

Motherhood and Mothering as Sites of Difference in Barbara Kingsolver's *Pigs in Heaven*

Barbara Kingsolver's novel Pigs in Heaven (1993) discusses a debate between a young white adoptive mother of a Native American girl and a young Cherokee attorney who advocates the tribe's legal rights in adoption cases. Kingsolver depicts the two women as antagonistic figures who debate over the child's "best interest." The adoptive mother believes that in light of the physical abuse her daughter suffered on the reservation, the adoption was an act of rescue and beginning of a more stable life for the five-year-old girl. The attorney on the other hand argues that the child's separation from the tribe is an act of interference with tribal traditions, which would result in the child's confusion about her cultural origins. This essay argues that Kingsolver's depiction of the antagonistic presumptions about the child's best interest are indicative of differences in mothering practices between Native and non-Native American women. Because their concepts of motherhood and mothering are rooted in different histories of oppression, the white adoptive mother and the Cherokee attorney in Pigs in Heaven embody different ideological issues within feminist theory. Therefore, as this essay suggests by interrogating Kingsolver's discussion of the various issues that arise in the context of (illegal) adoptions of Native American children by white parents, the controversy over what is best for the child amplifies the differences between white and Native American women's feminist agencies.

Ever since their emergence as commonplace in feminist theory and practice, motherhood and mothering have been sites of a variety of critical fields of interest. The very venue in which this essay appears is testimony to the abundance of critical and creative works that interrogate, re-negotiate, and contextualize motherhood under a myriad of scopes, all of which are innately feminist in their methodologies of argumentation and interdisciplinary in their reach. Aspects of race/ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality are intricately

linked to women's experiences of motherhood (the institution) and mothering (the practice) in the context of health, reproductive rights, and social rights. Mothering thus also offers a contestable terrain in which differences within feminist theories and practices become graspable. The various differences in women's experiences as mothers amplify different trends in feminism, especially in so far as these trends are deeply rooted in and draw critical attention to the circumstances in which women and mothers tackle everyday struggles as their agency. That is, the context of their agentic locations largely determines their mothering.

Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Pigs In Heaven* (1993) addresses the differences in motherhood and mothering between Anglo American and Native American women. In the confrontation between Annawake Fourkiller, a young Cherokee attorney, and Taylor Greer, the adoptive mother of a Cherokee orphan, the specific modalities of discussion over the child's best interest are indicative of the difference in family practices between traditional Native American and Anglo American cultures. Kingsolver depicts the two women as antagonistic figures whose debate over the child's "best interest" amplifies these differences. In *The Bean Trees* (1988), the prequel to *Pigs In Heaven*, Taylor Greer finds an abandoned and physically abused three-year-old girl in her car on her odyssey through the American Mid-West. Two years later, Annawake, a character that did not appear in *The Bean Trees*, learns about Taylor's adoption of a Cherokee child when Taylor and her daughter Turtle appear on a segment of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. On the show, Taylor explains the unusual circumstances leading to Turtle's adoption, how somebody left the child in her car (52). Recognizing Turtle as a Native American child, Annawake suspects an illegal adoption performed by representatives of the state of Oklahoma and decides to press legal charges against Taylor, contesting the mother's right to sole custody over the Cherokee child. When Annawake meets with Taylor for the first time she informs her that Turtle's adoption papers might be illegal and invalid according to the *Indian Child Welfare Act* (1978), a law which ensures that Native American children may only be adopted by non-Native families upon the tribe's consent (78). Since Taylor basically found Turtle in her car and since Turtle's family and tribal affiliation were entirely unknown to Taylor when she filed for adoption, there was no involvement of the tribe's right to protect their children from unwanted placement in foster care.

