlds.

Reading books was a bonding experience, especially with Elsa when she was very little. I would have her come, and it was the actual closeness, it was the sitting and touching and reading and sharing, and there were times where things would happen, and her language was very primitive... so we would use books a lot this way, to be close; to be physically close, to touch each other and to touch the book and to talk about worlds, you know to talk about worlds.

Yvonne described a situation where her daughter brought Yvonne a book that had included pictures of a girl who wore colorful clothes to describe her mood. She also described her excitement when she realized that her daughter had learnt to use books to find a place in herself to 'relate from.' She said: "I took a big breath, and said, she found it. She found that place in herself."

Understandably, in some of the interviews trust was also recognized as a feature on which this relational space was contingent. One older male participant, Martin, described how trust was achieved with his friend's adopted daughter, when power dynamics were unequal and roles were confusing.

It's always dangerous being a single male involved with a family, especially a family that has young women in it ... there must always be an element of suspicion, as there should always be an element of suspicion, because they've got to know whether they're safe or not, but I think we established a level of trust and understanding very quickly.

I have been completely transparent ... I don't necessarily put myself down but I can admit my foibles quite openly, and in a way that allows people to get an idea of who you are and what you are. It's really important for families to have people around who are trusted.

It was not easy to set up a situation of trust with an eight-year-old girl who knew nothing of the culture or values in the place she found herself. This was compounded in this case, since there was no spoken language as she is deaf. Martin described an outing they had, saying:

She wanted that dress right or wrong, and here am I with about three signs that she understood... And everyone thought I was either a murderer or an abductor.

In a busy department store these two people, silently battled wills as the girl was determined to have a white, chiffon dress off a mannequin. I asked Martin how he solved the problem without carrying her outside and without shared language. He said:

We kind of walked around and around the bottom of the store for ages and ages, trying to work out how we were going to escape, and in the end, she calmed down enough, and we got out, but that was frightening.

So, something transpired between the two bodies and psyches as they walked silently and some understanding was negotiated, but difficult to put into words.

In contrast, Kathryn reflected sadly on the traumas of her relationship with her transracially adopted son, guessing that not acknowledging difference was a mistake. She explained that her relationship with her son was not the same as with her biological children, saying:

It's not the same, never has been, probably never will be. He is on a different level to us; he thinks differently, he talks differently, he is different.

I asked: "Do you think you've treated him differently to the biological children?"

Kathryn: No, no, that was one thing, that my husband and I agreed on, we'd treat them the same. But, in hindsight, we should have treated him differently, because he wasn't the same... and you live and learn, and hindsight's a wonderful thing, but we never really bonded, and I think he got to the stage where he just didn't like me... and I mean why should he? I'm not his mother.

Kathryn said that now her son is an adult they are barely on speaking terms.

There's not that relationship with me, you can't force a child to have a different personality, but the way he is with me is not nice.

Failed and/ or loveless transracial adoptions occur, and, seen as sensitive, are not often spoken about. Yet, without questioning it is impossible to envisage how society can change to better meet the needs of social and global families.

We know that adopted children are born to biological mothers and fathers, and that such loss is traumatic. This fact alone means that adoptive parenting is different to biological parenting, as there needs to be allowance for two mothers in the role of mother and two fathers in the role of father. As well as these differences, adjustments for varying degrees of trauma impact the emotional space being created.

Kathryn's story was sad and told with tears.

But it wasn't black and white... I could see the grey areas. We could imagine what it must be like to be the middle, colored child between two high achieving white children, but he always appeared to be coping... I put it down to lack of balance, his body, he must have felt so different, being in a family but not really part of it. I thought it was a happy family and he had everything the same as the other two. He had piano lessons, braces on his teeth, dance lessons, but it wasn't enough. When he was little and I was pregnant he was so innocent pointing out his brown skin and curly hair, his difference.

If I was drowning and his two dogs were drowning I know he'd save the dogs first.

It's hard, how do you give them that affection if you don't feel it?

Even if there is a space established where two people can meet on equal terms and speak their own truths safely, I wonder how this plays out over time. As David Eng (2013), points out, there is a significant lack of "available vocabularies" to investigate practices where "deeply held beliefs about family and identity" and community exist (p. 3).

