

‘Wade in the Water ...’: Re-thinking Adoptees’ Stories of Reunion

Denise Blake^I, Leigh Coombes^{II} & Mandy Morgan^{III}

deniseblake@xtra.co.nz, L.Coombes@massey.ac.nz, C.A.Morgan@massey.ac.nz

^{I,II,III} School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

A b s t r a c t

In 1955, the Aotearoa/New Zealand government legislated the closed stranger adoption period. Approximately 80,000 children were constructed as a legal fiction when deemed *as if born to* a legally married couple. Birth family information was permanently sealed. Yet being raised in a fictional subject position and being denied access to any family of origin has consequences for all involved. After ten years of lobbying, the Adult Adoption Information Act (1985) came into effect. The power of that legislation was to overturn the strategies that suppressed adoptees’ rights to know details of their birth. Adult adoptees over the age of 20 years could access their original birth certificates, which provided a birth mother’s name. With this identifying information, reunions became possible. Birth family reunions involve a diverse range of experiences, reflecting the ways in which adoptees are contextually and historically produced. This paper reconsiders the identity implications of reunion stories using the theoretical concept of hybrid identity. The complexities of reunions are multiple, and adoptees negotiate their identities through being both *born to* and *born as if* and yet neither identity is safe. In the production of this hybrid story, it was possible to see the political and moral trajectories that enable and constrain a sense of self through the complexities of a legal context that produces binary subject positions.

Keywords: Adoption, adoptees, hybridity, identity, birth family, adoptive family, reunion.

Background

In 1955 the Aotearoa/New Zealand government legislated the ‘closed stranger’ adoption period, also known as the ‘complete break climate’. Here illegitimate, unwanted or neglected children could become the child *as if born to* a legally married adoptive couple. Section 16(2)a of the Adoption Act (1955) states “as if the child had been born to that parent in lawful wedlock”. In this way the biological and genetic truth of parenthood is replaced with legal parenthood, yet undeniably both exist (Ludbrook, 1997). This legislated birth created a legal fiction. Fiction in law is a supposition that is a contradiction to fact but accepted because of the practical implications. Legal fictions serve a purpose because they provide solutions to certain problems, in

this case a legitimate identity for those who had none. At the point that the new legitimate identity occurred, birth family information was permanently sealed. Yet, while one apparent problem was resolved, other problems arose such as the disregard for biological identity. ‘Closed stranger’ adoption depended on concealing birth relationships and produced secrecy as necessary to the adoption process. Restricting or stopping contact with the birth parents removed any ‘bad’ influences. This was in the best interests of the child. The ‘complete break’ practice of secrecy based on moral assumptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothering and enabled through attachment theory represented maternal bonding as vital to producing the ‘good’ mother. Adoption advocates assumed the adoptee would overcome the effects of a birth family ‘break’ in a ‘better’ environment. The adoptive family environment, with its nurturing and care, was alleged to more than compensate for the family of origin (Else, 1991; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988). The adopted child could be shaped and constructed *as if born to* and any difference would never be noticed or could be denied with the birth history permanently sealed. Between 1955 and 1985, approximately 80,000 children were adopted under this system.

Being denied access to a birth history and living the effects of a legal fiction can mean aversive consequences for adopted people, including psychological dysfunction and feelings of homelessness (see for example Griffith (1991), Hoksbergen (1997), Iwanek, (1997), Petta and Steed (2004) and Triseliotis (2000)). Movements protesting the human rights violation of secrecy and denial began to arise. Adoptees themselves began to demand knowledge of their birth histories and saw this as a fundamental human right. After ten years of intense and dedicated lobbying by adoptees and related health professions, the Aotearoa/New Zealand Adult Adoption Information Act (1985) came into effect. Under this legislation adoptees over the age of 20 years could access their original birth certificates (Griffith, 1991). Reunions became possible but opened up new spaces for identity, which could be problematic.

