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## The Hierarchy of Motherhood in Adoption

### Literary Narratives of Kinship, Maternal Desire, and Precarity

*How have women's (in)ability to reproduce, (un)desire to mother, or essentialist understandings of birth mothering, biomothering, or adoptive mothering been represented in literature? Narratives of adoption and mothering can trouble the boundaries of reproduction, reveal cultural anxieties surrounding the idea of maternal desire, and, thereby, invite transgressions of the definitions and boundaries of motherhood. Investigating the portrayal of adoption and mothering in literature opens up what Denise Cuthbert, Kate Murphy and Marian Quartly consider, "a much needed critical space for thinking about the family and mothering in non-essentialist ways which challenge the dominant script of family and motherhood" (412). When examining a selection of literary works—including Jackie Kay's novella length poem "The Adoption Papers," a selection of short stories from Elyse Gasco's collection *Can You Wave Bye Bye Baby*, Zona Gale's story "Adoption," and the fictionalized memoir by Jennifer Gilmore, *The Mothers*—which characterizations of "mother" perpetuate, and which challenge dominant normative definitions of womanhood, and bio-essentialist notions of mothering? Structures of inequality and economics, lingering binaries of who can and should mother and the construction of "good" and "bad" mother can also place adoptive and biological mothers into a position of precarity. In deconstructing all these narratives, the reader can reflect on the tensions in the perceptions of adoptive and birth mothers and question attendant notions of attachment, suitability, and authenticity: in particular, the assumption of maternal desire for all women, the places of precarity for birth mothers and adoptive mothers, and hierarchical notions of "real mother."*

Just how have women's (in)ability to reproduce, (un)desire to mother, or essentialist understandings of birth mothering, bio mothering, or adoptive

mothering been represented in literature? Many feminist considerations of motherhood in adoptive circumstances explore the ways in which heteronormative discourses of the family essentialize bio-genetic kinship as normative and position adoptive kinship as comparatively unnatural and constructed; as Marianne Novy notes, there are “dominant paradigms through which our culture has tried to imagine adoption” (*Reading Adoption* 7). Thus, investigating the portrayal of adoption and mothering in literature opens up what Denise Cuthbert, Kate Murphy, and Marian Quartly consider “a much needed critical space for thinking about the family and mothering in non-essentialist ways which challenge the dominant script of family and motherhood” (412). Such an investigation highlights tensions in the perceptions of adoptive and birth mothers and questions attendant notions of attachment, suitability, and authenticity: in particular, the assumption of maternal desire for all women, the places of precarity for birth mothers and adoptive mothers, and hierarchical notions of “real mother.”

There are many real and fictional narratives about mothering and adoption. These include the coercion to relinquish in particular circumstances, with lingering genuine trauma for birth mothers, and similar trauma in relinquishing the *idea* of a biological child on an adoptive mother’s part. There are also beliefs about automatic attachment between biological mother and child, who may or may not feel deep pain and loss upon separation, expectations about the birth mother’s or child’s need to search and to experience reunion, and even the assumption that most women will always choose to mother. However, these narratives also risk becoming inviolable assumptions—particularly of the adoption triad of the birth mother, the adoptive mother, and the child—or acceptable tropes that dictate how such losses, desires, and pain will be experienced. But more nuanced, layered, and complicated portrayals of motherhood and the relationships between adoption triad members, which counter dominant narratives, can be found, as in the literature considered here: Zona Gale’s short story “Adoption” (1909), Jackie Kay’s novella length poem *The Adoption Papers* (1991), Elyse Gasco’s short story collection *Can You Wave Bye Bye Baby* (1999), and Jennifer Gilmore’s fictionalized memoir *The Mothers* (2013). Although the works are primarily contemporary, they also reach back into the past and range from poetry, to prose, and to thinly veiled fictionalized memoir, which allows for a consideration of how mothering is depicted across genres, and whether that illuminates or obscures revelations about mothering and adoption.