Although this violation of the *Indian Child Welfare Act* can possibly abolish Taylor's custody rights, Annawake ensures Taylor that she does not want to take her child away from her but that she wants the child to be connected to her tribal family as well. After all, Turtle has a grandfather who still lives on the reservation. To Taylor, however, the abolition of her sole custody rights appears to be a violation of her rights to mothering. Taylor's fear of losing her child or to have to share her with somebody else is "reminiscent of the bereavement of Demeter/Ceres over the loss of her daughter Persephone/Proserpina" (Murrey, 1994: 159). This psychoanalytical reading of the threat under which Taylor's

mothering is being put emphasizes the mother's exclusive rights to her daughter. Indeed, as Adrienne Rich argues in her seminal book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, "[t]he loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy" (1986: 237). Still, in accordance with the *Indian Child Welfare Act*, the Cherokee tribe also has a right to its children, and this right, together with the idea of a tribe's dependency on its children, is quite foreign to Taylor's understanding of motherhood and family.

It takes a community

Mothering, or more specifically the right to mothering, is a central aspect of sovereignty for Native American women as well as for their tribes. Indeed, the figure of the mother, and by extension, the maternal and matriarchal guardian of tribal traditions and ancient wisdoms, is at the center of Native American feminist literature and culture studies (Bannan, 1980; Allen, 1986). At the same time, Native American women have seen their rights to mothering fiercely contested, such as through forced sterilization on the one hand and the residential school system and the system of foster care and adoption on the other hand (Guerrero, 1997). Through such practices, Native American children were taken away from their mothers and from their tribes and, after having undergone forced acculturation to non-Native American environments, grew up dislocated and alienated from their tribal cultures and from their families. It is this problematic of Native children's isolation from their tribes that Kingsolver's novel addresses.

While working on *Pigs In Heaven*, Kingsolver acknowledges in an interview that after the publication of *The Bean Tree*, she felt the need to tell the story more from the tribe's perspective: "I realized with embarrassment that I had completely neglected a whole moral area when I wrote about the Native American kid being swept off the reservation and raised by a very loving white mother" (Perry, 1993: 165). As a result, Kingsolver creates the character of Annawake, the Cherokee Nation's legal spokesperson and representative of the tribe's interest in the case of illegal adoptions. Through the introduction of Annawake's legal representation, Kingsolver depicts tribal struggles for cultural continuity and political autonomy, such as through the rights to raise Native children in tribal communities. Although not enrolled in any Native American tribe herself, Kingsolver has repeatedly emphasized her sharing of Native American world views (Perry, 1993). However, Kingsolver's attempt to serve as spokesperson for Native American rights in the context of family rights has been highly contested. Her idealization and exoticization of the Cherokee Nation, for instance, contributes to the further differentiation of Native American tribes as cultural "other." Kathleen Godfrey, for instance, argues that "despite her politicized sensibility, Kingsolver's depiction is undercut by authorial and rhetorical practices which commodify, ritualize, and idealize the Cherokee" (2001: 259). Kingsolver's use of one-dimensional, antagonist char-

acters, amplifies the differences in mothering rights and practices between Western patriarchal and Native American families.

The difference between western, nuclear families and tribal, extended families is implicit in the matter of handling adoptions of Native children outside their tribes. This practice of extra-tribal adoption is inherently connected to the disenfranchisement of Native tribal rights by interference of governmental policies with tribal traditions. In reference to the dire economic and social conditions on Native American reservations, as Marie Anna Jaimes Guerrero (1997) affirms, the US government justified placing Native American children in foster homes outside their tribal communities. These, mostly white, foster homes are supposed to provide the children with a stable and economically intact life, a life that would possibly save them from the disproportionately high rates of poverty, substance abuse, violence, and suicide on Native American reservations. At the same time, the US government fails to acknowledge that these symptoms of dislocation and disruption were caused by the history of genocidal practices against Native Americans since the first contacts with white settlers. The matter of adoption and foster care of tribal children is a product of that interference. Because the federal law does not recognize extended Native clans as family kinship, many Native American children have been separated from their relatives and placed in foster homes outside their tribe. Thus, the placement of Native children in residential schools is strategic intervention on the part of the colonizer to interfere with the integrity of tribal traditions.