The passing of the Adult Adoption Information Act (1985) enabled adoptees a place to ‘resist’ their birth history secrets. They could challenge the legal fiction

and access information about a birth identity. Given the multiple challenges that adoptees encounter, such as identity diffusion and the sense of not belonging anywhere, it is not surprising that in most cases they search for their family of origin (March, 1995). In my research, I heard stories from adoptees that had initiated a search for their birth origins and those who had been ‘found’ by their birth mothers. They had experienced both the possibility and the impossibility of reunion. Some of their birth mothers were not traceable; some had vetoed access to their information¹, and, even where a reunion was possible, it was not always a solution.

Many of the searching adoptees that took part in this research delayed taking the first step in applying for an original birth certificate, as they were concerned, at times even terrified, that they would encounter a veto that feels like a legalised form of abandonment. They were also acutely aware that a birth family search involved fear of further rejection, abandonment and pain.

Yeah, yeah and there’s also that fear of rejection, of like, you know, being told to fuck off (*Cooley*, 163)

I was scared, I was really scared to umm, to be rejected...I was really scared that if I made contact, I was really scared that - how I would respond emotionally if umm I initiated contact and they said no? (*Barry*, 843, 849)

What if he’d said, buggar off you know?...he could have yeah, so it would have been protecting me as well...from rejection at that level (*Jan*, 421, 423, 425)

Beyond the first step, there are also multiple pathways through the complex processes of creating and maintaining relationships with birth family members. This involves negotiating identities on either side, and in the space between biological fact and the legal fiction of their birth.

A Hybrid Representation

To understand the complex and multiple experiences of reunion and how they matter to adoptees’ identities, I am taking up the metaphor of hybridity. This metaphor produces an understanding of the adopted identity and the positions that are enable or constrained by it. Yet, to realise how this notion can represent the adopted reunion it is important to trace its history and

the way in which it is used. According to Smith (2008), the genesis of hybridity is located in both the hard sciences (for example botany) and the social sciences. In plant biology, hybridity represents the grafting of one plant onto a different root stock (Young, 1999). When considering adoption, this biological metaphor could represent the child grafted onto a different family tree. Once legitimated and constructed *as if born to* a legally married couple the child then grows from another family tree.

Within the social sciences, hybridity is conceptualised as a process of separation from racial, ethnic and/or cultural practices through colonisation. When this separation occurs new practices for ‘being’ in the world are reformed. In this context, new hybrid identities and cultures are constituted when there is a merging of elements of cultures. Here, the notion of hybridity enables new space for producing knowledge of identity and subjectivity in our culturally globalised world (Smith, 2008). In relation to race, ethnicity and culture, hybrid positions enable newly imagined differences after colonisation.

The production of hybrid identities necessarily implicates institutions and power relations, as the grafting of one culture onto another is not a symmetrical process. Historically, hegemonic governance meant that white, western, colonising cultural practices were valued, and these dominant discourses inscribed the bodies of ‘others’ (indigenous, illegitimate, women, girls). Discourse, in a Foucaultian sense, function as the body of statements through which organisations and societies produce rules to direct knowledge, power and truth claims. They construct objects and produce subject positions (Parker, 2002; Ramazanoglu, 1993), so discourse actively governs subject positions and relationships among subjects and objects. At the same time, legislation legitimates particular moral trajectories, excludes others and delimits acceptable practices of citizenship. Through discourse, and law, some subjects are positioned through hegemonic, scientific knowledge, as flawed and in need of fixing when they do not fit the desired norms (Parker, 2005), as occurred with the illegitimate subject. As Smith (2008) posits, these relations of social power disperse and scatter groups of people throughout the world. Such processes of colonisation produce alienation and fragmentation from notions of essential or authentic identity. To take up a hybrid identity means a complex positioning of self within the larger social discourses of class, gender, race and cultural diversity (Luke & Luke, 1999). Hybridity in cultural narratives represents the stories of racial, ethnic and/or

¹ Despite attempts to allow access to previously secreted information after the passing of the Adult Adoption Information Act (1985), it was still legally possible, through a veto, to maintain the secret. Both birth parents and adoptees could place a veto on their records to prevent the release of any identifying information. A veto lasts for 10 years.

cultural identities produced through postcolonial power relations (Smith, 2008).