These literary works shed light on many of the lingering assumptions surrounding maternal subjectivity in adoptive circumstances. Author Jennifer Gilmore, and her not too fictional counterpart Jesse in *The Mothers*, raises many ethical questions about private and open adoptions; her narrative gives

a window into an adoptive mother's problematic quest to become a suitable candidate for family building. The stories in *Can You Wave Bye Bye Baby* are an exploration of the complexity of biological mothering, birth mothering and adoptive mothering, and most of the stories contest the notion that maternal desire is universal or innate or that all women are capable mothers. Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*—an account drawing heavily on her own experience of being a black child adopted by a white couple in Scotland of the 1960s—is a further unmasking of the cultural pressures to conform to a narrow and rigid script of the “good” mother. It examines the tensions of adoption and relinquishment, along with conflicting understandings of motherhood from all three points on the triad. Lastly, in the short story “Adoption,” Zona Gale attempts to dispel hierarchical suppositions that adoptive motherhood is a kind of second-best, “non-quite” motherhood. It is important to note that all authors speak with authority: Elyse Gasco and Jackie Kay are both adoptees and mothers; Zona Gale and Jennifer Gilmore are both adoptive mothers: Zona Gale was a single mother at a time that women did not undertake this, and Jennifer Gilmore adopted after having exhausted other possibilities of natural conception and IVF treatments. The women whom these authors represent have been largely ignored by governmental directives, social workers, religious figures, policymakers, media or Hollywood, or by those who do not experience firsthand the impact of cultural beliefs and directives. These authors tell a story that rejects sensationalism, romanticism, or sanitized versions of their experience, of what it means to relinquish or adopt a child as well as what it means for the child herself.

### The Body as the Site of Motherhood

As Andrea O'Reilly notes, “feminist historians agree that motherhood is primarily not a natural or biological function; rather it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice . . . [and] its meaning varies with time and place; there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood” (*Rocking the Cradle* 37). But if motherhood is still subconsciously linked in popular imagination to gestation and the ability to physically nurture, a biological mother ascends a kind of false hierarchical ladder. Any supposition that there is something more natural about a woman who is able to conceive, undergo labour and childbirth, and nurture her child through breastfeeding—a child who is expected to share a continuity of heredity and familial lineage—emphasizes the body as a source of motherhood. Jesse in *The Mothers* confesses that she had to “come to terms with not being genetically linked to our child” and that she had exhausted “all the science they could muster” (Gilmore 2-9) before she turned to the alternative option of adoption, which she felt was the inferior option. When the

maternal body is idealized as the primal form of mothering, the hegemony of the biological mother is perpetuated.

Conversely, the precarity of supposed biological primacy is made apparent when the biological mother is unable to care for her baby or is pressured into relinquishment, often because she is young, poor, single, or otherwise deemed unfit. She has often been abandoned by her partner or parents, been rejected by support systems, or been seen to transgress acceptable moral behaviour. In these circumstances a woman's procreative ability is pronounced a liability; she has dared to be a sexual being without the legal, social, or religious precepts surrounding acceptability. Birth mothers have a further stigma: they are perceived as somehow unnatural because they are, and are not, mothers. They are mothers through the physical labour of childbirth but are not mothers because they do not raise the child borne. Prior to the sexual revolution, birth mothers were treated with suspicion if they wanted to keep their babies, yet, later, that same suspicion was transferred to the idea that they may consider giving up the child for adoption, which shattered the conception of motherhood as an innate and inviolable desire for every woman. What kind of woman could give up her own flesh and blood?

Those who do give up their baby are not allowed to grieve their loss in public ways, leaving wounds that might never heal; the birth mother in *The Adoption Papers* reveals, for example, "I still have the baby photograph/ I keep it in my bottom drawer" (Kay 10). Her loss becomes a secret and lingering grief, hidden from the world. If birth mothers who relinquish through coercive practices are troublesome, then birth mothers who relinquish voluntarily are unspeakable: they fall even further outside of the normative script of the maternal as well as outside of notions of female as innate caregiver. As Frances Latchford notes, "as the stories of autonomous birth mothers are erased, so too is the political import of their decisions and experiences as sites of resistance against imperatives of naturalized motherhood and bio-essentialist notions of family" (75). In all cases, the physicality of being or not being a mother cannot help but affect the ways mothers and non-mothers perceive and are perceived.

