

## **'TRAVELLING HOME IN BOTH DIRECTIONS': RETHINKING 'FAMILY' IN AN ADOPTED WORLD**

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### **Abstract**

Transnational adoption both challenges and reinforces standard assumptions about persons, families, nations, and belonging. Based on fieldwork in Sweden, India, Colombia, Bolivia, Chile, and the United States, my research considers these challenges. I examine the transformation of the "abandoned" child into an adoptable resource for nations that "give" it away, the implications of this giving for nations that send and receive children in adoption, and the meanings of being adopted for adults who grew up in a world where the immigrant, the undocumented, and other forms of "alien" were increasingly targeted as disruptions to national identity and belonging.

The figure of the adoptee assumes a complex place in such a world. Indistinguishable from (other) immigrants on the outside, but separable from them because of his or her adopted "inside," the adoptee from Asia, Africa, or Latin America in a Euro-American home represents the ultimate paradox of belonging in a global context where transnationalism both affirms and breaches the borders of the nation-state. The increasing popularity of culture camps, roots tours, and reunions with pre-adoptive kin, and the interest of sending nations in encouraging return journeys by adopted adults, suggest the ways adoption simultaneously evokes an origin (national, familial) without which no identity can be "complete" and the vulnerability of all identities, their politically and historically contingent nature.

My talk focuses on such returns and their implications for the ways that familiar cultural forms are reconfigured by the presence of a child (and later an adult) whose quality as "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994: 89) confounds any sense of what a biological family (or native land) might naturally be. I begin with a discussion of the legal clean break, which constitutes an adoption as "strong" or "plenary" and incorporates the adopted child completely into the adoptive family and adoptive nation. Plenary adoption is rationalized on psychological (a sense of belonging), economic (property transfer), and legal grounds (the child's entitlement to the rights and benefits of the new family and nation). Significantly, the clean break policy also protects the borders of the nation-state, preventing the possibility that the adoptive child could become a means through which his or her "pre-adoptive kin" could also enter the adopting nation. In this sense, the goal of complete incorporation of the adopted child is simultaneously a principle of exclusion, a theme to which I return in the course of my presentation.

I then present three case studies of adults adopted by parents in Sweden from Ethiopia, Colombia, and Chile during the period 1970-2004. This was a period when Sweden, where my research was based, was experiencing increasing tensions with its transition to becoming an immigrant nation. Drawing on interviews with adopted adults who have made between one and four return journeys to visit their birth countries, the orphanages where they lived as infants or young children, or their birth families, I explore their reasons for wanting to make these journeys, their connection to their adoptive and birth families, and the relationship of going "back" to their sense of identity and belonging.

I discuss the interpretation of such journeys in light of the principle that adoptions must be "strong" if the child is to feel secure; and I argue that the legal clean break sets up the conditions that seem to require a return, pulling adoptees "back" to an origin. I juxtapose the assumption that "real" belonging is to be found in the birth

nation or birth family, with experiences of adoptees whose identity as “Swedish people” materializes in the course of multiple returns. More generally, I argue that adoption and the returns it seems to demand, provides a lens for rethinking familiar cultural forms such as the nation, the family, the Swedish (the Ethiopian, the Indian, the Korean, and so forth). These identities take shape not so much in or on a ground of belonging, but in the context of complex relations that cross (and in crossing, and re-crossing, create and unsettle) the boundaries that make families, nations and subjects “complete.”

The refiguring of kinship in the space of transnational adoption involves work of creating relatedness at various levels: constituting the relationship of parent to child, constituting “kinship” among adoptees from a particular sending nation who are living in a particular receiving nation, building links between adoptees who are classified as “black” in predominantly “white” adopting nations, and reconstituting links between legally orphaned adults and legally non-existent siblings who were left behind, as well as the more encompassing transnational projects created over the past decade by adopted adults (Kim, 2005). This refiguring reaches back to rework the past and reaches forward to construct the future; and it stretches “across” the national borders that transnational adoption has both secured and unsettled over the past half century. Refiguring both incorporates familiar dichotomies of Euro-American idiomatic kinship (“nature” versus “nurture”; “blood” versus “law”; “biogenetic” versus “adoptive” families) and reworks them in ways that have the potential to create new forms of consciousness as well as to transform everyday practices of relatedness.

### **Bibliography**

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