In postcolonial and cultural studies, the notion of hybridity has shifted from racial discourse of an essentialised notion of a natural category to representing a social constructionist epistemology that rejects essentialist views of identity existing in nature. The social constructionist position, according to Bell (2004), represents self as shaped by context and social interaction. Again, hybridity is a mixing or blending of cultures that occur through experience within the particular cultures. Here hybridity is constructive and represents the ways in which identities are shaped and form over time. Cultural blending is necessary in our global world. Bell argues that it encapsulates the process of regeneration and dynamic change and that any claims of hybridity must be contextualised because ontological hybridity, the identities that 'arise from the *mixture* of two or more cultural origins' (p.125), do not represent a complete break from essentialism. There is still a sense of the natural or the essential embedded in the metaphor, evoked by the idea of 'root stock' onto which another culture is 'grafted'.

Even within a global postcolonial context, producing hybrid identities is problematic. While discussing the movements towards cultural hybridity in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Webber (2008) argues that since one in every ten citizens belongs to more than one ethnic group we need to reconceptualise our national identity to embrace diversity. However, in this process a dilemma occurs for those who are unable to locate self in an ethnic identity category. Not to 'fit' into an ethnic, or a racial category, opens a gap, where a hybrid subject resides, in-between - a "no-man's land" - within continuously negotiated borders.

According to Smith (2008) the possibility of negotiating borders and boundaries, including bodies, language, culture and race can produce advantages. In our global world occupying hybrid space enables both local and global knowledge. When transcending two cultures, knowledge of both enables diversity, multiplicity and fluidity. Hybridity can mean a life constantly punctuated by negotiations. Repeated re-negotiation removes the sense of dislocation or alienation and enables new relationships within specific cultural practices that merge to construct a new hybrid culture.

Theories of hybrid identities are not without critique. Webber (2008) and Bell (2004) describe resistance to hybrid identities in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Internationally, hybridity is realised by non-white minorities who want to gain status in predominantly white societies. However in Aotearoa/New Zealand, resistance

is not about enabling space for the colonised peoples inside dominant Pākehā culture; it involves taking up a unique Māori identity. With the revitalisation of te reo and tikanga Māori, embracing hybridity risks the loss of unique identity. It also appears as if there are two equal though distinct cultures available for hybrid identity formation. However, it has been argued that hybridity perpetuates colonisation through insidious practices of assimilation to Pākehā/Western culture. Bell posits that Pākehā value hybridity because it facilitates Māori to integrate and take up Pākehā customs. Historically, hybridity was viewed as a one way process because racist thought and practices meant that any Māori influences 'tainted' European superiority. Hybridity negates and rejects a distinct Māori identity (Webber, 2008).

While there are arguments against hybridity because some do not easily 'fit' into a particular category which locates them in an in-between space and arguments that caution against its use because of the way in which it reduces one culture to the dominant other, I am still taking up the metaphor of hybridity. Reunion processes are complex and hybridity enables a telling of the reunion story that values the position of *born to* and *born as if*.

Reunion

Research (Griffith, 1991; March, 1995; Trinder, Feast, & Howe, 2004) indicates that particular relational settings can have implications for the reunion process, these include the way in which the birth mother/father respond, the way in which mirroring or difference occurs between adoptees and birth mother/father, the feeling of connection and bonding within a reunion, levels of secrecy and empathy in the relationships, previous expectations, sense of self and boundaries, the adoptive parents reactions and practical factors, such as time and location. There is no contesting that the multitude of events that constitute the reunion experience are important, however here we explore the way in which the legal constitution of an adopted identity means there is always already no distinct adopted identity. And with this an adoptee must try to 'fit' into the binary subject positions of either *born to* and *born as if*.