A narrative written on the bodies of mothers is, therefore, a striking feature of many passages in the selected works: the assumed destiny and biological drive to be a mother, the need for physiological connection to a child, and lingering pro-natalist views of adoption. Although there is always a hope that mothering has been delinked from biology and that care and maternal practice are what truly count, the literary mothers depicted in these selected works do not necessarily point to this. Jesse in *The Mothers* constantly asks, "Where do I fit in here? Most women become pregnant and they carry their babies and then they breast-feed their infants, who need them to survive . . . really it was just this, only this: was I the mother? Wasn't I supposed to be the mother?" (Gilmore

2-47). In so revealing her inner conflict, she allows us into her deep sadness and sense of the precarity of her position. She and her husband, (fictional and real, as the avatars for Jennifer Gilmore and her husband themselves) suffered greatly through the failed IVF treatments, her miscarriage, the long wait for an available child, rejection by several birth mothers and multiple scams by birth mothers who might have been looking for money or had no intention of giving up their child. For her and her husband, “every time someone else has a child or gets pregnant ... [we] die a little” (19-43).

In Elyse Gasco’s short stories, biological mothers are deeply aware of the changes their bodies are undergoing, whether they wish to be or not. It seems the birth mothers in “A Well Imagined Life” have been betrayed by their bodies, first with unwanted pregnancy and then with the trauma of labour and childbirth. Their bodies are described as alien things, who act independently; there are graphic descriptions of bodily functions and “girls about to give birth [who] stagger down as though they’ve been shot, clutching their stomachs, water running down their thighs” (5-6). In “You Have the Body”—and note the title emphasis—the pregnant narrator remarks on the social discourses emphasizing the body. She remarks, “You are surprised at how many times the word uterus comes up in conversation. And areola” (27). In the story, there is also a contrast between what the daughter can create in her womb and what her own adoptive mother could not. This makes the daughter feel like a braggart or betrayer, and she confesses, “You are embarrassed ... by something even more unexpected—your natural and painless fecundity” (40). In “The Third Person,” the new mother observes that she “feel[s] motherhood coming at [her] like a subterranean mumbling ... each and every graceless action follows her... Sometimes her breasts begin to leak, darkly seeping through her shirt like something possibly frightening: wounds, holes” (87). Bodies, whether celebrated or vilified, seem to be a primary site of motherhood, whether such maternity is desired or not.

Shelley Park suggests that

adoptive mothers—like many other mothers—choose motherhood. However, we do so in a way that simultaneously rejects the idea that woman’s anatomy is her destiny. Adoptive mothers make conscious choices whether to become a mother and how to become a mother. Motherhood does not just happen to us; no accidents befall our bodies.... Motherhood here is a story of social agency. (214)

Margaret Homans counters that “even biological parents must make an active choice to keep and bear the children they bear. There is no purely natural or physical parenthood or even maternity” (qtd. in Park 212). In Jackie Kay’s *The*

*Adoption Papers*, the distinctions are not so clear cut, and the body is a central focus for both the birth mother and the adoptive mother and their shared child, who repeats the mantra of “the chosen child” often told to soothe adoptees: “ma mammy picked me (I wiz the best) / your mammy had to take you (she’d no choice)” (21). This mantra bears parsing. The poetic structure of the piece allows for a polyphony of voices acting in counterpoint, which lends a more comprehensive understanding of triad perspectives that may not be transmitted with as much emotional force in prose. Chapter one, “The Seed”—the title immediately points to the physical act of conception—contrasts the fecundity of the birth mother, for whom impregnation “only took a split second” (11), with the five years of fruitless attempts at becoming pregnant for the infertile adoptive mother. She longs to “stand in front of the mirror swollen bellied, so swollen bellied,” “crave[s] discomfort,” and wants the “tearing searing pain” (11) of childbirth: “[she wants] to push and push / and scream and scream” (12). Both women are in situations from which they cannot escape; they are both trapped in their bodies and biologies. The preface (“I Always Wanted to Give Birth),” the parenthesis adding apology and confession about a desire for physical experience, opens with the adoptive mother revealing her distress upon learning she could not do “that incredible natural thing / that women do,” but how she eventually opted for adoption, a distant second best that was “something scandalous / telling the world your secret failure/ bringing up an alien child / who knew what it would turn out to be” (10). The body is further emphasized when the birth mother speaks of her “own body as a witness” to the birth and of its “leaking blood to sheets / milk to shirts (13), and when she remembers how her body revealed her shame—“[she] lived the scandal ... / all but the softest whisper: / *she’s lost an awful lot of weight*” (28). The adoptive mother also pictures herself as a version of a failed mother, her body betraying her like her counterpart’s body; one has excess, the other an absence of physical procreative potential. Neither has the balance that the woman wants or society expects.