In what follows, I demonstrate how fiction can highlight the complexities and issues raised in the interview with Kathryn, while changing identifying features. I also fictionalise ways that the clean break trope, and racial differences can play out in Australian middle class lives, when pitted against normative discourses, with the occasional interrogative voice.

Markings

1

Meryn waited for a reply for two weeks, but Jilly did not respond to her message.

She wrote again, "Please will you come?"

"I don't even know the man." Jilly replied.

"Will you meet Richard with me then? Before the wedding?" Meryn wrote back, and attached a photo of Richard. She chose one that was not too close-up. Meryn thought he looked relaxed, staring across a green, golf course.

Again, she waited for a reply. After three weeks Meryn tried again.

"Can we meet then? Just you and I?"

"Where?" Jilly wrote back.

"Tomorrow at lunchtime by the river? At the park. I'll be there at one o'clock. I'll bring drinks."

The air seemed to be thick, pressing her, as she waited behind the bench seat at the park. At three o'clock Meryn was ready to give up when she noticed the heads of two, big dogs swimming further down at the bend in the river. They had been there for some time in her peripheral vision.

Meryn stood and slowly walked towards the river bend, looking through the reeds at the dogs' heads, still moving through the water. The water was already dark with shadows, but there were occasional lighter patches of sky reflected between overhanging leaves.

Then Meryn saw Jilly, sitting alone, further along on the bank, watching the dogs, but she must have sensed her coming. She looked thinner than she had been, and composed, hugging her knees to her chest.

Meryn stepped over the muddy, brown rivulets that seeped away from the edges. She raised her hand and Jilly nodded her head. Meryn started then to walk quickly across thick, silty sand, littered with bark and stones, watching where she put her feet. But, when she looked up Jilly was in the water with the dogs.

Meryn waited awhile, then she took off her long jacket and waded into the water, wearing a pale camisole and dark leggings, so her white body looked half dead to Jilly. She turned her back, then turned again to watch Meryn slowly, deliberately breath-stroking towards them.

Jilly braced against the relentlessness of her mother, pushing on with the slow stroking movement toward her. She swam further out.

Meryn eventually slowed, hating the coldness of the water, and the pungent smell of wet dog hair. Jilly watched as Meryn began to struggle, supposing it was a ruse to get her attention. She swam in to the bank with the dogs and waited, watching.

Jilly patted her dogs as they sat while Meryn floundered towards where she thought the shallow ridge was. Meryn had her back to them, but she knew they were watching her.

At last she felt her feet on the silty sand. She righted herself and stumbled off the beach to the grass, to find her coat and bag.

Meryn thought, if she was the one drowning, I would have done anything to drag her out, which reminded her of the hospital, and Jilly lying so still and quiet, her brown body on hyperwhite sheets, cut and in pain.

“You ok?” Jilly asked Meryn.

“I’m a bit cold,” she said, “that’s all.”

They stood in silence.

“Your wedding?” Jilly asked.

“Yes, so at last I seem to have found my soul mate. I’m sure you’ll get on. I just want us to find some peace now. Can we try?”

Their silence, which was full of the sounds of water moving and dogs panting, unnerved her.

Meryn went on, “I won’t be happy if you’re not there. Will you come please?”

Meryn waited for Jilly to answer but she was looking at the river and watching the dogs running.

“I don’t know,” she said.

Jilly half smiled at Meryn as she walked away.

2

“This is the last picture I have of me and Jilly together. We’re at Tamworth, four years ago,” Meryn said, reaching across to pass Bev the small picture of two faces. But it was getting dark outside, and it was too dark to see it. There was a small electric shock as their hands touched.

“Oh dear,” Bev said.

“Yes,” Meryn said, “a lot has happened in the last fifteen years. Not all of it pretty. It’s not a nice story.”

They were sitting side by side at Meryn's old farm house, on the same two deck chairs they would usually end up in after days of painting, getting through a bottle of wine. There had been the time for painting, and sitting around, before Jilly came. Bev used to etch zinc plates in the dull light, so there was constant scratching and scraping, mostly images of rocks and stones, and marks that she made from memory.

"It's been an unhappy life for the poor girl. Was she about fifteen there?" Bev asked, glancing at the photo. She wondered why she had agreed to come.