'Not fitting' or not having a biological family connection opens a gap for the adopted subject: A lack that is realised though the constructed identity of *as if born to* an adoptive family. The imposed legislative identity produces an adopted subject who has to walk in a world that values personal identities which originate with blood ties and a connection to kinship. In this position the relational link that is not blood emerges.

How can you be not blood related but still have that link? (*Toni*, 332)

With no reunion or birth family history, this socially valued biologically connected identity is not possible – there is a gap. For some, after a reunion, connection through genealogy enables new knowledge of self, yet here the adopted identity and the biological identity can remain fragmented. For example, in Barry’s experience, his birth family positions him as belonging to his “own” (adoptive) family and excludes his need to be connected.

They just can’t deal with it, they’ve, they’ve, they, they kind of all believe like I have my own family and you know I have my own life and yeah it’s nice to have, umm, it’s nice that I’m in their lives, arrh particularly for my birth mother, and so I think there’s a lot of respect there for her and their relationship with her...so they’re by proxy with me, but I really get that umm, it’s not with me (*Barry*, 673, 678, 680)

Necessarily, the adopted subject can experience not belonging in either the born to or *born as if* families and here the adopted hybrid subject resides in a no-man’s land. The adopted subject experiences no-man’s land at a very early age and during their lifetime they can return there. Mary, for example, recognises that at some time she had been socially positioned as illegitimate, living in a between space, “no-man’s land”, and Barry experienced himself as “blanked out”.

As I got older, I did think about the illegitimate side of it, you know when you suddenly become aware that children are born out of wedlock. I remember kind of thinking – oh I wonder how that works because I remember thinking that there had to be a time, like when you are born and when you are adopted when you are in no-man’s land (*Mary* 272)

[I was] given away and they just, they probably want to blank that out so you know I’m blanked out so... (*Barry*, 995, 998)

The metaphor of “no-man’s land” signifies the space between two armies, a place where no one is safe. However, by taking up the metaphor of hybridity it enables space for new possibilities beyond that of the *born to* and *born as if*. That space can allow negotiation between and through the borders and boundaries of the two identities, allowing and valuing a diverse, multiple and fluid adopted identity. Here identity occurs through valuing context, social interactions and bodies.

Homi Bhabha (1990) talks about hybridity enabling the possibility of a ‘third space’. In this account, the third space does not arise from being able to trace the two original moments; hybridity *is* the third space. The third space shifts the histories that construct it, and enables new structures and political positions to emerge from the cultural relationships of the past. For Bhabha, hybridity can be understood through a psychoanalytic lens whereby it is not an identity but a process of identification involving the ‘other’/object with which the subject identifies with. Within this theoretical framework, the subject is ambivalent because of their relationship with otherness. Here, hybridity carries the traces of emotions and practices that inform it, always connecting to the other meanings and discourses through which it is constituted. What this understanding enables is a possibility of making sense of the traces of the other/object and how they inform the reunion relation for adoptees, in particular the identification with and through (m)other/s. The embodied adoptee carries the traces of the birth (m)other/object and reunion enables identification with and through her to be realised.

Drawing from Bolatagici (2004), hybridity also realises the contradictions and struggles that are involved in living in-between cultural or social groups. Hybridity signifies a co-existence and enables the representation and interplay between two different subject positions, or locations within a family (Bolatagici, 2004; Carrillo, 1999). Hybridity within the context of this adoption research provides a metaphor to represent the ways in which the adopted subject lives in the world negotiating two identities – the *born to* and the *born as if*. The hybridisation of an adopted identity values the constant interaction that occurs between their families, including inevitable tensions. However it is important to also note that within cultural studies Carrillo (1999) asserts that both identities can exist without contradiction in some cases, which is also possible for an adopted subject. Here it may take effort, strategies of management and valuing the complexity of this existence in-between, but it is possible. Carrillo argues that hybridity enables the acceptance of a dual identity.