### The Assumption of Maternal Desire

In the nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth century white, upper-class women who were married and who did not have children were regarded with pity, or more likely with condemnation, for not fulfilling their “maternal imperative.” The assumption that women’s mental health is determined by their wombs has been historically reflected in clinical literature on adoption. The first psycho-dynamic theories appear in the mid-1940s, such as those of Helene Deutsch, who asks in *The Psychology of Women* (1945), “above all, has the sterile woman overcome the narcissistic mortification of her inferiority as a woman

to such an extent that she is willing to give the child, as object, full maternal love?" (397). Adoptive mothers may be perceived, to varying degrees, as insecure about their role as mother or as suffering from psychological maladjustment for failing to obtain the "domesticity ideal," and for lacking the maternal bond. But do birth mothers all experience an inevitable natural bond?

Several of Elyse Gasco's short stories undermine the notion of an automatic maternal bond. In her stories, most protagonist mothers are unnamed: this suggests their own detachment and, perhaps, is also an invitation to the anonymous reader to insert herself into the story and imagine her own choices. In "A Well Imagined Life," the adolescent birth mother works through her own ambivalence about her role. She notes that "There is in the word 'mother,' the word 'other'" (15), which suggests her alienation from her fetus. She also provides another definition of mother: "a slimy film composed of bacteria and yeast cells.... You have to be clear on your terms, otherwise you'll believe anything" (16), which is a clear attempt to dissociate herself from the product of conception and the romanticized notion of innate connection. Does she feel guilt or relief for her deliberate or psychic absence? Does she make the right choice in relinquishment, if she had a choice at all, or will she forever be tormented? The only benediction or absolution given to her is "eventually you will find a story you can live with" (20). The title story of the collection "Can You Wave Bye Bye Baby" is another example that chronicles what, at first, seems to be postpartum depression, but which is more realistically a lack of any maternal feeling for a baby. The narrator, a single mother, prepares the reader for this with the devastating opening line: "It is surprisingly easy to run out of love" (119). She notes that when she looks at her newborn's face "it is though [she has] swallowed a cold, round river stone" (119), and she tells her baby, "I don't think I will ever really love you" (120). A further illustration of lack of inherent maternal desire occurs in "You Have the Body," which is centred on an unnamed pregnant protagonist. She has a partner and lives the expected script of family building, but as this biological mother prepares for birth, her growing realization is that she wants nothing to do with a child or with mothering. The narrator's tone is flinty, without pretense of second thoughts, and filled with dark humour. For example, she relates that "Your friends tell you that there is no greater gift than the gift of life.... Thinking about this gift, you wonder if a card wouldn't be just as nice, or maybe cash" (26). This would-be mother reports her growing alienation from her body and her lack of comprehension of the expected maternal desire that she is supposed to feel. She pushes against the restrictions of what others declare is normative for pregnant women: "People tell you now you will be complete. This makes you wonder what they thought of you before. Incomplete, obviously" (32). The story ends with the birth: it is clear that the depression and emptiness he



feels is not going to go away and that there will be no mother-daughter bond. Whether this inability to mother stems from her own feeling of disconnection to her adoptive and birth mothers because of her own adoption or whether this is incidental to her psychological struggle is unclear: in any case, she is resisting motherhood and has no script to follow in so doing.