Bev lit a cigarette and drew in loudly. When she exhaled, the smoke covered them. There was no breeze.

"She was just thirteen there actually, withdrawn, see, all that hair hiding her face."

Bev looked away.

In the silence, Meryn would always talk. "She hid things from me. I didn't know she was drinking, or the rest."

Meryn stood up and paced back and forth, seeing blue-black sky, and stars, very distant. Once she had seen a shooting star, in the bush. It was when Jilly had just joined them and they were camping, her and Pete and Jilly. But no one else had seen it. They thought she had imagined it.

"So, you were at Tamworth, at the music festival?" Bev asked her, when she had finished her cigarette. "That surprises me. You're not really musical, at least you weren't when I knew you."

"I couldn't sing like you, but I still liked music," Meryn said, finishing her glass of wine.

"So, you took the poor girl to country and western music festivals? She's Malaysian for fuck's sake."

Bev reached into her bag and pulled out a bag of chips. She sat crunching them in the dark.

It was a still night with the occasional sounds of dogs barking in the distance. Meryn reached for a chip and knocked her glass onto the cement. It shattered. She ate the chip then gathered up the glass in her hand. She felt it cut her skin and squeezed it so it cut a bit more, but it hurt, so she stopped. She stood up and walked to the edge of the garden, then threw the pieces of glass. Meryn ran her hand under the hose then sucked it. The blood in her mouth made her feel sick. She took another sip of the red wine straight from the bottle.

"Use my glass," Bev said, and passed her a full glass of wine.

"I can see more now, looking back. I mean there are the benefits of looking back, reflecting, like we did with the paintings. You said it was better to look at it from a distance, move back," Meryn said, as she sat back down next to Bev.

"And you always got confused about perspective," Bev said.

"Anyway, at the time of that photo of us in Tamworth, we were on our own. Pete had already moved out, and Jilly was lying to me, and harming herself, and I didn't really feel like making new friends. I didn't feel like seeing anyone at all actually, but we had to do something. You couldn't just have the two of us alone in that big house with nothing going on, just emptiness all around."

Meryn looked across to see if Bev was with her, but she could never really tell.

"One night," she went on, "I was just out wandering, Jilly was with friends, and I came across this pub. There were yellow lights and everyone seemed to be smiling, listening to this upbeat music. There were so many sounds going on, you couldn't

walk past, and so without really planning it, I just went in and sat down. I realised I didn't have to be alone but I could still be alone. You know, they could have been playing anything, it was just such a relief to be sitting with people, not talking and not arguing, but having a glass of wine, and it went on from there. I found more places and festivals, and I realised Jilly and I could be out of the house, and we could go places together, and we didn't have to talk, and we were with people."

"Did you think not talking would make you closer?" Bev asked.

"I don't know, the music was easy to follow, you didn't have to try, and the atmosphere was easy, no tension. We could just be."

"So not a real alliance," Bev said. "It sounds like neither of you had a clue what was going on with the other."

"Alliance is a strange word." Meryn said and reached out to touch her arm in the night. Bev shifted away.

"I'm so glad I found you again," Meryn said. "I haven't been able to talk to anyone about what has been going on. I knew you would understand."

She turned herself around in her chair so she was face-on to Bev, aware that the night had turned into a performance, almost a plea for help, which wasn't what she had intended.

"You mean you knew I would tell you what a dickhead you're being about all this."

"There's actually something else. I'm getting married again and I want you to come to the ceremony. Will you?" Meryn asked.

Meryn's words were lost in the empty space that was not a farm now, just vacant space, where they used to paint. Meryn had painted four boards of rich, Prussian blue skies, one with a staircase of wooden steps that lead nowhere, while Bev had made the series of prints.

"Why didn't Jilly ever speak up, that's what I don't understand. Was she scared of you?" Bev asked as she pulled her phone out of her bag to check the time.

"Aren't you staying? The beds are all made," Meryn asked.

Bev didn't answer. She had to tell Meryn that she was not able to help her. The problems were Meryn's, as she had tried to point out when she was teaching her painting, the world she imagined she lived in was a fantasy; in reality, people are not free to do whatever they like.

"I can't stay," Bev said and stood up.

"Funny how you could always stay when I provided your canvases and oils," Meryn said putting her hands over the hot skin on her face. "You're like Jilly, cunning," Meryn said.