Even when both of those identities have not been realised through the process of reunion, the embodied knowing of a birth history shapes and splits the adopted subject. Moreover, if a reunion has been possible, adoptees straddle the two different worlds. They can be simultaneously members of a family and not members.

I see how my two brothers from my birth mother right, I see how they interact together...but they treat me like a brother and they love me, but the three of us sitting in a room, they’ve got something

that I haven't got with them...yeah and they love me (birth father siblings) and they're so open to me and they give me everything, but I haven't got what they've got together (*Brendon*, 612, 615, 620)

They all got, they made this real big deal about the grandkids all being around to take a photo and [my birth brother] was the oldest, and you know. I was excluded from it (*Alice*, 737)

Despite Brendon feeling love, living the binary between connection and disconnection locates him outside; there is no access to the 'thing', the sense of belonging. And Alice is able to interact with her birth family and yet is simultaneously excluded. After a reunion, a new identity may emerge for adoptees which can blend the *born to* and *born as if*. A hybrid identity, as Smith (2008) asserts, can emerge in response to the problematics of having two identities.

When one plant tissue is grafted onto another, the original plant still exists, in as much as it has been grafted onto the other plant (Young, 1999). Similarly, the adopted subject produced as a legal fiction still embodies the 'original self', their birth history. Continuing the hybridity metaphor, when neither plant is pruned the hybrid plant returns to its original stock (Young, 1999). For the adopted person with or without a birth family reunion, returning to the 'original' is not always possible but the longing to return is always already there.

I sort of felt, I wanted, I always wanted to know where I came, who, who I looked like (*Margaret*, 112)

So in this embodied space, the time in which the adoptee is neither *born to* nor *born as if*, a literal and metaphoric birth at the hyphen occurs and without significant care, the adoptee can be returned to the place of no-man's land, here they are not returned to their origin, but to a space in-between.

According to Fine and Sirin (2007), the hyphen can be understood as the a "dynamic social-psychological space where political arrangements and individual subjectivities meet...the psychological texture of the hyphen is substantially informed by history, media, surveillance, politics, nation of origin, gender, biography, longings, imagination and, and loss" (p. 21). How we come to negotiate the hyphen is dependent on the contexts, such as work, family environment or talking with a friend. Fine and Sirin argue that you can be born at the hyphen, in the political faults (fissures) that produce social identities. For some the hyphen is a 'traumatic check point' or a 'space of shame' that may involve

feelings of anxiety. For the adopted person the hyphen can be the conduit to stand in the place of no-man's land.

Hybridity can also be located at the hyphen, however according to Bolatagici (2004), again discussing race, the hyphen obscures the complexity of a mixed race identity. When located at the hyphen it reduces a person to the sum of their parts with the hyphen representing a juncture, a land fault that is unfixable. Bolatagici highlights how this fissure leaves a perception of mixed race people having an innate disunion. For some adoptees, the 'life time in-between' cannot be fixed and when adoptees try to talk about the juncture that cannot be fixed, it is difficult in a world that values blood tie kinship and the adopted subject is acutely aware of the lack and loss.

We were at a, a sort of bit of a gathering and there were some other people there and this woman said – "oh yeah, I suppose she is my daughter". You know and it's kind of like - oh okay, I guess I am, but you know, I guess I came along 20 years later. Was there as a baby, came back 20 years later and there's a life time in-between (*Maxine*, 472)

Unless you've been separate from it and then reconnected to it you aren't going to know that...I mean like if you are not adopted then you've always had that connection...if you haven't been adopted and haven't been reconnected then you don't know you've lost it... 'cause you never, do you know what I mean...like you have to have an awareness of having it then losing it, to know that it wasn't there (*Barry*, 563, 566, 568, 570, 572)

To 'have an awareness of having it then losing it' signifies the adopted disruption. Young (1999) uses the language of "disruption" and "forcing" to represent the notion of hybridity - "making difference into sameness [and] sameness into difference" (p. 26). Here similar becomes dissimilar and different is more than merely different. Young discusses Derrida's logic of 'brisure', the simultaneous breaking and joining, the hinge that produces binary operations to signify the way in which hybridity forces the limitation of one by the other.