Does a birth mother who relinquishes act with what Sara Ruddick labelled “preservation” in mind (“Maternal Work” 105), sacrificing her own mothering for the good of the child? Or is this a form of abandonment, a selfish act? Can such a non-mother be considered maternal? “What would make a mother give up a child” (Gilmore 5-10) asks Jesse in *The Mothers*, before considering the factors that might pressure her to do so. Is it not better for a child to be given up if the mother is unable to raise the child? Or is this the script that young women were often sold, without receiving proper information about potential support systems that might have allowed them to keep their baby? For many women, it is an agonizing decision, leaving them bereft and traumatized throughout their life. Such is the case for the birth mother in *The Adoption Papers*, but not in the prevailing trope: she is full of contradictions. The thought of her daughter searching for her when she comes of age haunts her, and she wonders how she can possibly explain her decision—“Sorry never seems large enough” (Kay 28)—yet, she wishes to decline contact. However, she is also concerned about how to reassure, on some level, the searching daughter—a kind of mothering *in absentia*. It may appear that she feels no true sense of loss or remorse in relinquishment, yet she reveals the mourning she went through, despite her decision to give up her child. She goes home from the hospital and wills herself to “put it out of [her] mind” (17), which is, of course, impossible. She digs a hole and buries “the clothes [she had] bought anyway” (18) and, later, gives her baby a kind of ritualized funeral service, the only closure that she can muster. The short story “The Third Person” also has relinquishment and repercussions at its core. Elle (her name only a non-specific pronoun, which is suggestive of her own detachment) recalls her origin story. She was told with bluntness by her adoptive mother, “When you were born you were abandoned in an alley. When they found you, you were very cold and almost dead” (80). At eighteen, Elle “received an impossible letter in the mail from her real mother,” who wrote “despite what you may think, I was relieved to know you made it through that long dark night” (98), and asks for some kind of absolution, including a return address on the envelope, but would understand if there is no reply. Elle refuses to even acknowledge her as a maternal figure, however partial. In “Can You Wave Bye Bye Baby,” the protagonist, whose own mother gave up her first baby for adoption and later abandoned her husband and the protagonist when she was a child, transfers some of this grief and confusion



to her own circumstance and, gradually, withdraws from her own baby. This title story of the collection shatters several notions: the supposed altruism of relinquishing a child to “better” circumstances and more deserving parents, or that all children given up for adoption are wanted by their birth mother and are subsequently forever mourned, or that most children would be better off with their original parents. Elle emotionally and physically begins to increase her distance after giving birth, first muffling the baby’s cries by running the shower and hiding in the bathroom. Later, she leaves her alone in the house and returns almost hoping that the police or firefighters have broken into her home to rescue the child. She fantasizes that she will get caught for negligence and abandonment but is always surprised at the stillness and ordinariness of her house when she returns. The neglected baby is never even given a name by the woman who feels only “dark-pitted emptiness” (129). This mother is truly absent. She will give this baby up. To what degree is she worthy of condemnation? Perhaps, she should be commended.

### Places of Precarity

It is hopeful to believe that maternal thinking, as Sara Ruddick wrote so many years ago, has delinked biology from “mother,” which would allow “some men who engage in maternal work, as well [as] many mother-identified women who are not mothers of particular biological or adopted children” (“Thinking About Mothering” 4) to be considered maternal. Yet there remains a biological definition of motherhood that takes for granted “‘woman’ equals ‘mother’ equals ‘wife’ equals ‘adult’” (Letherby and Williams 721). The failure to fulfill such social expectations has traditionally been regarded as a primary indicator of a woman’s moral irresponsibility, immaturity, and selfishness. (Young women who become pregnant without the force of social legitimacy, however, are often not allowed to become mothers, despite this “imperative”). As the pregnant woman’s friend remarks in “You Have the Body,” “Before this, you were pretty childish” (Gasco 33), which perpetuates the notion that only by becoming a mother do women achieve true adulthood. If such a woman turns to adoption, she is placed under further scrutiny by state systems, as is an intended adoptive mother, who can be excluded by any number of measures of worthiness. Kerry Daly and Michael Sobol find that

both when pressing for relinquishment and when selecting adopters, adoption professionals have been guided by a patriarchal domesticity ideal that defines “good mothering” narrowly.... Adoption workers can also still regard the adoptive mother’s “resolution of infertility” as the most important precondition for readiness to adopt. (483)