Bev walked into the garden, seeing dark, spiky, familiar leaves, and the joyless, stretches of dark, flat land behind the trees.

Meryn sat still.

"It was my life too," Meryn said finally.

"I know you just want me to tell you that none of this is your fault," Bev said.

Meryn felt the alcohol and heat and pressure in her body, pushing into her sinuses, so she had to close her eyes. Her head hurt as she looked across to the shed at the bottom of the yard. It blocked the view of the empty paddocks. There was an old water tank, not in use, and an empty half gallon drum, rusted and jagged that they used to light fires in.

"I feel sorry for the child," Bev said.

“She’s a woman, not a child. We all feel sorry for her. But she did it to herself. I did all I could. There was not a thing more I could have done. She cut herself, her skin is scarred; she did all of it, and now she won’t see me. How do you think this makes me feel? I’ve spent the best part of my life on her and now she’s rejected me.”

Bev lit another cigarette, blowing out the smoke close enough that Meryn felt her breath touch her face. She rubbed her eyes. It was always like this with Bev, which made her wonder if that could have been why she had pressured Pete into the adoption in the first place, to fill the hopeless space Bev made apparent, the void in her life.

“Why didn’t you get in touch with me sooner then? You could have called me, rather than relying on those women you hang around with. You know they’re at the bottom of the problem between you and Jilly don’t you?” Bev said in a flat voice.

“You don’t know who I hang around with now,” Meryn said loudly.

“It’s obvious; you always had those blue-ribbon friends, in their red lipstick.”

“Who I associate with has nothing to do with what’s up with Jilly,” Meryn said.

The picture of Jilly had fallen off the table between them and was lying on the ground. She bent and picked it up.

3

Meryn was unpacking in the new apartment in the centre of the city. She was setting up her bedroom, bringing boxes in from the car, putting things in drawers, as if the whole thing would disappear if she didn’t move quickly. She spread a designer batik bedspread.

When she finished, she lay on the bed and opened her laptop. Bev and Jilly had both sent her emails. She was excited, but neither of them would come to the wedding. Richard came in with take-away coffees, and he said that she would see how good it would be to be making a fresh start. Richard said that there were so many people coming to the function that she would hardly notice that Bev and Jilly were not there. He had booked the restaurant on the harbour and ordered the food that morning.

Meryn called Jilly’s mobile number, not expecting her to answer.

“I can’t make it. I can’t face a crowd of people, but thank you for wanting me to be there,” she said and hung up.

Meryn called Bev twice more. They talked about Bev’s art, and the television documentary being made, set near Meryn’s old property.

“Peter called me,” Meryn told Bev, “out of the blue. He said he had been thinking that Jilly would probably come to the wedding if I moved the whole thing to the beach, a dog friendly beach, you know, there’s one on the central coast, with a beautiful club house where they do receptions. I think it might work out.”

“Good luck,” Bev said.

“I feel I’m on the right track finally. I even bought some pastels the other day.”

Three weeks later Meryn had not heard back from Jilly.

“We can’t move it to the beach” Meryn told Bev. “Richard said he’s not comfortable with the idea of having dogs at his wedding.”

“Well he’s not comfortable with you then, is he? Dogs come with your daughter. You should call it off.”

“But we have moved into this apartment, and he’s organised the food. People are coming.”

“Did you think Jilly would come to the beach?”

“Yes, and Pete said she had indicated as much to him.”

“Then you have to be strong and insist.”

“He will call it off,” Meryn said.

“This is how you might work it out,” Bev said. “Imagine you were painting your wedding. What would you see?”

“Pale sand, blurred horizon, flat, dark sea, and Jilly in long black clothes, walking.”

“There you are.”

“If I call it off I’ll probably be alone for the rest of my life,” Meryn said.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have demonstrated how fictional interpretations can extend the use of language and perspective, while engaging with theory, to make sense of complex inter-subjective emotional issues. For love to operate between parents and transracial adoptees, acknowledging and understanding these complexities is of paramount importance. I have looked at the way my participants live and love amongst social and political confusion, and found that many are forging loving relationships by creating spaces to negotiate difference and power imbalances. It goes without saying that kinship has moved beyond the nuclear family, but it remains difficult for some to transcend its ideological confines.

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