Mothering and the “absolute power of motherhood”

In return, Taylor feels that her right to mothering is under threat. She is afraid of losing her “absolute power of motherhood” (Kingsolver, 1993: 341). This interpretation of motherhood as power is emblematic of Nancy Chodorow’s (1978) observation that, in societies where women in general and mothers in particular are being marginalized, mothers seek to re-invent themselves in the lives of their daughters by claiming their daughters as future, more perfect versions of themselves. For Taylor to lose her daughter, thus means a disruption of the prospective reproduction of herself in Turtle. In this context, Taylor’s possessive claim over Turtle is reminiscent of the patriarchal normativity of motherhood.

This intervention of a patriarchal model of motherhood stands in opposition to Taylor’s emancipation from patriarchal ideology in general. Her non-committal relationship to her boyfriend Jax, for instance, characterizes Taylor’s resentment to traditional patterns of relationships. Taylor even grew up in a fatherless family, which, as she implies at one part in the novel, made her the independent woman she is. Similarly, when Taylor decides to adopt Turtle, she does so following solely her own wish, without having conferred with her boyfriend or her mother. In this sense, Taylor is certainly a modern, independent woman who does not personify the conventional model of patriarchal

family structures. However, her claim to exclusive motherhood is indeed embedded in the history of childrearing within patriarchal structures. Kingsolver even goes so far as to define Taylor's demand for exclusive rights over her daughter as emblematic of American individualism. In "Everybody's Somebody's Baby," Kingsolver asserts that American society "has a proud history of lone heroes and solo fighters, so perhaps it's no surprise that we think of child-rearing as an individual job, not a collective responsibility" (1992: 49). This statement summarizes well the ideological concept of motherhood to which Taylor subscribes.

In contrast, Annawake adheres to a much different concept of motherhood and mothering. Annawake sees motherhood as cultural agency that ensures the survival of Native American tribal traditions. As she explains to Taylor, it is within the comfort of extended tribal families that Native Americans maintain cultural traditions and practices. The extended family per se is a legitimate and highly valued social entity in matrilineal Native American societies. In fact, Annawake emphasizes that the concept of the nuclear family was entirely foreign to the Cherokee Nation until social workers interfered with their traditional practices of communal child-rearing. In Annawake's opinion, nuclear families are "an insane rationale. We don't distinguish between father, uncle, mother, grandmother. We don't think of ourselves as having extended families. We look at you guys [non-Native Americans] and think you have contracted families" (Kingsolver, 1993: 284).

Residential schools, foster care, and adoption

In light of the many cases of Native American children being separated from their families and placed in foster homes or in adoptive homes outside the tribe, Kingsolver's depiction of the controversy over Turtle's adoption raises issues about sovereignty rights of Native American tribes, including the right to raise children in accordance with tribal traditions. The separation of children from their tribal families through the institutionalization of residential schools or foster homes, is a subtle form of colonization of indigenous peoples. In an interview with Donna Perry, Kingsolver asserts that the *Indian Child Welfare Act*, and its legal manifestation of tribal veto rights in the cases of federal foster home or adoption policies, is "one of the most valuable pieces of legislation that's ever happened for Native Americans in the United States because, throughout this century, a very strong and insidious form of cultural genocide has been the adoption of Native American children out of the tribe" (1993: 165).

This interruption of the "chain of caretaking" among tribal communities traumatized generations of Native Americans who grew up completely disconnected from their families and from their tribal heritages. In her depiction of the cases of the social workers' interference with Annawake's family, Kingsolver accounts for the colonization of Native American child rearing through western interference with tribal traditions. Annawake remembers: "Federal law

put them in boarding schools. Cut off their hair, taught them English, taught them to love Jesus, and made them spend their childhoods in boarding schools. They got to see their people maybe twice a year. Family has always been our highest value, but that generation of kids never learned to be in a family” (Kingsolver, 1993: 227). Annawake’s mother, Bonnie Fourkiller, went to a residential school, where she became “a die-trying acculturated Cherokee, like most of her generation, who chose the Indian Baptist Church over stomp dances and never wore moccasins in her life” (59). As a result of the traumatic separation from her tribe and the dislocation within white society, Bonnie fell into heavy alcoholism, and was finally institutionalized, leaving behind two young children. After Bonnie’s disappearance, Annawake was raised by her uncle Ledger, the tribe’s medicine man. Her twin brother Gabriel, on the other hand, was adopted by a Caucasian family in Texas at age ten, or, in Annawake’s words, “stolen from the family and can’t find his way home” (61). His adoptive family “told him not to say he was Indian at school, or they [teachers and fellow students] would treat him like a Mexican” (149). On the basis of his skin color, he was put in “the Mexican classroom” and eventually failed school because he could not understand the teacher who only spoke Spanish. As a result, Gabriel disappointed his adoptive parents who were unable to empathize with the social stigma their son carried as outsider both to the Caucasian and to the Mexican American groups at his school. At age 15, he was convicted of a juvenile delinquency felony and was then in and out of prison.