The adoptive mother in *The Adoption Papers* speaks of such barriers: her politics were wrong. She “didn’t live close enough to a church [and] they weren’t high enough earners” (Kay 14). The specific obstacles might have shifted since the 1960s, but they are no less daunting: finding the right adoption agency, the years of waiting, filling out forms, creating profiles, the unlikelihood of finding an infant, the likeliness of having to search in other countries, the high expense, enduring trial placements before adoption is finalized (Jesse in *The Mothers* has to “put it out of her head the notion that a mother could come back and take the child away” [Gilmore 3-34]): all of this places the adoptive mother in a place of precarity. Denise Cuthbert, Kate Murphy and Marian Quartly note that

in dominant family ideology, the birth mother, frequently unwed or deemed otherwise unfit to tend to her child, was stigmatized in favour of the “good” adoptive mother whose role was to redeem these otherwise doomed infants and secure them within the embrace of good homes ... in feminist critiques of this approach to adoption, the birth mother is endowed with the virtue that accrues to victimization, and the adoptive mother, where she is registered at all, implicitly occupies a problematic position deeply implicated within dominant family ideology and conforming to regressive models of acceptable “womanhood” and “domesticity.” (404)

It is comforting to think contemporary society is wise enough to reject the patriarchally narrow view of female maturity, which assumes a causal link between women’s mental health, their sexual and reproductive behaviour and their capacity to mother. Yet as Katarina Wegar realizes, “feminists have so far largely failed to acknowledge the problematic social position of adoptive mothers from a gender perspective” (77). Structures of inequality and economics, and lingering binaries of good and bad mother, can also put an adoptive mother into a place of precarity, where her “inauthentic” status and lack of genetic attachment to her child renders her less feminine, less woman, less mother, and more other. Rosemary Pringle points out “the sympathy of feminism for the plight of the birth mother is at odds with the problematic endorsement of an essentialised view of motherhood and the bond between the birth mother and the relinquished child” (232). And Cuthbert, Murphy, and Quartly observe that “for many this tension was, perhaps, overlooked in favour of what may be described as a specific social justice agenda in relation to the harm done to these women, and their children. In the process, the position and experience of adoptive mothers was damagingly occluded, as much by feminists as by others” (404).

Adoption complicates motherhood when the maternal is not linked to consanguineous kinship because, as psychologist David Kirk explains, it suggests that blood ties can be superseded with artificially constructed ones, “shared fate” (1964) instead of shared biology. A social contract replaces genetics, which is seen as a “fictive” relationship given the strength of a biological one. Furthermore, advocates of adoption rights and the quest for open records have not challenged but rather reinforced the representation of adoptive motherhood as fundamentally inferior to a biological mother-child bond. But precarity also remains for birth mothers. As Cuthbert, Murphy, and Quartly consider, “Where the necessary and overdue recuperation of the figure of the adoptive mother comes at the expense of the birth mother, the job has not been done well enough” (412). Jackie Kay’s birth mother—her real and fictional counterpart—as with many women, had no choice.

In the Elyse Gasco collections, another place of precarity for many of the protagonists is the notion of what it means to be, or to have, a mother. There are mothers who could not carry a baby to term but may resent their daughters who are capable of doing so or not understand their pregnancy journey. Many have absent mothers or were themselves relinquished for adoption, sometimes even abandoned. Some of these young women subsequently transfer this wound, which leads to the eventual ambivalence that they assimilate about mothering. The narrators question how they belong to their mothers, women who either relinquished them—whether well-intentioned or not—or who did not have the physical experience of pregnancy, labour, and childbirth as a mother. The narrators decry their absent or adoptive mothers’ lack of help in carrying them through the experience of pregnancy and childbirth, since they never went through it themselves. From the child’s perspective, as the narrator in “You Have the Body” notes, it is difficult for some adoptees to explain their feelings towards the two women who claim motherhood: birth mother and adoptive mother. This binary definition is often pressed on adoptees, consciously or not: who is your real mother is the (un)spoken question, thus, as the narrators note, “you straddle these two women, somehow trying to keep your balance” (28) or “it’s like those weird science fiction stories where ... every woman is every child’s mother” (15). The narrator in “You Have the Body” internalizes this question to such an extent that she wonders, “When is your mother not your mother?” (40) Poet Jackie Kay recalls in similar fashion how, as with most adoptees, she “had an imaginative—and imaginary—birth mother that [she] carried around with [her]” (qtd. in Gish 171). This is a figure who haunts many adoptees’ dreams, especially those who have lived under sealed records and non-disclosure laws. Fantasies, wishes, projections—all can trouble, and even consume, an adoptee. The precarity of the binary is often deeply felt; the adoptee in *The Adoption Papers*, for example, states, “I have my parents who