Hybridity enables a way to represent adoption reunions and a blending of the *born to* and *born as if* identity for adoptees. It enables the possibility of a third space, which can negotiate the borders and boundaries of the two identities and values the fluidity of the adopted identity. Hybridity also represents the hyphen. However, here it also signifies a gap. The metaphor of hybridity does not adequately represent the in-between space, the no-man's land that adoptees encounter. It does not

represent, when fusion is not defined, where adoptees are unable to meld identities or hinge them together. Future inquiry needs to explore that swing between brokenness and joining and how this enables and constrains an adopted subject.

References

- Adoption Act 1955 s93 [Electronic Version]. (1955) Retrieved 10 June 2007, from <http://www.brookersonline.co.nz/databases/>
- Bell, A. (2004). 'Half-castes' and 'White Natives': The politics of Māori - Pākehā hybrid identities. In C. Bell & S. Matthewman (Eds.), *Cultural studies in Aotearoa New Zealand: Identity, space and place* (pp. 121-138). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1990). Interview with Homi Bhabha. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture and difference* (pp. 207-221). London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Bolatagici, T. (2004). Claiming the (n) either/(n) or of third space:(re) presenting hybrid identity and the embodiment of mixed race. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 25(1), 75-85. doi: 10.1080/07256860410001687036
- Carrillo, H. (1999). Cultural change, hybridity and male homosexuality in Mexico. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 223-238.
- Else, A. (1991). *A question of adoption*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books.
- Fine, M., & Sirin, S. R. (2007). Theorizing hyphenated selves: Researching youth development in and across contentious political contexts. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 1(1), 16-38. doi: 10.1111/j.1751-9004.2007.00032.x
- Griffith, K. (1991). *The right to know who you are: Reform of adoption law with honesty, openness and integrity*. Canada: Katherine W. Kimbell.
- Hoksbergen, R. A. C. (1997). *Foreign adoptive children will often encounter attachment problems*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Adoption and Healing, Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand.
- Iwanek, M. (1997). *Adoption in New Zealand - past, present and future*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Adoption and Healing, Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand.
- Ludbrook, R. (1997). *Closing the wound. An argument of the abolition of adoption*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Adoption and Healing, Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand.
- Luke, C., & Luke, A. (1999). Theorizing interracial families and hybrid identity: An Australian perspective. *Educational Theory*, 49(2), 223-249.
- March, K. (1995). Perception of adoption as social stigma: Motivation for search and reunion. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57(3), 653-660.
- Parker, I. (2002). *Critical discursive psychology*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Parker, I. (2005). *Qualitative psychology: Introducing radical research*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Petta, G. A., & Steed, L. G. (2004). The experience of adoptive parents in adoption reunion relationships: A qualitative study. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 75(2), 230-241.
- Ramazanoglu, C. (1993). Introduction. In C. Ramazanoglu (Ed.), *Up against Foucault. Explorations of some tensions between Foucault and feminism* (pp. 18-25). London: Routledge.
- Rockel, J., & Ryburn, M. (1988). *Adoption today: Change and choice in New Zealand*. Auckland: Heinemann Reed.
- Smith, K. (2008). Hybrid identities: Theoretical examinations. In K. E. I. Smith & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Hybrid identities: Theoretical and empirical examinations*. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers.
- Trinder, L., Feast, J., & Howe, D. (2004). *The adoption reunion handbook*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Triseliotis, J. (2000). Identity formation and the adopted person revisited. In A. Treacher & I. Katz (Eds.), *The dynamics of adoption: Social and personal perspectives*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Webber, M. (2008). *Walking the space between: Identity and Māori/Pākehā* Wellington: New Zealand Council for Education Research.
- Young, R. J. C. (1999). *Colonial desire: Hybridity in theory, culture and race*. London: Routledge.