The child’s best interest

The controversy over Turtle’s adoption revolves around the question as to what is best for the child. As Mary Jean DeMarr suggests, “since *Pigs in Heaven* would be read by a predominantly white and middle-class audience, the sympathy of readers would naturally tilt in the direction of individualism, of the child’s best interest” (1999: 98). However, it is problematic to argue that Turtle’s separation from her tribal family would be beneficiary to her identity quest. Kingsolver constructs the circumstances of Turtle’s adoption so that Taylor’s motherhood appears to be an act of rescue to the brutally abused child she finds in her car. In *The Bean Trees*, Taylor muses when she discovers the child’s “bruises and worse”: “I thought I knew about every ugly thing that one person does to another, but I had never even thought about such things being done to a baby girl” (Kingsolver, 1988: 23). Given that Turtle’s abuse happened while she was at the Cherokee reservation, Taylor is resistant to Annawake’s suggestion that it is in Turtle’s best interest to remain in touch with the tribe: “Your people let her fall through the crack when she was in bad trouble” (Kingsolver, 1993: 76). Taylor even goes so far as suspecting a clever publicity ploy behind the Cherokee Nation’s sudden interest in the well-being of her daughter: “And now, that she is a cute little adorable child and gets famous and goes on television, now you want her back” (76).

This skepticism about the tribe’s intention and her conviction that her

right to absolute motherhood entitles her to make decisions for her daughter becomes most evident in Taylor's argument with Annawake about what is best for Turtle. Taylor's motto "Do right by yourself" clashes with Annawake's motto "Do right by your people" (Kingsolver, 1993: 88). As Annawake emphasizes the tribe depends on its children for the maintenance of its cultural heritage: "We consider the child is part of something larger, a tribe. Like a hand is that belongs to the body. Before we cut it off, we have to ask how the body will take care of itself without that hand" (338). This bi-lateral dependency between the tribe and its individual members is entirely foreign to Taylor's world view, her sense of agency, and her quest for individuality (Murrey, 1994). However, Turtle does have family on the reservation: her grandfather, Cash Stillwater, is her only living relative, and she his. Annawake mentions the "Baby M" legal case in the 1980s, where a Jewish American biological father's (and his wife's) custody rights were favored over the surrogate mother's because the daughter was the only living kin to the father whose relatives had all died in the Holocaust. Similarly, Turtle's role as embodiment of a minority culture contests Taylor's right to absolute motherhood rights.

To be precise, Annawake does not contest the general right to adoption, nor does she condemn adoption as an illegitimate manner of mothering. On the contrary, she acknowledges the love and dedication adoptive parents instill in their children. In fact, she does not want to take Turtle away from her mother, but instead, she wants to make sure that Turtle also has access to her tribal heritage and that her grandfather has a right to pass down his cultural legacy to his only living kin. In particular, as Annawake argues, it is important for Turtle to learn about her Cherokee heritage and to learn how to negotiate her Native origins in mainstream American society. Annawake specifies: "[a]dopted Native kids always have problems in adolescence when they're raised without an Indian identity" (Kingsolver, 1993: 148). What these children suffer, as the example of Annawake's brother emphasizes, is a sense of displacement when they grow up as members of Caucasian families while being reminded by society of their outsider status on account of their skin color and facial features, for instance. It is not the families in which these children are being placed, but their lack of awareness of the problems Native American children face when growing up in a predominantly white world.

Does mother know best?