are not of the same tree / and you keep trying to make it matter / the blood / the tie / the passing down / of generations” (Kay 29), but she also reveals, “I confess my contradiction / I want to know my blood” (29). In the story “A Well Imagined Life,” the narrator is haunted by her absent birth mother: “all I can seem to do is imagine, and imagine being imagined . . . she follows me like a camera” (Gasco 9). In “Elements,” an illusory birth mother returns, conjured in the narrator’s psyche by the death of her adoptive mother, who claims, “Finally after all these years, I am your mother” (52). The narrator rejects this, as she tries to cope with the loss of the one whom she considers mother: “of course she [the birth mother] is the ghost of the one who gave you away so many years ago” (52) she asserts, thereby rejecting the psychic substitute. This birth mother figure is not romanticized, and she has no discernable interest in her daughter; indeed, she states openly, “I don’t know what to ask you” (52), and the narrator, in turn, labels her not as mother but as “the one who could not take care of you and gave you away” (60). At her adoptive mother’s grave she “reassure[s] her, like a lover, that she is the only one” (61). The adoptive mother in Jackie Kay’s poem, however, “want[s] her [daughter] to think of her other mother” (22) and to welcome, not fear, the sharing of the title. Conversely, describing the open adoption process conceptualized by her social workers, Jesse in *The Mothers* recounts her struggles: “the birthmother, we were told, would be like family. This became the fairy tale narrative we lived by” (Gilmore 38). Increasing openness is now the norm, and the stripping away of secrecy and shame is healthy; nonetheless, the apparent simplicity and success of open arrangements have not yet been fully scrutinized. For example, what is a child to assimilate if the birth mother who is initially present in an open adoption later recedes from her life? It can be felt as a form of second rejection. Allowing a window into contemporary adoption, Jennifer Gilmore acts as a first person participant, who can question some problematic or simplistic assumptions about best practices.

### The Real Mother

Jackie Kay contends that

There is no point in denying that it is different growing up knowing that your mother is not actually your mother, and that your father is not actually your father. Those seeming opposites—how can someone be your mother and not be your mother? How can somebody be real and not real?—are just at the heart of what it means to be adopted; you have to contain both those supposed opposites together. (qtd. in Gish 173)

The child in *The Adoption Papers* wrestles with this conundrum. She is told at six years old of her adoption; her mother uses the words that she is not the child's "real" mother, which invites an inquiry of what "real" mothering is and underscores how care and love do not only have genetic links. The adoptive mother, however, considers that "all this umbilical knot business is nonsense" (Kay 23). She pushes back ignorant comments, such as "It's not like having your own child though is it?," by responding, "Of course it is, what else is it / she's my child" (23). The goal is to take up the objective of feminist theorists who want "to recuperate the figure of the adoptive mother from a complex of associations which see her playing the bad or 'not as good as,' inauthentic, problematic 'other' to the discursive constructions of the good, whole, true birth mother whose status is elevated through suffering the loss and absence of her child" (Cuthbert, Murphy, Quartly 405). Barbara Katz Rothman also reminds us that "we can acknowledge the ongoing grief of a woman who has given up a baby without saying that makes her the real mother or more of a mother than the adoptive mother who gives ongoing care" (qtd. in Wegar 82). There seems to be an implicit struggle for the claim to authenticity.

Consider the 1909 short story "Adoption." Although it is perhaps sentimentalized, in the fashion of the period, it, nonetheless, is a poignant snapshot of the tensions of defining authentic motherhood. In the story, the adoptive mother is "simply hungering for a child whom [she] could 'take to'" (Gale 279). She announces to the narrator that she and her husband have found a baby, but says, "I don't want he should be called after his father, being he isn't ours, you might say," which acknowledges the prejudice of the time. Yet she defiantly concludes "He is ours" (279). The mother-to-be has both absorbed and rejected the rhetoric of the non-biological as second-best, just as Jackie Kay's adoptive mother recites to her child, "I'm not your real mother" (21) but also asserts, "I brought her up as my own / as I would any other child" (24). Her daughter later says that "I love ma mammy whether she's real or not" (21). The woman neighbour in the story displays all the same hopes and fears for her baby as any expectant mother. When a dispatch arrives telling her that the baby has taken ill, the neighbour's worry is clearly maternal: "Seems as if I'd ought to be there to the hospital ... doing what I can.... But if I could get hold of him in my arms it seems as if I could help 'em" (Gale 283). The next day, the neighbour sadly announces that her baby died. She mourns that, "I've never held him once.... Do you s'pose anything could be worse than that?" (284). The speaker notes, "It touched me unutterably, the grief of this mother who was no mother." Yet the village women "many of [whom] had lost little children of their own ... could not regard her loss as at all akin to theirs," and the speaker notes "this my neighbour felt; and perhaps she dimly felt that to me her grief, hardly less than theirs, brimmed with the tragic disaster of the

unfulfilled and bore, besides, its own peculiar bitterness" (285). Biologic or not, even an *intended* bond severed between a child and a willing mother is shown as true loss, which justifies the resulting grief and rejects adoptive motherhood as a lesser form of motherhood.

Jesse, the narrator in *The Mothers*, also struggles with competing claims of motherhood. She thinks that "Working hard to become a mother is about the imagination, an unknown future. All mothers have wondered: What will it be like? Who will I be if I become a mother? What will be gained and what will be lost? Will I be the same woman to myself? To the world?" (Gilmore 11-1). Chiefly, Jesse struggles with her would-be role and balks at the term "adoptive" in front of mother. And she is uncertain how she will negotiate or share the role of mother with a stranger in her planned open adoption. After seeing a mandatory film screening displaying happy birth mothers speaking of the utopian open arrangements they live under, Jesse thinks: "Am I allowed to ask where I fit in here? There is the woman who gives birth and that is not I. And then she is in our lives ... however she chooses to be. I accept that, but I had to turn away from the screen; when do I get to be the mother? Perhaps never" (7-7). Similarly, the short story by Elyse Gasco called "Mother: Not a True Story" haunts by its very title: it questions truth and authenticity in motherhood. The story is embedded in an adoptive mother's psychological perspective, one who loves her daughter so fiercely, and, perhaps, questions her place as mother so deeply, that she is willing to make an imaginary portrait of a birth mother to permit closure for her daughter but also to ensure her own "rightful" place. Katarina Wegar notices the "normative and constrictive definitions of true womanhood and good mothering" (77), and Cuthbert, Murphy, and Quartly further recognize "in our attention to the plight of birth mothers, we have failed to recognize that these apply as invidiously to adoptive mothers as to birth mothers" (404). When stories of her "homecoming" and the circumstances surrounding her birth begin to lose their fairy-tale quality, the daughter begins the process of searching for her birth mother. Thus the adoptive mother devises an elaborate scheme that she hopes will quell her daughter's curiosity and prevent another woman from taking her place in her daughter's heart. She imagines that "[she]'ll hire someone to be her mother ... [she]'ll audition women to play the hardest role they've ever played" (Gasco 238). The mother, thus, begins to lie. She suddenly "remembers" details that she "forgot" in the origin story and fabricates a birth name for her daughter and a memory box with all the treasures the birth mother purportedly left behind, which also contains a letter that the birth mother never created in which she supposedly tells her child to never search for her. Although this act is selfish, it may also elicit some empathy; ultimately, readers are left to decide the morality of her actions,

and how deeply they might condemn or forgive the adoptive mother in her deep desire for authenticity.

All people are shaped, consciously or unconsciously, as Marianne Novy explains, by “the anxieties that cultural influences instill” (*Imagining Adopting* 28). The discourses in culture and literature around adoption and motherhood that renounce bio-essentialism and maternal desire as natural/crepudiate the absent or relinquishing mother as necessarily evil, reject oversimplification or binaries, and refuse to privilege one form of mothering or “not” mothering over others, are first steps to negotiating more comprehensive and open understanding of what it means to be a mother, or to be a “not” mother. As Cuthbert, Murphy, and Quartly plead, “We need a thorough dismantling of sex/gender/ and reproduction systems to allow for all women and all reproductive statuses to be viewed and treated with equal respect” (412). In deconstructing these narratives of birth mothering, biological mothering and adoptive mothering, fictional or otherwise, perhaps we can come to a more nuanced understanding of the pressures on, and vulnerabilities of, all (m)others.

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