Annawake speculates whether or not Taylor will be able to prepare her Turtle for the racist and xenophobic world outside the loving home: "I wonder what you are giving Turtle now that she can keep" (Kingsolver, 1993: 149). Indeed, Taylor is unaware of the struggles Native Americans face when they are confronted with the need to negotiate their identities in the face of a myriad of misrepresentations of Native American in pop culture: "In the last few days Taylor has been noticing images of Indians everywhere: the Indian-chief profile on a Pontiac. The innocent-looking girl on the corn-oil margarine. The

hook-nosed cartoon mascot of the Cleveland Indians, who played in Tucson. Taylor wonders what Annawake meant when she said Turtle should be in touch with her Indian side. Maybe that doesn't mean feathers, but if not, what then? [...] Maybe being Indian isn't any one thing, any more than being white is one thing. What mascot would they use for a team called the Cleveland White People?" (95).

Disregarding the cultural differences between her own and her daughter's backgrounds, Taylor manifests throughout the novel that, no matter what the circumstances, a mother always knows best. With the incident of Turtle's acute lactose intolerance, Kingsolver illustrates a case where Taylor, despite her unconditional love for her daughter, doesn't know best. As a pediatrician explains, it is the daily glass of milk that Taylor makes Turtle drink for an optimum intake of calcium, that causes Turtle's intestinal problems: "Cow's milk is fine for white folks ... but somewhere between sixty and ninety percent of the rest of us [people of color] are lactose intolerant" (Kingsolver, 1993: 295). Turtle's lactose intolerance underscores Taylor's "culture-blind" adoption policy, i.e. her lack of awareness of the specific needs of non-white children. At the same time, the novel juxtaposes Turtle's suffering with her ancestors' suffering from food intolerance that Annawake describes: "The food was nothing that forest people had ever eaten before, maggoty meal and salted pork, so everybody had diarrhea" (281). Turtle's suffering from lactose intolerance is symptomatic of her cultural estrangement from her tribal culture. On the level of cultural interference with tribal practices, there is a correlation between Turtle's sickness and the fatal dietary changes the Cherokee went through during their removal in the 1830s (Purdue and Green, 1995). This incident also illustrates that Taylor needs to overcome her Eurocentric ideas of motherhood and womanhood for the sake of a more heterogeneous feminist practice that addresses the culture-specific locations from with women and mothers of different cultural backgrounds can develop a sense of connectedness and solidarity with one another.

The adoption of Native American children by Caucasian parents raises a number of important questions about the cultural and social belonging of these children. Born Native and raised Anglo, these children are neither Native American nor are they Caucasian. In fact, because of their tribal heritage, they are outsiders in mainstream Anglo-American society. By the same token, through their Anglo up-bringing they are also outsiders to their tribes, whose cultural practices and traditions they are not familiar with. Because cultural performances, as for instance a person's sense of connectedness to tribal traditions, are "learned" features that rely on the nurturing capabilities of a cultural community that initiates and supports a person's cultural values, these children will not be able to contribute to the cultural survival of the tribes into which they were born.

These questions about cultural belonging and representation are central in Kingsolver's depiction of the custody battle between an Anglo American single

mother and the Cherokee Nation, her adoptive daughters' tribe.

However, by ending the novel with a deus-ex-machina solution, the sudden discovery that Taylor's mother is also Cherokee by blood relations and that, according to Cherokee matrilineal succession, Taylor herself is Cherokee by blood quantum, and by the love interest between Taylor's mother Alice and Turtle's grandfather Cash Stillwater, the novel's potential for a candid portrayal of the complex issue the adoption of Native American children poses comes to an abrupt and rather unsatisfactory conclusion. It would be interesting to see how the joint custody agreement between Taylor and Turtle's grandfather works out, or how Turtle will relate to her affiliation to two cultures that have Taylor's alleged family linkages to the Cherokee tribe and love romance between Turtle's grandfather and Taylor's mother Alice leaves the reader with the impression that the issues of Native American tribal sovereignty can be "resolved" by reuniting Native and non-Native American in one family, without pursuing the quest for tribal struggles against continuous colonization through a biased American legal system. In this regard, the novel can only partly succeed in advocating Native American tribal sovereignty rights.

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